

Gospel Entry: Grace

Ephesians 2:8-9

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Now turn with me if you would to Ephesians chapter 2, Ephesians chapter 2. This summer, we began a number of weeks ago a series of studies on the theme of “The Gospel-Centered Life” and Jeremy and myself have been sharing this. I think I've got grace and Jeremy got sin. I think he pointed that out to you perhaps last week in my absence. It is a great and wonderful theme that we are going to think about tonight and the doctrine of grace. And tonight I want to focus on grace as the way of entry into the Christian life. Now later on, in a few weeks time, we'll be considering together how grace operates throughout the whole course of the Christian life. It doesn't begin with grace and then become something else. It is grace “that has brought me safe thus far and grace will bring me home.” But tonight I want to focus right at the very beginning, at the point of inception, and there is no better text for that I think than Ephesians 2 and verses 8 and 9. Now we'll begin to read at the first verse of Ephesians chapter 2 but before we do that let's look to God once again in prayer.

Lord our God, we would quiet our hearts just now. We would be still and know that You are God. We come as needy as ever. We come before the open Scriptures that read us like an open book. We read the Scriptures but the truth is, the Scriptures read us. The Bible penetrates deep into our very being. It exposes what we are and we are acknowledging again, as we come before You, that all Scripture is given by the out-breathing of God and is profitable for doctrine and correction and reproof and instruction in the way of righteousness that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto every good work. Now Lord, come by Your Spirit. Help us to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest and all for Jesus' sake. Amen.

This is God's holy, inerrant Word:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience — among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the

desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; 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, that we should walk in them.

Well thus far God's inerrant Word.

Now you're all familiar with the story of Jesus and Nicodemus in John chapter 3. Nicodemus is the most renowned Bible teacher in Israel. His fame stretched throughout the land. He was a notorious expositor of the Bible, of the Old Testament. And Jesus comes to him and says to him, "Unless a man is born again or born from above, he cannot enter, he cannot see the kingdom of God; unless a man is born from above, he cannot understand the things concerning the kingdom of God." And Nicodemus says in reply to Jesus, "I don't understand. I don't understand what You're saying."

It's sovereignty. Our entry into the kingdom of God is from above. It's not of us. It's not of our doing. It's not the result of something that we do. It is from above. It is a sovereign initiative and work of God.

"Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

That's what we sing, those extraordinary words of John Newton - amazing grace. Why are we Christians tonight? Why am I a Christian and perhaps someone else, maybe in this building this evening, is not? Why is it that I'm in a living, vital relationship of fellowship with Jesus tonight and another is not? Why is it that I may entertain an assurance that my sins are forgiven, that my guilt is covered, and another cannot? Why is it tonight that I may reckon myself to be a child of God and another may not? And the answer is: grace. "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

John Newton was born in 1725. When he was eleven years old he went off to sea with his father. He went on six or seven journeys that would have lasted many, many months at a time. When he was nineteen he was pressganged into a warship, a man-of-war ship, and he left, he deserted, he was publically flogged, and then joined a ship that engaged in slavery off the coast of Sierra Leone on the West Coast of Africa. He worked his way up to become the captain of one of

these slave trading ships and on the return journey in the Atlantic, caught in a violent storm, he cried out. This man, he was an ungodly man with very bad language, and the only reference to Jesus that he had ever made was as a curse word, but in this storm at sea when he thought for a moment that his life was in danger, he was about to die, he cried out, "Lord, have mercy on me." It was the beginning of an awakening in his soul. It was the beginning of God coming from above and quickening him and bringing him to saving faith in Jesus Christ. He spent the rest of his life as a Gospel minister — one, perhaps, of the greatest Gospel ministers, whose wisdom in terms of letters that he wrote to various people are still today poured over because of the insights that he had into the ways of God and the schemes of Satan and the various problems that Christians faced in their soul. But we remember him mostly because of that hymn, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

Well, Paul says twice here in Ephesians 2, once you see there at the end of verse 5 and then he repeats it in verse 8 and expands upon it, "for by grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast."

I. Salvation is by grace alone.

The first thing I want us to see here is that salvation is by grace alone, by grace alone. There is no possibility of works of our doing, of anything that we do, of anything that we perform, of anything that we accomplish, or anything about us in terms of our personality, or giftedness. There is no possibility of any of those contributing to our salvation. God doesn't say, "Look at these beautiful people. Look at these multi-talented people. Look at these useful people. Look at these Type-A personalities. I'll save them." God doesn't say, "Well, at least they're trying. You know, at least they're sincere. At least they're showing interest. At least there's some degree of effort on their part. I'll save them."

