

20, 655a

Sermon preached by Mr. David Crowter at Bethel, Guildford, on Sunday evening,
2.2.75.

Hymns: 946, 87 2nd part, 276.

Text: Eph.2: verses 4-6.

"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus".

These words, like the previous verses, refer to the MOST PROFOUND CHANGE that can ever take place in a human being. This is the greatest change that can happen to anyone - to be quickened into divine life. When Adam fell from his innocency, a very great change took place. At once he proved the truth of the warning, "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die". He became spiritually dead - dead to God. All Adam's descendants were born into this world in that state and are described as "dead in trespasses and sins". That indeed was a tremendous change, but it is not so great as the restoration described in these verses, because in Jesus Christ believers are raised up to a higher position than Adam had in his innocency. He had not eternal life abiding in him at that stage: he was fallible and mortal - at least there was that possibility of his falling; but now believers are restored to a much higher plane and level and position. "But now," the apostle says, "ye who once were far off" - so distant from God, alienated from Him in your sins - you are brought nigh by the blood of Christ; nigh in Him. And indeed this is an even greater change, a more profound change, than that which takes place after our lives on earth are ended. It is indeed a great and terrible change when the souls who died in their sins are cast down into the depths of despair and misery - unspeakably solemn a change is that! And it is a most wonderful change when believers are raised from death to glory and brought into the very presence of God, into the immediate presence of His glory. But, even so, this is the most profound change that can ever take place, because it is an absolute change. - There can be nothing greater than the absolute change described in such words as these; a change from darkness - terrible absolute darkness of the soul in sin - from darkness into light; and from the kingdom of satan into the

kingdom of God's dear Son. What greater change could any mortal really ever know? - To be raised from this terrible death in trespasses and sins, to be quickened into divine life, that eternal life imparted to the soul:- what can be greater than this? And yet one of the strangest things about this change is that often it is almost imperceptible at first; many who have been the highly favoured partakers of this change, who have undergone such a transformation, could not say just when it was that this change was wrought, that the great transformation began. But there it is, although we cannot understand a great deal concerning it, yet the truth remains. The Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus: "The wind bloweth where it listeth". This is how the great change is wrought; it is under the sovereign power of God, as He directs the wind, which may suddenly blow. We cannot control it; we cannot understand it. Sometimes it blows; then suddenly it may die away; it is in the hand of God. But the wind is known by its effects - and so this great change is made known by the great difference it makes in the hearts of those who receive it. This life is manifested; there are now indubitable signs of divine life. The apostle could say concerning these Ephesians, and other believers, that this great change had taken place in them; he says: "But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ" (v.13). There had been, so to speak, a revolution in their lives: from the depravity and depths of heathen darkness they had been brought into the marvellous light and liberty of the gospel. "And you hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins" (v.1).

Has the great change taken place in your case and mine? Is there that evidence? If we can really sing that first hymn which was given out just now, there can be no doubt that it is true of us. If we can really say,

"'Tis by Thy death we live, Oh Lord,
'Tis on Thy cross we rest,
Forever be Thy love adored,
Thy name for ever blest" -

if we can really enter into that language, then a great change has certainly taken place in our hearts. For

"There's not a man that's born of God,
But readily will say,
If ever my poor soul be saved,
'Tis Christ must be the way" (678).

If this change has taken place in you, you will begin to understand - we might say, you will begin to relish - the truths expressed in these wonderful verses. You will begin to appreciate something of the wonder expressed in verses such as this: "For by grace are ye saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves" -

you will know that it is all of the sovereign grace of God. Nothing less could have reached your case, and you will say as Paul did, it is "to the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He hath made us accepted in the Beloved". Paul never seemed to tire of bursting forth into these expressions of praise unto the God of all grace: he loved them, and so will we, dear friends, if we know what this grace is and if it reaches our hearts.

