

“The Gift that Keeps on Giving” (Ephesians 2:8–10)

Imagine you’re going into the hospital to have heart surgery. You’re anxious and cranky. You didn’t sleep well the night before. And now you and your family have a ton of questions and concerns regarding the procedure. Who are you going to want to talk to? Obviously, a surgeon who knows what he’s talking about! You need someone who is competent and understands the ins and outs of heart surgery.

While heart surgery is vitally important, soul surgery is even more significant. Heart surgery will help you in this life, but it will do nothing for you in the next life. Conversely, soul surgery is good for both this life *and* the life to come. Therefore, soul doctors must be certain that they are competent and skilled in sharing the cure for the human soul. Although God is the Great Physician, we’ve been entrusted with the privilege of sharing His life-giving message. It’s critical that we get it right!

The first ten verses of Ephesians 2 are ten of the most important verses in the entire Bible. The flow of thought is beautiful. Paul begins with *Amazing Depths* (2:1–3) as he takes us down to the Death Valley of the Soul where all are seen to be dead in their transgressions and sins. Then in 2:4–7 we’re taken up, up, and away to *Amazing Heights*, to the very pinnacle of life as we are seated in the heavenly realms with Christ. This incredible journey from the amazing depths to the amazing heights is capsulized in the *Amazing Grace* described in 2:8–9. This section concludes in 2:10 with *Amazing Work*.¹ As much as I’d like to take us through this entire unit, for our purposes, we’ll limit our study to 2:8–10. Paul writes, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”** In these three verses, salvation is depicted as *the gift that keeps on giving*. As we slowly and carefully unwrap this text, five facets of salvation will be identified.

1. Salvation is by grace (2:8a).² In 2:8 Paul tells us how we’re saved. He begins with familiar words: **“For by grace you have been saved.”** The word “for” (*gar*) explains the surpassing riches of God’s grace (cf. 2:7) and elaborates the parenthetical statement in 2:5 (“by grace you have been saved”).³ Theologically speaking, “grace” (*charis*) means “unmerited favor.”⁴ It’s getting something good you don’t deserve. We’re saved because God is good, not because we’re good.⁵ In other words, God’s grace is responsible for our salvation. A well-known acronym for grace is: “God’s riches at Christ’s expense.” While salvation is “by grace,” it’s critical to recognize that it cost Jesus Christ His life. The only reason we can enjoy a free salvation is because He paid a tremendous price. This glorious expression of God’s grace distinguishes Christianity from all the religions of the world.

The verb translated “you have been saved” (*sesosmenoi*) is a perfect passive participle (cf. 2:5). The passive voice means the act of saving is something which is being done to me or for me. I’m making no contribution to the act of my salvation. The perfect tense emphasizes action initiated in the past, the effects of which continue into the present and beyond. Therefore, salvation has a moment of initiation in the past, but the results of that primary experience continue. This underscores the permanence of our salvation of the believer’s eternal security in Christ. *Salvation is the gift that keeps on giving.*

2. Salvation is through faith (2:8a). Paul writes, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith.”** The channel by which we receive salvation is faith in Christ.⁶ Faith isn’t an act or work that earns merit with God, which He rewards with salvation. When a person puts out his hand to take a gift that someone else offers, he or she is doing nothing to merit that gift. The giver gets credit for the gift, not the receiver. Likewise faith isn’t a meritorious work.⁷ Faith is the hand that simply receives God’s gift of salvation. By Christ’s death and resurrection for our sins, He alone graciously promises eternal life to all who will simply believe Him for it. Our salvation is by His grace alone through faith alone.⁸

The same faith that is necessary to have a relationship with God is the same faith exhibited when sending children off to school, taking prescription medicine, eating in a restaurant, depositing money in an ATM machine, signing a contract, and driving on the highway. It's not faith that saves. Faith is not magic. There's no saving virtue in it. Rather, it's *who* we have faith in—Christ. The New Testament never says a man is saved on account of his faith, but always that he is saved *through* faith or *by means* of faith.⁹ The saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith or in the nature of faith, but in the object of faith, Jesus Christ. The object of faith doesn't determine the nature of faith. If someone writes a check sincerely believing she has adequate funds to cover it when she really doesn't, has she believed any less than if she did have adequate funds? Of course not! Likewise, one can believe in Buddha and another believe in Christ. Both believe in the same way, but only one will be saved. What is different is the object of his or her faith. Who or what you believe makes all the difference in this life . . . and in the next.

