

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS
(LESSON TWENTY-THREE)
“SAVED BY GRACE”

EPHESIANS 2:1-10 (NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

1 And although you were dead in your offenses and sins,

2 in which you formerly lived according to this world’s present path, according to the ruler of the domain of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energizing the sons of disobedience,

3 among whom all of us also formerly lived out our lives in the cravings of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest...

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us,

5 even though we were dead in offenses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you are saved! —

6 and he raised us up together with him and seated us together with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,

7 to demonstrate in the coming ages the surpassing wealth of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

8 For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God;

9 it is not from works, so that no one can boast.

10 For we are his creative work, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared beforehand so we can do them.

In **Ephesians 2:1-3**, the Apostle Paul addressed the spiritual condition of the believers in Ephesus prior to their conversion. In doing so, he described four characteristics which are true of every unsaved person. He characterizes them as being **dead**, **disobedient**, **depraved**, and **doomed**.

It is against the horrible backdrop of the spiritual condition of lost sinners that Paul, in verses **4-7**, highlights four activities that God performs on their behalf, in order to save them from the consequences of their sins. He says that God **loves** them, **quickens**, or makes them alive, **exalts** or raises them up, and **keeps** or secures them.

In verse **7**, Paul informs us that God’s ultimate purpose in the salvation of sinners is that they might glorify His grace, not only for the present time, but for all eternity. Throughout eternity, God’s grace which was lavished upon those who were once dead in trespasses and sins, will be manifested and clearly understood in all the grandeur and majesty of its exceeding riches. Throughout the eternal ages, God will exhibit His kindness to the saints in order that He may be glorified.

In verses **8** and **9**, we come to a short paragraph that has often been called the heart of Paul's gospel because the essence of some of the great thoughts that he develops in **Romans** and **Galatians**, are summarized in it: *"For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so that no one can boast."*

In our previous **Lesson**, we noted that in verse **5**, after Paul had informed his readers that God had quickened them together with Christ, and before he tells them about God raising them up together with Christ, he had interjected, *"by grace you are saved."* We stated that these words are in a construction in the Greek which speaks of an action that took place, and was also completed in past time, but which has results that exist in the present time. Thus, the phrase could be translated in the following way: "By grace you have been completely saved in time past, with the result that you are in a state of salvation which persists through the present time."

Now, in verses **8** and **9**, the great cry, *"by grace you are saved,"* which had interrupted the flow of thought in verse **5**, is now taken up in a renewed form and elaborated on. It is as if the Apostle was saying to the Ephesians: I want to spend some time and deal with the doctrine of the grace of God, lest any thought of deserving or merit should arise in your minds. Perhaps it would be beneficial for us to do likewise.

The word *"grace"* is a translation of the Greek word **charis**. This Greek word was chosen by the writers of the New Testament, particularly the apostle Paul, to designate the relation and conduct of God towards sinful man as revealed in and through Jesus Christ, especially as an act of spontaneous favour wherein no mention can be made of obligation.

In its use among the pagan Greeks, the word **charis** referred to a favour done by one person to another out of the pure generosity of his or her heart, with no claim or expectation of reward. The Greek philosopher **Aristotle**, in defining the word **charis** stressed that it is given freely, with no expectation of return, and finding its only motive in the bounty and free-heartedness of the giver.

In the New Testament, the word **charis** refers to God's favour towards mankind in general or to any individual in particular. This favour is a free act, totally excluding merit or deserving. It is not hindered by guilt, but freely forgives sin. The apostle Paul, in all his epistles, sets grace and works against one another in direct contrast, showing that they mutually exclude one another. Paul argued that the essence of grace is that it is unearned and unmerited.

Charis, the Greek word translated *"grace"* by the writers of the New Testament, refers to that spontaneous act of God that came from the infinite love in His heart. It is exemplified in the process of God becoming a man, the process known to us as the incarnation. It is also exemplified at Calvary when He stepped down from His judgment throne to take upon Himself the guilt and penalty of human sin.

Grace allowed God to satisfy His justice and maintain His government. Grace made possible the bestowal of salvation upon sinners who receive it by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who became a Sin-offering for them on the Cross.

