"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But 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 - it is by grace you have been saved."

Ephesians 2:1-5
New International Version

Early one morning I was zipping down the highway to catch a plane. Mists were rising from the fields. The road was a crooked mountain road. At a curve of the highway on the side of an old building in fresh new paint were the words, "Jesus, please help us."

Since that time I have often reflected on those words. Most of the problems in life arise because life gets centered in the wrong place. When it does, things don't work out right. Sometimes we don't know where to turn for help.

J. Wallace Hamilton tells that one day he heard a strange noise out behind his house. It sounded as if someone was strangling a crow. So he peeked out the back door and there was his boy and the neighbor's little boy playing with an old phonograph record. They had
taken an old record and bored a hole about two inches off center. They were playing the record off that hole! Of course, the needle was skipping and sliding, a dissonant squawk.

So, by way of experiment, he picked up the record and set it down on the proper center. Immediately there was beautiful music - there was harmony.

Seems to me life works that way. When life is centered in ourselves it never works out right. We feel empty. We wonder why we are living. We are at odds with our universe. We never quite fit. There is disharmony.

When life is genuinely centered in God, who is the center of all reality, there can be music in our lives. We would be at home in our universe. We would know who we are. We would know why we are here. Things would be going some place. But when our centers are wrong, our relationship with God is broken. We are crying out for help. We may not know why, but it is because our relationship with God is broken.

Sin is the basic problem we all have. But sin is not merely bad things we do. Sin results when that relationship with God is broken, when our lives aren't centered in ultimate reality. When we are reaching in the wrong directions, we hurt ourselves and other people. When we don't get along with God very well, we are not able to relate to each other very well. Result? Social problems. And because we don't get along with other
people very well, we are at odds with ourselves, and psychological problems result.

When Adam and Eve broke with God, God said, "Cursed be the ground." So, we are even at odds with our universe.

"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

II Corinthians 4:3-4

Now watch that. "The god of this world" is the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience - Satan dominates those who are not centered in God. Satan blinds our minds and distorts our sense of values so that in our attempts to find ourselves, we inevitably look in the wrong places.

I met a boy up in Canada who was hopped up on MDA (a mixture of heroin and speed). He said, "I've got a huge hole in my reality." I rather think that anyone who has broken relationship with God has a hole in his reality, and he keeps trying to stuff it with meaning. But because his mind is blinded, he stuffs it with the wrong things. People try to get happy by pleasure trips, or ego trips, fame, or money or a perfect sex experience. Some contrive the illusion of meaning with alcohol, or drugs, or sports. We are not equating sports with adultery, but sometimes sports can be just another attempt to fill life with meaning that lasts only as long as the game does.
Harry Emerson Fosdick remembers a childhood Christmas party. The whole town was there, gathered around the Christmas tree. Santa Claus was giving out the presents. In the crowd was the village idiot. Every village has a village idiot: someone people make fun of, and at the same time protect and take care of. There was a gift for everyone except this poor boy. Finally there was one big box left under the tree. Santa Claus picked up that box and plunked it down in the lap of the poor village idiot. His face brightened. His fingers flew as he tore off the wrappings. He looked inside the box and his face fell, because there was nothing in the box. Somebody had played a rather ugly trick on the village idiot.

I don't think it is a very pretty story at all. Not just because I don't think that is the way to treat that kind of person, but because I have seen myself stupidly staring at that box. Everyone takes his turn at it, thinking that he has found where the handle to life is and when he lifts the lid - nothing is there!

Then we go grasping again. James says:

"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures."

James 4:1-3
There is the struggle. Trying to create the illusion of meaning and always being disappointed.

Do you find yourself there anywhere?

Sometimes people even do this with religion! Give me a quick easy religion. Zap. I want to be a spiritual giant. Now! But spiritual gianthood doesn't come that way. The Lord doesn't go around with a spiritual Roman candle to put under a person that is down to send him into orbit.

Even real answers are sometimes discarded because the faith is distorted. The name Jesus is on it but it is a cheap substitute. And when people try this, then discard it, despair can really set in.

Paul said, "You did God make alive." Notice, "when you were dead." That word "dead" ought to be heavy. Not the cessation of physical movement, but when there is no life, no meaning, no life source, no direction, when one merely exists. That's dead!

Paul was talking of people who exist in this universe and don't know why. Now, we can live without a lot of "things" and we can live with a lot of "things", but one thing we can't live without is "meaning". We must know who we are.

