

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 15, 2015**

**THE ESSENTIALS OF OUR FAITH (9):  
ALL BY GRACE**

**Ephesians 2:1-10**

In our ongoing study of the EPC Essentials of Our Faith, we come today to the paragraph that deals with our human condition as “natural-born sinners” and what God in His grace has done for us and our salvation. We’ll say it aloud at the conclusion of this message, but take a look now at the affirmation of faith printed in your bulletin and listen as I read it.

*Being estranged (that is, alienated, separated, cut off) from God and condemned (justly and deservedly) by our sinfulness, our salvation is wholly dependent upon the work of God’s free (sovereign) grace. God credits His righteousness to those who put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation, and thereby justifies them (declares them “not guilty”) in His sight. Only such as are born of the Holy Spirit and receive Jesus Christ become children of God and heirs of eternal life.*

These words express the heart of the doctrine of salvation by grace, the doctrine laid out in a clear, straight-forward, and beautiful way in the passage we read from Ephesians 2. What you cannot tell from reading this passage in the NIV or other English translations is that in the original Greek, verses 1-7 are all one long sentence. The NIV, from which I just read, breaks these verses down into five sentences. It is nine sentences in the NLT (New Living Translation). The ESV translation, remarkably, consists of just two sentences. But it is all one really long sentence in the Greek, one long thought laying out the problem of human sinfulness – the universal predicament of spiritual helplessness and hopelessness apart from the intervention of God and His saving grace – and what God, in His great 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.” In this one long sentence, Paul diagnoses the universal condition of fallen humanity and declares what God, in His grace that is infinitely more amazing than words can ever express, has done for us in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

**THE WAY WE WERE**

To appreciate God’s grace, you need to have a clear understanding of our need, of *your* need, for grace. So Paul, in verses 1-3, paints a picture for us of the way we were before we experienced His saving grace in Christ. Ah, “the way we were.” Some of us are old enough to remember Robert Redford and Barbra Streisand in the 1973 movie, *The Way We Were*, a romantic drama (Question: If a romantic comedy is a *rom com*, is a romantic drama a *rom drom*?) about a couple from very different backgrounds, with very different values, who meet in college in the 1930s, then meet again after the War (WWII), fall in love, marry, divorce, go their separate ways, and meet again years later, in the 1960s, rekindling this nostalgic longing for “the way we were.” So, Barbra Streisand sings:

*Mem'ries, 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.  
 Can it be that it was all so simple then?  
 Or has time rewritten every line?  
 If we had the chance to do it all again  
 Tell me, would we? Could we?*

....

*Mem'ries 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-emi Music, Inc.)*

Unlike Barbra Streisand, Paul does not wax nostalgic in describing the way we were in the days before we came to know the Lord Jesus Christ in His saving power. There is nostalgia about being dead – 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, Paul says, in the way we used to live. And the cause of death was our transgressions and sins, our willful (or sometimes unintentional) violations of God’s commands, our sins of commission and our sins of omission, resulting from our natural-born inclination to rebel against God and exalt ourselves, to reject God’s way and to go our own way in life.

We are not all guilty of the same sins. But we are all guilty sinners. We do not all sing racist chants or commit violent acts against innocent persons. We do not all sin in the same way, but we are all, as it says in the first of our five church membership questions, “sinners in the sight of God and without hope for (our) salvation except in God’s sovereign mercy.”

Think of it like this. Some of you may be fans of *The Walking Dead*, a TV show on the AMC cable channel about a group of survivors living in the grip of fear after some sort of zombie apocalypse. Zombies are dead people who, though they are dead, are still up and walking around. They are walking, decaying corpses.

It is not a flattering thought, but “spiritual corpses” walking around accurately describes our fallen condition in the grip of sin. When you’re dead, you are powerless to do anything. You’re completely helpless. When you’re spiritually dead, estranged from God, cut off from Him as a result of your trespasses and sins, even though you’re walking around as if you were alive, you are totally unable to make a single move toward God or to do anything to make yourself alive.

This is the way we were, and the way it is for a world full of sinners who are spiritual corpses 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." This is a pretty frightening thought, don't you think? 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 against His rule. And our inability to fix what is wrong with us.

