

BY GRACE, THROUGH FAITH

Ephesians 2:8-9

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For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

There are some verses in the Bible that are so important to our understanding of the gospel that every Christian should know them by heart. John 3:16 is one of these: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Ephesians 2:8-9 falls into this same category, as Bible teaching essential to a sound grasp of Christianity. Here, the apostle Paul makes the definitive statement relating grace, salvation, faith and works: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

SALVATION BY GRACE

In Ephesians 2:1-10, Paul’s purpose is to explain how salvation comes to us as individuals. But he wants to do more than explain the doctrine of salvation: he wants to magnify the glory of God because of it. To that end, his key message is the one that opens verse 8: “For by grace you have been saved.”

For Paul, this is the stupendous good news of the gospel, that God saves sinners by grace alone. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains,

It is in spite of us that God forgives us. We are Christian not because we are good people; we are Christian because, though we were bad people, God had mercy upon us and sent his Son to die for us. We are saved entirely by the grace of God; there is no human contribution whatsoever, and if you think there is, you are denying the central biblical doctrine.¹

This is what Paul has been driving at in this whole section. This is why he began chapter 2 by saying that men and women in sin are spiritually dead, as unable to contribute something positive to their salvation as a dead man is able to rise from the grave. This is why in the midst of verses 4-6, which recount what salvation has done to us, Paul broke in and exclaimed, “By grace you have been saved” (v. 5). This is why verse 7 gives as the reason for our salvation, “so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace.” Salvation is all of grace; this is the glory of Christianity, that God saves us who had no power to save ourselves, who had nothing to commend ourselves to God, and who had nothing to offer in payment. This is Paul’s great explanation of salvation: “For by grace you have been saved.”

We always need to define our terms, and there are two main ways in which the word *grace* may be taken. First, it denotes *an attitude within God*. God is gracious. A.W. Tozer writes, “Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits upon the undeserving... A self-caused propensity to pity the wretched, spare the guilty, welcome the outcast, and bring into favor those who were before under just disapprobation.”² As the result of God’s grace, Christians receive blessings we have not deserved and could never merit.

It is grace that causes a wealthy man to voluntarily pay the tuition of a poor student who otherwise could never go to college. It is by grace that a family takes in an orphan and adopts him or her into a loving home. But all these human examples, glorious as they are, pale before the grace of God. God responds to the guilt and rebellion of his creatures by offering his own Son to pay the debt of their sin and by

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Faith on Trial*, 171.

² A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 145-146.

renewing them with a new spirit to love and serve him and enjoy blessings as his children. We are saved, then, because of the gracious love in God that causes him to show so much kindness to us in Jesus Christ.

No wonder that when Paul considers God's grace, he wants us to praise God. What a terrible pity that so many people hate and refuse God, not knowing his grace, which they so greatly need. This is what we need to tell people, that God has grace to forgive them and to bless them. This is what God wants for people – to be their God and be gracious to them.

The second way in which we should consider the term *grace* is as a system of disbursement. God has blessings to give. God has eternal life to bestow on his creatures; he has fellowship with himself; he has participation in the blessed rule of his Son, Jesus Christ. The question is, How will he grant these blessings?

There really are only two ways we can gain or receive something: either by earning it or by receiving it as a gift. So it is with God. He may grant his blessings on the basis of merit or on the basis of grace. In Romans 4:4, Paul acknowledges these options: "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due." These are the only two possibilities: as a gift or as our due. History shows that man prefers merit as the way of gaining God's blessings. This is what human religion always teaches unless corrected by God's Word. Man wants to stand on his own two feet and pay his own way. Man wants to preserve his own dignity, even in the presence of God, and receive a salvation that will promote his own glory.

The problem is that what man has merited before God is not blessing but condemnation. This was Paul's point in verses 1-3: "By nature, we are children of wrath." Just by being born as members of the rebel human race, just by being the offspring of the sinners Adam and Eve, no man or woman can ever stand before God and demand blessing. Furthermore, as Paul writes in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Yes, merit is a way in which you might procure God's blessings, but it is a way that is no longer open to you or any other sinner. The prophet Isaiah knew this, lamenting that even

our supposed good works “are like a polluted garment” (Isa. 64:6), helplessly tainted by sin.

