

“BUT GOD ... ”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for the Sermon: Acts 2:22-24; Ephesians 2:1-6

Prayer: Holy Father, glorify yourself and your Son in the preaching of your glorious Gospel, both here and all over this city, nation and world. Declare with loudest voice the truth of your Son’s resurrection. Grant us a fresh vision of your glory. Merciful Father, grant to me now thought and expression that is worthy of the clarity and excellency of your Word. In the name of Jesus our risen Savior and Lord. Amen.

Introduction.

The conversation is usually a short one and it goes something like this:

“The answer is no.” “But, dad.”

Or “I said not now.” “But, mom.”

Kids today really should appreciate English grammar more than they do. They have no idea where they would be today without that handy little adversative conjunction “but.” How else could they disagree with what mom and dad say?

But it isn’t just kids who benefit from this little adversative conjunction. All of us would be in a world of hurt without it, a world of pain and suffering and darkness and hopelessness.

In the context of our homes it’s not a very pleasant word, *but* in the context of life it has saved our lives. We owe our lives to that word. I am well aware a sermon with a title like this is subject to lots of juvenile jokes and humor, but try to restrain.

Life can be lived on the left side of this conjunction or on the right side of the conjunction and which side you are on makes all the difference.

Life on the left side of “But God ...”.

This is the clear, unflinching, brutally honest teaching of Scripture. Look at how life is described in the first three verses of Ephesians 2:

Ephesians 2:1-3 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 *But God.*

Apart from Christ we were dead, we walked in the ways of death, we were in bondage to the passions of our flesh, we were God's enemies and objects of His just wrath.

Life on the left side of "but God" is summed up in three bleak words, sin, death and wrath.

Scripture paints a dark, bleak picture of human nature and the human condition before the "but God."

The cross says all have sinned and all are under God's judgement and wrath. No human being has ever found a way or every will find a way to satisfy the righteous demands of a Holy God.

It is spiritually fruitful to meditate on what life would be like if there was only the left side. Where would this world be, where would we be if God never intervened.

Life on the right side of "But God ...".

Ephesians 2:4 begins with that mighty adversative, that greatest of all antitheses.

"But God ..."

Two words that turned the world upside down. Two words that declare God has invaded our history. Two words that announce the great reversal.

Look at the series of contrasts created by "but God." Watch what happens when God steps in and consider how impossible all of this is without Him. Look what God has done for us.

Once we were dead in our sin, but God made us alive.

Once we walked in ways of that piper Satan, but God has seated us with Christ.

Once we were in bondage to the passions of our flesh, but God delivered us and set us free.

Once we were God's enemies and children of wrath, but God made us His children and heirs with Christ.

Once the wrath of God was on us, but God took that wrath and put it on Jesus.

Once we were sinners, but God loved us while we were yet sinners.

Thanks be to God for those words, full of love and mercy and grace and peace and hope.

God who raised Christ from the dead is the same God who is powerful enough to raise us from sin and death. Dead people cannot become alive, but for God.

Easter is a celebration of a double resurrection, Christ's and mine, Christ's and yours. What God did for Jesus, God does for us.

You have heard the old saying, "God helps those who help themselves." Easter declares that false. God helps those who can't help themselves, those who are helpless and hopeless. God helps those who left to themselves would die in their sin.

Romans 5:8 *but God* shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

A History of “But God ...”.

“But God” occurs over forty times in Scripture. Every time it represents a turning point, a pivotal moment in history. Each time it is a moment when God interjects Himself into our world and our lives and always with a redemptive purpose.

God is not a passive God, but an active God.

God is not a distant God, but a present God.

Adam and Eve rebelled in sin and were expelled from the Garden of Eden, but God said the seed of woman would crush the head of the serpent.

Noah was adrift in an ark full of animals for a year.

Genesis 8:1 But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the livestock that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided.

Abraham was a pagan idolater wandering in the Ur of the Chaldeans, but God called him out and sent him to a far country and promised to make him a great nation.

Sarah was barren 90 years but God promised a son and sent Isaac.

Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery and later left to languish in prison, but God delivered him and made him second in Egypt enabling Joseph to say to his brothers:

Genesis 50:20 You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

Moses was alone and forgotten herding sheep on the back side of the desert, but God appeared to him in a burning bush.

Naomi and Ruth were widowed and without hope, but God sent Boaz, a kinsman redeemer at just the right moment. And to them was born a son in the line of Jesus and the grandfather of King David.

David was fleeing for his life from King Saul:

I Samuel 23:14 Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand.

