

## One Way Back: Grace Alone

*Five to One: How the Reformation*

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**Bible Text:** Ephesians 2:8-10  
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*Father, it is a truth that we will never tire of singing for the rest of eternity, so to speak, and that is the truth that there is amazing grace, it is a sweet sound, and we find it in Christ and you have lavished grace upon us, and so we ask for something of an understanding of this massive revolutionary world-altering truth tonight for the glory and praise of him who is grace, even Jesus our Savior. We pray in his name. Amen.*

Ephesians 2, beginning at verse 8. This is God's word.

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

The grass withers, the flowers fall but the word of the living God will stand forever and ever. Amen.

I read a story this week about a little boy who was deaf and had gone to a vacation with his family to Colorado, they'd gone hiking and he got separated from the group, a parent's worst nightmare, and he had a special whistle around his neck that he could blow on such occasions so that people would hear him and know where to look for him but there were some rapids nearby so the rescuers couldn't find him. He spent a very long and cold night in the Rockies but the next morning they could hear him finally and they found him and he was returned safely to his parents, and to the mother of the child one of the search and rescue team members remarked that, "It's always easier to find lost children." Puzzled she asked him why. He said, "Because they don't try to save themselves like adults do. They sit and wait for the rescue team to find them and that's why we found your son." And what's true of being lost in the physical world is also true of being lost in the spiritual realm. We've all lost our way from God, we're all alienated from him by sin. That's the focus of Ephesians 2 at the very start of this chapter in verses 1 and following where Paul says we're dead in our trespasses and sins, we're alienated from God, and the only way that we can be saved is if he finds us. We cannot save ourselves. That's what it means to be saved by grace alone.

Let me set the context for us here briefly. The book of Ephesians breaks down pretty neatly into two main sections. We could put it like this, Ephesians 1 through 3 is grace for us, and Ephesians 4 through 6 is grace in us. So Paul tells us what God has done for us in Ephesians 1 through 3, and then beginning at chapter 4, verse 1, he says, "Now here's how to live it out." And he never reverses that order. He always starts off with what God has done for us before he tells us what to do about it. That's the difference grace makes.

So Paul wants to highlight grace for us in these opening chapters, and we use that word a lot around here and so we need to have a clear definition on just what grace is. It's popular to define it as unmerited favor. That's what grace is, it's God's unmerited favor, and the problem with that definition is it assumes that we're neutral, it assumes that God has just seen us and we're okay as far as we go and then he decides to bless us, that's unmerited favor. Unfortunately the Bible makes it clear that we are not neutral, that's not the situation. We are in the red against God, we have sinned against him so grace is better defined as demerited favor. It's not that we haven't done anything to earn it, we've done things positively to not have it. We have sinned against him. We deserve his wrath and that's why grace is best defined as demerited favor.

And what I want us to see from these verses tonight is that God shows us that we have been saved by his grace alone, to live a life pleasing to him. He shows us that we have been saved by his grace alone, to live a life that is pleasing to him, and we'll look at these verses under three headings. In the first part of verse 8, no assistance necessary in salvation, the first part of verse 8. The second part of verse 8 and verse 9, no assistance possible in salvation. No assistance possible in salvation. And then in verse 10, no other result imaginable in salvation. So no assistance necessary in salvation, no assistance possible, and no other result imaginable.

Look with me there again at the first part of verse 8, "For by grace you have been saved through faith." He's drawing a conclusion. Three times in this chapter alone, never mind how many times he told us this in chapter 1, Paul has used this term grace and he draws this conclusion to tidy up this section of his teaching, he says we're dead in our trespasses and sins but has saved us and he's done it in a marvelous way, and then he gives us the reason, because of grace and he says, "you have been saved," and in other places he'll say, "you are being saved," and then in still other places he'll say, "you will be saved," and all three aspects come together, as it were, in God's grace. And what he highlights here, what he emphasizes for us is that this salvation has been accomplished. It's a finished act. It's something that has taken place already, you have been saved, and this is why he could write earlier in the chapter that we were dead in our trespasses and sins but raised already and seated in the heavenly places with Christ. Already there with him by virtue of our union to him by faith and by faith alone.

