

What Christ Has Saved Us From

— *Ephesians 2:1-10* —

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After nearly two millennia since Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians, there are still depths of truth in it that we all have yet to penetrate fully. In chapter two we read the exactly-right formula of salvation—we are saved “not of works” but “by grace . . . through faith, and that not of [ourselves]; it is the gift of God” (vs. 8). When we say that we are “saved through faith” we don’t want to give the impression (or have the idea) that our own exercise of faith is the cause or the means of our salvation. No one in the hereafter will boast, “Yes, the Lord saved me, but I did my part: I did the work required, I believed—that’s why I’m here. I helped save myself.” Utterly wholehearted thanks will pour out of our souls for all time and eternity. (To believe is not a work!)

We all long for clearer, sharper understanding of what it means to be saved, because of “the riches of [God’s] grace, . . . the gift of God.” If we have been “saved . . . through faith,” we will bear fruits of “good works” which are “His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus” (vss. 9, 10). All our reading the Bible is useless if it doesn’t result in “good works.” Although they don’t save us, they are an important evidence that we have truly believed and that our pride and arrogance have been humbled by appreciating that grace. That’s included in what it means to “believe.”

Conservative Christians for hundreds of years have discussed (even argued) the relationship between faith and works. Their favorite word used to describe it is “balance.” The popular idea is that one must hold faith and works in “balance.” If you talk about faith for ten minutes then you must also talk about works for ten minutes. However, a check of the concordance reveals that nowhere in the Bible is the word “balance” used to describe this relationship. In inspired writings, there is practically nothing to suggest the use of that word as being appropriate. Scripture and inspired writings are clear “beyond question” that salvation is totally by grace through faith, and Paul even goes out of his way to add, “Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph 2:8, 9). The “balance” idea strongly suggests that salvation is by faith and by works, a 50/50 deal. Which if true, would certainly give the saved ones something to boast about: “Yes, Jesus saved me, but look, I did my part too!” One popular little book is entitled “Faith And Works”, the title having been added by editors long after the author’s death. Yet inside the covers, the original author repeatedly speaks of the correct formula as being “faith WHICH works.”

Yes, the Bible is true; there is only one Saviour, Jesus; none of us is a co-savior. It’s not a 50/50 salvation trip; it’s 100% salvation by Christ, received by faith. But the faith is not the “dead faith” that the apostle James decries (James 2:20). A “dead faith” can do nothing except self-righteousness (which doesn’t have a very nice fragrance!). A living faith WORKS; it has to work; it will work; it always works.

The “works” is a verb and not a noun. What is faith itself? How does the Bible define it? It is not a synonym for works! The devil hates the idea of salvation by faith alone, by faith which works; if in any way he can inject into our thinking the idea that faith is itself works, then he has us deceived. John 3:16 has it: “God loved,” “God gave,” and we “believe” (the same in Greek as have faith). Faith is a human heart response to God's loving and giving. “With the heart *bold* man believeth unto righteousness” (Rom 10:10). “Take heed, . . . lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief” (Heb 3:12).

An important part of “good works” which are the fruit of mature faith is a preparation of heart and life for the second coming of Jesus—not just getting ready to die. Not until the second advent can God's people safely claim graduation out of our “rich-and-increased-with-goods” complex which has continued to “frustrate the grace of God” (Gal. 2:23, KJV) for centuries. We are living in this “time of the end” which began, according to Daniel (11:35; 12:4) at the end of the 1260 years of papal dominance. We will want to “walk softly” as we come to chapter two of Ephesians; this is the time to pray, as Paul told us, that “the eyes of [our] understanding” may be “enlightened.” Ephesians has never been “present truth” so vital to understand as it is just now.

We are living in this “time of the end,” the cosmic Day of Atonement, the hour of the cleansing of the sanctuary. Therefore our reading of Ephesians is prefaced by the conviction that we live in an hour of

supreme crisis. The Lord Jesus wants to return the second time. He will forever retain His human nature so that He is still a Man seated at the right hand of His Father in heaven. All humanity is bound up there with Him. He is an eager bridegroom who wants the wedding to come. We know that the reticence of His Bride-to-be to prepare herself for “the marriage of the Lamb” has been for Him a disappointment beyond description. The great controversy between Christ and Satan has not yet been finally settled even though Christ won His victory on His cross two millennia ago; His people now have a vital part in this final outworking of the issues.

This message of Ephesians will come into its own in this “time of the end.”

Ephesians 2:1-3: “You He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.”

“We all,” says Paul; this describes our fallen nature we have “all” inherited from our fallen head, Adam. Give us enough time and if we had no Savior to save us from ourselves, we would be where any lost soul in the world is today. When you hear of something terrible someone has done, never say, “I could never do that!” You don't know what you

could do if there isn't Someone who saved you—Jesus.

