

Ephesians 2:4-7
Raised by God
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

At the risk of you thinking I'm going all philosophical on you let me start this morning by asking you a question: "Why are we here?"

I don't mean why are we gathered in this particular building this morning, though that's always a very good question to ask as we come to meet other Christians.

I mean the human race. Why are we here? And in particular I mean Christians. Why are we here? Why has God chosen to create a world populated partly by people who believe in and honour him?

Why has God set things up so that there are Christians and Christian churches in the world?

What does the existence of Christians add or contribute to the universe?

It's a question that might be particularly on your mind if you were watching Channel 4 on Monday night when the eminent Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins presented his programme "The root of all evil?"

His contention, even though technically speaking as an atheist he doesn't believe in evil, is that religion, in its many and varied forms, is the root of all evil.

A genuine understanding of the universe and a life which is lived rightly can only happen, Dawkins contends, if we accept that there is no God and no purpose in the universe. Nothing, as he has put it in one of his books, "but blind, pitiless indifference."

But of course that's really no answer to the question "why are we here?" at all.

The question "why are we here?" is also one that's particularly important if you've read Ephesians 2:1-3. Looking at the state of the human race as God, through his messenger Paul, presents it in those verses should certainly lead us to ask why on earth God went to such a lot of trouble.

Human beings are spiritually dead, following the godless habits of the world around them, following the leading of the devil himself, the personal personification of all evil, and following our own self-centred desires. And we all, consequently, face God's just judgment. So why did God bother? Firstly because...

1 God loved Christians

What makes you love someone? I guess that for many people here the most powerful love we have ever felt is our love for a boy or girl friend, fiancé, husband or wife.

What do we mean when we say "I love you" to them? It's not always easy to work out I don't think. But most of the time it's a response isn't it. Love is our response to something about someone else that we find attractive. Usually to a whole combination of traits that we find pleasing – their looks, humour, intellect and character.

Well God's love for Christians is not like that. And it's really important for us to understand that. Because the dominant understanding of love in our culture is romantic love it's easy to imagine that that is exactly how God's love for us is.

I think that's one of the reasons that so many contemporary Christian songs and sermons focus on God's love for us as the love of a husband for a wife. And that is an entirely biblical image and a wonderful truth – many of us will be thinking about that in two weekends time as we go to Ed and Jen's wedding. But we do need to remember that God's love for us is not exactly parallel to the love of a man for a woman.

That's just one of the images that the Bible uses to describe the nature of God's love for us. Another one is found right here in Ephesians 2. It's the love of God for someone who is dead in their rebellion against him.

God loves his people, Christians, like a husband loves a wife. But he doesn't love us because there is anything attractive in us. God's love for us isn't a response to our moral attractiveness or our intellectual beauty.

Next week we'll see that God's love for us isn't even a response to our faith. It's not that God loves those who have faith – because faith itself is a gift that God gives to us because he loves us!

God's love is self-originating. It comes only from himself.

God loves us simply because of who he is. *Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.*

At this point there are really no analogies for God's love. For some people here this morning your experience of human love – that of your parents, friends or lover – will have been profoundly wonderful. For other here today your experience of human love will have been much more limited. Perhaps you have felt that your parents' love was conditional on performance. Maybe you've been let down or hurt very badly by someone you thought loved you – a family member, friend or partner. Our experiences inevitably colour our understanding of what it means for God to love us.

But I want to say to you this morning that none of us has ever experienced any love which is exactly like, or even very close to, the love of God for his people.

The Bible makes it clear that God loves every person he has created. But here in Ephesians 2 Paul emphasises God's particular and special love for all who trust in Jesus. A love that has no reason other than that God has chosen to love. It's a love that Paul says in these verses is about mercy and grace. A love that is undeserved.

And understanding the nature of God's love is profoundly important for every Christian. You see because God's love for us has its origin only in himself it is not dependent, in any way whatsoever, on us.

God does not love you any more when you do well. Because he loved you when you were dead – before you were doing anything good, spiritually speaking.

God does not love you any less when you fail. Because he loved you when you were nothing other than a sinner who constantly rebelled against him.

Why are we here? Why are there Christians? Because God loves us.

2 God rescued Christians

Those of you who don't come from the UK may be unfamiliar with our ancient and strange system of honours.

Twice a year – on the Queen's birthday and at New Year – awards are presented to people who have all sorts of things that are considered to have contributed to life in the UK.

Famous sportsmen and women, entertainers, politicians, people who have made a

difference to their community and others are given one of four awards.

In ascending order of importance they are (I think) the: MBE, OBE, CBE, KBE. These stand for Member, Order, Commander and Knight of the British Empire (an empire which now consists of about 3 islands in the Pacific that nobody has ever heard of).

This year in the New Year's honours list there were quite a lot of awards for members of the emergency services who were the first people to go into the tunnels on the London Underground after the terrorist bombs exploded there on July 7th. They went through the flames, wreckage and smoke and, literally, carried people out to safety. Can you imagine what an amazing feeling of relief and thankfulness the people who were stuck in those tunnels must have had when their rescuers arrived. I can imagine that they will remember for the rest of their lives not only the horrible situation they were in, but the moment of rescue.

Well if you are a Christian here this morning God, through Jesus Christ, has rescued you. But when did he do that? Strikingly Paul's answer is that it was 2,000 years ago.

That's hinted at in v4. Unfortunately the NIV translation that we're using obscures it but v4 says that God "loved us" with a great love.