I was a guest on a panel in a high school assembly of about four or five hundred high school juniors and seniors. It wasn't a Christian high school. I was the guest resource person on drug abuse. I was supposed to be an authority on
the drug scene. I was very poorly qualified, but had been involved at that time with people who were involved in the drug scene and had some feel for it.

There was a lawyer on one side of me and a pharmacist on the other side. There were two high school students who were very much involved in the drug scene. One was very sharp and articulate. I felt intimidated by him.

I really didn't think I was making much of a contribution. The lawyer was telling the kids what would happen to them legally if they got involved with drugs.

Then the pharmacist told them what would happen physiologically if they got involved with drugs. I suppose a lot he said was true, but the students didn't seem impressed. I think they already knew those things.

It dawned on me that we really hadn't talked about the most important thing at all. We hadn't talked about the "why"! With the knowledge of the legal hassles and psychological and physiological dangers, why was drug abuse still a life style for some of those people?

So I said, "why would people make drug abuse a life style, knowing the "hazards" involved." To the boy sitting beside me I said, "Why do you do it?"

He parted his hair so he could see me and said, "Man, you've got to be bombed out of your birdie. You're spaced out like Arizona, man. You don't know where it's at. I do the drugs because that is, the living ultimate. That is the ultimate purpose for being human."
So I said, "Well, I can't argue with you. That sounds to me like exactly the right reason. If it is what being a human being is all about, then you ought to do it. You shouldn't apologize for doing it. You shouldn't worry about the legal or psychological problems or whether your parents or the law like it - if it is the ultimate human experience. But the thing I would differ with is that while I agree with your logic, I just don't think your basic premise is right. I don't think a drug experience is what being a human is all about. I have another idea. I believe the ultimate purpose for being human is not something you take. It is a person you get to know. His name is Jesus Christ! And I know He lives because He is alive in my own life. When I get up in the morning, I have a sense that that day is going somewhere. When I put my head on the pillow at night I may be tired, frustrated, disgusted, and scared, but I don't have to worry about whether I'm going to wake up in the morning or not. If I do - great; one more day walking with the Lord. If I don't - well I always did want to get to know Jesus more personally. Either way, I come up a winner.

Because of this, I can be a better husband, father, and citizen. I am at home in my universe. I would like to recommend Jesus to you. If you don't buy Him, just make sure you have rejected Him intelligently. Examine the original document - the Bible itself. You still may
reject Him, but if you do, make sure it is because you have come up with an "ultimate" that is better."

At this point that whole pagan high school audience broke into applause! That's right - applause! I was flabbergasted. The principal was wiping his eyes. He didn't have a religious hair on his body, but anything that made the kids clap, made him emotional. I don't think those students were saying, "Preacher, we want to be Christians, show us where the baptism is". I think they were saying, "You have touched a nerve. We don't know who we are." In fact this was evident when a girl walked up to me after the assembly and said, "I would give anything if I knew what was worth living for. My teacher tells me one thing. The kids tell me another thing. The movies tell me another thing. I don't know. I'm confused."

At this point, the lawyer walked up and said, "Well, fellow, I want to level with you. I am an atheist, but I'm not going to knock what you said to those kids, because everybody needs a crutch."

I said, "I think you are right. I don't know that we can make it on our own, but if it is true that everybody needs a crutch, what is yours?"

After a long and awesome pause, he looked back visibly shaken and said, "O.K., I'll tell you. I stay real busy!"
I hope you can capture the significance of that moment. I felt like we were standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon of his despair. Do you hear what he was saying?

"I can't look at myself. I can't stand that hole in my reality so I've got to stay busy so I don't think about it. In fact, I am playing at law. I am fighting drugs."

Who says that drugs are bad and law is good, if there is no God? How do you come up with values? If there is no God that gives roots to value and truth and meaning, the whole thing is an illusion. He was playing at games to create for himself the illusion of meaning. But if he stopped moving long enough to think, he was hurting, and alone in an empty universe.

Now, I guess one reason that incident had such an impact on me is because that is what Paul means in Ephesians 2, "God made you alive when you were dead." If that is not death, there is not any.

It meant something to me also because I have gone through a time in my life when I was dead like that.

I was reared, as were many of you, in a Christian home, and I thank God for that. But, I wasn't always tuned in on what my parents were trying to give me. In the little community where I grew up, there was the church and there was the world. The church was mighty small and warm, and the world was mighty hostile and big. If you
just stuck your nose outside of that church circle into that world, there was nothing but hostility. So because I have always been dominated by the need to be well thought of, I began to find my sense of personhood in that nice, little warm circle. The way to do that was to do religious things. So, I would pass the communion and make little talks and lead prayer. People would pat me on the head and say I was going to be a great preacher and I would feel so good.

