

You were dead. But God! Your whole life consisted in trespasses and sins. But God! You were caught in the world's vortex, circling the drain on your way down. But God! Satan ruled over your thoughts and actions. But God! You were sons of disobedience, children of wrath, and no one on earth could save you. You were dead, but God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved you, made you alive together with Christ! By *grace* you are saved.

And I don't mean to trivialize the gospel by comparing it to magic, but I do hope you are as stunned by God's gracious gift of salvation as anyone has ever been by a magician's trick. And if you've heard the classic explanation of the three stages of a magic trick, you can see them reflected here in Ephesians 2. First is the *pledge*, where the magician shows you the subject: an ordinary deck of cards, or his assistant or a volunteer. This is what Paul has done in vv. 1-3: he's shown you humanity, normal, dead-in-sins humanity. Second, the *turn*, where something extraordinary happens: the magician makes the volunteer *vanish*. In Ephesians 2, the turn is introduced by saying "But God", and the extraordinary thing that happens is that dead-in-sins humanity comes to life!

But a really talented magician won't stop there: he wants to completely overwhelm you, and so the third act is called the *prestige*, where suddenly a spotlight shines out into the crowd and you see the volunteer who vanished sitting in his original seat as if he'd been there the whole time! Well, the prestige for Paul comes in v. 10, where the dead people who once walked in sins and trespasses are now not only *alive*, but are walking in good works, fulfilling God's original plan for mankind that everyone thought sin had ruined. Here's the pledge: see these walking-in-sins-dead people, just like the rest of humanity? Here's the turn: now they are alive! And here's the prestige: now they are walking in good works, to the glory of God.

With minds boggled and jaws on the floor, everyone in the crowd has one question: **how?** How did he do that? And it makes no difference how long you examine the volunteer or the stage; it still doesn't make sense, because the secret lies with the magician. In the same way, you'll never understand the mystery of salvation by looking at humanity – this is not your own doing, not a result of works; it is the gift of God. In order to understand the "magic" of salvation, stop looking at man, stop looking at the world, and look to God.

And this is where salvation *isn't* like magic, because the magician never tells, but God does: by *grace* you are saved. And once you know the secret, you realize that this is no trick; this is real! What Father, Son, and Spirit have done for the world by bringing life out of death is not sleight of hand or smoke and mirrors. What you've just witnessed in Ephesians 2:1-10 is *the miracle of grace*, so break out your applause – endless songs of worship and praise – the God of grace has done the impossible. Salvation is no trick. It's not a matter of enriching or improving or enabling a mediocre life to become better; salvation is about bringing the dead to life, which is something only God can do; something He *has* done in Jesus Christ.

And so as we focus on vv. 4-10 today, I want us to see how Paul magnifies the work of salvation by answering our *what*, *how*, and *why* questions. **What** is this gift of salvation? Vv. 4-6 answer: we are saved *from* death. **How** can this be? Vv. 8-9 answer: we are saved *by* grace. **Why** are we saved? Vv. 7 and 10 answer: to show forth the riches of God's grace through our good works. Saved *from* death, saved *by* grace, and saved *for* good works. That's the gospel. And don't miss the repeated refrain: v. 5 – with Christ; v. 6 – in Christ Jesus; v. 7 – in Christ Jesus – okay, we get the point! Not yet you don't – v. 10 – in Christ Jesus! Your salvation is not about *you*, with Jesus included. Salvation is all about **Jesus**, and by the mercy and love of God, *you* are included!

As we look at the “what” of our salvation, remember what I mentioned last week about how our lives follow Jesus' pattern of death, resurrection, ascension, and session (that is, being seated in the heavenly places). These things are the heart of what salvation brings, but I want to make it clearer that this is not simply a matter of *being like* Jesus or *imitating* Jesus; this happens because we are *united* to Jesus, we are *made one* with Jesus.

Paul coins three new words to emphasize that these things happen to us “with Christ”, all linked by the same prefix in Greek, but this gets lost in English. One translator put it like this, though: In Christ Jesus, we are *co-made alive* with Him, *co-raised* with Him, and *co-seated* with Him.<sup>1</sup> What happens to Jesus happens to you, but only because you are *with Him*.

