

“Foundations: Salvation and Grace”  
Ephesians 2:3-10

March 8, 2015

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Scripture: Ephesians 2:3-10

Sermon:

***Introduction***

Imagine with me for a moment that you are exploring a cave. Perhaps it would be helpful to close your eyes. Imagine that you are exploring an old mine with many passages. [pic] You turn down a side tunnel to see what is down there. A short distance down this side passage, you come to a cliff. You can't see the bottom, even with your flash light. [pic] You pick up a loose stone and drop it over the edge, listening for it to hit the bottom. You count for many seconds before you hear a faint “click” of the stone hitting rock.

As you turn back, you hear a deep rumble. Your heart catches in your throat as you hear a deafening crash from the tunnel in the direction you came. The beam of your flashlight is choked out by dust rolling down the passage. You cough and choke on the dust and hurry back up the tunnel. Your fears are confirmed. There has been a cave in. You're trapped in the tunnel! An avalanche of stone has completely sealed the passageway you came down. You're alone and completely cut off from the main passage of the mine. You try to move some of the boulders blocking your path, but while some of them move, most are too heavy for you to budge. You are well and truly trapped.

After a few hours, the batteries in your flashlight die. Now you're stuck in complete darkness. You brought a bit of food and water, but not much. You fumble around in the pitch black, opening your food. You sit down to think and wait for rescue. After a day, your food is gone. After the second day, your water is gone. You think it's the second day, but in such complete blackness you don't really know how much time has passed. All you know is that you're terribly hungry and terribly thirsty. Still there is no sound other than your own breathing. No sign of rescue. No hope for you to get out of the tunnel.

Three days later, weak with hunger and thirst, you are on the brink of death. Lying on the ground, you think you must be hallucinating. You hear a grinding sound coming from the pile of rubble blocking the tunnel. The sound grows and you recognize the sound of metal grinding on rock. You perk up! There is hope!

After an hour or so, the sound is quite loud. You can hear rocks shaking and a few tumble down the pile. Even in your weakened state, you stand up, eager at the thought of rescue. Suddenly, you are blinded by a beam of light slashing the darkness that surrounds you. There is a loud crash as half a dozen boulders roll down the pile. Shielding your eyes, you see the silhouette of a head poking through a hole at the top of the pile of rocks. You are saved!

An emergency worker slides down the inside of the rubble, calling your name. He reaches you and puts his arms around you. He hands you a bottle of water and helps you drink it. He asks if you're ok, if you can walk. He then helps you up the pile of rubble and through the hole into the main passage of the mine. A few minutes later, leaning on the emergency worker, you stagger out into blinding sunshine and fresh air!

How would you react? What effect would this have on your life? Would you think you had done anything to save yourself? Of course not! It required heavy machinery to reach you. Would you brag about your exploits? Not likely. While you may eagerly tell people about your rescue, you would be keenly aware of the fact that you did nothing to save yourself. In fact, the only thing you were responsible for was getting trapped in the first place!

How would you feel about the rescue workers? How would you approach the rest of your life? Having had a brush with death, do you think you would see the rest of your days differently? Would you live differently than you do now?

This is how we are to understand God's saving grace. The Christian doctrine we are talking about today is that of grace, in particular that we are saved by God's grace. **Literally, the word grace means “undeserved favour.”** That means, by definition, grace cannot be earned nor can it be demanded. It is undeserved favour.

In the Christian context, speaking of grace usually means speaking of God's grace shown to us. In this context, Martin Luther puts it well, “**Grace signifies that favour with which God receives us, forgiving sins**

**and justifying us freely through Christ.”** [Martin Luther, *What Luther Says*, p. 603] We do not earn God’s forgiveness. We do not earn our justification. We are forgiven because of Christ. We are justified because of Christ. God receives us because of Christ.

This is in contrast to the idea that we earn our salvation by doing good things, or by being good people. That is called “salvation by works.” Our good works, it is believed, will win God over and he will choose to welcome us into his presence because of them.

Since the earliest days of Christianity, there has always been a struggle between these two views. Since early on, it has been difficult for people to grasp that they cannot earn their salvation, they cannot overcome their own sin. Even while paying lip service to the phrase “salvation through grace” people still slip into thinking that they can earn God’s pleasure, that they can make God happy with them through their good deeds and by avoiding bad deeds. This is because it is “the natural desire of man to [try to] acquire grace through some effort or offering of his own.” [Luther, p. 604] We naturally want to play a role in our own salvation. We naturally want to lift ourselves up out of our difficulties. But this is part of our pride! That very same pride that caused Adam and Eve to choose to evaluate the fruit on their own terms and reach out to take it themselves in order to be like God. That same pride and desire for self-determination is still at work in us today when we think we can do something to merit God’s mercy, that we can do something to solve the problem of our own sin.