I belonged, but I had doubts. I remember at twelve years of age walking home from school thinking, "I've never seen God. He never does seem to give me what I ask for." Then, I would think, "No. My father's a good man and he believes, so I'll at least pretend I do."

Sometimes I would believe, and sometimes I wouldn't. But all the time, in this warm circle, I found that I had identity if I did the religious things.

Then, I went away to a Christian high school. Of course, that gave me more personhood with the people at home in that little circle and there in the Christian schools. I would make chapel talks, lead singing in chapel, belong to the religious organizations on campus, but of course, there were dirty jokes in the dormitory, fights in the halls, and things like that. But I did the religious things to have status and belonging.

Then, I was out preaching. I had a certain facility for that. That really gave me personhood in the religious
circles. (All these things are good in themselves if the motive is right. I don't mean to downgrade any of those things.)

But, I didn't want to examine the motives because I just needed personhood. I watched what the big boys did. I would string moving stories together and I would put the guilt screws on people to get them to do religious things because it again gave me personhood in my circles.

People began coming to me with real needs. Yet I never believed I was saved. I was too wicked, self-centered, egotistical, lustful - and I knew I could never go to heaven because I thought I had to earn my way in. But it would be nice to help some other people make it. Trouble is, what didn't help me didn't help them either. Then I began thinking, "You know, it is not just me that can't do it. It's other people too." What kind of God are you that would make it so tough to go to heaven that nobody could do it?" There couldn't be a God like that! So you see, I didn't believe. And doubts became unbelief and rebellion and sometimes anger toward God.

Now of course I was caught in a terrible situation. My whole life had been focused on being a preacher. I was afraid to trust the other preachers with my struggle. I was going through hypocritical motions. Sometimes I would believe it but most of the time I didn't. Then I posed as a super Christian and went to the mission field where I didn't even have a gallery to play to. The whole thing came unglued.
I didn't talk to my wife about it, because she thought she married a "believer". I was afraid the truth would hurt her. My kids would say, "We love you, Daddy." And I would say it back to them, but I would think, "Well, you are just a biological phenomenon." Nothing seemed to matter. In fact, there were long periods when I became almost suicidal. Now, I am not telling you this because I want to tell you about my life history. I am telling you that without God, we are dead. You can be full up with "religion" and not know God. I hope none of you have to go through this. If you are there, I hope you can find your way out.

There was nothing. "You were dead in your transgressions and sins."

"But God, who is rich in mercy......" Those words mean the world to me. Somewhere in there, I decided "I can't live like that forever. I don't have the courage to live or to die." I remembered a passage I learned in childhood, "Faith comes by hearing the word of God." (Romans 10:17) And I would say, "That is nonsense. I can quote whole books of it; and I don't believe it." But you see, I never really heard it. I didn't see the love of God. I didn't see the grace of God. I didn't see the power sources available. I didn't see the cross. I didn't see the need to abandon my own will. I thought I could serve my own will and gloss it over with a nice veneer of religion.

All of you have had private feelings back in your heart: For example, like when you hear a piece of music
you have never heard for a long time, and a whole world of memories comes back with it - pretty personal. We have those sad places and those glad places in us - those special places that are our own. They are secret. Only God can walk in there.

I, too, had those places and as I began to read in the Word as if for the first time - things happened. New insights would emerge. The Word would speak directly to those "places" within me.

At first I thought it was mere coincidence. Amazing! Those ignorant old farmers and fishermen would know that much about human nature!" But, it would happen again and again. And not only were the scriptures picking me apart and looking inside of what was there, they began to put the pieces together again. The Word would say, "You do it this way and it will work." And I'd do it that way, and it would work.

"Faith" does come by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. I didn't like some of the commands He was putting on me, but I saw that they fit. Piece by piece, a web of faith was woven around my heart so strong, it feels like it cannot be broken right now. There are many arguments you can raise to show me why I shouldn't believe the Bible, that I don't know how to answer. But I don't care - I know it is from God.
Tomorrow I want to talk about how faith comes.

I believe now. If I know my own heart, God is at the center. And that makes such a difference in my life. If that should all be stripped away, I think I would lose my mind, maybe even my life, and surely my soul.

"You will know him when He comes.
Not by any din of drums,
Nor by the vantage of his airs,
Nor by anything he wears.
Neither know him by his crown.
Neither know him by his gown.

But his presence known shall be
By the holy harmony
That his coming brings to thee."