These are the particulars, but the sum total of what God has done for you in Christ is this state of life and salvation: you were made alive, and *by grace you are saved*, which gets the idea across a little better than “you have been saved”. Paul's not focusing on a *past* event; he's

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<sup>1</sup> Baugh, *Ephesians*, 146.

explaining your current state. You are alive and saved because God had mercy on you. And after all the death we looked at last week, isn't it good to be alive?

When we ask how God saved us, we need to put the accent on the right word: we aren't asking how the almighty and omnipotent God was able to save us, or how Jesus accomplished salvation through His ministry on earth and His atonement. We're asking how can we explain the fact that God saved *us*? "God" and "saved" are the words that make sense; God is a saving God. But God saved *us*? How does that make sense?

Paul's answer is to stop focusing on us, and to return our attention back to God. We can't understand how sinners like us were saved by looking at sinners like us. There is no reason *in us* for God to save us. But there are plenty of reasons found *in God*: God is rich in mercy. God loves with a great love. God is kind. God has a predestined plan for us that He means to fulfill. Really, though, these are all variations on a theme: God, in Himself, *is gracious*. That's why He saved you.

In particular, Paul is concerned to rule out any idea that we were saved by our own efforts, either our attempts to keep God's law, or even the faith by which we take hold of Jesus. V. 8 tells us that faith is the instrument through which we receive salvation, but this is the passive reception of a gift, and not our little part in earning a heavenly reward.

Before we can be saved, first, God must make us alive, then give us faith, and only then are we enabled by that faith to receive Christ and all His benefits. Nothing in that process is of any credit to us; all of it highlights the grace God has for dead sinners. And in case we missed it, Paul hammers it home: "This is not your own doing."

The reason why this is so important is so that we do not *boast* in our salvation. If the reason *you* were saved, and *not* your neighbor, lies in *you* and not in *God*, then you have something to boast about. If you helped, even just a little bit, then you have good reason for just a little bit of boasting. But there is no room for any human boasting before God, because no dead man ever helped God save him.

This is a keystone of what it means to be reformed, one of the five solas of the Reformation: *sola deo Gloria*, to God alone be the glory. All theologies that find a little place for man and his efforts to *prepare* for grace, or *cooperate* with grace, or *earn* grace open the door to boasting, but Ephesians 2:8-10 slams that door shut. This driving concern to exalt the glory of

God, and this passage in Ephesians is why it's funny when people think that John Calvin invented Reformed Theology. No, the doctrines of grace are found in the Bible! *Ephesians* teaches us that salvation is *all of grace*, therefore, *all the glory belongs to God*.

That brings us to the last question: "Why were we saved?" The glory of God is the ultimate answer, but verses 7 and 10 help to explain how God is glorified in particular. In v. 7, we see that God gets glory by showing forth the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness towards those who are in Christ.

In the ancient world, the gods were glorified when trophies and spoils of war and valuable gifts were placed in their temples, like the one in Ephesus. Temples weren't just *worship sites*, they were *glory museums*. Paul is saying that God's temple, the Church, will be filled with trophies of God's grace, testimonies that God gives life to the dead.

But in v.10 we see that we won't just be statues on display, but living, breathing examples of what God can do. God not only gives life, but He gives us *abundant* life, which isn't found in living for self, but in living for God and others. God's original plan when He made man was to fill the earth with image-bearers doing god-like good works – art, science, technology, politics, literature, caring for animals, raising children; loving God and loving neighbor in a thousand different ways.

When sin and death ruined the human race, God *remade* us in Christ Jesus, overcoming sin and death so that once again we can walk in good works instead of walking in sins and trespasses. (We see that movement from 2:1 to 2:10.) It's a huge mistake to think that just because good works can't *save* you that good works *don't matter*. Good works are not an optional part of the Christian life; they are essential, because they are the reason why God created you in Christ Jesus! He saved you so that you could stop walking in death, and start walking in good works.

This is the glory that God wants everyone to see: you were dead; but God made you alive. You were walking in sins and trespasses, but now you are walking in good works. And what's the explanation for all of this? The grace of God has been poured out on us in Christ Jesus. Thanks be to God!

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*