

The Heart of the Gospel

Ephesians 2:8-10

But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; *otherwise grace would no longer be grace.*

Introduction: There are a few objects in the world that can be identified simply by showing a picture. The Golden Gate Bridge is one of those types of symbols.



Designed by Joseph Strauss, this bridge did the unthinkable at the time: span the mile wide ocean divide between the San Francisco Peninsula and Marin County. Thought to be impossible and too expensive in his time, the bridge was begun on January 5, 1933 and was completed, wait for it, ahead of schedule and under budget on May 27, 1937. It cost a mere \$35 million (adjusted for inflation in 2019 for \$523 million, or like billions adjusted for today's inflation!), and today services over 110,000 cars daily, with many more bikes and pedestrians also making use of it. At the time of completion, it was the highest and longest suspension bridge in the world, came at the cost of 11 lives, and remains an iconic structure known around the world.

Now, what does this have to do with the gospel or what we'll look at today? Nothing, and everything. Suppose you had the opportunity to walk across this bridge (perhaps some of you have) and after conquering your fear of being suspended hundreds of feet above hypothermia inducing Bay waters with fast currents and predators ready to eat you, you walk across to the other side. Then, in exuberance, you exclaim: *"See what I did! I built, conquered, and now own this bridge! I've earned the right to go down in the annals of bridge building and stake my claim on this iconic monster!"* Not only would this be foolish, but it would not make any sense, and no one would take you seriously, and those who actually did build or maintain the bridge would be rightfully miffed or offended by your assertion.

When it comes to the gospel, it has often been misunderstood like the person walking across the Golden Gate. I've met some people who have said, "I've been in churches my whole life, but I don't think I've ever heard the gospel preached." To be honest, that would be my testimony of my church growing up, like someone who walks a bridge but never considers who actually built it. The reality is, some churches may not actually preach the gospel, but more likely we simply could not hear it, not having ears ready to hear or a heart that was hardened to the truth. Others have thought that they are saved simply because they've been *around or in the church for a set time, perhaps their whole lives.* Like someone who walks across the bridge thinking they were somehow a part of the building and maintenance, we can subtly think that **we did something to earn, gain, or warrant salvation**, mostly because we are not as bad as people outside the church in the big bad world.

As we close out 2021, a year fraught with challenges, sorrow, loss, pain, uncertainty, joys, hope, and watching God's gracious and providential hand move among us, it is appropriate to conclude with a passage that is the **heart of the gospel**, an *explanation* and *reminder* of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ by His grace alone, the work that we could never do on our own. Our hope is that this sets the table for our march into a New Year, and foundation of reliance on God's grace alone, humbly clinging to the fact that God is merciful and loving toward His own, and joyfully depending on Him in all things.

Before looking at these last **3 verses** of this section, it's good to review where we've been through December for those who were not here or are experiencing Christmas celebration hibernation. Chapter 2 started with an explanation of our condition in birth, a condition that every human who has ever lived, regardless of geography, timeframe, or family affiliation was born into. We were ALL born as **dead people spiritually**, even while we lived physically. We were born sinners, so we sinned as a result by not giving glory to God in all things. We were under the power of Satan in this world, since he is delegated by God Himself to have authority in this world. Like a dead fish in a stream, we went wherever the course of the stream would go, and we followed the pathway that culture laid out for us, since it also appealed to our lustful desires. We were **dead and loving it**. But we were also sons of disobedience, without ability to worship God, and children of wrath, meaning we were destined for judgment. But out of this depressing and hopeless condition of a **zombie-like existence**, God broke through.

"*But God*" is the hopeful refrain of those who are followers of Jesus. God withheld what we deserved through the riches of His **mercy**. He **loved** us with a love consistent with His nature, which meant it was not dependant on our actions but His character, since we were dead. He lavished **grace** through Jesus Christ, saving us, making us alive, raising us up, and seating us, **ALL WITH CHRIST!** He did all of this for the purpose of continuing to display His grace to us by **kindness for eternity**, never exhausting His goodness to us. This is the basis and foundation of our life, worship, and hope, God making dead men live, by Himself, for Himself, to Himself.

Now, before looking at this familiar passage (if you haven't memorized this one, you should), we must see the point that Paul is making. Without a doubt, Paul is defining for the church and believers that salvation is **of God, a work that He does in the past, present, and future**, of which we get to be recipients, but not contributors, in. We are products of grace alone, so all the praise and ground of boasting are directed at Him, NOT US. In a world that we like to take credit or point out our contributions, the gospel is ALL ABOUT HIM. Since He WANTS to lavish grace on us in Christ, the most honoring thing we could ever do is continue to operate in the grace He provides, giving Him glory, and finding our greatest satisfaction in Him, including following Him obediently.