People say, “All I want is for God to be just to me.” But you do not want God’s justice; under God’s justice you will be justly condemned to hell. But because God is gracious, and because he wants his grace to be glorified forever, God offers another way for you to be saved, by grace. God offers to satisfy his justice through the death of Jesus Christ in your place. God will then bless you with salvation – forgiveness and eternal life – as a gift. The result is, as verse 9 concludes, “that no one may boast” before God. God wants to be God and he wants the worship of his people, not the boasting of self-righteous creatures. “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord,” says the Bible, “and he will lift you up.” God delights to save by grace, so that no one may boast before him.

SALVATION THROUGH FAITH

The Bible makes it plain that not everyone is or will be saved, so there has to be something that distinguishes those who have received God’s grace and that brings it to them. Some people think this is nationality; Americans seem to think, for instance, that by virtue of our nationality God is on our side. Others think it is church membership or baptism; so long as they stay in the church and receive its approval, they will be all right. Others believe it is some intense emotional experience that ensures God’s favor. But Paul tells us in verse 8 the one thing that provides us with God’s grace and thus saves us: “For by grace you have been saved through faith.” Salvation is *by grace* and *through faith*.

Faith is another word that requires definition. Norman Vincent Peale popularized a concept of faith that is widely held today. To him, faith was a general sort of optimism. His best-selling book was titled *The Power of Positive Thinking*. What we should just do, he said, is believe that all things are possible to us, and they will be. He wrote, “According to your faith in yourself, according to your faith in your job, according to your faith in God, this far will you get and no

further.”³ Faith, according to this view, is a power that you need to exercise.

But this is not the Bible’s teaching regarding faith. What matters about biblical faith is not the faith itself but faith’s object. What matters is not just *that* you believe, but *what* you believe and *in whom* you believe. If what you believe in is not true and not saving, then your faith will be in vain. Christian faith is in God and in Jesus Christ, in the truths of God’s Word and his promises for those who trust him. Faith is relying on God, receiving him and his Word for salvation. God has spoken and we are to believe his Word; God has acted for our salvation and we are to rely upon his saving work in Jesus Christ.

When we think of saving faith we should think of three necessary components. The first of these is *knowledge*. To have faith in something you must have knowledge and understanding of it. This is why the Bible is so important to Christian faith. We must know what God has revealed about himself, what he says about us and our situation, what he has done for us, and especially about Jesus Christ and his life, death, and resurrection for our salvation.

But knowledge alone is not enough. There are plenty of scholars who can explain all the doctrines of the Bible, but who do not believe they are true. Therefore, saving faith must include *belief* or *assent*. We must not only know what God has revealed, but we must believe in it.

But even that is not enough to have saving faith. The apostle James pointed out that the demons know about God and believe that he is who he says he is. But they tremble! (Ja. 2:19). Saving faith requires that we not only know and believe what the Bible says about God and Jesus Christ. It also requires *commitment*.

The first part of commitment is *trust*. Committing to God means trusting in him and in his Word and in the Savior Jesus Christ. Trust involves personal acceptance and reliance. The Westminster Confession of Faith helpfully states that “the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life” (XIV.2). Charles

³ Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952), 99.

Spurgeon writes, “The chief part of faith lies in... taking hold of it as being ours, and in the resting on it for salvation... It will not save me to know that Christ is *a* Saviour; but it will save me to *trust* him to be *my* Savior.”⁴

Commitment also involves a *surrender* of ourselves to God. Arthur Pink explains that faith

lies in the complete surrender of the heart and life to a divine Person. It consists in a throwing down of the weapons of our rebellion against Him. It is the total disowning of allegiance to the old master – Satan, sin, self, and a declaring ‘we *will* have this Man to reign over us’ (Lk. 19:14)... It is ‘receiving Christ Jesus *the Lord* (Col. 2:6), giving Him the throne of our hearts, turning over to Him the control and regulation of our lives.’⁵

This is precisely what we find in the Bible when people came to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Doubting Thomas knew Jesus, but he held back from believing. Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection and offered to have Thomas place his fingers in his wounds. At that moment, Thomas came to a saving faith: he worshiped Jesus, saying, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn. 20:28).