3. Salvation is a gift (2:8b). Paul insists that salvation is “**the gift of God.**” He doesn't call salvation a wage, a prize, or an award. All of these are earned. Rather, he calls salvation a “gift.” When a person isn't capable of earning a wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award yet receives such a gift anyway that's a good picture of God's unmerited favor! One of the chief emphases of the New Testament is that salvation is a free gift. Paul himself calls salvation a “gift” or a “free gift” no less than nine times.¹⁰ In the last phrase of 2:8, Paul lays the emphasis upon God. The first word is *theou*—“of God” (cf. 2:4).¹¹ The word order of the Greek phrase makes an emphatic contrast with the pronoun “yourselves” (*humon*). Paul's point is that God, not humans, is the provider of salvation. Literally, the clause reads, “and this [salvation] is not of yourselves, of God is the gift.”¹² It's a gift that costs everything to the giver and nothing to the receiver. Now that's free grace with no charge at all, no strings attached.

Suppose I invite you to dinner and we have a great evening, but when you get ready to go home I surprise you with a bill of fifty dollars for the meal. Our relationship would change drastically, from one of grace to one of obligation. The meal would no longer be a gift of grace, but merely a service for which I charge you a fee. A lot of modern marketing cleverly mixes works and grace. For instance, the “Buy one, get one free” ad isn't really a free offer. If it were, the ad would simply say, “Get one free.” This has become especially frustrating to me because of the recent condition that you must buy two drinks. As anyone should know, drinks are where restaurants make their money. This is rather deceptive.

Tragically, down throughout history churches and believers of every persuasion have pulled that same “bait and switch” trick: Salvation is God's free gift; here's how you earn it. When a person doesn't meet our expectations of what a believer should be we play God and determine where there person will likely spend eternity. Big mistake! God doesn't need fruit inspectors. He's capable of being Judge and Jury. I think most of us have enough to be concerned about with our own fruit of lack thereof.

4. Salvation is not of works (2:8b, 9). Paul reaffirms the divine origin of salvation when he writes, “. . . **and that not of yourselves**” (2:8b). The demonstrative pronoun “that/this” (*touto*) refers to salvation of 2:5 and 8 (see NASB side or center column reference).¹³ The whole enchilada of salvation, including grace and faith is the gift of God. We did nothing to deserve it. It required no effort on our part whatsoever. It's purely “the gift of God” to be received by faith. In 2:9, Paul again emphasizes the gift of salvation when he writes, “[Salvation is] **not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.**” Paul is a soul surgeon giving very serious directions for a prescription: “Take salvation without works.”¹⁴ The notion of God's love coming free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every human instinct of humanity. Every religion, cult, and spiritual view in the world teaches that salvation depends on the good things that we do. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant, the Muslim code of law—each of these offers a way to earn approval. So the world is right after all: All the religions are basically the same. They either teach “salvation by works” or as combination of “faith and works.”¹⁵ Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional.¹⁶ But that is because Christianity isn't a religion but a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. *Salvation is the gift that keeps on giving.*

One reason that salvation is “not as a result of works” is obliterate any boasting. The great 19th century evangelist, D. L. Moody claimed that if anybody ever got to heaven because of anything they had done the rest of us would never hear the end of it.¹⁷ Isn’t that the truth! We can all be so arrogant.¹⁸ Yet, the only thing we can contribute to salvation is our sin. We have absolutely nothing to bring to the table. We can’t even brag about our belief or our spiritual sensitivity because these gifts are all part and parcel of God’s gracious gift of salvation. *Salvation is the gift that keeps on giving.*

We must understand that if we depend upon anything beyond Jesus for salvation, then we’re really saying, “Jesus Christ alone is not enough.” The whole point of the gospel is: Jesus Christ *plus nothing* equals salvation; Jesus Christ *plus anything* equals damnation. Or if you prefer Jesus Christ *plus nothing* equals everything; Jesus Christ *plus anything* equals nothing.

