

# Ephesians 2:1-10

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When I was in sixth grade, my best friend was a kid named Brian. Even though neither one of us knew very much about it, we liked to talk about religion and the Bible. Even at that age, I knew that you had to be baptized to be saved. However, Brian's older sister had a boyfriend named Ron, and Ron was a member of a denomination that taught that baptism was not necessary for salvation, and he also talked with Brian a lot about religion.

One day, I got a phone call from Brian, and he said, "It's time to have a debate!" He had Ron on another line, and he wanted the two of us to argue about salvation so that he could figure out whom to believe. At 11 years old, I certainly didn't know enough about the Bible to cite book, chapter, and verse. Thankfully, my mother quickly realized what was going on, and she got out her Bible and started feeding me Scriptures to quote. No 20-year-old college kid was going to out-Bible my mother on baptism, so the next day, Brian told me that I had won the debate.

Even though Ron couldn't stand up under the deluge of passages that I faithfully repeated, there was one text that he kept clinging to, and that was Ephesians 2:8-9. Every time I cited another Scripture that showed the essentiality of baptism, he would reply, "You're boasting! You're boasting!" Of course, he was far from the first to make that argument. Confusion has reigned about this text for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. Nor is this confusion limited to the denominational world. Many of our own brethren have reacted so strongly to the idea of salvation by faith only that they write the first part of Ephesians 2 out of the Bible entirely and emphasize our salvation by our own works.

As always, the only way to resolve the confusion is to return to the word. We can't just ignore Ephesians 2 for the sake of convenience. We have to study it to figure out what it means for us. Let's look, then, at Ephesians 2:1-10.

## Spiritual Death

When we study this text, the first subject that we come to, though it is an unpleasant one, is spiritual death. Paul explores this concept in Ephesians 2:1-3. There are many things that can cause a human being to die physically, but there is only one cause for spiritual death, and that is sin. Note that Paul makes clear that it is our sin that kills us, not another's.

Paul continues on to say that while we exist in this sin-caused state of spiritual death, five things are true of us. First, he observes that sin is the result of walking according to the course of this world. Back when I was in junior high, I remember wanting very badly to be popular, and to some extent, this desire for popularity continues until the end of our lives. However, spiritually speaking, the popular course, the course that most people choose, is the deadly course. This is not to say that Christians have to be weird for the sake of being weird, but we are responsible for evaluating the righteousness of the things that people around us do and for making the righteous decision, even if it's not the popular one. Sure, some piece of clothing may be cute or trendy, but if it's also immodest, we endanger our souls by wearing it.

Second, this course is also according to the prince of the power of the air. When we sin, we aren't only following the world. We're also following the desires of the devil. We are obeying the one whom Jesus describes as a liar and a murderer from the beginning. I don't know any murderers, but if I did, I certainly wouldn't associate or listen to them, particularly if I knew that they wanted to murder me! And yet, when we sin, that's exactly what we're doing. We're taking our lead from someone who wants to kill us. The devil is very good at hiding his goal, but that's what he wants to do.

Third, when we live in this way, we live in the lusts of the flesh. Because all of us have flesh, we are subject to fleshly desire. We want to eat, to procreate, to avoid discomfort, and so on. These fleshly desires are not necessarily evil. In fact, God has given us a right way to fulfill every fleshly desire. This desire, however, becomes lust when it chooses as its objects the things that God's law has forbidden. The more we allow the dictates of our flesh to override the dictates of our creator, the more we are living in the lusts of our flesh.

Fourth, we indulge the desires of the body and the mind. We've already talked about bodily desire, but we also have desires that are not specifically related to our flesh. For instance, we have the desire to be well liked, the desire to be wealthy, the desire to succeed, and so forth. Once again, God has given us proper avenues to pursue these desires. For example, He wants us to cultivate the friendship of our brothers and sisters in Christ. However, the desires of the mind don't discriminate either. Being well liked may be so important to us that we are willing to lie to preserve it. When our hunger for one of these more abstract earthly goals eclipses our desire to serve God, we indulge the lusts of the mind.

Finally, all of this tells us that we are by nature children of wrath. Calvinists love to camp out on this verse. They claim that it shows that mankind has an innately depraved sinful nature and is incapable of doing anything good of its own volition. However, that's not at all the point that Paul is making. Instead, he's addressing the stubborn part of all of us that says, "Yes, I know I do all of these evil things, but I'm basically a good person." Paul's answer is that anyone who consistently chooses to do evil is evil. We aren't evil because we are tainted by Adam's sin and cannot choose to do good. Instead, it is precisely the fact that we could do good but choose not to that makes us evil. As we consistently choose to disobey God, our decisions warp and distort our character, until we do evil by second nature.