Paul isn't saying — I know some Christians think this way — Paul isn't saying that God can see into the future. Now God can see into the future. Let's be absolutely clear. God can see into the future. God knows what's going to happen tomorrow. He knows what's going to happen next week and next year and right up to the end. God knows the future. He knows it in detail because it's part of His decree. God can see into the future a person who repents and believes. Yes, He can. He can see into the future a man who is convicted about his sinfulness and he drops on his knees and he cries out to God to have mercy and he exercises faith in Jesus Christ and he's saved, but that's not the reason why he's saved.

But God doesn't look into the future and say, "Oh, I see that person and that person and they put their faith in Me and therefore I'll save them." No, that's not what Paul is saying.

Paul is saying — and he says it this way and he says it that way and he tries to shut all the doors — it's by grace, it's through faith, it's not of works, there's no boasting. It's all of God. It's all of God, from beginning to end.

Now let's dig a little deeper. What kind of people does God save? People who are dead in trespasses and in sins. Look at verse 4, verse 5 — “Even when we were dead in our trespasses” — not just sick, not just terminally ill, but dead. Now this may come as a revelation to you, but dead people don't talk. Dead people don't think. Dead people don't will. Dead people don't have aspirations toward God. They're dead. Paul uses a word here - they are dead in trespasses and sins.

Now, elsewhere the Bible expands on that. They are dead in their minds, in their thinking. They don't think clearly about spiritual things. What did Nicodemus say? Jesus says, “Unless you're born from above you can't understand the things relating to the kingdom of God,” and Nicodemus says, “I don't understand.” It's got nothing to do with IQ. You may have a PhD but that doesn't give you any insight into the kingdom of God by nature.

Paul isn't talking here about IQ or intelligence. He's saying that by nature, all of us — every man, every woman — is born into this world in union with Adam and they don't think clearly, not just in their minds, but in their desires, in their desires. We're not masters of our desires. By nature we don't master our desires. All of us, all of us at some point, say to ourselves — we have this moral consciousness that says, “I need to get these things under control.” Not just mind, not just desire, but the will, the will by nature does not will the things of God.

That's what Paul is saying. We can't — this is hard isn't it? The natural man doesn't respond to the Gospel. The natural man doesn't respond to the death of Jesus on the cross. We cannot say, “Will, will to belong to God” because we're dead by nature. No one can will the will to will what it will not will. Go home. You get a lollipop if you can repeat that afterwards! (laughter) No one can will the will to will what it will not will. We're dead in trespasses and sins.

It's about — you know, Martin Luther at the time of the Reformation, just after he had come to see the crucial doctrine of justification by faith, he wrote this book. It was a massively important book. He called it *The Bondage of the Will*. He wasn't setting out to be provocative, well, maybe he was because he was Martin Luther, but he was addressing what's at the very core of the Gospel, that the Gospel is for those who are dead, it is for those who are unable, who cannot respond by their own strength, by their own intuition, by their own personality.

Now I love that. You know maybe it's because there's something twisted about me but I love that - that this word of Gospel comes to people at their worst. Maybe you feel tonight disqualified. Maybe you feel yourself to be a failure. Maybe you feel yourself to be tonight unattractive. You know, the Gospel isn't for

beautiful people, only for beautiful people, only for those with a certain IQ, only for those who have achieved so much, only for those who have these insights. It's for dead people. It's for dead people.

And you know that's encouraging because this Gospel, at the end of the day, doesn't depend upon me. I've made decisions and then I've unmade them in the space of the same sentence. Have you ever done that? You know as you keep talking you realize that what you began saying is the opposite of what you ended up saying and you have to say to yourself, "Now let me say that again." How many of you have made resolutions at the beginning of the year and by February they're all gone, they're all forgotten? You made a resolution to diet and how long does it last? Or you make a resolution to exercise — how long does it last?