But what Paul is so anxious for us to see, it's almost simple and it's almost too simple when we stop and think about it, what he's anxious for us to see by putting it like this is that we don't contribute to our salvation. We don't accomplish a thing. We're the helpless child lost in the wilderness that needs to stay put and have God save us. We can't do it on

our own and that's why Paul says he does it through faith, and we need to be clear here what Paul is saying. He's not saying that our faith in and of itself saves us, instead he's saying faith is simply an instrument, it's an empty hand that receives grace, it connects us to this grace but it's not the strength of our faith that saves us, it's not an act of our own that saves us in any way, shape or form, it's all of his grace, that faith is a gift and it's the way we get connected to Christ, as it were.

It's so simple, isn't it? It almost seems too simple and in our fallen nature we want things to work out and puzzle through and what the Scriptures say to us when it comes to salvation, the single most important question any of us will ever ask or answer, "How can I be right with God?" The answer comes back, "Believe." And the only way you believe is if prior to that believing, which is a gift, God shows you grace. That's his focus of chapter 1 and if there's one thing we want to focus on in Ephesians 1 and 2, it's this emphasis that's easy to miss that God did all of this before he made the world, that he had planned this all out, as it were. And Paul puts it like this again and again to remove any ground we might have in ourselves to say, "I saved myself." He does it like this, Paul tells us to make sure we understand it's all from him.

"By grace you have been saved through faith." No assistance necessary. And then in the second place, look at no assistance possible in salvation. Look at the second part of verse 8 there, "And this," being saved, "is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." And it's almost as if Paul is piling one thing on top of another here. He says the same thing three different ways. This is not of your own doing, not of works. This is why the Reformers insisted on grace alone. What were they protesting against? The Roman Catholic teaching in the medieval church which is still very much adhered to today in the Roman Catholic Church, in the Eastern Orthodox Church, in the Roman Orthodox Church, in the Coptic Orthodox Church, in Mormonism, in Jehovah's Witnesses, in Islam, in any other world religion and that is this: you have to contribute something to be saved. This wretched, awful, damning, soul-crushing, soul-destroying, eternity in hell guaranteeing doctrine took the form in the Reformers' time of this: if you get on the sacramental treadmill of Rome, then you can be saved, if you do all the things the Church tells you to do. Now to be sure, these were all done by grace but not by grace alone. Rome has never taught that there's a graceless salvation. No, she teaches that there's grace plus works and that plus is fatal, friends.

This is what the Reformers were saying. They came to a place like Ephesians 2 and they said, "It's not of your own doing. It's not of works. It's not anything we can do. There's no assistance possible in salvation." And here, my friends, is again the cardinal difference between Christianity and everything else. It's one reason C. S. Lewis one time, the great Christian apologist, was at a congress of world religions and these scholars were debating the major differences between world religions and they asked Lewis, "What is the main difference?" He said, "That's easy, Christianity is the only religion that teaches grace." And to be clear and put a fine point on it, Christianity is the only religion that teaches grace alone.

And that's Paul's point here. He makes the same point in Galatians. He makes the same point in Romans. He makes the same point in Titus. Over and over again Paul, the former Pharisee, if anyone could boast in his works, it was him. That's what he tells us in Philippians, isn't it? "A Hebrew of Hebrews, of the tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day, touching the law blameless, excelling all my peers," he says, "and I count all of that as dung." And boy, is that a sanitized translation of the Greek. And what Paul is saying there is, "Everything that I had or did means nothing at the bar of God's justice when it comes to my salvation." And that's the message of every other worldview. There's grace to be sure, there's some way God assists us and makes us savable if we cooperate with it, and what Paul is saying here and what the Bible teaches on every page is, "No, you're dead. Dead people don't cooperate or do anything. They can't do anything. They have to be saved by someone outside themselves." And anything that we try to contribute just takes us away from the cross, anytime we think we can do something to be saved is just another way to avoid coming to the cross. It's just another way to avoid Jesus.