The Case for Grace Through Faith (2:8a)

*For by grace you have been saved **through faith**...*

One of the strong urges of our human, fallen nature is the desire to contribute, to add value or be counted. This is why salvation in the gospel of Jesus is not only **transformational, it is also counter intuitive**. How can I be saved by doing NOTHING? Isn't faith or belief a work that I contribute? Sure God works through grace but I have to believe, so we meet God in the middle, right? Nope. And the fact that the answer to the last question is "no" is great news for us.

God's Grace is the SOURCE of salvation – Salvation is produced by God Himself. We've already seen that our salvation is *sourced* in God's past work of choosing before the foundation of the world began

and predestining us as adopted sons and daughters before we breathed life, or anyone breathed life for that matter (Eph. 1:3-5). Salvation is the **gift of God from the beginning to end**, from planning to accomplishment. Notice back in **2:5** we saw that it was by grace we have been saved, and this description is given without the response of faith. In other words, it is NOT our faith that saves us, but God's grace which **causes us to believe** that saves us. Notice **Romans 3:23-25**:

*“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are **justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.**”*

The grace of God is how we are justified and redeemed through the work of Jesus Christ, who made satisfaction for our sin with the Father, so that we could simply be receivers of that grace by faith.

Our Faith is the MEANS of salvation – Faith, then, is the subjective means by which we are saved. It is not a work as if we could earn anything with God, but is our response to His grace when God moves on our heart to bring conviction and then trust. This is important to understand on two fronts. 1) We can only BELIEVE when God moves by His grace. That is why some people cannot figure out what to do when they have been presented with the gospel but are not ready to yield in repentance and forgiveness. Faith is a **work that God produces in us**, and cannot be conjured up in our own minds. 2) Faith, or belief, is more than mere assent to intellectual information. The church has often fallen short on this front as we have given assurances to young and old that if they simply believe that there was a Jesus and He forgives, they could be saved, without seeing if God was giving them true faith. True faith includes mental understanding, but moves to conviction and leads to trust, and entrusting of all of life to Jesus. Remember, even demons believe in God and shudder (James 2:19). Because **grace is a work only God can do, faith is produced by that work and will be evident in the life of one who truly believes**. To drive this point home, Paul gives **two balancing negative** statements so that we are not in doubt about who works in salvation.

The Case for Grace Not us (2:8b-9)

*And this is **not your own doing**; it is the gift of God, **not a result of works**, so that no one may boast.”*

A Gift Cannot Be Earned – *“But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.”*

*But the **free gift** is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the **free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many**. And the **free gift** is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the **free gift** following many trespasses brought justification.*

By definition a gift cannot be earned, which means it is up to the gift giver to decide how to give out the gifts. Once someone would point to themselves at all as to the reason why we'd deserve grace or salvation, it is no longer a free gift or grace. In fact, the only thing we COULD earn was our judgment through our sin. The more we would try in ourselves the more we'd earn wrath.

Remember, **grace is a free gift, but it sure ain't cheap**. Grace was given freely through the **work of Jesus alone**. If we are bent on wanting to add works to our salvation, we could only say this: it was based on the work of Jesus alone, who gave His life as a substitute for us on the cross, faithfully taking the wrath God had stored for us on Himself. It is also important to remember that **grace being free is**

not the same a free grace. There are some who believe since grace cannot be earned, then anything after faith in Jesus does not matter. But we'll see in the next verse that **faith works**, and though grace does not earn, it never stays alone.

Only One Deserves Glory – The second negative statement by Paul concerning any kind of contribution to our salvation has to do with “works”, which is a broad term referring to any kind of human effort. No amount of working can improve our status with God. But the issue at hand is much deeper than that. **The whole point of salvation is not even about us, but about God's glory, and God will not share His glory with another!** This is the point of 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. God created a pathway of redemption called the **gospel** that is intentionally **foolish to the world!** It is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to those who are worldly wise. Why?