This is why, from the earliest days, the apostles had to set things straight even with Christians. That is what we will see in our text today, one of many that emphasize the undeserved aspect of God’s grace in our salvation.

### **Context**

Our passage today comes from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. As you may recall, last week we read from 2 Timothy. Timothy had been sent by Paul to the church Ephesus to help them deal with some false teachers. The letter we are reading today was written by Paul some time previously but addressed some of the same issues Timothy had to deal with in person years later. One of the issues addressed in 2 Timothy is that the false teachers who had infiltrated the church were not living out their faith. In contrast, believers’ lives are to reflect their salvation in the way they behave.

The city of Ephesus was an important port city, a central location for trade. There were numerous temples to a variety of pagan gods in the city that the Christians there had to walk past on a daily basis. Surrounded by signs of the power of pagan gods, one of Paul’s goals is to remind them that their struggles are not merely against flesh and blood, but also against spiritual powers at work in the world. But they need not fear, because the power at work in them is so much greater than that which is in the world.

The church in Ephesus was mostly Gentile. That is, there were few Jewish converts in the church. Part of Paul’s message in the letter is that when it comes to getting things right with God, neither Jews nor non-Jews can do it on their own. Both groups are in the same boat when it comes to salvation.

We pick up our text just after Paul has described the situation for his Gentile readers before they found Christ. He says in verse 1 that they were “dead in their transgressions and sins.” In verse 3, though, he makes an important shift saying, “All of us” also lived among those dead in their sins. That means Paul is including faithful Jews like himself, before finding Christ.

### **Text**

With that in mind, let’s turn to our text, Ephesians 2:3-10.

### **Observations**

As usual, there is a lot going on in this text! We see terms like life and death, love and mercy, the resurrection, the coming ages and faith. This is a wonderfully rich passage and we are going to examine it well, but we don’t have time to go into every single detail.

To begin with, however, notice that Paul twice says, “It is by grace you have been saved.” He says it in verse 5 first and again in verse 8. Any time you find a Biblical writer repeating something, you should take note! The expenses involved in writing meant that you only repeated things if they were of utmost importance. So that Paul has repeated this statement means it is central to his message.

But where does Paul start? In our text, in Greek, verses 1-10 are all one, long sentence. **The core of this sentence is that “God is the one who sovereignly acts to make the spiritually dead alive by uniting us with Christ.”** [Bryan Chapell, *Ephesians*, p. 78 n. 1] All the rest of these verses are clauses designed to show the

depth of our misery in sin and the greatness of our loving and merciful God. Paul's whole point is that "salvation is a consequence of God's sovereign initiative and not a result of our achievement or merit." [Chapell, p. 78]

Paul starts with the problem. In verse 3 he says that "all of us" we "by nature objects of wrath." Literally, it means we were all by nature "children of wrath." In Hebrew they would say "sons of disobedience." It means that we are all "worthy to receive divine judgement." [Peter T. O'Brien, *Ephesians*, p. 162] Why is that? Because we all lived "gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts."

I want to point out here that **sin is deeper than just the bad things we do**. Our sinful nature has cravings. It has desires. It has thoughts. These are all sinful. Your desires are not pure. My desires are not pure. Just because we desire something does not make it ok! This is something our culture has lost sight of. In our culture we live by the rule "if it feels good, do it." We never have a desire we don't indulge. This is the background behind our massive consumer debt, rampant sexual promiscuity, abuse of food and alcohol and, I believe, ultimately behind the radical shift in the discussion about homosexuality. The argument in favour of gay rights assumes that all desires are legitimate and deserve to be satisfied. If you desire something it is your "right" to pursue it. But our desires are fallen! Our thoughts are fallen. And this is a significant part of the problem of sin.