That's what self-salvation is, it's a way to avoid Jesus and what Paul is so anxious for us to see under the inspiration of the Spirit here is you can't save yourself, and it's not possible, not of works, not of your own doing. Why? I love this line. I love this part of Paul's theology, "so that no one may boast." So that all human pride is destroyed. So that there's no way any of us can get to heaven and hold up our hands, as it were, and say, "Look what I did, God. Look how I helped get myself here." None of us will get to heaven and be able to say that. The only thing we will be saying is, "Jesus paid it all. All to him I owe."

No boasting. We're all prone to that. We all want to do something to earn our salvation. We all want to differentiate ourselves from others. We all want to have something we can look at in our lives and say, "Look at this." And that transfers right over to our relationship with God and the gospel is on a collision course with that kind of thinking. God has designed the gospel to function, as it were, in such a way that it destroys any ground for you and I to sit here and say, "I helped you, God." And we never might put it that nakedly, we might never say it that way but that's the way we function.

And that's why every other system of salvation doesn't provide a savior that actually saves you. What do they provide for you? They provide moral guidance. They provide teachers. They provide ways and means and systems and rituals and things to obey and laws that if you follow them and do them in the right order, then you might be okay. And I don't know about you but eternity is way too long for me to hang my destiny on "might," on "maybe," because here's the problem all of us have if you're honest with yourself for just two seconds, and you remove the blinding veil of sin, you and I if we're honest with ourselves know that we are so tainted, that we have nothing good in us, know all of our best impulses are tainted by sin and that no matter what we do we can't escape its clutches, and if we're honest with ourselves, we come back again and again to the fact that we can't do it and we don't want to admit that because we love to boast. We love our pride, and what the gospel does is it looks our pride in the face and says, "I have come to

kill you. I have come to destroy you because the best thing in the world for your soul is to not boast and to have no grounds for it." And that's what Paul is saying here.

And the final thing he tells us is there in verse 10. Look with me there, "For," another conclusion, "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Do you see how he does it here? He just, he tells us almost the same thing and puts two different emphases for us. In this verse he says *grace* works, or another way, *grace works*. It depends on where he puts the emphasis. He does both here. He says grace works. That seems counter-intuitive. How would he draw this conclusion? "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." Which is it, Paul? You just said we're not saved by works. And he says, "That's right. You're not saved by good works, you're saved for good works." That's one of the emphases the Reformers insisted upon. You weren't saved by anything you did, you were saved in order that you might do these good works. And once again Paul is following up on what he just said when he says there's no boasting, he draws this conclusion, even the good works you do were prepared beforehand in Christ, his workmanship, what he does for us.

And to be sure, friends, there is mystery here because we hear the gospel call to follow Jesus and die to self and live for him and do these things, and what God is saying to us is, "Yes, there's an element of obedience in the Christian life, there's good works that must be there or we don't have genuine faith," that's what the book of James is about, but what Paul wants us to see is that if you ever reverse this order and think that you're not saved for good works but by good works, then you've lost the gospel. And he also wants us to see that even those good works are Jesus' work in us. His workmanship.

We have a table in our house that a dear friend for us made back in Mississippi and one of the ways that you can tell that it's a table that was made for us is that on one apron there's a palmetto for South Carolina, and on the other apron there is a horseshoe for Kentucky where my dear wife is from. And when you look at that, you can see that there's workmanship implanted on that table that someone took the time to custom carve an ornate palmetto tree and an ornate horseshoe on the other apron, and when you look at that you say, "Ah, here's a workmanship, here's a piece of craftsmanship." And when we live for Jesus, God designs it so that people see us and say, "There's God's work." Not theirs. No boasting. Not drawing attention to how good we are or what we've done, but how great he is and what he's done.