Then, in these words, apart from the MOST PROFOUND CHANGE, we read of the RICHEST MERCY, the GREATEST LOVE, and the STRONGEST POWER that can ever be known. And so, of course, as the apostle Paul often did - he expressed in a few verses or a few words the most profound and wonderful truths.

We have first of all the RICHEST MERCY that could ever be known: "But God"... There we were - sunk, says the apostle, in the depths of sin; slaves of satan; dead, utterly dead to God; apparently lost and ruined and completely undone - "but God, Who is rich in mercy", He in His sovereign goodness enters the scene and transforms the whole position by His wondrous grace, "but God, Who is rich in mercy". For what is mercy? Mercy is that practical regard for those in a miserable condition. I think it is very beautifully expressed in that parable that Jesus spoke concerning the 'Good Samaritan', as he is often called. The Samaritan saw one in great need, one who was helpless and half dead and in a desperate plight; he saw him and had compassion on him, and he went and did all that he could, bound up his wounds and put him on his own beast and took him to the inn and told them to take care of him; and he was the one of whom the answer was given: "he that had mercy on him" - that was to have mercy, not only to have some compassion and feeling in his heart, but to do all that he could on that occasion. But oh, how rich is the mercy of God, mercy which comes from the heights of heaven, from the great heart of compassion of God, that comes down to the depths of the human race and their sin and ruin!

"But God, Who is rich", "rich in mercy". Of course, this expression we might long ponder over, that God is RICH in mercy. His mercy is rich, for instance, in the fulness, in the abundance of it. It is really infinite mercy, as we read several times in the Word, that "the Lord is full of compassion", of mercy. "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth" (Ex.34:6). We read that He is rich in mercy; it is a fulness of mercy that is in Him and is conveyed through the Lord Jesus Christ as the channel of mercy through which that fulness flows to needy sinful man. As one says:

"Twas Jesus, my Friend, when He hung on the tree,
Who opened the channel of mercy for me".

It all flows out of the fulness of the heart of God through that channel of mercy, through the Lord Jesus Christ. It is full; there is a fulness - a depth, length, breadth, height that we shall never exhaust or be able to fathom. And it is also rich because of its freeness. People of course can be rich in this world's goods, but very far from free with what they have. Many wish to keep a pretty tight grasp on any riches that they may possess, but oh, how different it is in this case! God's mercy flows freely, as one says very beautifully in the hymn, concerning the Lord Jesus:

"Mercy from His bosom flows,
Free as any river,
He redresses all the woes
Of the weak believer". (574)

Mercy flows freely. It will be seen, of course, in some degree - the lesser manifestation of it - in all the goodness of God to the human race: "The earth, O Lord", says the psalmist, "is full of Thy mercy". Whereas otherwise the wrath of God would be poured out on this sinful and provocative world, yet God is merciful to all mankind in His good providence, "He is kind to the unthankful and to the unholy"; but oh, how wonderful is the richness and fulness of His saving mercy! It is like the infinite ocean, full and freely flowing. And it is also rich in its extent, its length, in its enduring nature. - We know that mercy amongst men may extend for a while but does not often extend for very long. Man is so changeable in his ways that, although he may have mercy for a while, yet he will often turn and put an end to that. But oh, how wonderful is the mercy of God in this view of it! The psalmist speaks of man in his frailty: "man is like grass", like the flower of the field, so soon cut down. Today it is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven. That is what man is like, so short-lived. But the mercy of the Lord, how long is that? - Far, far longer than we can contemplate; it is "from everlasting to everlasting", it goes back farther than we can ever estimate. There was no beginning to it; it is eternal mercy. And there is no ending to it; it will never never be taken away from them, His mercy "is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him" (Psalm 103:17).

