

# Sermon 19, You Didn't Save Yourself!, Ephesians 2:8-9

Dedicated, with gratitude, to Benjamin Keil, friend, reviewer, and theological editor.

"Faith is indeed our response, but it is not our contribution!" — Sinclair B. Ferguson

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**Proposition:** This passage really does declare that salvation from first to last is a gift from God, so much so that not one of us can say “I meaningfully contributed to my own salvation.”

## **Introduction**

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, this passage is wonderfully clear and precise. In a few words the apostle declares how salvation works and its nature as a gift from God. Yet, in a departure from my usual style, I feel compelled to spend a generous chunk of the sermon expounding false interpretations of this text. Normally I try to stick to the positive, for three reasons: it is more difficult to say what the text really does mean, it is more in keeping with the positive-thinking spirit of the age, and it is more edifying to us to understand what the Spirit is communicating. But two false interpretations of this statement are so pervasive in our era, and have infected the thinking of so many of us even in our circles and denomination, that I think it only right to describe these interpretations to you and sketch the sort of lifestyle they might produce. I will then follow up those descriptions of error with a clear and full presentation of the truth, in order to help us understand and avoid the chasm of error on this point. Ultimately, of course, the topic we’re looking at is salvation, and salvation must concern each one of us. How does God save? What does it really mean to say that we have been saved by grace through faith? And why does Paul himself, in his positive presentation of the truth of salvation, include two denials and a fear clause indicating what will happen if his denials are not scrupulously observed? It is vital to understand the mind of the Spirit on this matter, and my goal is to answer these questions by looking at three fully-formed interpretations of the text and then comparing them with each other and the text to see which one is genuinely correct. We will end by seeing that salvation is so genuinely a gift of God from first to last that not one Christian can contribute to his own salvation in any meaningful way. Salvation is so thoroughly God’s work that you cannot even meaningfully contribute to it. You can only receive it as what it is — a gift. That is the correct interpretation of this text. But first, let’s look at the two competing views.

### **I. The Roman Interpretation of Ephesians 2:8-9**

The first error I’d like to address is the Roman Catholic error. According to the official teaching of the Church of Rome, the meaning of this passage can be summed up in the four points I have listed here.

#### **A. Grace Is God’s Helping You to be Good**

Rome defines grace as “*favor*, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1996). Grace is God’s help, something that comes in from outside and enables you to perform good works that would have been completely impossible for you without the work of the Holy Spirit infusing perfect love into your heart. So when the apostle writes “By grace are you saved,” the faithful Catholic understands him to be saying, “By God’s empowering help you have been saved.” On this reading of Ephesians 2:8-9, “grace” means “God’s infusion of love, His assistance helping me to be good.”

## **B. “You Have Been Saved”**

Well, the apostle says you have been saved by grace. What does this statement mean?

### **1. You Have Received God’s Help**

It means that you have received God’s grace, which is His assistance enabling you to perform meritorious good works such that it is fitting for God to reward you with final salvation.

### **2. God Will Always Keep Helping You**

God’s help, once offered, remains always offered. He will always keep helping you; He will always continue to give you more of His grace to enhance your spiritual performance, as long you continue to make spiritual efforts. So long as you are trying, God’s grace will be right there to assist you and enable you to accomplish things that please Him, thus making it fitting for Him to reward you with eternal life in Heaven and the fullness of salvation.

### **3. You Can Reject His Help at Any Time**

Yet though this is good news, you might call it mixed good news. You see, the perfect tense “you have been saved” is not intended to lull you into a false sense of security. From the Catholic perspective, yes, you have been saved, but that in itself is no guarantee that you will remain saved. You can reject God’s help at any time. You can kill the love for God in your soul through really bad sins, technically known as “mortal sins.” At any point between now and your death, you can reject God’s salvation, walk away from His help, and stop cooperating with Him.

Why is this? Well, in the final analysis the Roman Catholic teaching is that salvation is a two-stage process in which the final stage is definitive. Many other Christian groups believe this as well. According to all of these groups, the salvation of which Paul speaks here is merely the first stage, and the final stage is not complete until you are actually welcomed into Heaven itself. The first stage is all by grace; it is entirely by God’s help that you are brought into this state of salvation, which in the Catholic mind is a state in which you can do good and be good, assisted by the help of God’s grace. Your performance — i.e., how well you cooperate with God’s helping grace — determines whether you will be welcome in Heaven. Only if you fight the good fight, finish the course, and keep the faith all the way until you die will you then be finally saved, in the sense of the second and definitive stage of salvation. You will have been counted worthy to attain to the age to come, as Jesus put it. The first stage of salvation is by faith, but the final stage is by faith and works. If, sometime after receiving your original salvation, you decide to reject God’s grace and stop being good, you will not receive the second stage of salvation.