So he says grace works and then he finishes it off one more time to remind us that it's grace that works, "God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." When we obey, when we do good works we are simply following the path that God has already laid out for us, and so yet a further ground for boasting is removed. Even the good we do is only because God has designed it that way and that'll trip you up if we don't grasp that the focal point here is that God's sovereignty does not destroy our responsibility, God's sovereignty does not say that now you can just kind of live however you want, that's another error that's always happened in church history. What it does tell us is when you obey, when you see things happening in your life that you go, "Wow, I'm kind of starting

to follow Jesus and I see fruit in my life," you never get to look at that fruit and say, "I made it. I made the tree blossom with fruit." We never get to do that. We get to look at any obedience or good works in our lives and say, "You are so good, God. You did this. I did nothing."

So as we think about what this means tomorrow, what it means for our lives, one of the central features of Paul's theology is that grace is not a thing. That was the error of medieval Rome, it's the error committed by so many other religions today, that grace is a thing that we need to earn or store up. But what the Reformers insisted on is that grace never comes to us apart from God himself. Grace is not just personal, Jesus is grace to us, and the Savior's cross for us is always because he wants to show grace to us. And the two are inseparable and you can't enjoy God's grace until you realize it's not a thing. It's Jesus. He's the embodiment of it. He's the one who comes to us to show us grace. And more than that, it goes beyond Christ, as it were, to all three persons of the Trinity because it was the Father who designed this, it was the Son who said, "Yes, I'll go and live and die in their place," and it was the Spirit who said, "Yes, I will take the work of the Son and apply it to his people." That's Ephesians 1:3-14, by the way.

The Father, the Son and the Spirit, grace to us. That's why the epistles of Paul begin with, "Grace to you." Why can there be grace to us? Because of who God is for us in Christ and therefore we have to realize that all of us, all of us, the human condition is to be hard-wired to resist grace, to resist God, to insist on doing something. This is why the old hymn-writer put it this way, "Lay your deadly doing down." Realize that you can't do anything. Rest in the finished work of Jesus. Stop trying to be your own savior.

How does that work itself out and what does it do to us when we try to be our own savior? Well, think about how we do things in this life. Think about what we look at to be functional saviors for us. "I belong to this club. I go here for vacation. I have this label on my clothes when I play golf. I have this car in my driveway. I have this zip code and here's where I'll find my worth. Here's what will save me, if I have enough money, if I have the right relationships, if I have enough pleasure, if I have enough worldly comfort. If I have all these things, that'll save me and it's something I can do and get there." And grace destroys that kind of thinking and says, "None of it matters. None of it. It's all going to be burned up one day." No one in here is going to come to the end of their days and say, "Show me my college degree again. Bring me my car keys. Let me see my last bank statement." No one is going to say that if you're sane. The only thing we're going to say is, "Let me hear about Jesus once more. Let me know that the valley of the shadow of death has a shepherd waiting to lead me through it. Let me know that for someone as fallen, as sinful, as angry, as selfish, as full of greed, as full of sin, as full of all kinds of evil like me has a Savior who actually saves."

Grace levels the playing field and that's why every other system devised by fallen mankind never comes up with grace because it always wants to keep a class system. It always wants to say, "Here is the ones who are in, here's the ones who are out. How do we tell them apart? Because they work and the others don't." And the gospel says, "No, no, only grace."

How do you tell if you're looking at other places for salvation? If you just feel chronically depressed about your relationship with God, that's crept into your thinking. I want to be careful here, there's clinical depression, I understand that and I know it and there's medication and help for that. That's not what I'm talking about. What I'm saying is there's this kind of low-grade guilt, this low-grade kind of feeling off with your relationship with God and you don't pray and you don't really read the Bible and you don't feel close to him in worship, and one of the reasons why is because we forget how amazing grace is and we're trying to relate to him on our own terms. And we love that in the South because one of the ways we kind of measure our spiritual health is have you had your quiet time? Now please hear me: have your personal devotions, read your Bible and pray, but don't think for a second that if we do all that stuff we're always going to enjoy this closeness with God. It's all up to him. We don't get to boast in our quiet time. We don't get to boast in our prayer lives. We don't get to boast in when we have a wonderful time of worship. All of it's laid waste by grace and God says, "Just trust me."