The first part of Paul's point, which is the inherently offensive part of the gospel, is that we are all, by nature, objects of wrath. But what is wrath? Wrath is not an impersonal force of cause and effect. It is not a "rule" that because we sin God gets angry. Nor is wrath vindictive anger. God's wrath is not about revenge for having been offended or disobeyed. God's wrath is not an outburst of passion or rage. God always acts in a righteous manner, which means his anger at sin is holy and justified. God's wrath at sin is completely appropriate in the same way that a king rightly objects to rebellion in his kingdom. As this passage will show us, however, God's wrath and God's love are not mutually exclusive. [O'Brien, p. 163]

But in order to grasp God's love, in order to fully appreciate his mercy, one must first understand the depth of his wrath at sin. It is only when we understand the depth of our problem, it is only when we understand how fully trapped we are in sin and that we are doomed to die if left on our own, like being trapped in a cave with no way out, that we fully grasp the richness, greatness and power of his love for us in showing us mercy.

The depth of the problem of sin is shown in verse 5, "we were dead in transgressions." "By nature and practice we are spiritually lifeless. **Our status before God is that of dead people.**" [includes pic] This is how God sees us in our sin. This is what we have to grasp if we are to grasp God's grace. When God looks at our sin he sees only death, rot and corruption. If your stomach turns at the sight of this picture (of a zombie), magnify that by 100 and you'll start to get a sense of what God feels about sin. That is God's wrath at sin. And we are dead spiritually, which, when it comes to God, is far more important than being dead physically! We are cut off, in a cave, with no hope of escape. When God looks at us in our sin, he sees dead people.

So here is the miracle. We are all, by our very nature, objects of wrath and dead in our sin. We are completely unable to do anything about it. **BUT! "Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions."** Notice, Paul says that we have *already* been made alive with Christ, past tense! Similarly, he says we have already been raised up with Christ and been seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. **Notice that all of these accomplishments are in the past tense.** The work has been done, we are just waiting for the final fulfilment.

It is not that God has made us spiritually alive now, but will raise us up with Christ in the future. No, it is already accomplished. Why? Because "How can believers be expected to 'walk in newness of life' (Rom 6:4) or to behave as those 'who have been brought out from death to life' if they are still dead and buried with no hope of resurrection before the last trumpet?" [O'Brien, p. 170] That is, if our only hope is in the future, how do we live out our faith now in a sinful and fallen world? But, because God has already accomplished for us what he accomplished for Christ, "The power of God which raised Jesus from the dead is now available to [us] as [we] live in this world, take [our] stand against the devil's schemes, and struggle against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." [O'Brien, p. 171]

"Jesus came, not to make bad people good, but dead people alive!" [Ravi Zacharias] That means, by making dead people alive, God no longer sees us like this but like this. [2 pics] "What God accomplished in Christ he has also accomplished for believers." [O'Brien, p. 166] We have been raised up with Christ, we have been made spiritually alive with Christ and we have been seated in the heavenly realms with Christ. In other

passages, Paul says that we have been adopted as children of God and made co-heirs with Christ! So God really does see us as his little baby boys and girls!

Why? So that in the future God can show, through us, the incomparable riches of his grace as expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. **God's whole goal is to show all of creation how much he loves us and how kind he is.** That is God's purpose, motivated out of love for us. That is why he went to such great lengths to save us from such depth of sin. That is the nature of God's grace for us.

All of this, Paul says, is done for us by God out of his grace, not our merit. We are saved by grace. He says in verse 8, "and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." Why? "So that no one can boast." He completely rules out any opportunity for us to take credit for any aspect of our salvation. **We did nothing. God did it all.** And wow, look at what he did!

But, we do have a role to play once we have been saved. As a result of having been saved, there are good works for us to do. We were created (or re-created) in Christ Jesus to do good works that God prepared in advance for us to do. **What is the nature of these good works? To demonstrate God's kindness to us in Christ Jesus.** That is God's long term goal- to demonstrate the incomparable riches of his grace, as demonstrated in the kindness to us in Christ Jesus. That is what our good works are to do. That is why we have them to do. They are not something we do to make God happy with us. They don't bring us new life. Rather, they demonstrate to others the new life God has given us. They testify to the kindness of God as he has shown us in Christ Jesus. They are a result of new life, not the cause of new life. "These 'good works' cannot be the ground of our salvation or the subject of our boasting since they are the goal of the new creation. They are the fruit of salvation, not its basis or cause." [O'Brien, p. 178]

### ***Interpretation***

So what does all of this mean? We've gone into a lot of depth, and probably already done a lot of the interpretation of this passage. So how can we sum it up when it comes to grace and salvation? Furthermore, how is Christianity different from other religions? Remember, that's been one of the elements of this series, is to compare and contrast the Christian view with that of other religions.