So when a Catholic reads “By grace you have been saved,” he reads “By God’s help you have been brought into a state where you please God and can cooperate with His work in your life, thus (but only thus) remaining the kind of person who is welcome in Heaven.”

## **C. Faith Accepts God’s Help**

Similarly, then, reading on, the Catholic would understand Paul’s phrase “through faith” to mean that faith is the act by which you accept God’s help and cooperate with it. To respond in faith is to assent to God’s promises and the truth of His work in your life, such that you begin to want

what God wants. “By rightly responding to God’s help, you have been brought into a state where you can do things that please God.”

#### **D. God Freely Chose to Help You**

Finally, then, how would a Catholic understand the denials in these verses? When Paul says that this is “not of yourselves,” “not of works,” and adds that someone would boast if it was of ourselves or of works, what does he mean? Well, he means that God’s decision to bring you into a place where your works can be pleasing to Him was not based on any works that you did. It was not your own actions that led God to issue you an invitation to cooperate with Him. It was purely His own free choice, “caused” (if you can say that anything God does is caused) by His love, mercy, kindness, and gracious disposition, as the previous sentence says. In other words, all of the denials refer specifically to the first stage of salvation, the stage which is under discussion here. They can and must be understood of the primal salvation, the original act by which God gave you the opportunity to cooperate with His grace through faith. Of course final salvation (the second stage) is “of ourselves” and “of works” in an important sense. We must cooperate with God’s gift of love in order to be finally “saved.” Thus, we are a source (not the only source, but one of the two sources) of our own salvation in the secondary sense. Nonetheless, our cooperation should not be boasted about because though we must cooperate with God, still salvation is only through His assistance. First-stage salvation is a gift of God, given just because God desired to give it; second-stage salvation is a reward with which God gives fittingly to those who have done what pleases Him.

If this interpretation is unfamiliar to you, I want you to think seriously about it. Reread the text with me. Can you fit it neatly into the Catholic mold? I hope you can at least understand how such a reading appeals to those who hold to it. Everything in Scripture that talks about the freedom of salvation and the absence of works is simply a reference to the first stage; everything that talks about the necessity of works and the need to please God and the gift of the Holy Spirit helping us to obey is a reference to the second stage of salvation. Such is the simplicity and even beauty of the Roman Catholic reading. Again, we will see in a few moments why we ought to consider this reading to be incorrect. But before we reject it, it is imperative that we understand it correctly.<sup>1</sup>

What kind of lifestyle might this interpretation produce? I cannot do better than to refer you to the text of the ancient Requiem Mass. Any of the settings by the great composers, especially the inordinately famous ones by Mozart and Verdi, will give you a sense of the fear and trembling before God’s majesty that this doctrine produces. The knowledge that the second stage of salvation is on my shoulders, and that if I mess up and die in a state of mortal sin I’m

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<sup>1</sup> By the way, let me make it clear that I am not saying that a committed Roman Catholic necessarily *must* read Ephesians 2:8-9 this way. I am simply using this text as a scaffold to expound what I understand the Roman doctrine of salvation to be. Paul’s words are quite capable of being explained in a sense that makes them the vehicle of a Tridentine soteriology. Doing that, and only that, rather than suggesting that all Catholics read these two verses in exactly the way I have just explained them, is my goal here.

damned, can make for a tremulous, terrified Christian (though of course, in the modern era it rarely does). God's free salvation is only enough to get me through the door; what keeps me in, in the final analysis, is whether (or how well) I cooperate with God's grace — in short, my own performance. Is it fitting that my life should be rewarded with Heaven? Keep in mind that even if it is, a single mortal sin destroys that fittingness unless and until is absolved through the proper channels. Even with the performance-enhancing qualities of God's grace sustaining me, my encounter with the crushing majesty of Almighty God may not end well. Anyone who claims assurance of (second-stage) salvation in this life is therefore anathema.

That is the form of Christian life which the Roman Catholic interpretation of Ephesians 2:8-9 produces. Now for something more or less opposite:

## **II. The American Interpretation of Ephesians 2:8-9**

In keeping with the geographical theme, we look next at the American interpretation of Ephesians 2:8-9. Rather than being derived from any one authoritative source, this is my attempt to synthesize from the culture around me how a nominal Christian who happened to read the Bible one day might understand these verses.