It was and still is the natural thing for us to do, to “walk according to the course of this world.” It's the “dead” way, the way of “perishing” that John 3:16 speaks of (“that whoever believes . . . should not perish”). Life for those who walk after the world is a ceaseless process of perishing.

The Enemy of Christ in the “great controversy” is a “prince,” a “spirit” who commands the world. His following is assured; every baby born into the world who doesn't learn of Jesus inevitably grows up to be a follower of this evil “prince” because the desires of his “flesh” and of his “mind” are naturally devoted to self. Every one needs the Savior!

Of course, no baby ever cries because some other baby is hungry; we smile because the baby is so self-centered; we watch the exhibitions of self in our little ones and we are amused, but unless the gospel principle of denying self can be introduced, this new person will become another “child of wrath,” says Paul, “just as the others.” The love of money is the root of all evil because its primary root is the love of self. That's the legacy of all the sons and daughters of the fallen Adam.

Can the love of Christ take precedence over this basic, inborn love of self which fulfills “the desires of the flesh”? Martin Luther said we can't stop the birds flying over our head, but we can stop them making a nest in our hair. That's a homely way of saying we need the gospel. Those “desires of the flesh” are natural, they come unbidden. Temptation arouses the lusts within; but as we read further in

Ephesians we find that there is power in the love of Christ that conquers the most alluring temptations.

We “once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling” them, says Paul; we were slaves to lust. In these last days this “prince of the power of the air,” this “spirit” of “disobedience,” has greatly intensified sexual temptations. Immorality has even invaded the ranks of the clergy; one great church has paid a billion dollars in efforts to settle sexual lawsuits against its clergy. A man who came to me once for counseling said he wished he could gouge out his eyes. He dreaded what he thought was the overmastering power of pornographic allurements. Even the Internet is full of the plague.

This greatly intensified appeal of temptation leaves honest-hearted, sincere people crying out, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). Illicit sex has a vise-like grip on human nature. People yearn for deliverance from the horror of this captivity. To a great extent AIDS is a fruit of yielding to sensual temptations that God has lovingly forbidden us to indulge. But multitudes think it is hopeless to resist. This “prince of the power of the air” wants to destroy the human race, and he is trying to convince humanity that it's hopeless to resist him!

Now comes Paul's revelation of salvation:

Ephesians 2:4-7: “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that

in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

John M. Fowler offers this striking comment: “The apostle introduces the glorious alternative available to this pathetic lot in two dramatic words, ‘But God . . .’ These two words may be among the Bible’s most beautiful words. We were dead, but God; we were rebels, but God; we were under judgment of death, but God; we were aliens and strangers, but God; Satan may seem triumphant, but God” (Study Guides to Ephesians).

Muslims believe that Allah is “merciful,” but Paul goes further and establishes how God is merciful by linking His mercy to His love, which in Paul’s vocabulary is a special word, agape. The apostle John reaches the zenith in portrayals of the character of God by declaring simply yet profoundly that “God is agape” (1 John 4:8). Agape is what is missing in Islam, indeed, it has also become missing in much of modern professions of Christianity.

The reason is that a very popular teaching, embraced by the great bulk of Christian people, acts as a smoke screen or clouds that cover the snows of Kilimanjaro; it hides agape. The doctrine of the natural immortality of the human soul which is embraced by most Roman Catholic and Protestant churches (and of course in Islam) came originally from ancient paganism and has been imported into popular Christianity. Multitudes are totally unaware how it happened.

At first thought it is assumed that it doesn’t matter whether or not we believe in natural immortality; we still believe in the cross because we put it up on our church steeples and we wear it around our necks. But we can’t grasp what happened on the cross if we believe in that natural immortality teaching. Here’s why:

The Bible says that “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3), but if natural immortality is true, He didn’t! If you believe in natural immortality, you can’t believe that anybody will ever die; all go to heaven or to hell in eternal life-consciousness. (Paul says that the first death is a “sleep,” 1 Thess. 4:16, 17.) That’s why popular religion sends people straight to heaven when they die or straight to hell (or to Rome’s invention of “purgatory”). But the Bible teaches that when people die, they “sleep” and await either the first resurrection or the second—the first being “blessed and holy” and the second, “unto damnation” (Rev. 20:6; John 5:29). That expression, “Christ died . . .” means that He actually died the real, genuine death which is what the Bible calls “the second death” (Rev. 2:11; 20:14). That only is the real thing!

The Bible goes into great detail in describing the nature of the death that Jesus died. Isaiah says that He “poured out His soul unto death” (53:12). He “emptied Himself” (Phil. 2:7). No man has ever done that other than Christ, for no man ever had a divine soul of which to “empty Himself”! Jesus described the death he was dying when He cried out as no other man has ever cried, “My God, why have You forsaken Me!” (Matt. 27:46). No other

man has ever borne the full weight of such a forsakenness, for he never had the divine consciousness to realize it.

