

BUT GOD

Ephesians 2:4

Rev. Richard D. Phillips
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But God... *Ephesians 2:4*

Inumber of years ago, a society for the spread of atheism published a tract exposing the depravity of many great Bible heroes. One after another, the leaflet showed the villany of such men as Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David. Under the face of Abraham an inscription read that here was a coward who was willing to sacrifice the honor of his wife to save his own skin. It lists where the Bible admits this and then where the Bible calls him “the friend of God”. “What kind of God,” it asked, “would befriend so dishonorable a man?” Under Jacob’s picture was the Bible’s description of him as a liar and a cheat, and also where God makes him the prince of his people. What does this say about the character of a God who would even call himself “the God of Jacob”. Next came a reminder that Moses was a murderer, yet God picked Moses to bring his law into the world. David was worst of all. He seduced Bathsheba and then had her husband killed to cover it up. Yet this is “the man after God’s own heart,” the leaflet complained. What kind of God could find so much to praise in a man like this, they asked, and why would anyone serve him?

How do we, as Christians and followers of the Bible’s God, answer this? The first thing I would say is that everything the atheist tract said is true. It is true – no, it is a glorious truth – that the heroes of the Bible, excepting Jesus Christ, are all scoundrels and criminals, breakers of God’s law and sinners to the core.

This, by the way, shows the Bible's honesty; no other religious tome dares to display the human weakness and sins of its heroes the way the Bible does, because the Bible is not trusting in man but in God.

Furthermore, it is true that God saves people like this, making them his own friends and children and servants. God "justifies the ungodly," Paul writes (Rom. 4:5). So we agree on this with the atheists. The difference is that we see this as God's glory and not his shame. Since we are sinners like the people in the Bible, the fact that God saves sinners commends him for our affection instead of subjecting him to our disdain.

This glorious truth that God saves us in and despite our sin and guilt and shame, is the same truth that Paul teaches in the two words that begin Ephesians 2:4. In the first three verses of Ephesians 2, Paul has labored to show the truth of what the world and the atheists say about us – we are no better than anybody else, that we were spiritually dead, captives to the world, the flesh and the devil, justly under the condemnation of God and man. Paul admits this – insists upon this – and then writes two words that change everything: "But God." Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments, "These two words, in and of themselves, in a sense contain the whole of the gospel. The gospel tells of what God has done, God's intervention; it is something that comes entirely from outside us and displays to us that wondrous and astonishing work of God."¹

These two words declare that when man's resources and strength are gone, while sin has brought us into a hopeless situation, there is yet a great hope because God himself has intervened to save us. Before God's grace we were lifeless, enslaved, and bound for condemnation. But because of what God has done in Jesus Christ, believers are "made alive with Christ" and raised with him to reign forever.

I want to consider these two words, "But God," in terms of what they have to say about *the Christian message*, about *the Christian's God*, and about *the Christian life*.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God's Way of Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 59.

THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE

Sometimes, in order to understand a message correctly, you have first to be clear about what it does not say. I think that is a helpful exercise when it comes to Paul's presentation of the gospel in this chapter. We need especially to note that Paul is not calling us to take action. This may seem surprising, given all he has said about the terrible reality of sin. We might expect him now to say, "Let's all take a firm stand against sin. Let's organize ourselves and straighten out our lives so that we will no longer be dead in sin."

The reason he does not say this is because of what death means. Paul says, "You were dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1), and this means that for our part the struggle is over. We are like Jesus' friend Lazarus in John chapter 11. He was dead and buried, and the one thing Jesus did not do was wait for Lazarus to do something. Likewise, the Christian message to the world is not one of morality or of spiritual exercises, or of any other kind of human activity. Christianity does not offer you self-help techniques that promise to fix your life. It does not offer you stairs that you can ascend to God. Instead, Christianity tells the hard truth that in sin you are already dead, you are under God's wrath, and there is no hope in anything you can do.

Realizing this helps us to understand just what is the Christian gospel, just what it is that Paul tells us has happened for our salvation. He writes that God has intervened at the point of our hopelessness in order to save us. This is the proclamation he has been moving to since he began this chapter. He began, "You were dead in trespasses and sins," and then he had to explain that: we were in slavery to the world, the devil and the flesh, and we were objects of God's wrath. Now, in verses 4 and 5, he arrives at the solution: "But God... even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ." We were dead, but God has made us alive in Christ. As Jonah said in his prayer from the depths, "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jon. 2:9).

