

## **"Just As We Are"**

Ephesians 2:1-5, 8

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*And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved). . . For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God. . .*

This morning I share with you an excerpt from a story that aired a couple of weeks ago on 60 Minutes.

It was hot and humid in Burlington, N.C. on the night of July 28, 1984. Jennifer Thompson, then a 22-year-old college student, had gone to bed early in her off-campus apartment. As she slept, a man shattered the light bulb near her back door, cut her phone line, and broke in. And then she was raped. She was able to escape, and she was determined to find the man that had done this. She said, "I can identify him if I'm given an opportunity."

Three days after the rape, she was called in to do a photo lineup. Thompson studied the pictures for five minutes. "She picked up Ron Cotton's photograph and said, "That's the man that raped me." She was sure she had identified the right man. She later picked Ron Cotton out of a lineup. She was "absolutely certain" she had picked the right man.

It took the jury just 40 minutes to reach a verdict: guilty on all counts. Cotton was sentenced to life and 50 years.

Once he got to prison, he started working in the prison kitchen, singing in the choir, and writing letter after letter to his attorneys, hoping to get a new trial. Then one day as he

watched a new inmate being brought in, he had a strange feeling. "I said, 'Excuse me.' I said, 'You look familiar.' I said, 'Where are you from?' He said, 'I'm from Burlington.' I said, 'I am too.' I said, 'You kind of resemble the drawing of a suspect in a crime for which I'm falsely imprisoned.

His name was Bobby Poole, and he was also in for rape. He started working in the prison kitchen too.

"The stewards were calling me Poole instead of Cotton," Cotton said. People were mistaking the two men. Then a fellow inmate told him he'd heard Bobby Poole admit to raping Jennifer Thompson and another woman that night. Ronald Cotton won a new trial and his lawyers called Bobby Poole to the stand with Thompson sitting right there. It was the moment Cotton had been hoping for. But it did not turn out like he'd expected. Thompson again pointed to Cotton as the perpetrator.

Seven more years went by, and then everyone in the prison was riveted by a big news story: the trial of O.J. Simpson. Cotton was intrigued by something he'd never heard of: DNA. He asked his attorney to make one more try. Packed away on the shelves of the Burlington Police Department was 10-year-old evidence from the two rapes that night. Inside one of the rape kits was a fragment of usable DNA. It proved what Ronald Cotton had been saying all along - that he was innocent, and that the rapist was Bobby Poole.

When Jennifer Thompson heard the news, she cried and broke down. She felt terrible shame. "Suffocating, debilitating shame." She asked if Cotton would meet with her at a local church. "I remember him walkin' into the church. And I physically could not stand up," Thompson recalled.

"I started to cry immediately. And I looked at him, and I said, 'Ron, if I spent every second of every minute of every hour for the rest of my life telling you how sorry I am, it wouldn't come close to how my heart feels. I'm so sorry.' Do you know what Ron Cotton did? Ron just leaned down, he took her hands...and he looked her in the eye, he said, 'I forgive you,'"

"I told her, 'Jennifer, I forgive you. I don't want you to look over your shoulder. I just want us to be happy and move on in life.'"

"The minute he forgave me, it's like my heart physically started to heal. And I thought, 'This is what grace and mercy is all about. This is what they teach you in church that none of us ever get.' And here was this man that I had hated. I mean, I used to pray

every day of my life during those eleven years that he would die. . .that was my prayer to God. And here was this man who with grace and mercy just forgave me. How wrong I was, and how good he is.”<sup>1</sup>

By Grace we have been saved; it is a gift of God; none of us deserve it, not a one.

Saved. What do you think when you hear that word? How do you feel? Now, be honest. What really goes through your mind when someone says, “I have been saved.” It turns me off. And I will tell you why. There are a few reasons. For one thing, it turns me off because I didn’t grow up with it. In my Christian upbringing, no one I knew (even the most faith-filled!) ever talked that way. For another thing, it turns me off because some of those televangelists and politicians masquerading as preachers have co-opted this phrase and used it in ways that are exclusionary and demeaning. “I’m saved, you’re not.”

It also turns me off because it’s so focused on ME. As if salvation is all about---only about, me. As if salvation is just an individual, personal, disconnected experience. This is not biblical. The Bible says the whole created order needs to be saved. It is easy to forget this here in our own little bubble that is Lake Highlands. It is easy to forget this in the bubbles of our loving families, our meaningful work, our deep friendships. The Bible says all humanity needs to be saved. Paul says here in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the letter to the Ephesians that we are all by nature *children of wrath*, along with the rest of humanity. Children of wrath. That’s intense! Which leads to the final reason I do not like this phrase.

“I have been saved” means I need a savior. It means I need saving. It means I have to own up to the wrath inside me that is as much a part of me as my own mother. And quite honestly it is easier to go around thinking I don’t need to be saved than to think about all the ways I DO!

Who needs a savior? I am not lost. I don’t need finding. I am not lost. Not lost. Lost.

*I am absolutely certain. I know who did this to me. I have no doubts. I want justice. Justice.*

There is a lot packed into what Paul wrote: *And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air.* We were dead? We have walked in sin? We have lived our lives bowing to the Prince of Hatred and ignoring the Prince of Peace? To

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from the newscast 60 Minutes, 3/8/09 Produced by Shari Finkelstein  
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even begin to consider how these phrases apply to us means we have to admit a lot of things we frankly prefer not to think about. We have to admit there are powerful spiritual forces over which we have no control. We have to admit we cannot break free of them on our own. We have to admit we are in urgent need of a God who comes to save us<sup>2</sup>.

Yes, these are unpleasant truths to face, but all we have to do is open the newspaper to see we all need to be saved. Humanity needs a savior! There are terrible things happening every day, every second. Terrible, unspeakable things. And all we have to do is open a newspaper and open what is written in our own hearts. All we have to do is honestly look at our habits, our failures, our sorrow and our guilt to discover where we have fallen short of God's good intent for us. There is no one among us, not even one, who is without sin. There is no one of us, not even one, who is not lost. There is no one of us, not even one, who does not need a savior.

Jesus. His very name means "He saves."

***But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ.***

Here is Grace. God loves us, just as we are. God forgives us, just as we are. God makes us who were dead alive again, just as we are. Like what Ron Cotton did for Linda Thompson, God has already forgiven us even before we ask. God leans down, takes our hands...and looks us in the eye, sinners that we are, just as we are, and says, "I forgive you."

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Thomas Long for this idea, expressed in his essay, 'Just as I Am', The Christian Century, March 21, 2006, p. 18.

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