Look at verse 4 — two little words, two little words — "But God." You know there's this truth, and it's the truth that men and women and boys and girls and baptized boys and girls are dead in trespasses and in sins. They may be in the covenant but they're dead in trespasses and in sins. They may have all of the privileges that we heard about this evening in terms of prayer and a godly home and reading the Bible and listening to sermons and being catechized and so on, and so on, but they're dead in trespasses and in sins. Nicodemus was a covenant son and Jesus said to him, "You must be born again. You must be born from above." But God.

But God. There's this terribly negative truth that men and women and boys and girls are dead in trespasses and in sins in their minds, in their desires, in their wills. God says to them, "If you believe on the Lord Jesus you will be saved" but they cannot believe. They cannot believe. They don't have the ability to believe. But God. But God. Not just God, but God who is the Creator of the heavens and the earth, God who made everything, this God who is all powerful and sovereign, the God that we were thinking about, many of us, this morning - the God who decrees whatsoever comes to pass, the God whose will is always fulfilled — but God. What man cannot do, God does.

Today these Ephesians to whom Paul was writing are in heaven. These Ephesians, who by nature were dead in trespasses and in sins, who followed the course of this world, who were children of wrath like the rest of mankind, are in heaven singing the praises of Jesus along with angels and archangels and cherubim and seraphim. They were saved. They were redeemed. They were washed. They were cleansed. They were brought into the kingdom of God and they're in heaven tonight, standing complete in Jesus Christ, credited with the righteousness of Christ, their sins forgiven, their guilt removed. That's grace. Do you know what grace stands for? Great riches at Christ's expense. Great riches at Christ's expense, that's what grace is.

Salvation begins with empty hands, with empty hands — "nothing in my hands I bring, nothing." I don't bring my church membership in my hands. I don't bring my

covenant status in my hands. I don't bring the fact that I was raised in a godly church in my hands. I bring nothing. I can't come before God tonight and say, "Lord, look at me because I've got this or I've got that or I've got the other. Look at me and show me favor because there's something in me." No, it's all of grace. It's all of God from beginning to end.

See, the Gospel is not — how do you answer this question? How do you answer this question — what must I do to be saved? The answer is not go and meditate seven times a day. The answer is not pray some more, read the Bible some more, become a missionary for two years and distribute literature like 55,000 Mormons do every year all over the world to ensure their salvation. Nothing in my hands I bring, nothing. "Cast your deadly doing down, down at Jesus' feet and stand in Him, in Him along, gloriously complete." "Tis mercy all" — Augustus Toplady's hymn — "Tis mercy all immense and free and O my God it found out me." That's the first thing — salvation is by grace alone.

II. Salvation is by faith alone.

Secondly, it is by faith alone or through faith alone. You see, here's the logic — if I'm dead in trespasses and in sins, dead in terms of my mind's ability to discern the things of the kingdom of God, dead in terms of my desire, dead in terms of my will, what then do I do? Do I wait, do I simply wait for grace to come? No, it is through faith. It is through faith.

Okay what's faith? What is faith? Faith is knowledge, assent, and truth. It's knowledge. This isn't fideism. This isn't just faith in faith. This isn't just faith in anything. This is faith that has knowledge, faith that has content. There are certain truths — "I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received," Paul says. And what are those truths? "That Christ died, according to the Scriptures, and that He rose again." There are certain truths that Jesus was God and that Jesus became man and that Jesus died on the cross of Calvary in our room and in our stead as our substitute and sin-bearer and on the third day after He had been buried He rose again from the dead and he ascended into heaven and that He is coming again. There are truths.

Faith involves knowledge, but not just knowledge, but faith believes those truths to be true, that they are true. It's not mere information that saves. And then I must entrust myself to those truths. I must give myself to those truths.

You know, there's an extraordinary thing that happens in the New Testament. It only happens in the New Testament. It doesn't happen anywhere outside of the New Testament. There's a little expression — a preposition followed by a certain case. In this instance it's the preposition *dia* and it's followed by the genitive of "faith" and that can only mean one thing, that we are saved through the instrument of faith, not that we are saved on account of our faith. You see, we

can twist what Paul is saying here - It's our faith that saves us. It's my believing that saves me. That's something I do.

Why am I a Christian and someone else is not? I had this conversation one time with someone. Why am I a Christian and someone is not? This person was objecting to total depravity. He was objecting to the idea that the natural man is in a state of inability. He was objecting to this notion of absolute sovereignty in the matter of salvation. And so I said to him, "Are you a Christian?" And he said, "Yes." And I said, "Why are you a Christian and someone else is not?" I said, "Is it because you're smarter than that other person?" "No," he said. And then he stopped and he said, "Well, I made the right response," he said. "I made the right response." And there it was, because when he came down to it, the reason why he was a Christian and the other person wasn't was because he had done something and it was meritorious. It was meritorious.