The atheists complain about the sins of Abraham and Jacob, Moses and David. But perhaps the best example of sin and salvation comes from even earlier in the Bible. Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden with every blessing they could possibly hope for. God merely

insisted that they acknowledge him as Lord. He tested them by forbidding them to eat from just one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:16-17). Not eating from this tree symbolized their willingness to rely on God and do his will in all things, not to be their own gods, deciding for themselves what is right and wrong. But, tempted by the devil, our first parents disobeyed that one prohibition and fell into sin. Lloyd Jones asks:

What defence is there for Adam and Eve, made in the image of God, in Paradise, in absolute perfection with the friendship and the companionship of God, with all the blessings that anybody could ever desire? What did they do? They deliberately rebelled against God; they disobeyed him and put their own wills before his. Is there any excuse for them? Can any plea be put forward?²

Adam and Eve had no excuse. They cannot plead ignorance, for God had clearly revealed his will. They cannot say they weren't warned, because they were. "Nothing can be said for them. They had no defence and deserved not only to be driven out of Paradise, but to be destroyed totally and eternally."³

The same is true of us. We have no excuse for our sin. We cannot plead ignorance of God's law, which has been taught in the Bible and is stamped by God on our very conscience. We have deliberately flouted our knowledge of right and wrong. God has created us, he has given us everything good, he has told us clearly what is our obligation before him and warned us of the penalty of death that resides on sin. Lloyd-Jones therefore concludes: "We must realize that as members of the human race we deserve nothing but total destruction."⁴ We may blame God, as so many do, but the fact is that we are at fault.

Let's return to Adam and Eve. They had sinned and were under God's judgment. They were guilty and at fault. What now could they do? First, they tried to evade God's wrath, putting on fig leaves and running away. These are still our main strategies: to cover our sin with the false righteousness of supposedly good works, corrupted as they are by sin, or by seeking to forget or deny the reality of God.

² D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God's Way, Not Ours* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 88.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Adam and Eve failed to escape, because God is God; he saw them and he found them out. As Psalm 139 says, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in the grave, you are there!” (Ps. 139:7-8). Then they tried to blame God, but God knows all things and cannot be fooled. God is the judge and he is not threatened by our petty complaints and accusations.

You see their predicament. When God came to Adam and Eve, they could do nothing to make themselves right with God. They could not remove their guilt. They could not erase their responsibility. They could not deny the corruption of sin in their hearts or keep sin from tainting any good works they might offer to assuage the wrath of God.

So what happened to our first parents? Were they eternally destroyed, as they might well have been? The answer is found in Paul’s statement: “But God”. Genesis 3:21 tells us what God did to save them, because for all their sin and guilt God loved them still: “The Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.” God was under no obligation to save Adam and Eve, but he did. He did it by sacrificing an innocent animal in their place, transferring their guilt to the substitute which bore the penalty of death for them, and then clothing them in its innocent skin. That was a picture, of course, of what God was going to do through Jesus Christ, to save all of his people from their sin.

What was true of Adam and Eve is true of us all. We are hopeless in our guilt and our sin, without any way of making right all that was and is wrong. Isaiah wrote of us, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.” So what will happen? But God! Isaiah states, “But the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6).

These are the two greatest words in the Bible, on which we must rest for salvation: But God. When mankind was lost in sin, when you and I were lost and condemned and without hope, God sent his own Son to be the Lamb that was slain for us. Paul writes in Romans 5:8, “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Paul says in our passage, “You were dead in trespasses and sins... But God... made us alive together with Christ.” God sent

his own Son to bear our sins on the cross, dying the death that our sins deserve, and in his resurrection power giving us eternal life.

This is the Christian message, and Augustus Toplady puts its story on our lips:

Not the labours of my hands can fulfill Thy law's demands
Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow
All for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Is that the message that you have believed for your salvation? Have you confessed that you are dead in sin apart from God's saving grace, and that because of his mercy and love you are saved by the work of Christ alone? Can you sing the remaining words of the hymn:

Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.
Naked, come to thee for dress; helpless look to thee for grace.
Foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.