First, **the Christian view of sin is much darker than any other religion.** In Islam, Allah is holy. He is so holy that the thought of him coming to earth as a man is ludicrous. But even in Islam, as holy as Allah is, there is still the opportunity for a Muslim to live such a life that their good deeds outweigh their sins and they are saved. In Hinduism, through Karma, it is possible for a person to live in such a way as to not only overcome their own sins, but through a series of lifetimes, to even overcome the sins of past lives. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses believe people have a role to play in their salvation, that we give God a helping hand when it comes to overcoming sin.

But the Christian view of sin is much harsher. It is much more offensive. Paul, a devout Pharisee, which was the most religious sect of his day, realized that all of the goodness that any person can do is nothing in the face of sin. Sin taints everything we do, even the supposedly good things we do! So nobody can contribute anything to their own salvation. It's like being radio-active. Everything you touch becomes contaminated so it can't help you get clean.

This brings us to the second point. **The Christian view of God's grace is much greater than in any other religion.** Because Christianity sees the problem as so much deeper than any other faith, the solution to the problem is that much greater than any other faith. "God's magnificent rescue from death, wrath and bondage is all of grace." [O'Brien, p. 175] "His gracious initiative and sovereign action stand in wonderful contrast with the hopeless condition of fallen humanity." [O'Brien, p. 164] Naturally objects of wrath, living in the squalor of our sinful desires and thoughts, dead to God, we were beyond any hope whatsoever. But out of God's grace, we have been shown mercy instead of wrath, been made alive who once were dead and out of bondage we have been raised to be seated with Christ in the heavenly realms! God does so much more for us in Christianity than the god of any other religion.

**The Christian view of good works is different than any other religion.** In all other religions, a person's good works is for their own benefit. In Islam, one must do enough, pray enough, give enough, fast enough and go on enough pilgrimages that their goodness outweighs their sin. That is the purpose of religious observance, to get yourself into paradise. In Eastern religions that believe in Karma, one's good deeds are to help

you grow towards enlightenment and overcome the sins of either your current life or your past lives. In Mormonism your good deeds contribute to your salvation. Jehovah's witnesses believe the same thing. In all these religions, one's good works are, ultimately, for one's own benefit. They may benefit others along the way, but primarily they are how one works towards salvation.

In Christianity, **our good works do nothing for our salvation. Rather, they demonstrate God's kindness as we have already experienced it.** In the same way that we have already been brought to life, already been raised, already been seated beside Christ, our good works demonstrate the kindness we have already experienced! Good works are the result of salvation, not its cause. I see clearly in the daytime because the sun has already risen. My sight of the sun does not cause its rising nor contribute to it!

There are two common objections to this view of salvation by grace. First, **people object because they don't believe the situation is so bad that they cannot contribute to their salvation.** They think that they can, and should work for their salvation. This is the view across almost all other beliefs. But in this we see that the gospel is inherently offensive. It says your sin is so bad that you're helpless against it. This is also why so many of the religious leaders in Jesus' day were offended by him. This is why the religious leaders in many cities Paul visited were offended and chased Paul out of town. This is why it is so hard for "good people" to give their lives fully over to Christ for their salvation. They want to believe, they like to believe that their goodness helps them get saved.

The second objection is that some say, "I am not worthy to receive God's grace." They know they are sinners. They don't believe they measure up to God's standard and so they believe they are barred from a relationship with God. But this is exactly the point God's want us to come to! **If God only showed mercy to the worthy, he would show mercy to nobody!** This is why we need to accept Christ's worthiness on our behalf. [Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, p. 158] That is why Jesus said "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." [Matthew 5:3]

### ***Now Apply It***

So how do we apply this? What use can we make of this radical concept of grace? Let me go back to the image of being trapped in a cave. [pic] When you were rescued from the cave, you did nothing to contribute to your own rescue. You couldn't move the boulders blocking your path. The tunnel you were in led to a dead end at a cliff so deep you couldn't jump down and it would be death to try to climb down. You were well and truly stuck.

In the Christian view, God is the one who mounted the rescue operation that saved you. It was all God, all the time. In the Muslim view, when you come of age, an angel starts recording all the good and bad deeds you've done. When you die, Allah weighs the good vs the bad, and if the good outweighs the bad, you get into paradise. In the analogy of the cave, **as a Muslim, Allah does open the tunnel**, but before you are allowed to leave, you must show him that while you were waiting to be rescued, you moved an amount of rubble greater than the pile blocking your exit. You may not be able to move the stones in your way, but you have to show Allah that you were trying and that you moved a greater amount of stone within the tunnel than the pile which blocked your way out.

