From God, to God (Ephesians 2:1-10)

# The writer of Ephesians interprets what is happening to a person entering the Christian life.

by Fred Craddock in the March 22, 2003 issue

In Dallas, Texas, one week prior to the assassination of President Kennedy, I heard German New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias reminisce about his life in Israel, where his parents were missionaries. After WWII, he returned nervously to Israel to see if the treatment of Jews by the Nazi regime had severed forever his friendships there. When he knocked at the door of an old friend, he was welcomed with an embrace. He joined his friend in the backyard, where a crude tent had been erected for the observance of the Feast of Tents or Booths, a time of recalling Israel's wandering in the desert, dwelling in tents. Fastened on the entrance to the tent were two slips of paper, each bearing a brief message: on the left was "From God"; on the right was "To God." There, simply yet dramatically, said Jeremias, was the whole of life: from God, to God, and in the years between, a tent.

His recollection is a commentary on Ephesians 2:1-10; or, more correctly, on Ephesians 1:3-3:20. Ephesians 1-3 is widely regarded as a baptismal liturgy, or at least a portion of one. How appropriate that the church prepare candidates for baptism in Lent! What most needs to be impressed on the candidate on the occasion of being set apart for God and God's service in a world confused and estranged from its Creator? One could do for the baptismal candidate what the writer of Ephesians does for the reader, that is, interpret what is happening to a person entering the Christian life. To "interpret" is not to enter the classroom for an academic exercise; interpreting is a common and necessary activity of every community. It is what a parent does when a child asks, "What is that noise?" or "Do hamsters go to heaven?" It is what a physician does when a patient worries about a numbness in the left arm or intense headaches. Teachers do it, as do lawyers, friends, spouses and neighbors. As do churches. In fact, interpreting is a primary activity of the church and its leaders. "What does it mean," asks the candidate, "to become a Christian?"

The Ephesians text answers the question experientially. The language is vivid: You were dead. This is to say, you were caught in a futile way of life obedient to desires of the flesh, seeking the approval of your culture, heeding every inclination that led away from God, aimless and helpless to extricate yourself. But God, rich in love and mercy, by free unmerited favor quickened your life and set you in a safe place in the constant presence of Christ. You are now alive, but not simply in order to enjoy God's grace. You have been created again as God's masterpiece for two purposes: to show what God can do through Jesus Christ, and to serve human need, engaging in good works which reflect the nature of God as gracious love.

The Ephesians text answers the question historically. As unexciting as this may sound, it must never be overlooked. Israel has a history, Jesus has a history, the church has a history. To be a Christian is to enter into that history, to say *we* were in Egypt, *we* were in Nazareth, *we* were in Jerusalem, Rome, Geneva, Wittenberg and Boston. But the primary historical location of the believer, according to Ephesians 2, is Jesus Christ. The text does not use the usual Pauline phrase "*in* Christ Jesus," but "*with* Christ Jesus." The historical references to him are brief but sufficient: he was crucified, he died, he was buried, he was raised, he was enthroned. To be a Christian, says the text, is to be crucified with Jesus, to die with him, to be buried with him, to be raised with him, to be enthroned with him. Spiritual? Yes. Mystical? Perhaps. Subjective? Partially. Will-o'-the wisp? Never. Experiential but inseparable from history? Always.

Finally, the Ephesians text answers the question "What does it mean to enter the Christian life?" by setting the believer in a cosmic context. Spatially, this context extends from "this world" to "the heavenly places." This represents what the Greeks called *ta*, *panta*, the totality. The totality included the subterranean region, the earth and the heavens, and in every place, says Paul, dwelt hostile powers, including "the ruler of the power of the air," and "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly place." For all their power to cripple, control and alienate, all hostilities in the universe will not only cease ultimately, but will be reconciled. For redemption in Christ to be complete, it must range as far and wide as the forces of evil. And his liberating work has already begun in setting free the person caught in the passions of the senses and enamored of this world's offerings. Change the worldview, change the language, and any adequate interpretation of the Christian life must still range this far.

Temporally, the cosmic context for the Christian life extends from "the foundation of the world," that which "God prepared beforehand," to "the ages to come." Many, of

course, do not think in terms of before time and after time, and they seem to function without this concept. But what such language seeks to convey is hardly a casual option. The life of the believer is set in a narrative far grander than the narrow parentheses of one lifetime. Faith says there is a metanarrative, a story within which our stories make sense. In other words, “from God, to God.”