THE CHRISTIAN'S GOD

This great teaching of Paul's tells us not only about the Christian message, but also about the Christian's God. If we are to believe this message of a salvation that is wholly of him, then that tells us much about what we have to believe about God himself.

The first thing this shows is that *God is sovereign*. This is good news, because it is a sovereign God, a God who is in active control of events in the world that he made, who can intervene for our salvation. The words, "But God", go right along with Paul's teaching in chapter one on God's sovereignty in salvation: "He chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world... in love, he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:4, 5). God's sovereignty is a comfort to his people, because it says the one on whom we utterly rely is able to accomplish all of his will.

The second thing the gospel shows is that *God is holy and just*. Verse 3 shows that sinners are "children of wrath". People don't like to hear this, but because of God's holiness we must. God told Adam that if he sinned he would die, and that is exactly what happened. We

experience physical death because of God's just punishment, and we are all born spiritually dead as the consequence of Adam's first sin.

Even God's solution to the problem of our sin shows his holiness and justice. The great Puritan theologian, John Owen, explains:

To see Christ... beloved of the Father, fear and tremble, bow and sweat, pray and die; to see him lifted up on the cross, the earth trembling beneath him as if unable to bear his weight; to see the heavens darkened over him... and to see that all this is because of our sins is to see clearly the holy justice and wrath of God against sin. Supremely in Christ do we learn this great truth that God hates sin and judges it with a dreadful and fearful punishment.⁵

Third, Paul's teaching tells us that *God is filled with mercy and love*. In verse 4 he says, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us." This is the *why* of the Christian message. What can explain a gospel that is all of God, in which hopeless sinners find grace in the hands of the holy God they have offended? The answer is found in 1 John 4:8, "God is love." The answer is found in Exodus 34, after Moses had asked the Lord to see his glory. God hid him in a cleft of the rock, and passed by, saying, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex. 34:6). This is how the gospel glorifies God instead of shames him; it shows what God is really like and makes him attractive to those who know him: God's love is great and he is rich in mercy.

The Scottish minister, Alexander Whyte, told of an evening when an older minister came to discuss some pastoral matters. When their business was completed, the old man seemed to linger and to want the conversation not to end. Finally, after discussing the situation of many other people, he asked, seemingly in jest, "Now, sir, have you any word of comfort for an old sinner like me?" Whyte realized that behind the half-smile was a real seriousness and even a deep agony. He wrote later, "It took my breath away. He was an old saint. But he did not know the peace of forgiveness." Not exactly sure what to do,

⁵ John Owen, *Communion with God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 82, 83.

Whyte walked over and sat beside the older minister, opened his Bible to Micah 7:18, and read, “He delights in showing mercy.”

“He delights in showing mercy.” You remember the atheist’s tract complaining about how God could fellowship with scoundrels like those found in the Bible. This is the answer. Yes, Abraham was a coward and idolater. But God delights in showing mercy, so Abraham was called to walk with God and become our forerunner in faith. Jacob was a liar and a cheat. But God delights in showing mercy, so Jacob became a man of integrity and the father of God’s people. Moses was a man of violence. But God delights in mercy, so he called Moses to be his ambassador and law-giver. Moses became, the Scripture says, the meekest of all the men upon the earth (Num. 12:3). David was an adulterer and murderer. But God, who is rich in mercy, enabled him to repent, just as he will allow you to repent and be forgiven. David prayed, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions” (Ps. 51:1). God had mercy on David and restored him to himself.

That was Dr. Whyte’s answer to the suffering old minister: “He delights to show mercy.” The next morning he received a letter in reply. It read: “Dear friend, I will never doubt Him again. Guilt had hold of me. I was near the gates of Hell, but that word of God comforted me, and I will never doubt Him again. I will never despair again. If the devil casts my sin in my teeth, I will say, ‘Yes, it is all true, and you cannot tell the half of it, but I have to deal with the One who delights in showing mercy.’”⁶

That is the God revealed in Paul’s teaching of the gospel. As the Psalmist sang, “Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people” (Ps. 113:5-8). Who is holy and just, but rich in mercy and abounding in love? “There is none holy like the LORD,” sang Hannah in her song. “There is no rock like our God” (1 Sam. 2:2).

⁶ Cf. Bryan Chapell, *The Promises of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 136-137.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

These two words, “But God”, describe not merely how we are saved at first but also how we live our whole lives as believers.