In **Hinduism, which believes in Karma, each time you die, you have to show that you moved a greater amount of rubble than you caused.** You must show that you moved more dirt away from the exit than you added to the exit. Ultimately, over a series of lifetimes, you have to show that in total you moved more dirt away from the exit than you added to it in all of your lifetimes combined. As a person, being a higher level of reincarnation, you should be well on your way to that goal.

In **Buddhism, enlightenment means sitting in the cave and realizing there is no cave.** There is no exit. There is no pile of rubble blocking your exit. You just come to enlightenment and realize that you are one with the cave, the universe and everything. Highly "advanced" Buddhist monks actually have to be spoon fed by lower level monks because they are so deep in their meditations that they fail to eat. They are so "close" to enlightenment that they cannot even feed themselves.

In **Mormonism, God digs a hole in the rubble, but leaves you to climb your way out.** Similarly, Jehovah's Witnesses also talk about God's grace, but expect individuals to earn the grace. In both cases, you have to hold to the teachings of the church, you have to have been baptised and done enough good works that you

can take hold of God's grace. Specifically, Brigham Young, the most influential Mormon teacher, ruled out the potential for a deathbed conversion. The idea that you could live a sinful life, but at the last minute repent and still enter Heaven was not possible in his view. Your life must contain enough good work that you "merit" God's grace. But that's a contradiction of undeserved favour.

Now, let me develop the image of the cave a little bit more so you understand the Christian view of grace. Imagine, now, that the reason you were in the cave was to escape the police. Imagine that you were running away from the police and ducked into a cave clearly marked "danger." [pic]

So you're deliberately running away from authority, running into a place you hope they won't follow. Now, fast forward to your rescue. Imagine finding out upon your rescue that it was the Prime Minister himself who ordered your rescue. Imagine that upon hearing that a criminal, on the run from the police, was trapped in a cave, he mobilized the Canadian Forces to dig you out. Then, when the light poured into the tunnel and you saw a face looking through, imagine that it was the PM himself! He climbs down into the tunnel to check on you. As he gives you a bottle of water with one hand, he hands you a full pardon with the other hand! In fact, he asks you if you would be willing to serve as a member of his cabinet once you've recovered.

What would you think? Not only were you saved, but you were given a second chance to live free! Not only was your life restored, but your debts were cancelled and you were elevated to a position of power and prestige! How would you feel about the PM? How would you live your life?

Consider next that you leave the cave, you go to the hospital to recover, and as you're being nursed back to health, you see a story about yourself on the news. In that news coverage, you find out that at the same time you were trapped underground, the PM's only son was also trapped in another cave. The PM himself ordered the rescue operation to proceed to rescue you, leaving his son trapped. When the team finally reached the PM's son, having already found you, the son was already dead. How would that make you feel?

This is more accurately the Christian understanding of grace. **Not only did we do nothing to contribute to our salvation, but our salvation cost God dearly.** God's grace was earned, but by Christ, not us! [Luther, p. 604] Grace is free to us, but it is not free. "Grace and life were given you; but it meant bitter work for [Jesus]. It cost him much." [Luther, p. 604] Free grace is only free to us. It was not free to God.

Now, ponder for a moment, the ludicrous situation of somebody being trapped in a cave, finally being rescued but refusing to come out of the cave! Imagine somebody trapped in such a cave, finding out that the PM wishes to give them a full pardon, but they refuse to be in his debt. Imagine they find out that the PM chose to save their life at the cost of his only son's life, but they decide that they would rather try to rescue themselves, "thank you very much." So they start picking away at the pile of rubble, refusing the help of the rescue workers, refusing the pardon of the PM. They take the water offered, but then go about trying to either dig their own way out, or set up a little camp so they can stay in the cave forever.

That, sadly, is what happens when people refuse to respond to and accept God's grace. For some reason, we are all too happy to accept gifts and good deeds from other people, "but we rebel and recoil at receiving the gift of salvation from God as grace!" [Luther, p. 607] "That people do not believe is not due to any insufficiency of the Lord Christ, but the fault is [theirs]." [Luther, p. 608]

So accept the gift of God's grace. Stop striving to show God that "you can do it!" Stop trying to earn the love he has already shown you. There is nothing you can do that will make God love you less. There is nothing you can do that will make God love you more. So stop trying to wrestle your own way out of sin, accept the hand graciously offered to you in Christ Jesus, and put your full weight on him to overcome your sin and restore your relationship with God. Amen.