

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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**ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH:
GOD'S PROVISION FOR OUR PREDICAMENT**

Ephesians 2:1-10

The Affirmation of Faith we just said together from the EPC *Essentials of Our Faith* is a power-packed paragraph that expresses both the ugly truth of our condition as natural-born sinners and the beautiful truth of the gospel.

The unpleasant truth is that in our natural, unredeemed state, we are “estranged” – alienated, separated, cut off – “from God and condemned” – justly and deservedly – “by our sinfulness.” We are, as we say in our church membership vows, “sinners in the sight of God and without hope for (our) salvation except in his sovereign mercy.”

The truth is that “our salvation is wholly dependent upon the work of God’s free” – sovereign – “grace.”

The beautiful, transforming truth of the gospel is that “God credits His righteousness to those who put their faith in Christ alone for salvation, and thereby justifies (us)” – declares us *not guilty* – in His sight.”

The radical and unfailing hope of the gospel is that all who “are born of the Holy Spirit and receive Jesus Christ” as Savior and Lord “become children of God and heirs of eternal life.”

This is the essence of the gospel, and it teaches us that our salvation is all by grace. It is the heart of the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace articulated by Paul in Ephesians 2. In these verses, Paul lays out the problem of human sinfulness – the universal predicament of our spiritual hopelessness and helplessness apart from the intervention of God – and what God, in His extravagant mercy, love, kindness, and grace, has done to rescue us from our addiction to sin and our captivity to the unholy trinity of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Here Paul diagnoses the universal condition of humanity in our fallen state and declares what God, in His grace that is infinitely more amazing than words can express, has done for us in the saving work of Jesus His Son.

THE WAY WE WERE

To better appreciate how amazing God’s grace is, you need to have a clear understanding of our need, of *your* need, for grace. So, in verses 1-3, Paul paints a picture for us of the way we were *before* we experienced God’s saving grace. *Before* we embraced the gospel and trusted Jesus as Savior and Lord.

“The way we were,.” Some of us are old enough to remember when Robert Redford and Barbra Streisand were much younger and starred in *The Way we Were*, a 1973 movie about a couple from very different backgrounds, with very different values, who meet in college in

the 1930s, go their separate ways, meet again after WWII, fall in love, marry, divorce, go their separate ways again, only to meet again years later, in the 1960s, rekindling this nostalgic longing for “the way we were.”

So, Barbra Streisand sings:

Memories light the corner of my mind
Misty water-colored memories of the way we were.
Scattered pictures of the smiles we left behind
Smiles we gave to one another for the way we were.

* * * * *

Memories may be beautiful and yet
What’s too painful to remember we simply choose to forget.
So it’s the laughter we will remember
Whenever we remember
The way we were.

(Written by Marvin Hamlisch, Marilyn Bergman, and Alan Bergman. C 1973, Colgems-cmi Music, Inc.)

Unlike Barbra Streisand, Paul does not wax nostalgic in describing the way we were before we came to know the Lord Jesus Christ in the power of His saving love. No way. There is nothing nostalgic about being spiritually dead in your transgressions (NIV) or trespasses (ESV) and sins (Ephesians 2:1). Spiritually “dead” is a simple, straight-forward statement of the condition of every human being apart from Christ and His saving work. We were spiritually dead, says Paul, in the way we used to live. And the cause of death was our transgressions (or trespasses) and sins, our willful or sometimes unintentional violations of God’s commands, our sins of commission (the wrong things we do) and our sins of omission (the good we should do but fail to do), resulting from our natural-born inclination to rebel against God and exalt ourselves, to reject God’s way and go our own way in life.

Do you want a picture of what this natural inclination to sin looks like? John Ortberg tells of a little girl we’ll call Lucy (not her real name). She was a strong-willed child. When she was four or five years old, she would try to ride her tricycle where she was not allowed to ride. Her mom became so frustrated one day that she went out in the front yard and said: “All right, Lucy. Look, here’s a tree. Here’s the edge of our driveway. Here’s our sidewalk. You may ride your tricycle between the tree and the driveway, but you cannot go beyond that. If you go beyond those boundaries, I will spank you. I am going back inside the house, but we have a big picture window. I will watch you. If you ride beyond these boundaries, I will come out, and there will be spanking.”

Lucy was not intimidated. She stuck her little hip out, pointed to it and said: “Well, you better spank me now, because I got places to go.”