It is by God’s action and intervention and prompting all through our lives, to which we respond in faith, that he leads us in the way of new life and ultimately brings us home to heaven.

The life of Abraham shows this clearly as well. Abraham was living as a pagan in Ur of the Chaldees. But God called him to journey into a distant land of promise. Abraham believed God and set out on his trip. Before he got to Canaan, however, Abraham settled down in Haran, only part way there. But God came back and prodded him forward. Abraham went to Canaan and then a famine struck, so he headed down to Egypt. It was there that he embarrassed himself by having his wife taken in by Pharaoh in order to save his own skin. Things were going badly, “*but the Lord* afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai” (Gen. 12:17). God was working in Abraham’s life, and Pharaoh gave Abraham great riches to take his wife away. Abraham returned to Canaan, but grew disconsolate because God had promised to give the land to his descendants, and Abraham did not have a single son. But God came to him and showed him the stars in the sky, encouraging his faith with a promise that his offspring would be as numerous as the lights of heaven.

Abraham grew tired of waiting, so he took Sarah’s maidservant and had a son with her. This tore his household in two, and Hagar and her son were unjustly sent out into the desert. But God found Hagar and preserved her from Abraham’s folly. Abraham and Sarah des-paired of bearing God’s promised son, Abraham nearing 100 years old and Sarah being 90. But God sent his angel to renew the promise and to open Sarah’s womb, so she gave birth to a child, Isaac.

After this great blessing, Abraham was in danger of becoming complacent, *but God* came to him with a new challenge. God directed him to take his son, Isaac, and offer him as a sacrifice. Abraham, by now, had learned to trust the Lord, so he obeyed. Upon Mt. Moriah, at the spot where later Solomon would build the temple, Abraham raised the knife to kill his beloved son and heir. *But God* sent an

angel, who called out, “Abraham, Abraham, do not lay your hand on the boy,” and God provided a ram to be sacrificed in Isaac’s place (Gen. 22:11-12). Finally, Abraham grew old and died. His body was placed in the grave and his life on earth came to an end. *But God* received his spirit and we know that Abraham entered into the paradise of God, where now he lives forever in glory.

Do you see what this shows? – that the whole Christian life is a glorious adventure, with God as our Savior and Lord, teacher and guide. God calls you to faith and you have no idea where God is leading you, you cannot imagine how the changes the Bible talks about could happen in your life. The answer is here – “*But God*”. The problems are not really yours but God’s, and he is more than able to accomplish all his desire in your life.

You realize, for instance, that you can never become a man of spiritual stature, of solid faith, of self-control and godly dignity. But God can make you such a man. You know that you could never become a woman of inward, spiritual beauty, a bearer of virtue and a source of redeeming love for others. But God can make you such a woman as you trust in him and walk in his ways.

That is the whole Christian life, a a journey of discovery into the workings and wonders of God. God intervenes and directs, coaxes and chastises, inspires and empowers. God challenges us and renews our weary souls. He provides the encouragement we need. He convicts our sin. He tests and strengthens our faith. And in the end he makes us vessels of his glory, so that we can say with Paul, “We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor. 4:7).

The point is that God is sufficient to meet our every need. Are we ignorant of God and his truth? The fact is that apart from God, we are. Paul writes, ““No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’ – *but God* has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:9-10, NIV).

Are we tempted? Certainly we are. “Temptation... is common to man; *but God* is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” (1 Cor. 10:13, NKJV).

Are we weak and foolish? Yes, we are. “*But God* chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor. 1:27-29).

Are we, or will we be, victimized by the sins of other people? Yes, we can be sure of that happening some time or another. The Bible says, however, “You intended to harm me, *but God* intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done” (Gen. 50:20).

James Montgomery Boice therefore concludes, “May I put it quite simply? If you understand those two words – ‘but God’ – they will save your soul. If you recall them daily and live by them, they will transform your life completely.”⁷

Those two words also help us to realize that we may safely follow God’s Word all the days of our lives. Let us, then, respond in faith to all that he does in and through our lives. Let us give all the glory to God, in whose sovereign grace we rest our hope. And let us live with the truth that the Psalmist wrote, “My flesh and my heart may fail, *but God* is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:26).

⁷ James M. Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 54.