David sinned grievously against God and his heart was hard, but God sent Nathan to rebuke him and call him to repentance. Don't despise the severe kindness of God when He shows His love for us by sending someone to call us out of our sin.

His son died, but God gave him another son and made him a great king.

The prophets of Baal ruled the land under Jezebel, but God sent the prophet Elijah to destroy them.

Job was severely tested by Satan, but God spared him and restored to him all that he lost.

Daniel was thrown in a den of lions, but God shut up their mouths.

Jonah tried to run away for God, but God opened up the mouth of a whale.

Peter denied Jesus, but God restored him to a place of ministry.

Paul was the chief of sinners killing Christians, but God opened his blind eyes and showed him mercy and gave him a message to save sinners. Was his life easy after that?

II Corinthians 4:8-10 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

And then of course there is the greatest “But God” moment in history.

Acts 2:23-24 This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 **But God** raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Acts 13:28-30 Though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. 29 And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. 30 **But God** raised him from the dead.

Do you hear the message Peter and Paul make clear? The crucifixion was not some out of control, mob violence; it wasn’t some great cosmic interruption to God’s plans. Everything happened just as Scripture said, just as God deliberately planned.

The resurrection shows God’s ability to take the very worst efforts and actions of mankind, and reverse them for His glory and for good. Absolutely nothing we can do on earth can usurp or thwart God’s sovereignty.

“But God” marks God’s relentless, merciful interventions in human history.

What is your “but God”? Is there a “But God” turning point in your life? When did God intervene in your history? If you would be willing to write it down, I would be blessed to read it.

Implications and Application.

What side of “but God” are you living on?

To the left of “but God” are all the agonies of life, disease, addiction, abuse, distress, fear, anxiety, depression, darkness, hopelessness, broken relationships, deaths of loved ones, rebellious children, personal rejection.

To the left of “but God” are all the worst things that afflict us in our human existence.

Do you feel trapped?

Do you feel like you are losing control, like there is nothing you can do?

Do you feel like it’s hopeless?

Do you feel like life isn’t worth living?

Do you feel like everything or everyone is against you?

Has someone done something evil or sinful to you?

Do you believe that God can take all that left side stuff and turn it into right side stuff?

To the right of “but God” is hope and light and life.

Easter is about living on the right side of these two words.

Easter makes it possible for there to even be a right side to these two words.

Addictions, anger, bitterness, hate, but God.

Cancer, but God.

Drugs or divorce or death, but God.

Financial trouble, unemployment, but God.

Health issues, cancer, infertility, but God.

Injustice, unfair treatment, but God.

Spiritual emptiness, loneliness, or crushing losses, prodigal children, but God.

Terrorism and bombings, but God.

Psalm 73:26 My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Life is hard, but God is good.

Life is unpredictable, but God is sovereign.

Life is unfair, but God is just.

Life is short, but God is eternal. (Mary Farrar)

Nothing is impossible with God. You had a plan for your life, but God has a different plan and in the end it is better.

Proverbs 16:9 The heart of man plans his way, *but the Lord* establishes his steps.

I thought I needed, but God.

I thought I wanted, but God.

I thought it was time for, but God.

I thought I was ready for, but God.

I thought the best thing for my kids was, but God.

I thought the best path was, but God.

“But God” are the two words that change every person’s life. Until you can say “but God” you don’t know the Gospel, you don’t know the power of God, you don’t know the victory of Jesus, you don’t know the grace and mercy and forgiveness of God.

But if you know these two words, they will save your soul. If you have come to the end of yourself and have said “I have nothing left but God” then you have enough and you are in the best place.

“Whenever we face an impossible challenge or obstacle, remember these two words: ‘But God.’ His power is limitless. His character is dependable. His promises are sure. Whatever He says, He will do” (Ray Stedman).

These two words capture the whole message of the gospel of Christianity. If you had to define the Gospel in two words this might be as good as a definition as any, “but God.” The good news of the gospel tells us what we have done and then what God has done, how God has intervened. The gospel is about something that comes entirely from outside of us, something completely opposite of us or our world.

I Corinthians 15:56-57 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Prayer: from 2015

Holy Father, you have destroyed the last enemy death, you have defeated Satan, you have vanquished hell, you have raised to life your Son whom you crucified. Enable us, to live in the light and truth and promise of the resurrection. Reorder and reorient our lives around this one central truth, the reality of Jesus’ final and decisive triumph over death. Make this “but God” reality practical in all our daily lives, in all our daily interactions and relationships, to the glory of Jesus Christ, in whose mighty name we pray, Amen.