### **A. Grace Is God's General Disposition to be Impressed with Me**

First of all, the nominal American Christian would probably read "By grace are you saved" and think "God's grace is His general disposition to be impressed with me."

### **B. Faith Is an Inner Certainty that I'm Going to Heaven**

Faith, by the same token, becomes merely a confidence that I'm going to Heaven. If you ask me why, I might say "Because I'm a good person" or "Because God is well-disposed to me and wants me with my loved ones forever, and He loves everybody."

### **C. I Wouldn't Dream of Bragging About Being Saved**

And as for the denials, that this salvation is not of ourselves and not of works, the nominal American Christian would presumably say something like the following.

#### **1. It's Within Reach of Anybody**

"Everybody is, or can be, born again. Everybody's going to Heaven! All you have to do is not enslave anyone or commit genocide!" The content of this faith is really no deeper than "Believe that I'm going to Heaven."

#### **2. I Wouldn't Dare Assert that Any Religion Can't Save**

"Besides, preacher, I wouldn't presume to question anyone's religion. Who am I to say that Judaism or Buddhism aren't true?" And indeed, when "salvation" is no longer understood as an objective event but rather as a subjective feeling, of course it's mean-spirited to question someone else's salvation. Who am I to judge that a certain set of claims about religious questions are false?

It doesn't take long to sum this stuff up because it is more a set of feelings than a coherent body of thought. In cold black-and-white, it looks remarkably silly. But such are the central dogmas of moralistic therapeutic deism. By these lights, anyone who is not Hitler can be saved because salvation is nothing more than a feeling of confidence about a future life.

The kind of life this doctrine produces is one that avoids much deep thought, and certainly much deep thought about the truths and teachings of the Bible. If you want to go deeper, or to get into a discussion of what the text is actually saying, you will probably need to look elsewhere. The folks who hold this view are likely not very interested in discussing it further. Their life will largely revolve around entertainment and fun rather than around deep thinking or attempting to love God with all their mind.

### **III. The Real Meaning of Ephesians 2:8-9**

Well, those are the two misconceptions of the text. Both the Roman interpretation and the American interpretation have serious problems. The problems I want to focus on lie primarily in the understanding of the words used. Grace is not an infused substance which helps the believer perform spiritually good works, but rather is a disposition in God. Salvation is not a two-stage process in which the second stage is definitive; it is a once-for-all event, inamissible and organically unified from first to last. Faith is responding to God not only with cooperation but with trust in His promise; and the denials Paul gives relate not merely to the first stage of salvation, but to every part and aspect of the entire event we term “salvation.”

#### **A. Grace Is God’s Favorable Attitude and Actions Toward the Undeserving**

Let’s look first of all at God’s grace. The passage which defines Paul’s understanding of grace is Romans 11:6, “Now if by grace, then it is not by works; otherwise grace ceases to be grace” (HCSB). According to Paul’s own definition of this term, then, grace as such excludes works as such. Far from being a God-given substance helping us to be good, then, grace is actually something else. It is not primarily something that comes into us and helps us work.

Let’s return to our Ephesians passage. Paul just explained how God saved us using the terminology of resurrection, ascension, and session. All three verbs had God as their subject. He made us alive, He raised us up, and He seated us in the heavenlies. Now, when the apostle repeats here what he said in v. 5, that you have been saved by grace, of whom should we think as the agent? Obviously “Grace” is not a goddess, or someone’s girlfriend. I think we can all agree that in this sentence, the obvious candidate is God. By God you have been saved. That is, it was God who brought us into this state called “salvation.” But Paul uses the word “grace” to emphasize a disposition in God. God, *moved by His graciousness*, has saved you. In other words, “grace” is fundamentally an attitude rather than a substance. So far, we could say that the American interpretation is correct over against the Roman one. But grace is not a disposition in God to be impressed with everything that has two legs and a beer belly. Rather, it is a disposition in God to show favor toward His creatures. It is a disposition to not always claim His rights, to demand justice, but rather to give to others things that by definition they do not deserve. It is an attitude which results in actions. Now, one of those actions is of course to help people do good things. No question. But, technically speaking, that is an act done by God in His grace rather than a supernatural love infused into someone. The pouring out of God’s love in the human heart is a *result of* grace rather than being in itself grace.

So when we Reformed read “By grace you have been saved,” we read “God, who is full of grace, has saved you precisely because He is gracious.”

## **B. The Supreme Act of God’s Free Favor Is to Save**

And indeed, brothers and sisters, it was God’s grace that led Him to create the world. It was God’s grace that led Him to make us rational creatures and to paint breathtaking sunsets in the sky every evening. But the greatest act of His grace is to save sinners through the sacrifice of His Son.