The Bible consistently teaches that man is by nature mortal and that immortality is something given to man only by Christ. Thus in one stroke, the superstitious fear of an eternally burning hell in consciousness is removed; the character of God begins to shine in its natural clarity as truly being “mercy.” God could never be happy in eternity with a burning hell in perpetuum filled with tortured humans. Neither could you be happy in such a heaven!

When Paul says that God “made us alive together with Christ,” he means He saved us from that same second death that had claimed Christ! You have infinitely more reason to be glad that you can take your next breath if you can realize the price that Christ paid to “make you alive”!

Paul says that you and I were “dead with Christ” in order to have been “made alive . . . with Christ.” “Alive” takes on an enormously greater meaning. You were born as all babies are born, and that birth was the beginning of your existence in this universe; but Paul perceives a deeper spiritual meaning—your birth was in fact a resurrection from what would have been for you the horror of the second death! And he can’t bring himself to say it without throwing in again, “by grace you have been saved”! The Father simply sent His Son with the command, “Save that person!” And He did—you! Paul speaks of what it means to “frustrate the grace

of God” (Gal. 2:21, KJV). Let that grace have its way with you; don’t resist or frustrate it.

And where now is our new home? You may still have your earthly residence in a shack in Slum Town, but Ephesians is stratospheric writing. So Paul has to say that God has “made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” The sitting is “together” with Him; a shack in the slums is better than being nailed to a cross, so that any living condition now short of crucifixion is something to be thankful for—difficult as that may seem to be. But seriously, the Lord Jesus has promised that He lives with you! His presence transforms your humble home into His palace.

Don’t mock this holy truth, or even let yourself doubt it. His presence with us is most real; only sinful unbelief will deprive us of the joy of its comfort.

And what is His greatest “pleasure,” His “fun”? Showing off the purchases of His great sacrifice throughout the wide universe, “that in the ages to come He might show [display] the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” We can understand this just a little if we think how a father or a mother loves to show off their child; their lives are bound up with the little one—and it’s only natural that God the Father loves to “dote” (that’s not the best word, but what’s a better one?) on His adopted children!

And all this glorious destiny, God has prepared for us long ago. Not that He has predestined anyone to be saved against his will—He can’t do that to anyone; but He prepared it all “beforehand” that we

should walk in all these “good works,” to our eternal delight and to His eternal joy as well.

Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

Here we have the classic, inspired formula that forever ends all controversy and confusion! Paul, no angel could have said it more plainly! You have cleared up all the controversy that has raged through the centuries about “faith and works.”

It may be popular to say “we are saved by faith,” but that is not the precisely accurate definition: rather, “by grace you have been saved.” Faith is not far away: the grace operates “through faith.” The latter is only the appreciation of the former.

When and where was the saving grace revealed? At the cross.

Whose grace is it? “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men” (Titus 2:11).

Is it possible for us to resist this grace? Paul says, “I do not set aside [frustrate, KJV] the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain” (Gal. 2:21).

Does this grace of God wipe out the reality of obedience to all the commandments of God? This grace of God “teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present age” (cf. Titus 2:12). We have teacher!

What are the dimensions of this grace? “Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as

sin reigned in death, even so might grace reign through righteousness to eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 5:20, 21).

Therefore, which is stronger—our wicked, sinful nature, or this much more abounding grace? Astonishing as the answer is to many, the simple truth is clear: there is no temptation that Satan and all his evil angels can invent that is not weaker than the corresponding grace that “abounds much more.”

Don’t let yourself think upside down; think the pure Bible good news: it is better news than we have thought.

This means, of course, that the blessed truth of the pure Good News of Ephesians says that it is easier to be saved at last, than to be lost—if only we appreciate how that grace is revealed—in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:10: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”

The more we read, the more obvious the truth becomes: the “good works” are not inventions of our own; God “prepared” them “beforehand.” They are “prepared” in the same way that ripe, delicious peaches were “prepared beforehand” before you even planted your peach tree. In the vast creation of God, the spiritual fruit of a converted heart is grander than the Lord’s most magnificent physical creations. The Greek word rendered “prepared” is *poiema*, from which we derive our word “poem.” Think of a beautiful poem—how was it “created”? From someone’s gifted mind, or heart.

The “good works” which are like David’s poems about Christ, beautiful in conception, are not done by automatons; they are the fresh, original “creation” of a converted heart which has now been reconciled to God, and thus loves “all men” in Him. God Himself enjoys the spontaneous beauty of these “poems” of ours.

The joy of the “poet” of these “good-works-poems” is reward enough for him. He never thinks of any “crown” to be given him in the judgment day; they are the product of his own free-will. And we realize that we didn’t invent any of our “good works.” God “prepared beforehand that we should walk in them,” and no joy could be greater than growing up in the “family of God” to realize our full maturity in Him.