God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

The gospel leaves us all without any grounds of boasting in ourselves, and only puts us in a place where we revel in the **power of God** who saves sinners by His own hand and for His own purposes. What tales can dead men tell? None! What can the weak, unwise (according to worldly standards), low, despised, and the dregs of the world boast in? Nothing, except our Savior. This is the plight of those who have been raised in a church or any kind of moral culture. When we think that we are saved BECAUSE we are good, or not as bad as the world around, or because we haven't done certain things (we haven't committed sexual immorality, we don't drink/get drunk, we don't swear, etc), or if we point to ANY kind of moral areas AT ALL for our standing with God, we have NOT experienced God's grace by faith! **Morality flows FROM faith, but never produces saving faith.** This does not mean our kids or young people should go out like the Prodigal Son, but it does mean we do not affirm faith simply because of external conformity. Salvation is always by faith in the Person of Jesus Christ alone, and it is Him that we glory in and trust. Far too many will point to what they do not do as the means of salvation. We always point to our Savior, because if it were left up to us and our morality, we could only offer filthy rags and dirty garments.

However, faith never stays alone. Salvation is not only transformational, it is a transfer! Verse 10 is extremely important to Paul's whole discussion of the heart of the gospel, and without it, we'd be left thinking that salvation only existed in the mind and heart, but not the hands.

The Case for Grace as New Creations (2:10)

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should WALK in them.”

New Creations mean New Lordship – Verse 10 creates an *inclusion* or bookend with verses 1-2. In verses 1-2, we were out of our own control, but were totally under the influence of the Prince of the power of the air, dead in our sin, and sons of disobedience. But in salvation, we are **transferred by Christ as NEW CREATIONS.** “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a **new creation**. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Cor. 5:17) In verse 10, the first word in the Greek is “His”, meaning we are now God's possession, His workmanship, and no longer under Satanic control. God has broken us free from the shackles of sin and death that once weighed us down and bound us to hopeless, ignorant existence.

Salvation means we are God's in Christ. Christ is our Savior AND LORD, meaning we are simultaneously free and slaves of Him! (Rom. 6:22). There is no such thing as a Christian who believes in Jesus as his Savior, asks for forgiveness, trusts in Him for salvation, and then rejects Him as Lord of His life. The point of salvation was the fact that God makes us new creations and makes us HIS WORKMANSHIP.

What does it mean that Christ is Lord?

New Creations mean a New Course – Christ has freed us up to obey Him in all things, since His commands are not burdensome (1 John 5:3). Notice a few things about this new, free, and joyful course of life, a trajectory that we now are on in Christ.

- 1) **Good Works are an absolute result of salvation** – In other words, the transformation of our nature means we are now expected to do works consistent with our nature, since faith without works is DEAD (James 2:17). But even these works are not produced by us but are a result of what God prepared beforehand. And since He prepared them for us, He provides the power and ability. The fruit that a transformed life produces is a result of the work of the Spirit in our life (Gal. 5:22-24). In other words, the works that He has for us are still driven by Him. We are able to continue on in **confession and repentance** as a normal rhythm of a redeemed life because of the work of Christ who is our Advocate with the Father and propitiation for our sin (1 John 2:1-2). We fulfill our mission of making disciples knowing that it is Christ who has authority and is with us to the end (Matt. 28:18-20). We seek to obey now not so that we would be made acceptable, but because we have been accepted in Christ.

- 2) **Good Works are to be walked out (not worked out)** – We are justified by grace, but we are also sanctified by grace, perfected by the Spirit of God's work in our life (Gal. 3:3). Notice that Paul does not say we were created for good works, so now WORK for them, he simply said WALK in them. That is not an insignificant word choice. **Walk** is a key word for Paul and the book of Ephesians. In fact, the last 3 chapters of this letter are all about *walking out the good works that God has already planned for us*. Even our works are not our own! We walk in a **manner worthy of our calling** (4:1) in humility, gentleness, in love and unity. We walk in **holiness** (4:17), **in love** (5:1), in the truth **of the light** (5:8) and in **wisdom** (5:15). In Colossians 1:10, we are to **walk in a manner worthy of the Lord**, pleasing Him and bearing fruit in every good work while increasing in the knowledge of God. Each of these IS NOT done in our own strength but as a result of grace through faith, trusting in God's provision to walk out the realities that He has already given us. This is not only an expectation, it is a privilege, since God will finish what He started in each of us (Phil. 1:6)

As we conclude this year, it is a good time to take inventory of the heart of the gospel in our lives. Is Christ the center of our hope of salvation? Is grace the only basis of our assurance of salvation? Have we been walking out our salvation in the good works God's prepared for us? Is our boast in Christ alone for a salvation we could never earn but have graciously been gifted? If we can answer these questions honestly and biblically, it will produce a church full of **humble, passionate, free, gentle, and ready servants of Christ Jesus who desire to walk obediently, suffer dependently, and trust implicitly that God is not only in control, but is doing all things to glorify Himself**. Our call for the New Year should be: *"Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!"* (Psalm 115:1).