Do you struggle to relate to God? Do you feel that low-grade guilt? The gospel tonight says to you rest in Jesus. He's done it all. He doesn't need your help. Your help's not even possible. And he wants you to realize this last thing here, the practical difference grace makes. Here's what it comes down to. Here's why the Reformers were so worked up about this. Here's why I yell a lot about it, as my kids say, "You sure do yell, daddy." Here's the reason we're worked up about it: because the difference that grace makes is the difference in knowing who God really is, and what you believe about who God is will determine in a large portion how you live out your spiritual life. And if you believe God is an angry, irritable, cranky father who needs you to obey over and over or he won't be satisfied, and when you do manage to work up a little bit of obedience, he's kind of standing there like this, going, "About time." If that's how you think about God, you'll never enjoy being a Christian, and worse than that, that's not who the Father tells us he is. That's not who the Son tells us he is. That's not who the Spirit tells us he is. If we think of God like that, you won't love him, you won't want to serve him, you'll want to avoid him, you'll want to keep out of his gaze so you don't make him mad. But when you understand that it's all of grace, who God is comes into focus and you realize at once that he smiles upon his children, he delights in welcoming them home.

This is why, grace is why Jesus scandalized his hearers with two parables, one about the prodigal son and one about the wage-earners. The prodigal son when the father runs out to the son, the younger son and the older son, it's God welcoming sinners home. And then there's that parable Jesus tells in Matthew 20:1-16 when he talks about these laborers in the vineyard all day and the ones who were hired first thought they were going to get paid more because he paid the ones who had only worked an hour the same as he paid the first ones and they said, "What gives? Why did you pay them the same that you paid us and we labored in the heat of the day? Look at what we've done for you." Remember what Jesus says, that the master of that vineyard said? "It's my money. Don't I have a right to do with it as I please?" And the point is so simple: you can't work your way in, there's no way to distinguish yourself in God's kingdom, you either come in by grace alone, through faith alone or you don't get in. You either stop doing and trust in the done of Jesus or you

don't make it. You either lay your deadly doing down and take up your cross and follow Jesus and know that he's paid it all or you don't make it. The only entrance way to heaven, the only way to have eternal happiness, the only way to enjoy a right relationship with God right now is to know you and I can't do it. Only Jesus. Only him. Only grace. Grace alone. Faith alone. Nothing else. Any deviation from that is damnation.

I read this story of a man and his wife who got bumped up to first class. I've never had that problem. And they'd never had an experience of flying first class before and so they said they started to play a game unconsciously. They're believers and they said they tried to play this game of figuring out who didn't belong and they saw a guy kind of poorly dressed, shuffling through the magazines, didn't understand the etiquette, they said he was sneezing so loud he almost brought down the oxygen masks, kind of making everybody in first class going, "That guy doesn't belong." And here's the thing this author said he realized is we do this in the church, don't we? We do this in everyday life. We try to figure out who's in and who's out but there's no economy class in God's kingdom. Everybody in here who's a Christian is a first class citizen because we didn't do anything for the upgrade, we can't do anything for the upgrade, and there's no other result possible except that we live in gratitude for God's grace to us. The only way we're saved is by grace alone.

Let's pray.

*Our Father, we don't even know what to say to such soul-cheering truths, as knowing that you have paid it all in Jesus. It's your grace, your demerited favor, your lavishing upon us in him that saves us. So help us, help us to walk in the light of your grace knowing that we live under a smiling heaven this week.*