As Ortberg points out, that is a picture of the human heart. It is a picture of the human condition apart from God and His grace. The human will has become corrupt. The human will has turned away from God. Apart from grace, your heart is corrupt. And so is mine. (Adapted from John Ortberg sermon, “Grace Alone,” accessed at www.preachingtoday.com.)

We are not all guilty of the same sins. But we are all guilty sinners. That is the bad news of the gospel to which the Bible testifies from beginning to end. We are not all racists or adulterers. We do not all commit acts of violence against innocent persons. Not all of us engage in gossip or character assassination. Not all of us openly defy our parents or others in positions of authority. We do not all sin in the same way. But we are all sinners. And we are helpless to overcome our natural bent toward sin.

In her book *Acedia & Me*, Kathleen Norris tells about a child she once knew who emerged one morning from a noisy, chaotic Sunday school classroom to explain what was going on to the adults who heard the commotion and had come to investigate. She said: “We’re being bad, and we don’t know how to stop” (Norris, 16). At one level, I know, that may seem funny. But doesn’t it pretty much tell it like it is in a world like ours where sin reigns in so many hearts? Couldn’t we all make the same confession ... if it weren’t for Jesus?

The consequence of our badness (our sinfulness), says Paul, is spiritual deadness. You know the TV show, *The Walking Dead*, about zombies? Zombies are dead people who, though they are dead, are still up and walking around. They are walking, decaying corpses.

“Spiritual corpses” walking around is an accurate description of our condition in the grip of sin. When you’re dead *physically*, what can you do? Absolutely nothing. When you’re dead *spiritually*, estranged from God, cut off from Him as a result of your trespasses and sins, even though you’re walking around as if you’re alive, and you may look pretty good on the outside, you’re still dead on the inside. You’re totally unable to make a single move toward God or to do anything to make yourself come alive.

This is the way we were, and the way it is for everyone in the world who remains a spiritual corpse apart from God’s saving grace.

Not only are we spiritually dead apart from Christ, Paul says in verse 3 that we are “by nature children of wrath.” Isn’t that a pretty frightening thought? The just judgment of God is what we deserve. The righteous wrath of a just, righteous, and holy God is what we deserve because of the guilt of our sins and transgressions. Because of our rebellion – yours and mine – against His rule. And our inability to fix what is wrong with us.

This is the predicament in which the entire human family finds itself. This is our predicament in the grip of sin, a predicament for which we have no solution of our own. Fortunately, providentially, we know the One who has the solution. We know the One who *is* the solution. We know the One who specializes in taking objects of wrath and turning them – *us* – into trophies of grace.

BUT GOD

The opening words of verse 4, in the Greek text, mark a dramatic turning point in Paul's message. Verse 4 begins: *Ho de theos*. Three words in Greek that translate into two words in English: *But God*. Two of the most beautiful words in the Bible.

But God! We were all dead in our transgressions and sins. "Mired," as Eugene Peterson says in *The Message*, "in that old stagnant life of sin." None of us escaped the oppressive grip of sin and death. We were all estranged from God. We were all deserving of God's wrath. Then we encounter these two words: *But. God*.

We were dead in our sins. *But God* made us alive in Christ (2:5). *The Message* says: "He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did this all on His own, with no help from us!" Through the initiative and intervention of God, we are spiritual corpses no more.

We were objects of wrath, *but God* made us into trophies of His amazing grace. We justly deserved the full measure of God's displeasure, *but God* has instead lavished His mercy and grace upon us. We were subject to the ways of the world, the lusts and desires of our sinful nature, and the lies and deceit of the devil, *but God* raised us up, gave us new life in Christ, and set us free from the tyranny of sin and the dominion of the devil.

Why in the world did God do it? Because of His grace. God took the initiative and did what He did – what only He could do – for us and for our salvation because of His grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. If you deserve it, it isn't grace. No one *deserves* grace. No one deserves God's unmerited favor, which is what grace is. God acts in mercy, love, kindness, and grace, because this is the kind of God He is. He is under no obligation to show us mercy. He is under no obligation to shower us with His love and kindness, or to bless us with tokens of His grace. "*But God*," says Paul, "being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, made us alive with Christ when we were dead in our transgressions – by grace you have been saved" (2:4-5).

ALL BY GRACE

Your salvation and mine is all by grace and only by grace. As it says in our *Essentials*, "our salvation is wholly dependent upon the work of God's free grace." It is a gift of God's grace from start to finish. It is not a joint effort in which God requires us to do our part as He does His part. It is a good thing, too, because the only thing you and I contribute to our salvation, the only thing we *can* contribute to our salvation, is our need of it. All we can contribute is the fact that we have nothing to contribute. We are completely and totally unable to contribute anything to our salvation.

