

Ps. 84:1,2

Read: Genesis 1:1,2; 26-31; John 3:1-8

Ps. 8

Text: Lord's Day 3

Sermon: Reflecting on how we have become as bad as we are, we stand amazed at God's grace.

We see this as we consider

1. How it was in the past
2. How we have become what we are
3. How bad we have become.

Ps. 116:1-5 (After sermon)

Read Apostles Creed:

Sing: Hy. 5

Hy. 26

Brothers and Sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ:

In a well laid out garden, each section flows naturally into the next. This is what we see also as we turn our attention to the next Lord's Day. The previous Lord's Day showed the magnitude of our misery by highlighting the law's demand to love God and our neighbor. It then stressed we are inclined to hate. This begs the question, "How did this situation come about?" This Lord's Day answers that question by showing how good things were in the beginning, and how things have become as bad as they are.

As we hear that, it may seem like we are going to have a sermon that will be high on the negatives but short on the positives. This is not the case. Keep in mind we are reflecting on these matters as God's children. As we see how it was in the past, how things have become as they are, and how bad things really are, we will be overwhelmed by the amazing grace of God to save sinners like us. Therefore I proclaim to you this afternoon:

Reflecting on how we have become as bad as we are, we stand amazed at God's grace.

We see this as we consider

1. How it was in the past
2. How we have become what we are
3. How bad we have become.

First then, we consider how it was. For this, of course, we have to look beyond our own lives. After all, our own lives may have been fully lived within the communion of the church. We need to shake ourselves free from this narrow, individualistic, approach to existence and see ourselves as part of the human race. Only when we do that can we truly consider "how it was in the past." The past we have to consider, however, is not the time of our immediate forefathers. It is the time before things went wrong. We have to go back to the beginning.

When we speak of going back to the beginning that means we have to go back to the Book of Beginnings, the book of Genesis, and the very first chapters at that book.

That this is about as far back as we can go is clear from the opening words of Scripture, “In the beginning....” That is when the eternal God, as part of his work of creation, also created time.

As you start reading the first page of Scripture, it is easy to become intrigued and even distracted by all those marvelous details about God’s creation. At the same time, you cannot miss the main point, namely, the creation of man. That the creation of man is the focus and climax comes out not only in how all things lead up to the creation of man, but also by the space devoted to his creation and the details given about it. How special man is comes out in the way we are allowed to hear God deliberate before making man in his own image and likeness, and then making him in his own image and likeness. To top it off, he gave man the task to rule over the earth.

It is that being made in God’s image and likeness that requires further attention, for this impresses upon us how **good** it was in the beginning. Though only a creature, in man you could see something of the Creator. That something had to do with man’s nature.

That being made in God’s image and likeness has to do with man’s nature is not something we see so clearly in the chapter of beginnings. That we have to understand talk of the image and likeness in terms of man’s nature comes out in Paul’s words to the Ephesians when he wrote about the effect of Christ’s work. He called the Ephesians “... to put on the new nature, created to be like God in true *righteousness and holiness*” (Eph. 4:24).

It should be mentioned that there is line of thinking that wants to include such things as man receiving dominion over the earth when speaking about man being in God’s image. It has been promoted by respected Reformed scholars. Yet, as attractive as it may be, it requires some speculation and exegetical jumps. The Catechism plays it safe, basing its explanation on the only explicit reference to the meaning of being made in God’s image as found in Ephesians 4.

That it is not explained anywhere else suggests it should have been self-evident that talk of being in God’s image and likeness is talk of man’s nature reflecting God’s nature, in man being free from sin. The Canons of Dort go in the same direction. We read in Chapter III/IV, Art. 1,

In the beginning man was created in the image of God. He was adorned in his mind with true and wholesome knowledge of his Creator and of all spiritual things; his will and heart were upright, all his affections pure, and therefore man was completely holy.

We need to get a good grasp on how it was in the beginning. It is one of the regrettable things in our time that people never get this far when looking at Genesis 1. They spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about the mechanics of creation. Not only do people come up with all sorts of hypotheses, but they can also become intrigued

by the details, trying to figure out things that really are beyond our understanding. When you spend all your energy on those kinds of things, you never get to the point of chapter 1, namely the marvel that was man.

Let us spend a little energy this afternoon thinking about the marvelous creation that was man, and let our imagination reflect on the time of man's existence when he was the image of God. Note how I put use the verb "was." We are, after all, dealing with the past, how it was. What a marvelous situation it must have been! Unaffected by sin, our first parents were able to live in a totally harmonious environment. From the way Adam and Eve eventually hid from God, after eating the forbidden fruit, we get the impression they had daily communion with God, who would visit them in some form. Nothing stood in the way of knowing and understanding God. Nothing stood in the way of loving God with heart, soul, mind and strength. Nothing stood in the way of living with God in blessedness. Praising and glorifying God could go on unhindered. On top of that, there was perfect harmony between the man and his wife, as well as between them and all creatures. They never had to fear a cougar or lion jumping on them while they were walking through the garden. The lion and the lamb, and mankind, lived in harmony. All this was so because there was no sin to plug up relationships. The longer we think about it, the more nostalgic we will become, longing for such a time.