I read about an instant cake mix that was a big flop. The instructions said all you had to do was add water and bake. The company couldn’t understand why it didn’t sell—until their research discovered that the buying public felt uneasy about a mix that required only water. Apparently people thought it was too easy. So the company altered the formula and changed the directions to call for adding an egg to the mix in addition to the water. The idea worked and sales jumped dramatically.

Isn’t this how some people react to the plan of salvation? To them it sounds too easy and simple to be true. They feel that there is something more they must do, something they must add to God’s “recipe” for salvation. Unlike the cake-mix manufacturer, God has not changed His “formula” to make salvation more marketable. The gospel we proclaim must be free of works, even though it may sound too easy.¹⁹

Today, if you’ve never received the free of salvation would you believe in Christ? He promises eternal life to all who will simply believe His promise. If you’ve never placed your faith in Christ alone, please consider praying this simple prayer: “Lord Jesus, I acknowledge that I’ve sinned in word, thought, attitude, and deed. I understand that my sin deserves to be punished by eternal separation from You. However, I recognize that Christ died and arose on my behalf to rescue me from sin. I’m persuaded of His promise to give eternal life to those who simply ask Him for it. I’m depending upon Jesus perfect person and work as my only way to heaven. Thank you, Lord. Amen.”

5. Salvation is for works (2:10). In 2:8 Paul told us how we’re saved; in 2:9 he told us how we’re not saved; and now in 2:10 he tells us why we’re saved. We’re not saved *by* good works; we’re saved *for* good works. The apostle writes, **“For we are His workmanship, created²⁰ in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.”** This single verse is full of rich insights. **First, we are God’s “workmanship.”** The pronoun “his” (*autou*) is the emphatic first word in 2:10 and links back to the emphatic use of “God” (*theou*) in 2:8. The word “workmanship” comes from the Greek word *poiema*, from which we derive our English word poem.²¹ However, *poiema* originally referred to any work of art. It could mean a statue, a song, architecture, a poem, or a painting. Thus, the best rendering is likely “his work of art, his masterpiece.”²² Interestingly, the word *poiema* occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in Rom 1:20, where it refers to God’s majestic work of creation.²³ Paul is saying that God is the Artist and we’re the works of art that He’s created. We’re His masterpieces. What a glorious truth about your significance in Christ (i.e., not self-esteem, but Christ-esteem).

Secondly, we are created in Christ Jesus for good works. Nothing creates itself. Salvation was not brought about by us. It was God’s act.²⁴ Paul’s point is that just as we contributed nothing to our initial physical creation neither did we contribute anything to our spiritual re-creation. God’s saved people are to be a witness to the wonders of His grace.²⁵ The word translated “created” (*ktizo*) always refers to that which God created.²⁶ Furthermore, this verb is in the aorist tense and passive voice, and since the subject is God, it is obvious that God is the one who acted upon us at a given point in time to make us creatures who belong to Him.²⁷ The reason God created us was not an end in itself. It was *for* (*epi*) good works.

Thirdly, we are predestined to walk in obedience. God “prepared beforehand” (*proetomazo*) specific works that you and I would walk out. The only other use of this verb in the New Testament occurs in Rom 9:23, where Paul discusses God’s predestination. In eternity past before we were “created in Christ Jesus,” God prepared works for us to do. In order to fulfill God’s goal in your existence, you’re expected to “walk out” the gift you have received.²⁸ The verb “walk” (*peripateo*) is used metaphorically to mean “live in a consistent manner.” The tense of the verb refers to continuing practice. However, it’s worth noting that this verb is in the Greek subjunctive mood, confirming that it’s something that may or may not happen. In other words, good works or lack thereof has nothing to do with salvation. Good works are the purpose, not the procuring cause. They’re the fruit of salvation, not its basis or cause.²⁹ The good works are not the cause of salvation, but the desired result of God’s effort through Christ Jesus.³⁰ Works are essential for spiritual growth, and eternal rewards. They are our “thank you” note to God for His free gift of salvation. Don’t miss God’s overall purpose for your life.