### **1. God Saves by Direct Act**

First, then, we can assert that God saves by direct act. “Salvation” is God’s taking you out of one state and putting you into another. It’s a move from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of His beloved Son. But though we know whom salvation saves (us), what exactly does salvation “save” us from?

### **2. God Saves from Sin**

It saves us from sin. We are delivered from the power and penalty of sin. Sin is our greatest problem, the thing that separates us from God. But God freely did us the favor of taking away our sins and removing us from the dominion of sin!

### **3. God Saves from His Own Wrath**

But more than that, He saves us from His own wrath. Sin was a problem because it made God angry with us. In common with the medieval Christians who wrote the Dies Irae and the other texts of the Requiem Mass, we recognize the threat of the wrath of God. God’s salvation was not just from sin, death, and Satan. God saved us from Himself. Remember that we were by nature children of wrath, as Ephesians 2:3 explicitly states? We were doomed to suffer God’s wrath. Yet He saved us from that wrath by pouring it out on His Son instead.

### **4. God Grants New Life with Himself to Everyone He Saves**

And so, when we say that God saves by grace, what are we positively saying? Not just that we are freed from sin and wrath, but positively that we are given an inheritance and position as adopted sons of God. We are not only taken out of the dungeon; like Joseph, we are made rulers over all the land of Egypt! We are not just freed from eternal death; we are also granted eternal life, clothed with the righteousness of Christ, gifted with the Holy Spirit Himself and with every other benefit and blessing listed back in chapter 1 and described in the previous sentence of our text this morning (i.e, in vv. 4-7). To be saved is to be made the beneficiary of everything God has to offer.

### **5. God’s Salvation Cannot Be Lost**

That, brothers and sisters, includes the gift of perseverance. You see, we do not believe that salvation is a two-stage process. Jesus Christ saves with eternal salvation, salvation that persists from the moment when it is granted on to the end of eternity. That’s what Hebrews 5:9 says: “And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (NKJ). Yes, the salvation is for those obey — but it is never because they obey. You see, we do not envision salvation as a cooperative endeavor between God’s grace and our obedience.

Salvation is an action God does for us — and therefore, it is not an action we can undo. We'll get into that in just a moment.

### **C. Faith Is Our Trusting Response to God's Promise of Salvation in Christ**

Paul says that we have been saved, that is, that we have been freed from sin and God's wrath and made His children and heirs, and that God has done this precisely and entirely because He is gracious. We respond to that promise by faith — by trusting that God has done and will do for us exactly what He has promised. Faith is our response to His work, not our contribution to His work. It is the outstretched hand that receives the gift of salvation by grace. Grace is the efficient cause, faith the instrumental cause of salvation.

### **D. Salvation, Then, Is and Always Remains God's Free Gift**

Yes, you have to accept the gift by faith. But when you are saved, you are passive while God reaches down, forgives your sins, adopts you as His child, and then starts renovating you into the image of His Son. You work with Him after you have been saved, not so that you will pass muster when the time comes for stage 2, but because you have already been fully saved. Paul first says that salvation is something God does, adds that He does it by grace, and then calls it a gift. Salvation as a whole — not just as a first stage in a multi-stage process — is something that God gives you from His own resources and munificence. It is not an “of course” kind of thing, as the American interpretation holds. It is a magnificent gift which God did not have to give.

#### **1. You Cannot Meaningfully Contribute to Your Own Salvation**

In case you misunderstand “grace” and “gift,” Paul includes a denial. He denies that salvation is “of yourselves.” What does that mean? It means that you cannot meaningfully contribute to your own salvation *at any stage*. When He saves you, you're saved and that's it. You can and must contribute to your sanctification, but again, sanctification is a *result* of salvation rather than being itself salvation. This is the correct way to understand Paul's denial here.

Don't forget the OT background. Jonah tells us that “salvation is of the LORD” (2:9). Conversely, then, Paul denies that salvation is of ourselves. In other words, salvation is not a cooperative project. It is not something that is both from God and from you. Keep in mind that Jonah is talking about what could only be the final stage of salvation if it really is a two-stage process. In other words, from beginning to end salvation is of God exclusively, in such a way that it is not “of” or from us. It is not sourced in us, based in us, dependent on us, or resultant from us in any meaningful sense.