The word **charis** referred to an action that was beyond the ordinary course of what might be expected, and was therefore commendable. In the case of the Greek, the favour was done to a friend, never to an enemy. In the case of God, however, the favour was done, not for His friends but for His enemies! In **Romans 5:6-8**, Paul writes, *"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."*

(For rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person perhaps someone might possibly dare to die.) But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." These verses lend credence to what is perhaps the most succinct but cogent definition of grace that I have ever heard: "**The almightiness of God that invades the helplessness of man.**"

Arthur Pink defined grace in the following terms: "Divine grace is the sovereign and saving favour of God exercised in the bestowment of blessings upon those who have no merit in them and for which no compensation is demanded from them. Nay, more; it is the favour of God shown to those who not only have no positive deserts of their own, but who are thoroughly ill-deserving and hell-deserving. It is completely unmerited and unsought, and is altogether un-attracted by anything in or from or by the objects upon which it is bestowed. Grace can neither be bought, earned, nor won by the creature. If it could be, it would cease to be grace. When a thing is said to be of grace, we mean that the recipient has no claim upon it, that it was in no wise due him. It comes to him as pure charity, and, at first, unasked and undesired."

Paul says emphatically, "*For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so that no one can boast.*" Salvation is the gift of God; it is not a reward. Salvation does not find its source in human beings. Furthermore, salvation is not out of a source of works. This explains salvation by grace. It is not produced by human beings nor earned by them. "*It is the gift of God.*" It is a gift from God with no strings attached to it. This is a favourite doctrine of Paul, and it should be a favourite doctrine of all who love the Lord Jesus in sincerity and with understanding.

Paul's whole theology of salvation by grace is presented as an equivalent to the Gospel itself. He argues that if persons are saved entirely without making any contribution themselves, they must be saved by sovereign grace, for if they contribute anything whatsoever, and that contribution is essential to their salvation, then in the final analysis, they are saved by their contribution. If we are saved by any kind of co-operative effort between us and God, no matter how little is our contribution and how much is God's contribution, then grace is no more grace. It is an all-or-nothing situation.

"*For by grace you are saved through faith.*" Faith is understood here to denote the human response by which God's salvation is received. If God's grace is the **ground** of salvation, then faith is the **means** by which it is appropriated. It would be a mistake however, for us to view this faith, in itself, as a meritorious work that earns our salvation. Faith is not some good thing that we do in order to make up for all of the evil that we have done in our lives. Rather, **it is the response which receives what has already been done for us in Christ.** This is important because some persons mistakenly assume that we are saved as a reward for the goodness of our faith or that we, even after the Fall, possess some small residue of good that enables us to exercise faith on our own.

The Bible tells us that this is not the case. Paul states emphatically that "*it is the gift of God.*" Paul is making the point that the response of faith does not come from any human source, but that is God's gift. Our faith itself is a gift from God. It is not the result of a self-generated effort. Salvation in its entirety, including the faith through which it is received, is God's gift of grace! Of course, we are responsible to exercise faith, but the only reason we have faith at all is because of God's sovereign work of regeneration. Even our faith is something that we do not deserve!

What Paul is saying in effect to the Ephesians is, "Every aspect of your salvation, including the saving energy of faith, is not of yourselves: it is a gift, and it is God's gift."

Salvation cannot be “*of works*” because the work of salvation, past, present and future has already been completed on the cross. This is the work that God did for us, and it is a finished work. When Jesus Christ said shortly before His death, “*It is finished,*” He meant it. You and I can add nothing to it and we dare not take anything from it. When Jesus died, the veil of the temple was torn in two, from the top to the bottom, signifying that the way to God was now open. There is no more need for earthly sacrifices. One sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, has finished the great work of salvation. God did it all, and He did it by His grace.

One reason why salvation is a free gift of God and not earned by works, is given us in the words; “*lest any man should boast.*” Grace glorifies God, while works glorify human beings. Since none of us can bring salvation to ourselves by our own efforts, no one can boast. Our boasting can only be in the Lord.

The Hymn, “*It Is Finished,*” was written by a man named **James Proctor**. He introduced the hymn with the following words: “Since I first discovered Jesus to be the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth, I have more than once met with a poor sinner seeking peace at the foot of Sinai instead of Calvary, and I have heard him again and again in bitter disappointment and fear groaning out, What must I do? I have said to him, Do, do? What can you do? What do you need to do?”