Walking is a part of our daily lives. We often do it without thinking. A couple of weeks ago, I did some prayer walking in the auditorium. Even though I was wearing my New Balance tennis shoes, I still blistered up. As I humbly and gingerly walked back to the church office I was practically walking on the sides of my feet. In the midst of my discomfit, I couldn’t help but think, “I should have calluses NOT blisters. I need to do more prayer walking.” How true! You and I need to develop some spiritual calluses from walking out good works in as a consequence of the gift of grace we’ve received.

My mother and father-in-law have sleep apnea. They are unable to breathe on their own while they sleep. Consequently, they have to use a respirator, which helps them breathe. As long as they can breathe on their own power, the respirator does them no good. But when they cooperate with the respirator, things happen. They are still involved in the process, since the oxygen is coming in and out of their mouths and lungs. They are working in unison, but the machine is ultimately doing the work. Similarly, God wants to breathe His very life into you. He wants to help you function well and live a life worthy of your calling. You can’t breathe spiritually without Him, and neither can I. His grace is the very oxygen in our lungs that makes the spiritual life possible. As we yield ourselves to Christ, He fills us with the incredible, life-giving gift of grace.³¹ *Salvation is the gift that keeps on giving.*

You likely look forward to Christmas every year. I bet you anxiously anticipate giving and receiving gifts. Regardless of who you are, you undoubtedly love receiving gifts, even if receiving gifts isn’t your “love language.” It’s likely that you also enjoy giving gifts. After all, this act brings you satisfaction and meaning. The good news is you and I can celebrate Christmas type giving every day.³² If you and I recognize that the gift of salvation has benefits, not only in the past, but in the present and future, we can rejoice in God’s grace on a daily basis. Out of our abundance, we can also choose to give gifts away to God and others for all that Christ has done for us. May we model an attitude of gratitude as we respond to God’s glorious and matchless grace.

Scripture References

Ephesians 2:8–10

John 4:7–10

Acts 15:6–11

Romans 3:21–31

1 Corinthians 1:26–31

2 Timothy 1:8–12

Revelation 21:6; 22:1–2, 17

Study Questions

1. How significant is God's grace in providing for my salvation? Why is God's grace so essential in the salvation equation? What does God's grace mean to me? How would I explain God's grace to an unbeliever? How have I learned to appropriate grace in my Christian experience?
2. What is faith? How would I explain faith to a believer or an unbeliever? Do I truly believe that faith alone in Christ alone is the sole condition of salvation? Why or why not? In what way(s) did Eph 2:8–10 change either my thinking or my theological terminology?
3. Why is the gift of grace such a beautiful picture of eternal salvation? How can I help others overcome the following mindsets (e.g., there isn't anything free in this life, it's too easy/good to be true)? What does God's unconditional love mean to me? How can I model that love to others?
4. Why is it so easy to boast in salvation? Why is there such a temptation to contribute to God's gift of salvation? How can I ensure that I point others to the Lord, who alone is the author and preserver of salvation? When other believers intentionally or unintentionally glory in themselves, how can I point them back to Christ?
5. How can I avoid implying that works are a necessary part of salvation? What types of terms or expressions have I used that I now see are misleading or erroneous? How can I help others present the gospel clearly and simply? How can I also encourage and motivate others to fulfill God's works in their lives?

Notes

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*. Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), Electronic ed.

² Speaking of the remnant of Israel who believes in Christ, Paul argues, “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace” (Rom 11:6).

³ The definite article (*te*) in the Greek text of Eph 2:8 has the force, “by *this* grace you are saved . . .” It is the “article of renewed mention,” pointing back to the grace spoken of in 2:5 and 7. See Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42, Bruce M. Metzger ed. (Dallas: Word, 1990), 111; Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. D. A. Carson ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Leicester, England: Apollos, 1999), 174; Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 340. It is also worth noting that *te chariti* (“the grace”) is the dative of means; it denotes the means by which something is done. Specifically, salvation is by means of God’s grace.