Zacchaeus was a sinful tax collector who preyed upon the weak. When Jesus passed through Jericho, Zacchaeus was interested and so he climbed into the sycamore tree to see him. Jesus called Zacchaeus to himself, and we know from what happened that Zacchaeus committed himself to Jesus in saving faith. He replied, “Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold” (Lk. 19:8).

Acts 16 tells us about Lydia, a successful businesswoman who Paul met in Philippi. God opened her heart and, having believed, she opened up her house and urged that Paul allow her to support him and the work of the church. Believing, she gave herself wholly to Christ.

The apostle Paul himself provides a prime example of saving faith. He was a violent hater of Christians, devoting himself to their torment and destruction. But when Jesus revealed himself to Paul and called him into his service, Paul offered the whole of his life to proclaiming

⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1880), 3:260.

⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *The Life of David* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 260-261.

the gospel. He who had wielded a harsh sword of hatred became the greatest teacher of the glory of God's grace.

These are examples of true saving faith, which always culminates in a commitment to Christ that involves personal trust and surrender. Saving faith involves what happens in a wedding ceremony. In the gospel, God's Son says to us, "I will be your Savior and will take you as my bride." In faith, we reply, "I trust in you alone for my salvation, and I give myself into your service and rely upon you for all my blessing forever." Jesus then gives us his own name. We were Sinner but now are Christian, and this denotes the change that is to characterize our lives.

THE GIFT OF GOD

Faith is a subject that is often confused, which is why we need such careful teaching on it. We have already noted that faith is not merely a sort of optimism, but depends on its object.

Furthermore, saving faith involves knowledge, belief, and commitment. But Paul says three things in verse 8 that we also need to appreciate. The first has to do with the word *through*, which Paul applies to faith. We are saved by grace and *through* faith.

The point is how faith functions in our salvation. Paul says that grace comes to us *through* faith. One way to think of this is of faith as a vessel in which grace is received. Think of a picnic on a hot day, in which there is a large container of lemonade. The soothing drink is available, but you still need a cup in which to pour it. If someone has no cup, they cannot have anything to drink. The cup is not a way of earning the lemonade, but is the means of receiving it. Likewise, faith does not merit us God's grace, but is the means whereby we receive salvation from God.⁶

Perhaps an even better way of understanding how we are saved through faith is to think of faith as the channel by which salvation flows to us. Grace flows through faith as water flows through a pipe. This keeps us from thinking that it is the strength or virtue of our faith

⁶ Adapted from Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 104.

that saves us, when, in fact, we are saved by the grace which comes through our faith. Salvation is *by grace* – that is the ground or the basis for our salvation – and *through faith* – that is the channel by which salvation comes to me.

Next, we must understand where faith comes from. Do you trust Christ because you are better or more spiritually motivated than people who don't? Is faith just the way we prove our worth and earn salvation? Many people in the church think this way, that faith is basically a work that God accepts because full obedience to the law is just too hard. Paul destroys such a theory in verse 8, writing, "This is not your doing; it is the gift of God."

There is dispute among scholars as to what Paul is saying here. Does *gift* point back to "salvation" or to "faith"? Is Paul saying that salvation is not our own doing or that faith is not our own doing, but is the gift of God? The answer is that it does not matter; Paul's point is the same in either case. If salvation is not of our own doing, and salvation comes through faith, then Paul's point must be that faith is God's gift and not something we produce or possess on our own.