Kathleen Norris writes of a child she once knew who emerged one morning from a noisy, chaotic Sunday school classroom to inform the adults who heard the commotion and had come to investigate. The child explained the situation this way: "We're being bad, and we don't know how to stop." (Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me*, 16). Doesn't that pretty well tell it like it is in life as we know it in a world where sin seems to reign? Couldn't we all make this same confession?

We could, except that we know the One who has the solution to our predicament in the grip of sin. We know the One who *is* the solution. We know the One who specializes in taking objects of wrath and turning them into trophies or masterpieces of grace.

## **BUT GOD**

The opening words of verse 4, in the Greek text, mark a dramatic turning point. Verse 4 begins: *Ho de theos*. Three words in Greek that translate into two words in English: *But God*. *But God!* We were all dead in our transgressions and sins. None of us – no one – escaped the oppressive grip of sin and death. We were all estranged from God. We all deserved the righteous anger and judgment of God because of our sinfulness. Then these two words: *But. God*.

We were dead in our sins, says Paul, *but God* made us alive with Christ (2:5). In *The Message*, it 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 God's initiative and intervention, we are spiritual corpses no more.

We were objects of wrath, *but God* made us trophies of His amazing grace. We justly deserve the full wrath of His displeasure, *but God* has instead lavished His mercy and grace upon us. We were subject to the ways of the world, the lusts 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 is given free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. If you deserve it, it isn't grace. But no one deserves God's favor. 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, to shower us with His love, to be kind to us, or to bless us with tokens of His grace. "*But God*," says

Paul, “being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, made us alive with Christ when we were dead in 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 the EPC 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 while He does His part. 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 except that we are totally unable to contribute anything to our salvation.

If not for the grace of God, there would be no hope for any of us. If 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 has said 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 may boast.”

We are saved not by our faith, but by grace. Faith is “the channel through which this grace of God comes to us” (James M. Boice, *Ephesians*, 63). Again, it is not our faith that saves us. Faith, we may say, is *only the means* by which we receive God’s saving grace. It is also *the only means* by which this grace is received (Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 104). There is no other way. No other means. No other channel through which to receive the gift of salvation. We are saved *by grace alone through faith alone*.

Our faith, if it is saving faith, must have as its object the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross. If it is saving faith, our faith must involve more than just head knowledge or an intellectual belief in certain doctrines. There is an intellectual component of 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 (Snodgrass, 105).

### **THE PLACE OF WORKS**

Our salvation, Paul says, is not our own doing. It is not something we have achieved or accomplished. It is not by good works we have done or could ever do. It is not a result of acts of charity. It is not gained by deeds of sacrifice. There is nothing any of us can do to earn God’s favor. And there is nothing we need to do, because Jesus has done it all for us. Our salvation is entirely the gift of God – a gift from God freely given to people who don’t deserve it and never will. Which is called grace.

The fact that our salvation is entirely a gift from God means, as Paul says at the end of verse 9, that there is no room for boasting. If it is all God's doing (which it is), if it is all by grace (which it is), there is no place in the equation for pride. You and I are not saved because of anything we have ever done to commend ourselves to God. We are saved simply because, undeserving as we are, God chose to pour out the riches of His mercy, love, kindness, and grace upon us.

So then, do good works matter? Of course they do. We are not saved by or because of good works. Paul makes this clear in verses 8 and 9. We are saved by grace. By grace alone. But we are saved *for* good works, which Paul makes equally clear in verse 10: "We are (God's) workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared beforehand for us to do."

The New Testament Greek word for "workmanship" is *poiema*, a word that means "work of art" or "masterpiece." Which is to say, 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**

In his newest book (*All the Places You'll Go ... Except When You Don't*, 1-2), John Ortberg asks: If you had to summarize your life in six words, what would they be? 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.
- Savior complex makes for many disappointments.
- Cursed with cancer. Blessed with friends.

What six words would you use to summarize your life? I've thought some about this, and here are a few six-word phrases 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 am 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. It *is* all by grace. It is *all* by grace. It is all by *grace*.

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

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.