That doesn't mean that he used to love us but doesn't any more. It means that God's love is particularly focussed on something in the past. God's love was demonstrated for all time in an event that took place before he wrote this letter to the Christians in Ephesus.

I don't know if you noticed as we read the passage but Paul describes three separate actions of God that were involved in him rescuing us:

- He made us alive with Christ.
- He raised us up with Christ.
- He seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms.

When I first became a Christian one of the things that amazed me most was that God exercised his astonishing power and might to raise Jesus from the dead.

Paul describes that for us in Ephesians 1:19:

"That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms."

But what I think is actually even more amazing is that that is true not just of Jesus himself but of even Christians as well. When Jesus rose from the dead, we rose with him. When Jesus ascended into heaven, we went too. When Jesus took his place on a throne, we were there. We weren't even alive to understand it at the time but it was as real as anything you can possibly imagine.

And the reason that all of those things are true of us is that we are, end of v6 there, in Christ Jesus.

This is sometimes called the doctrine or teaching of union with Christ and it's one of the most mind-blowing and exciting truths of the Bible.

By grace, because of God's mercy, not because we deserve it, every Christian is joined to Jesus so that what is true of him is true of us.

I was at a memorial service yesterday for a Christian man, giving thanks for his life. And at the service we were thinking about how now he is with Christ in the heavenly realms.

But actually that has already happened to every Christian here this morning. Not just in the sense that it is so certain it will happen that we can speak of it as if it already had – though that is true.

But in our present experience too. Before we became Christians we were spiritually dead – and now we are aware of the reality of God's existence and love him.

Before we became Christians we were followers of the spirit of our age and subject to the influences of Satan himself. But now we are able to reject sin and wickedness in a way that was not possible before.

Here at Christ Church one of our main aims is to be realistic about the Christian life. Because, sadly, there are many churches in the world, and even in this city, that will give the impression that becoming a Christian will solve all your problems more or less straight away.

So we take very seriously the Bible's descriptions of the Christian life as a battle. We want everybody who comes here to understand that the Christian life is always a struggle. We do that so that people who are considering the claims of Jesus Christ, and that may be you this morning, are absolutely clear what it is we are urging you to commit to.

And we do it so that when trouble and persecution come those of us who are Christians aren't dismayed by that but realise that this is exactly the kind of life Jesus promised his followers.

But if we're not careful that emphasis can make us think that being saved, being rescued, is all about the future. That we will be rescued then, when Jesus returns. But the Bible's perspective is that we have been rescued already.

If you are a Christian here today you are made alive with Christ, ascended with him and seated on a throne in the heavenly realms.

And, as Paul goes on to show in detail in the second half of this letter that means that there is no reason for Christians to go on living the way the rest of the world does.

It's not that in the future God will rescue us so we just muddle along till then. God has rescued us.

So we need to live like rescued people. Many of the Christians who lived in Ephesus would have been converted from religions that we would probably call occult. Many of them would have been taught to be afraid of all sorts of gods and spirits who could influence their lives for good or ill.

And I know there are people here today who find it easy to be frightened by the possibility of the influence of Satan or evil spirits over their lives. Well you don't have to be. God has raised you up with Christ to a place far above the influence of any wicked power. Satan has no hold over you. You need not fear him. Because you are joined to Jesus – the one who defeated Satan spectacularly and finally in his cross and resurrection.

I'm sure others of us succumb to particular patterns of behaviour and justify it by saying "well that's just who I am." I'm a sinner waiting for God to rescue me.

Well, Paul says, that's not who you are. Not any more. Yes you have to live with your old nature. But that person is not who you are any more. You are no longer the man or woman who was dead in trespasses and sins.

If you trust in Jesus you are a person who is in Christ.

You are seated in heaven.

We do not have to live the way we used to live any more.

God rescued Christians because he loves us. But he did it finally because...

3 God glorifies himself

When I first began to understand, after being a Christian for about 3 years I think, that the main reason God had rescued me from hell for heaven was to glorify himself I was, frankly, pretty offended.

It seemed like God was using me, and of course every other Christian, to sort of big himself up.

But I have to say that as I thought about more and more, with the help of older and wiser Christians, I began to see that God's glorification of himself is a wonderful and amazing truth.

The trouble starts, I think, if we begin to think of God as being just really pretty much like us.

And there are few traits more unattractive in a person than a kind of self-centred, preening that constantly seeks to draw attention to how wonderful someone thinks they are. Whether that's in the realm of academic brilliance, sporting prowess or business success.

"Who do they think they are?" we ask. This person is just another human being – no different from the rest of us.

But think how ridiculous that question is when we ask it about God. "Who does he think he is?"

Well he is the creator of the universe. He is the point of the universe. It exists as an expression of his own creative genius. He made people to know and glorify him, not because his ego needs a boost, but because knowing and glorifying God is the greatest privilege and wonder of existence.

Christians are here to show the whole universe how good and kind God is.

That is the point of our existence. Our spiritual life in Christ is a gift from God that shows off his grace.

Next week we'll see how every time we do anything good in the world that speaks of God's transforming power and purpose. But in these verses we learn that just by existing as

Christians, simply by being people who have been given spiritual life as a gift, who have been raised from the grave to sit with Christ in heaven, we demonstrate God's goodness.

And that is not some abuse of us. It is the best and most wonderful thing that can ever happen to us. Because it is what we were made for.

Both right now, and for evermore, God is displaying his character in you if you are a Christian here today. He is showing that he is the God who gives life to the dead and grace to the undeserving.

That is why we are here.

*Andrew Evans
January 2006*