Were it not for the grace of God, there would be no hope of salvation for any of us. Were it not for Jesus, who freely took my sins and yours upon Himself in His death on the cross, there would be no hope for us.

What Paul says in verse 5 he repeats and expands in verses 8 and 9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.”

We are saved not by our faith, but by grace. *God’s* grace. Faith, as James Boice says, is “the channel through which this grace of God comes to us” (Boice, *Ephesians*, 63). It is not our faith that saves us. Faith is the means by which we receive God’s saving grace. It is the only means by which you can receive the gift of salvation. There is no other way. No other means. No other channel through which to receive the gift of salvation. You can’t gain salvation by being more successful, more talented, more generous with your time or money, or even more religious. You can’t gain salvation by doing more or trying harder. Salvation by works is a dead end. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone.

Your faith, if it is saving faith, must have the Lord Jesus and His finished work on the cross as its object. If it is saving faith, your faith must be more than just a set of facts in your head or an intellectual belief in certain doctrines. Is there an intellectual component to faith? Of course. But biblical faith has a relational component as well. It involves a relationship of trust in a relational, trustworthy God. One good way to say it is that faith is reliance on a reliable God (Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 104).

THE PLACE OF WORKS

Our salvation, Paul says, is not our own doing. It is not something we can achieve or accomplish by our hard work. Christianity is not a “bootstrap religion.” As Eugene Peterson said, “We can’t save ourselves by pulling on our bootstraps, even when the bootstraps are made of the finest religious leather.” Don’t be fooled into thinking you can be a “self-made Christian.” There ain’t no such a thing!

Good works do not, will not, and cannot save you. You don’t gain salvation by doing acts of charity. Or by deeds of sacrifice. There is nothing you can do to earn God’s favor. And there is nothing you need to do, because Jesus has done it all for you. And me. Our salvation is entirely the gift of God that comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. There is a name for this: It is called *grace*. All we need to do is to receive it by faith in Jesus.

Since salvation is entirely a gift from God, it means, as Paul says at the end of verse 9, that there is no room for boasting. If it is all God’s doing (it is), if it is all by grace (it is), there is no place in the equation for pride. You and I are not saved because of anything good that God sees in us. We are saved simply because, undeserving as we are, God has chosen to pour out the riches of His mercy, kindness, love and grace upon us.

So then, do good works matter in the life of a Christian? Of course they do. We are not saved by or because of good works. We are saved by grace. By grace alone. But we are saved *for* good works, as Paul makes clear in verse 10: “We are (God’s) workmanship,” he says, “created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

The word “workmanship” in the Greek language is *poiema*, which means a “work of art” or “masterpiece.” What this means is that you are a masterpiece of God’s grace. You are a work of art created by the Master Artist of the universe. You are still a masterpiece in the making. God is not finished with any of us yet. Nevertheless, you are a divine masterpiece of His grace, designed for His purposes, made for His glory, to manifest the greatness of His grace in the way you live.

SIX WORDS

If you had to summarize your life in six words, what six words would you choose? An online magazine asked this question several years ago. Among the responses were these:

- Not quite what I was planning.
- The psychic said I’d be richer. (That will teach you to listen to a psychic!)
- Savior complex makes for many disappointments.
- Cursed with cancer. Blessed with friends.

What six words would you use? Here are a few I’ve come up with:

- But for the grace of God.
- It is all by God’s grace.
- Saved and kept by God’s grace.
- Blessings undeserved; thanks be to God.
- No condemnation now I dread; Hallelujah!
- Amazing love! How can it be?
- Once was lost; now I’m found.

Do you detect a common thread running through them all?

Our salvation is wholly dependent upon the work of God’s free and sovereign grace. Your life as a Christian is wholly dependent upon God and His grace. It is *all* by grace. All by *grace*.

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On Palm Sunday, Jesus came riding into Jerusalem to the Hosannas and Hallelujahs of the crowd that lined the road into the city. But He knew what would happen to Him before the week was out. He knew the tide would turn against Him. It was all part of God’s design for our salvation. Jesus was and is God’s provision for our predicament. What He did for us was an act of love. He was the embodiment of grace.

I pray that you know this grace – *His* grace – in your life. In your own experience. I pray that you know the God of grace in the fullness of His saving power and love.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.