⁴ See Paul’s other uses of *charis* (“grace”) in Ephesians 1:2, 6, 7, 8; 2:5, 7; 3:2, 7, 8; 4:7, 29; 6:24.

⁵ Blaise Pascal said, “Grace is indeed required to turn a man into a saint; and he who doubts this does not know what either a man or a saint is.” Quoted in Hughes, *Ephesians*, Electronic ed.

⁶ Over one hundred and fifty times, the NT writers emphasize faith alone in Christ alone.

⁷ Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 104; René A. López, “Is Faith a Gift from God or a Human Exercise?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164:655 (July-Sept 2007): 259–76.

⁸ Lincoln writes, “Faith involves the abandonment of any attempt to justify oneself and an openness to God which is willing to accept what he has done in Christ.” Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 111.

⁹ E.g., Acts 3:16; Rom 5:1–2; Eph 2:8; 3:12, 17; Phil 3:9; Col 2:12; 2 Tim 3:15.

¹⁰ Rom 3:24; 5:15 [twice], 16 [twice], 17; 6:23; 2 Cor 9:15; Eph 2:8. Cf. James spoke of the new birth as a gift from God: “Every good *gift* and every perfect *gift* is from above, and comes down from the Father...Of His own will He brought us forth [regenerated us] by the word of truth...” (James 1:17–18). The author of Hebrews also speaks of eternal salvation as “the heavenly gift” (Heb 6:4). Eph 2:8 is the only place in Paul’s letters where he uses the Greek noun *doron* (“gift”).

¹¹ This phrase could be possessive (“God’s gift”) but it more likely denotes origin (“gift from God”).

¹² O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 176 n. 93; Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 344.

¹³ There is scholarly debate over what the pronoun *touto* refers to. Some say “*Touto* refers to grace.” Others say, “*Touto* refers to salvation.” However, *touto* is a neuter form in Greek here, so it cannot refer to faith (feminine) or grace (feminine). Greek uses the neuter form of *touto* to refer either to neuter words or to phrases. Hence, the most plausible referent for *touto* is salvation. See John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*. The Bible Speaks Today series. Reprint ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979), 83; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 111–12; O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 175; Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 342–44.

¹⁴ Here “works” is not “works of the Mosaic Law” (as in Romans and Galatians) but human effort in general, any and all deeds generated by the human heart in an attempt to put God in our debt. See O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 176–77.

¹⁵ Gene A. Getz, *Looking Up When You Feel Down* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1985), 102.

¹⁶ See also Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 45.

¹⁷ Quoted in George R. Knight, *Exploring Galatians and Ephesians* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2005), 208.

¹⁸ Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians*, 57, rightly notes, “Boasting may puff us up, but it doesn’t build us up (cf. 1 Cor 8:1).”

¹⁹ Richard De Haan, “It’s Too Easy,” *Our Daily Bread*, 5/31/2003: <http://odb.org/2003/05/31/its-too-easy/>.

²⁰ BDAG s.v. *ktizo*: “to bring someth. into existence, *create*.”

²¹ *Poiema* is often used in the LXX to denote creation as God’s work (e.g., Ps 91:4; 142:5).

²² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1973), 52. See also The Jerusalem Bible: “We are God’s work of art . . .”

²³ See also Ps 92:4 (92:5 MT and LXX); 143:5 (142:5 LXX).

²⁴ Michael Eaton, *Ephesians*. Preaching Through the Bible (Kent: England: Sovereign World, 2002), 37.

²⁵ Knight, *Exploring Galatians and Ephesians*, 209.

²⁶ E.g., Matt 19:4; Col 1:16; 1 Tim 4:3.

²⁷ See also 1 Cor 1:30.

²⁸ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 116, notes that Eph 2:10 ends where it began in 2:1, namely, with our “walk.”

²⁹ O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 178.

³⁰ Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*. Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 69.

³¹ Tony Evans, *Free at Last* (Chicago: Moody, 2001), 99.

³² The seed for this illustration came from Hughes who writes, "It's Christmas every day for the humble." This is a brilliant remark. R. Kent Hughes, *Sought by Grace* (Chicago: Moody, 2002), 77.