Do you fear Him? Do you know what this wonderful mercy is, how rich it is as it reaches the hearts of those who are born anew, and they taste this mercy? Oh, how rich, how wonderful it is! As one says, when we fall into sin, the mercy that restores us again "is mercy transportingly sweet" (hymn 12). Well, how do you regard this wonderful expression, that "God is rich in mercy"? I hope there are those who say, "Yes, I know something of the exceeding, most wonderful, mercy of God, and I praise Him that I am here tonight". There may be

some who feel doubtful as to whether that mercy will ever reach their own case, and yet, why should you think like that? Why should you judge God's mercy in that way? We know that it is sovereign mercy: He has said "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion"; and of course it is His sovereign right so to do. But we also read such words as this: that "He delighteth in mercy". Why should any cut themselves off when we have such a word as that? "Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy" (Micah 7:18). A wonderful word is that! Oh, how comforting, how encouraging to those who seek it. As the hymn expresses it very sweetly:

"The door of His mercy is open all day
To the poor and the needy who knock by the way;
No sinner shall ever be empty sent back
Who comes seeking mercy for Jesus's sake". (11)

You may remember that in the Pilgrim's Progress in the Second Part there was a character called Mercy, a very gentle and rather shy kind of character. She was afraid that she was going to be left out when the door was opened and when the Lord let the other pilgrims in, and so she knocked hard on the door and she was admitted, and she asked afterwards: 'Did He seem angry because I knocked so hard?' And they spoke of her hard knocking and said: 'No, He gave a wonderful smile'. "Knock, and it shall be opened unto you".

And then we have the GREATEST LOVE; the greatest love as well as the RICHEST MERCY. This is why this great change takes place, why there will be so many saved by grace, to sing the exceeding riches of His grace to all eternity - because of His rich mercy, because of His great love. Oh, look at that love, "of His great love wherewith He loved us even when we were dead in sins!" Oh, see the depth, the depth of God's love! The apostle prays for the Ephesians and other believers, that they might know "what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge". (Eph.3: 18-19). Oh, how great this love is! That God's love could be so great as to love sinners in all the vileness of their fallen condition, dead in trespasses and sins and without the least feature to draw forth any love from Him at all. We know that love on a human scale always sees something attractive in the object. It is drawn forth because there is some merit, attraction or beauty, in the object of that affection. This is how we love. But that cannot be, in this sense, how God loves, because there is nothing whatsoever to love in us, in our fallen condition; except that He saw

believers in Christ, that He viewed them in His Son, there could have been no love whatsoever. But He loved us even when we were dead in sin; rebels; "from head to foot defiled in sin, deep in rebellion too"; slaves of sin and satan; depraved. When you realise anything of the exceeding sinfulness, deceitfulness, depravity of your heart, are you not amazed that God could ever love such a one even when we were dead in sins?

This love is also wonderful, great and deep, because of its unchangeableness. Any love that we otherwise know - the love that we may have in a natural way, and any spiritual love too that we experience - oh how changeable it is! So often varying in intensity; often perhaps it seems scarcely to be alive at all. Oh how changeable is man's love! We know that

"An earthly brother drops his hold,
Is sometimes hot and sometimes cold,
But Jesus is the same." (149)

The love of God is unchanging; indeed it is unchangeable - nothing can change it. As one says -

"No change can turn it's course;
Immutably the same, it flows
From one eternal source". (132)

There is no possibility of change in the love of God as regards its objects or its intensity. The quality is of infinite extent, and what a comforting thought this is, because, if we realise our own weakness and our own sinful propensities, is it not amazing that God, though He had once loved us, should not have taken His love right away for all that we have done? And He says: "I will heal their backslidings, I will love them freely"! Nothing can turn His affection away from those whom He loves; nothing can ever do it. And that love is infinitely great; it is immeasurable. I really despair of words to express it. One says:

"High beyond imagination
Is the love of God to man,
Far too deep for human reason,
Fathom that it never can.
Love eternal
Richly dwells in Christ the Lamb". (582)

Now this is the GREATEST LOVE; the greatest love that you could ever know! Do you know anything of it? Have you that desire of the apostle towards the Thessalonians, when he said, "The Lord direct your heart into the love of God and into the patient waiting for Christ". There can be no greater subject, no more wonderful place or sea of exploration that you could find, than to know something of this love. Is this your prayer? I can say that it has been mine for years, to enter into that which the apostle prays for these Ephesians:

"that ye might know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God". And certainly that includes the fullness of His love. Is this your desire? Do you want to know this love? I do tell you, from some little experience of it, that there is nothing to be compared with it, to know the love of God! "The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God".