Our imagination, however, can only go so far. This is so because in the end all we get is a snapshot of how good it was when man's nature still reflected God's nature in being holy and righteous. We also get a few glimpses throughout Scripture when it speaks of the age to come, when all things will be restored, images like each man sitting under his fig tree, or times when all the implements of war will be turned into implements for agriculture. Or, we can think of the image of the marriage feast of the Lamb. All in all, these are very desirous images.

It makes us realize something precious has been lost. We need to move on now from how it was to how it has become. What we see is not a pretty picture. That is our second point.

Of course, we are not unfamiliar with "how it has become." We live in it. We know the Scriptures well enough that we don't need to go into detail about the actual fall and disobedience of our first parents. Where we do need to go into detail is in reflecting on the effect of that fall into sin. It is essential to do this to help us understand why a problem of the past is also our problem today.

In terms of the effects of the fall into sin, it will be beneficial to point out briefly what affect it did not have. First of all, it did not affect man's place in the world. He still has dominion. It did affect how he would exercise that dominion. The world was going to work against him, rather than work along with him. Further, it did not take away his human faculties like speech, thought, emotions, or his ability to discover the potential in creation and develop it. Man remained different from the other creatures.

What became different was man's nature, the part of him that was the image of God. We might say that he stopped being the image of God. As we saw earlier, the image of God had to do with man being made in righteousness and holiness. By the disobedience of our first parents, human nature was altered and in effect became the anti-image. Human nature became typified by unrighteousness and unholiness. We could even say he became an image of his new father, the devil.

Since this took place at the very beginning of the human race, it was inevitable that everything that would come after this event would show the consequences. Every child born from them would inherit their nature. Infants would pick up this infected nature already in their mother's womb. We are reminded of this truth every time a baby is brought for baptism. Parents are asked to confess that their children are conceived and born in sin, and by nature are children of wrath.

Furthermore, this change of nature is going to show up in man's actions. We confess in the BC, art 15, that "as a root it produces in man all sorts of sin." It is also helpful to hear some more words from the Canon of Dort. We confess there,

But rebelling against God through the instigation of the devil and through his own free will, he deprived himself of these excellent gifts, and instead brought upon himself blindness, horrible darkness, futility, and perverseness of judgment in his mind; wickedness, rebelliousness, and stubbornness in his will and heart; and impurity in all his affections (COD III/IV 1).

You will sense that the situation does not look very good. The question that will arise, however, is, how bad did it really become? We need to know, because if we don't see the full extent of how bad it has become, we will not appreciate the magnitude of our misery and, subsequently, how amazing God's grace is. This takes us to our third point.

The best way to show how bad it has become is by considering what is needed to fix the problem. Let me give a comparison, an analogy.

The analogy is this. Sometimes you hear that a person has been in an accident. Let us suppose we know the person. Before the accident he was a strong, healthy, bright, cheerful, capable person. We might say he was a well-rounded person. Automatically one of the first questions we ask is, "How bad was it?" Our reaction will be determined by the answer we receive. So, if we are told that the person is in hospital, with a significant number of broken bones, a concussion, and extensive cuts and bruising, but his heart is going strong, we will feel sorry for the person, but at the same time we will be relieved. After all, the person is still alive. With some tender loving care, some surgery, and some time, he is healable. We may plan to go to the hospital and visit him while he lies in bed.

The situation is quite a bit different when we are told that the person had broken bones, head injuries, and other damage to his body, and was taking to ... the morgue. Such news tends to bring a sense of quiet in our minds because then we know that he is

dead. Somewhere a wife, perhaps children, parents, relatives and friends, will be grieving. His life has been wrecked. We will have to count on a funeral.

The latter is the case when it comes to man's nature after the fall and disobedience of our first parents. You know how a person in a coffin, with some skillful makeup by the undertaker, can look better than when he was still alive. So it is with man's nature after the fall. There are things that remind us of the way God made man in the beginning. Things can look pretty good. Yet, looks are deceiving. He is not healable. He is a spiritual wreck. He is dead.

This is the point our Lord Jesus made so powerfully in his conversation with Nicodemus. We find this conversation in John 3. The Lord Jesus told Nicodemus that "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." In response to Nicodemus' further questions, our Lord Jesus says that we must be born of the Spirit.

Note well the need to be born anew, or, to be born from above. This is not something that we can do. A dead person cannot give himself life again. It must be given to us. Paul wrote about being a new creation. He was speaking of man's nature.

It is ironic that this very passage which points out how bad it has become, because of the fall into sin, is used by some in such a way that it minimizes the severity of the human condition. This is because they take the words of our Lord about the need to be born anew or to be born by the Spirit as a command to be obeyed by sinners. To go back to our analogy of the man in the casket, when we would say that for him to rejoin the land of the living he must be born again, that "must" is not a command to him. Rather, the "must" describes a condition that must be met, but about which he can do nothing himself.

What all this impresses upon us, then, is how bad it has become. Human nature did not merely suffer a severe bruising in the fall into sin, but it was wrecked. We should not be fooled by the fact that mankind still seems to be so much like the original. To put it plainly, spiritually speaking, man is dead. What we see in man's nature today is a mere shadow of his former glory.

When we thus look at humanity, how it was, what it has become, and how bad it has become, again, we will be overwhelmed by the magnitude of our misery. At the same time, when we keep in mind that we have been looking at this in the comforting company of Jesus Christ, who has given us new life in the Spirit, without doubt we have to say: Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that God saved a wreck like me." Amen.