It seems to me that claiming “Salvation is not of yourselves” means “The first stage of salvation is not of yourselves, but the second most certainly is (though of course in such a way that it is of the LORD too)” is a faulty reading of the text. The opposition between God's work and ours in this instance is too plain to miss, and all Christian traditions acknowledge it, at least with respect to the first stage of salvation. Because we believe that the first stage of salvation is in fact the *only* stage of salvation, though, we believe that salvation from first to last is of God and therefore not of ourselves.



## **2. You Cannot, Strictly Speaking, Be Saved by Anything You Do**

Indeed, Paul's second denial only highlights the contrast. Not only is salvation "not of yourselves;" it is also "not of works." It does not have its source, basis, or ground in works. It is not caused by works in any way. Again, to refer this only to the first-stage of a multi-stage salvation process is simply inadequate. "Not of works (until you start working, at which point the next stage of salvation most certainly is of works)" is not what he says here. The entire contents of the parenthesis are absent from this text (and, I contend, from the rest of the New Testament as well). These categorical statements clearly exclude both works and we ourselves from being in any sense the principle from which our own salvation flows. Three additional considerations make me even more convinced that "not of works" means "You cannot be saved by anything you do."

### **a) The Word Is Passive**

First of all, the verb "be saved" is a passive verb. Nowhere is it used in the active voice with a human being as the subject to talk about this kind of salvation, the salvation from sin, death, and the wrath of God which we simply call "being saved." To "save ourselves" (as the Humanist Manifesto II put it) is a concept foreign to Scripture. The whole reason Jesus came was because we could not save ourselves. The idea that our Savior left us in some sense responsible to save ourselves is just a bit absurd. After all, in Biblical usage, you can be saved or get saved, but you cannot save yourself.

### **b) The Images Are Passive**

Furthermore, the images the Bible uses — resurrection, being born again, being grafted into Christ the vine — are passive images. You cannot give yourself new life. You cannot give birth to yourself. You cannot graft yourself. All of these things describe salvation in its key aspects, and they are passive through and through. But do they apply as well to the alleged second stage of salvation? After all, Christ tells us to abide in Him. Micah tells us to walk with God. Paul tells us to stand firm. And these images are clearly active, not passive, and they clearly describe what happens after you're resurrected, born again, and grafted.

But here's the thing. You will not find walking with God described as salvation, saving, etc. Same thing for standing firm or abiding in Christ. Yet Christ tells us that the one who endures to the end will be saved, and John that the one who overcomes will be given the right to the tree of life. Isn't that attaining to the second stage of salvation in part through one's own efforts? No. We acknowledge the reality and possibility of apostasy. There are many who believed themselves to be saved and then fell away and are in Hell today. They did not endure to the end, and they were not ultimately saved. But this can be explained at least as well, all other things being equal, by saying that these apostates were never truly saved as by saying that they received first-stage salvation but missed the second stage. In other words, the two-stage theory is not a necessary explanation. The evidence for an active second stage of salvation can also be compatible with a passive original salvation which is complete and inamissible.

### **c) The Thing Itself Is God's Action, Not Yours**

Here in our text, salvation without limit or qualification is ascribed to God. It is the salvation that categorically and totally delivers us from the condition described in vv. 1-3. It is the salvation that made us alive and raised us and seated us with Christ. All of these are God's actions because salvation is His action. He saves; we are saved. That is a fundamental truth, and it applies to all parts of salvation, including the final declaration of "righteous" and inclusion among the blessed in Heaven. You don't get yourself to Heaven; God puts you there.

### **d) Nonetheless, Salvation Includes Massive, Life-Altering Consequences**

Yet, with that said, obviously salvation includes massive consequences. We disagree with the American position, which says that a saved person can look just like an unsaved person and ultimately there is no difference between the two! We Reformed agree with the Roman insistence that a saved person will and must be a good person. Of course! We simply disagree that being good is itself salvation or a key part of salvation. It is a result of salvation rather than a part of it. (Compare v. 10 of Ephesians 2, in which Paul gives the reason why he denies that salvation is "of yourselves" or "of works.")

### **3. You Cannot Pride Yourself on Your Status as Saved**

And so Paul excludes boasting. He does so by the law of faith. God saved you. You received that salvation by faith, but you did not contribute to it. It came to you fully formed. Don't boast about it! The reason you are saved is simply that God had mercy on you. Bragging and boasting and saying how amazing you are should be the farthest thing from any Christian's habits and attitudes.

Brothers and sisters, does this news of salvation by grace through faith humble you? Does it make you rejoice? Does it make you confident that God will complete the work of salvation He's begun in you? He is faithful, He will bring it pass. He saves by grace, through faith. Believe Him. Amen.