And then we see the MIGHTIEST POWER, the STRONGEST POWER that this world has ever known or can know - the power of God's grace. It really needed all of this mercy, His great compassion, His wonderful love, and His mighty power - the power of His grace - because the state was so serious; the condition of man in sin was such a deadly, dangerous one. Just think of what power was needed: "And you hath He quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience:". Satan himself works in the children of disobedience; they are his slaves, as the Word declares. Yes, they are very much under his control. What power was needed! - a greater power than that which was needed to create the world and the universe, because to do this God "spoke and it was done!" - There was no opposition to that; but here there is the most tremendous opposition of the power of satan (which is second only to the power of God's grace through Christ). There was this tremendous power to overcome, but God's grace was irresistible; nothing can resist its course, and how wonderful it is to think of that! Those we may see around us, those perhaps we have some very special regard for, seem to be perhaps for a long time unaffected by these marvellous and wonderful truths, but if God puts forth His grace they will never be able to resist it. His grace is almighty; there is no power like it. See what this has done, as the apostle says in the 1st chapter: he desires that the Ephesian believers "might know the exceeding greatness of His power to usward who believe, according to the working of His mighty power" (Eph.1:19). It is the same power "which He wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might and dominion". He suffered His own beloved Son to be brought so low, to be put to death on the cross under that vast load of man's sin. And then He raised Him up from the depths of that position right to the heights of glory. What a vast change that was; to raise Him up from the dead and "set Him at His own right hand in all heavenly places far above all principality and power!" And the apostle

says, "I pray that you might know the exceeding greatness of His power to quicken you into life and raise you up from death in sins, that you might be raised up in Christ" - the same power, the same tremendous power of God's grace! "What shall we say to these things?" Oh, how deeply moving they are; these are subjects we can scarcely touch upon, and yet the little we may see of them is so great, so wonderful! There are no greater subjects for us to consider; we ought really to ponder over them for many hours - the GREATEST LOVE, the RICHEST MERCY, and MIGHTIEST POWER that we shall ever know.

Do you know anything of these things, dear friends? Do you know anything of the riches of God's grace, the exceeding riches of His grace? Do you know anything of the exceeding greatness of His love? Do you know anything of the marvellous, unspeakably sweet riches of His mercy? If it is so, the Lord help us to sing His praise and to express these things in our lives and with our lips, as the apostle so eminently did. - How often he wrote and spoke, and doubtless sung, of these great and marvellous truths! How he delighted in them, how (if we may use such an expression), how he revelled in these things! What a great delight were they to his soul! May they warm our hearts. And if we feel to know little of them, well, God is just the same. - "He waits to be gracious"; He is to be sought for the revealing and teaching of these things. When we come to these vast matters we all have to see it is but a very little that we know - there is so much more to be known. As Rutherford said when he spoke of the love of God being like a vast ocean, "How little of the sea can a child take away in his hand!" - but it is the same water that fills the vast ocean. And so this love is to be tasted, to be known in measure here below. But those who are saved by His grace - that is, who have been quickened into divine life - oh, there is a vast eternity before them of all these riches; to feast for ever on these vast matters, on the RICH MERCY, the GREAT LOVE and the MIGHTY GRACE of such a God. Oh, the Lord help us to praise Him, and to realise more and more of the wonders of His grace and mercy and love to the chief of sinners.

Amen.

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(Hymn 1118 was sung at the Lord's Supper following this service.)