*“Nothing, either great or small —
Nothing, sinner, no;
Jesus died and paid it all,
Long, long ago.*

Refrain:

*It is finished! yes, indeed,
Finished, ev’ry jot;
Sinner, this is all you need,
Tell me, is it not?*

*When He, from His lofty throne,
Stooped to do and die,
Ev’rything was fully done;
Hearken to His cry!*

*Weary, working, burdened one,
Wherefore toil you so?
Cease your doing; all was done
Long, long ago.*

*Till to Jesus’ work you cling
By a simple faith,
Doing is a deadly thing—
Doing ends in death.*

*Cast your deadly doing down—
Down at Jesus’ feet;
Stand in Him, in Him alone,
Gloriously complete.*

Brothers and sisters, we are saved because of God's unmerited favour, not as the result of any effort, ability, intelligent choice, or act of service on our part. However, because we are saved, we will endeavour to embrace holiness and please God out of gratitude for His free gift of salvation. While no action or work we do can help us to obtain salvation, God's intention is that our salvation will result in us living holy lives.

Since we have not been saved because of our good works, we cannot be lost because of our bad works. Grace means salvation, completely apart from any merit or works on our part. Grace means that God has done it all for Jesus' sake!

In verse **10**, Paul gives us another reason why salvation is not of human origin and therefore, cannot be the basis for human boasting. He writes, *"For we are his creative work, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared beforehand so we can do them."* We are **God's** creative work! We are **His** workmanship from start to finish; from beginning to end! The saints have **already** been created in Christ Jesus for good works. Once again, the apostle makes it clear that we are wholly dependent on God's gracious, sovereign activity for our salvation. We are the handiwork of **God**; we are **His** new creation and our salvation, therefore, is due to Him, not to ourselves.

We have been *"created in Christ Jesus for good works."* This further defines God's workmanship. We are God's spiritual creation and this creation was in Christ, so that without being united with Him, it could not have taken place. We were created for *"good works."* Good works are God's design for His new creation and they flow from His gracious salvation as its consequence or fruit. It is important for us to understand that these good works are not the ground of our salvation and therefore, they should never be the subject of our boasting. They are the **fruit** of salvation, not the **basis** or **cause** of salvation. We are not saved **by** good works, but saved **unto** good works. In other words, it is God's will that those who belong to the new creation should be characterized by a lifestyle which ultimately reflects His own character and action.

Our works are not good because we ourselves are good, but because we have a new nature from God, and because the Holy Spirit works in us, and through us to produce these good works. It is not we who manufacture these good works. They are the results of the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. In **Galatians 5:19-22**, we have a confirmation of this truth:

19 Now the **works of the flesh** are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, depravity,

20 idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions,

21 envying, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and similar things. I am warning you, as I had warned you before: Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God!

23 But the **fruit of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Philippians 2:12-13, also makes the point: *"So then, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence but even more in my absence, continue working out your salvation with awe and reverence, for the one bringing forth in you both the desire and the effort — for the sake of his good pleasure — is God."*

The secret of Paul's good works was "*the grace of God,*" according to **1 Corinthians 15:10**: "*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been in vain. In fact, I worked harder than all of them — yet not I, but the grace of God with me.*"

We have been created in Christ Jesus for "*good works,*" and these good works are described as those good works "*that God prepared beforehand so we can do them.*" The word "*prepared*" is the translation of a Greek word which means, "to prepare before, to make ready beforehand."

This is a stunning statement emphasizing the importance and divine origin of these good works. The words are in a construction in the Greek which indicate that God has already prepared, in advance, the "*good works*" that we are to do! Paul has already informed us in **Ephesians 1:4**, that God "*chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him in love.*" Now in **Ephesians 2:10**, he is telling us that believers are God's work, and the good deeds which He has purposed for them to do, which are achieved only through his enabling power, can be thought of as already prepared in his mind and counsel from before eternity!

God's plan from eternity past was not simply to introduce His sons and daughters into a relationship with Himself through His Son, but to bring us fully to glory. This included the little steps that we would take in order to reach our final goal. These little steps embrace the good works that He has marked out for us beforehand. Here again, Paul stresses the absolute priority of divine grace.

It is God's intention that we should order our lives in the ambit of good works. We have a responsibility to live in the world so as to please Him. Remember that there was a time when we were dead, disobedient, depraved, and doomed. "*But God*" loved us, quickened us, exalted us, and is keeping us. He now intends for us to demonstrate a changed life-style through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives inside us.

Are we wearing "grave clothes" or "grace clothes?" Are we enjoying liberty in Jesus Christ, or are we still bound by the habits of the old life in the graveyard of sin? As Christians, we have been raised and seated in the heavenlies. Let us practice our position in Christ! He has worked **for** us; now let us allow Him to work **in** us and **through** us that He might give you an exciting, creative life to the glory of God.