This is why the salvation that comes through faith is by grace alone. Obviously, faith is something we do; we are actively involved in it. We have to believe and commit to God. But, since faith is something God works into us, something he gives out of his own sheer grace, salvation is not a result of our works. In Romans 4:16, Paul writes, "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace." Faith is the one way in which I may be personally entered into salvation, while that salvation remains the gift of God's grace, with all glory going to him. Faith is not an achievement, but faith is a gift God graciously works into us by the power of his Holy Spirit. God promised this in Ezekiel 36:26, "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

Why is it that you believe on Jesus whereas your old friend does not? Both of you were, according to Paul, "dead in your trespasses." So why are you saved and not others? The answer is not because of something you did or something better in you, for there is nothing better in you. The answer is the free and sovereign grace of God, who

gives faith to those whom he would save as the instrument of their receiving Jesus Christ and all the blessings that are in him.

For this reason, we should never trust in our faith – weak and inconstant as it is – but in God who showed his grace for us by giving us the faith that joins us to a strong Savior.

Paul makes this clear with the third statement he makes regarding faith. First he described it as the vessel or channel through which grace comes to us. Then he called faith God's gift. Finally, in verse 9, he contrasts faith with works. He says, "By grace you have been saved through faith... Not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

We contrasted grace with merit. Those are the two ways of salvation and, having sinned, we now can be saved only by grace. Similarly, faith and works are two opposing instruments of salvation. We merit salvation through works, but we receive grace through faith.

Another way of saying this is to observe that you must trust either in your own works or in the works of Jesus Christ. Someone's works must commend you to God, causing him to receive you as worthy and righteous. Most people today are trusting in their own works, even if they are religious ones. Why should you be allowed to enter into heaven? we ask. They reply in terms of their own works: I am a basically good person, I have attended church, I have given money, I have prayed, I have memorized verses in the Bible, I have not committed any serious crimes.

That is salvation through works! How appealing it is according to the spirit of our age. Self-justification is the way of man. Self-glory is the kind of salvation sinners want. But understand that God utterly rejects anyone who comes to him that way. Whatever you think of yourself, God cannot and will not get over the reality of your sin. You have exalted yourself against him and stained yourself with iniquity. "The wages of sin is death," he says (Rom. 6:23). Jesus said to such people who do not trust him as Savior, "Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:24).

This was all dramatized at the beginning of the Bible when Cain and Abel, the two sons of Adam and Eve, approached God for acceptance.

Cain offered his works, the fruit of the soil he had farmed. It seemed so impressive to him, but not to God. Abel came not with a symbol of his works but a symbol of his faith in God's promise to save. He brought a lamb, pointing forward to the cross of Jesus Christ. Cain by works was rejected while Abel through faith was blessed.

Abel put his faith not in his own works but in the work of Jesus Christ. So must we. Christians are saved by works – just not works that we do. We are saved by the work of Christ, fulfilling all righteousness in our place and dying for our sins on the cross. By faith, we repudiate our own works and receive his for our salvation. As Augustus Toplady put it in his hymn: “Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law's demands / could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow / all for sin could not atone; thou must save, and thou alone.”⁷

“The wages of sin is death,” Paul wrote. That is our problem and our works cannot solve it. He therefore gave the solution: “But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). For this reason, salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, is salvation in Jesus Christ alone. It is coming to God as Abel did, looking in faith to the cross of Christ, where the grace of God brought forth a Savior to take away our sin and grant to us eternal life.

NO BOASTING?

Paul concludes this vital passage saying, “So that no one may boast.” I want to conclude by saying that Paul really does not mean that. Paul does not mean that in reply to this salvation by grace, through faith, in Christ, we ought not to boast. What he means is that we must not boast in ourselves. But the very thing Paul wants is for us to boast in God, to glory in God, to extol before all the world this salvation that is by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Indeed, this is the best way for you and me to make a difference in our generation. Ours is an age that delights in boasting in self. Ours is the time of the end-zone dance and the self-promoting political ad. Christians are to stand in contrast to the vain boasts of a spiritually

⁷ Augustus Toplady, “Rock of Ages Cleft for Me,” 1776.

dead, sin-enslaved, God-condemned world, by living humbly before God. By grace, we speak of a God whose mercy overwhelms our sin. Through faith, we bear testimony to an all-sufficient salvation freely given from the hands of our loving God. And this is our boast, given by the testimony of our lives: “To God alone be the glory, for the riches of his grace and his kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”