## God

Thankfully, Paul follows up this gloomy description by defining the gracious work of God. This discussion appears in Ephesians 2:4-7. In this sub-context, Paul begins by describing God's motivations. First of all, even though we have ruined ourselves and shaped our nature to be the opposite of His, He still loves us anyway. In fact, He loves us with a great love. He is inclined to pursue our own good, even at great cost to Himself. Because of this love, God is rich in mercy toward us. We are children of wrath, make no mistake. We deserve condemnation. However, God doesn't want to destroy us, any more than we want to destroy that which we love. He sought a way to be merciful instead.

The death of Jesus on the cross gave God the out He wanted. Once Jesus died, God could save us while still remaining true to His perfect justice. Through Christ, God did three things for us, three mighty works that parallel what He did for Christ. Just as God's power made Christ alive after His physical death, it makes us alive despite our spiritual death. Just as Christ was raised up, we too were raised up. Interestingly enough, there's only one other passage in Scripture that talks specifically about us being raised up spiritually. It's the parallel passage to this one, Colossians 2:12. We are raised up with Christ through baptism. Therefore, if we have not been baptized, we remain dead in our sins.

God completed His work of salvation by seating us in the heavenly places with Christ. Clearly, we aren't in heaven yet, so this must mean that God has given us some spiritual position similar to Christ's. We get an inkling of what this might be in Romans 1, in which Paul says that Jesus was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead. The resurrection announced the Sonship of Jesus. In the same way, when we come out of the waters of baptism, that announces that God has adopted us as His children. We are now sons and daughters of the King.

The final part of this context describes why God went through all of this. He did it so that through the endless ages of heaven, we would constantly display the riches of His grace. Think of it like this: Back in the old days, when a king went off to war and defeated the enemy, he would often come home and put up a statue or some other monument, so that everyone for hundreds of years down the road could look at the monument and learn what a great guy the king was. The monument that God designed for Himself, however, wasn't some construction of brick and mortar or bronze. Instead, His mighty works will be memorialized through the people that He saved from their sins. Anybody can put up a statue, but only God can rescue an entire people from eternal death and preserve them forever to proclaim His glory.

## Salvation by Grace Through Faith

From here, we shift to the final subject of our text this evening, salvation by grace through faith. We read about this in Ephesians 2:8-10. Before we go forward through this, though, we must first look back. Remember, what precedes this block of text is not the Jews on the day of Pentecost asking "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Instead, it is a declaration that our eternal presence in heaven will glorify God's grace. Throughout the next three verses, Paul's goal is to explain why that is. He wants to prove that God will get the credit for our being in heaven, and not we ourselves.

Paul's first argument in this proof is that our salvation is due to the operation of grace through faith. If, in the life to come, we were to take a tour of heaven and ask all the Christians there why they are in heaven, not a one of them will be able to say, "I'm in heaven because I lived a perfect life and earned by my works of merit the right to be here." No one will even be able to say, "I'm here because I was such a good guy that I pleased God and He decided to favor me." Instead, every disciple will be compelled to admit, "I'm here, even though I'm a wicked sinner. Despite my wickedness, God offered me salvation from my sins, and I believed in His power to cleanse me of all that I had done." That is what it means that our salvation is by grace through faith, and not of works, lest any man should boast.

However, lots of people aren't content with this contextual reading. Instead, they declare that anything that we might do to obey God is a work, and therefore, if we have faith alone, we are saved, even if we don't so much as lift a finger. This definition of "works", however, runs into massive problems elsewhere in Scripture. Look with me at John 6:28-29. Here, the people want to know what they have to do to do God's works, and Jesus tells them that God's work is to believe in Him. So, then, by no lesser authority than Christ Himself, belief is a kind of work. If we take that idea and plug it into Ephesians 2, the passage tells us that our salvation is by grace through faith, not of belief, and that distinction doesn't make a lick of sense. The point is that works of obedience and works of perfect merit are two different things. If I believe God when He tells me that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, I am also going to believe Him when He tells me that baptism now saves me. What is more, if I truly believe that baptism saves, then I am going to obey the command to arise and be baptized at the earliest opportunity.

The second half of Paul's proof here addresses a slightly different argument. What about all of the good things we do after we're baptized and begin to live lives of obedience to God? Don't those righteous deeds add to our glory and not God's? Paul denies this for two reasons. First of all, the very reason why we can live lives of obedience with a clean slate is that God created us in Christ, so that we could dedicate our lives to doing good instead of doing evil. Second, the good works that we do aren't of our own devising. Instead, they are part of an entire system of faith that God has commanded us to follow. So, then, if a people that God created is following the plan that God created, does that glorify them or Him? When we sin, God's grace glorifies Him, and even when we are righteous, our obedience glorifies Him.