No, Paul is saying faith is absolutely necessary. It's absolutely necessary. You cannot be saved without faith. You cannot be saved unless you believe, unless you believe in these truths of the Gospel, unless you entrust yourself to these truths of the Gospel, but that faith is a gift. Just when you thought that you had a handle on something that you can do, Paul takes it away. He says, even that faith, even that believing, even that response is part of the sovereign work of God in your heart. It's a gift. He enables you to believe. "He makes you willing in the day of His power," the Bible says. It's a gift. "It has been" — Paul is writing to the Philippians and he says, "It has been granted to you to believe."

Billy Graham was passing through a southern town. I don't know which town it was. And he was speeding and the police pulled him over. And he was charged with speeding, a speeding violation. And as part of the process he had to appear in court. This is in his biography. He was brought before the judge and the judge asks him, "Are you guilty or not guilty?" and Dr. Graham says, "Guilty." And the judge says, "That will be ten dollars." This was a long time ago. (laughter) "One dollar for every mile above the speed limit." And then as he looked at him more closely, the judge recognized who he was and he said, "Dr. Graham, you have broken the law and that law must be satisfied and payment must be made." And the judge pulled out his wallet and attached ten dollars to the sheet of paper and stamped it and paid it himself and then took him out to dinner. And Billy Graham says that's how God treats repentant sinners. He says, "You're guilty" and He pays the price Himself. He sends His Son. He sends His only Son to pay the price that we should have paid and couldn't pay. He grants us faith.

You know, I've never met a Christian who ultimately, who ultimately denies this. I've never met one. Now I've met Christians who, when they talk, say all kinds of nonsense, but when they pray, when they pray it's all different. You know, I've never heard somebody say in their prayers, "Lord, time out Lord. I just want to say I really was smart. I made the right decision. You're sovereign but this was my doing. I believed." I've never heard anybody pray like that, ever. I hear

Christians who may deny this doctrine of total sovereignty here, but when they pray they say, “Lord, my salvation, it was all of Your doing. If You hadn't come into my life I would still be doing what I was. I'd still be in that old way of life. I would still be blaspheming the name of Jesus.”

God came into my life in 1971. I was eighteen years old. The only time I'd ever used the name of Jesus was as a swear word. I'd never read the Bible. I didn't possess one. I couldn't have told you if Genesis was in the Bible. I knew nothing about it. I was reading books on Einstein's theory of relativity. I was into physics and math. Science was everything. And God put into my hands through a dear, dear friend, John Stott's *Basic Christianity*. I read it within twenty-four hours. I was on my knees asking God to save me. Who saved me? Was it my friend? Was it the book? Was it my insight? It was God. It was all of God. It was by grace. It was through the instrument of faith but that instrument was not in any way meritorious. God gave me the faith to believe. Grace, that's how you enter the kingdom of God.

My dear friends, maybe you don't come to church that often and a lot of what we've been saying tonight has gone, whoosh, over your head, and you're asking the question you really want to know — How can I be saved? And I'm saying to you, call upon the name of the Lord and you will be saved. Go to Him tonight and say to Him, “I can't do it. I can't repent, I can't believe. You must come and do it. Quicken my heart. Give me faith. Take away this stony heart of unbelief and give me a heart of flesh.”

And the Bible says, “Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord, whoever, whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” He will not cast you away no matter what you've done. If you've done some terrible thing, some dreadful thing, I don't care what it is — your sins may be like scarlet, but if you come to God and ask Him with empty hands, “Lord, forgive me. Receive me. Quicken me.” He will not cast you away. It is by grace that we are saved.

Father we thank You tonight for grace. “Grace has a charming sound, harmonious to the ear, heaven where the echo shall resound and all the earth shall hear.” We thank You tonight for sovereign grace that brings us out of darkness and into light, into communion and union and fellowship with Jesus, the only Savior there is. Lord grant Your blessing. Come by Your Spirit. Work in the hearts of some, perhaps here, who are not yet believers and bring them to an end of themselves and to cry out to You for mercy. Do it for Jesus' sake we pray. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction. Grace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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