

*Building Biblical  
Community in Christ*

THE MAKING OF A MASTERPIECE  
Ephesians 2:8-10

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

For centuries the Stradivarius violin was a mystery. Why would just one violin maker be able to do what no one else has done before or since, particularly since he was poor and couldn't afford the best woods of his day? Recent studies have answered that question. It seems that Stradivarius took most of the wood from the polluted harbor where he lived. This wood had been soaked in the sludge of the harbor for years. It was the choice wood that had been used to make oars, boats, and other seaworthy instruments. Broken and abandoned in the harbor, the wood had fallen victim to the decay-infested microbes in the pollutants.

Studies of the wood used in Stradivarius violins show that these microbes ate the cells of the wood hollow, leaving only the infrastructure of the cells to remain. In the hand of Stradivarius, these thousands of hollow chambers in each piece of wood were transformed from worthless empty spaces into resonating cathedrals of sound with every pull of the bow. Stradivarius rescued worthless scraps of wood, hopelessly damaged and drifting in a polluted environment, and used them to enrich our world with a beauty found nowhere else.

In many ways, you and I are like that wood – broken, abandoned and lost in the sludge of sin. But by an incomprehensible act God's grace, we have been rescued and transformed. The hand of the Master Redeemer has crafted us into an instrument of unique beauty. The hollow cells that sin carved within us now resonate life sounds that glorify Christ and we in turn fill our world with the unsurpassed priceless harmony of His presence in us and through us.<sup>i</sup>

This is the message of Ephesians 2:1-10. So far in this book, which is all about building biblical community in Christ, Paul has been addressing our *calling* in Christ – first, *to spiritual blessings* (chapter 1) and now *by reconciliation* (chapter 2). If the key word of chapter one is “know,” the key word of chapter two is “remember.” And as we remember what we have been bought out of, we can better appreciate what we have been brought into. That was the emphasis of Pastor

Reilly's message this past week – “Oh, what a difference Christ makes!” Though in the past we were dead, deceived and doomed, in the present by God's grace we are loved, livened (I like that one, Reilly...he insists that it really is word!), and lifted. And it is all so that in the ages to come God might continue to show you and me the riches of his grace.

This brings us to verses 8-10, which is our focus this morning. In light of what Paul has already said, his purpose here is to further clarify the precise relationship of grace, works and faith as God makes us into his masterpiece, just like that Stradivarius violin.

## I. CRAFTED BY GRACE

The first thing Paul tells us is that the handiwork of God in our lives (and more specifically, our salvation) is *crafted by grace*. Let's read again what Paul says in verses 8 and 9, noticing the emphasis –

*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast.*

Notice that Paul is speaking here about salvation. And salvation means essentially “deliverance.” But deliverance from what? Verse 1 of this chapter answers that question: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.” Salvation then is the act of God by which spiritually dead people are made alive. It has a future aspect to it; someday even these bodies will be raised up in resurrection life. It has a present aspect to it; God is even now saving us by his grace.

But this verse is talking about the past aspect of our salvation – “*you have been saved.*” Paul uses what we call in English the perfect tense – speaking of completed action with ongoing results. What this says to me is that my salvation doesn't depend upon my work for God but God's work in me that took place at a point in time.

But there is more. Paul's statement is also written in what we call the *passive* voice. It took place *to us*, not *by us*. It's not in the active voice; we certainly can't save anybody from spiritual death. It's not in the middle voice; we can't even save ourselves. But it is in the passive voice; it is all about God saving you and me. In other words, God is the source of this miracle in our lives. No wonder the key words of this section are “but God” (verse 4) and “by grace” (verse 8).

Next, Paul tells us that this salvation is *by grace*. What is grace? We've listed out many definitions before, especially as we made our way through the book of Romans: "God's unmerited favor," "God's love in action," "God giving us what we don't deserve," and the one I like best "Grace is the face God wears when he looks at my failures."

The emphasis here is on the *source* of our salvation – it is God's work, not *our* work. The result of this is that no one can boast in accomplishing his own salvation by his own good works. In heaven, no one can say, "Look what I have done." No one can even say, "Look what Jesus and I have done!" As John Stott puts it, "None of us will be able to strut around heaven like peacocks." We will only be able to say, "Look at what God has done for me by his grace."

One way to grasp the meaning of grace is to place it in relation to other terms used in the Bible to describe God's response to our sinfulness. Maybe a picture can help. We know that God is a God of love. The Bible says, "God is love" (1 John 4:16). But God is also holy (Leviticus 19:2). Because of God's holiness, he cannot look upon sin. In fact, not only can he not look upon sin, but he must judge sin. This is the result of God's holy anger towards sin. All of this results in condemnation, judgment for a sinner like you and me. But the wonder of the gospel is that God's love prompted him to a concrete demonstration of kindness to you and me. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ, who took the brunt of God's anger against sin upon himself. The penalty of sin being satisfied in the death of Christ, God can now show mercy to you and me. And friend, that is grace. And it is this grace that you and I celebrate as we come to this table this morning.

COMMUNION (Pastor Shon)

## II. EMBRACED BY FAITH

As we've just seen in each of these individuals' lives, our salvation is sourced in grace, but received by faith. And so Paul goes on to say, "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith...*" The emphasis here is on the *means* of our salvation – we are saved by God's grace working through our faith.

What is saving faith? Faith that results in salvation is the reliance upon who Christ is and what Christ has done (in dying for us), and that alone for our salvation.

Saving faith includes intellectual assent (i.e. cognitively acknowledging certain facts about Christ), but it is more. James, the brother of Jesus, writes this: “*You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-and shudder*” (James 2:19). Intellectual assent says, “I believe that this stool exists, it is made of wood, it has three legs and can hold me up.” Faith and trust goes further, leading me to actually sit on the stool and experience its support under my body. Saving faith that embraces God’s offer of grace begins in the mind, travels to the heart in destination for the hands and feet.

There is something else about faith that we need to understand. The value of one’s faith is in direct proportion to the value of the object of one’s faith. Many say, “Simply have faith!” But faith in what? It is not the *quantity* of our faith that matters, but the *quality* of our faith. And the quality of our faith is determined by the value of the object of our faith. Faith in a wrong or unworthy object can spell disaster. If you wake up in the middle of the night with a splitting headache, stumble into the bathroom and accidentally take a roach tablet all the while thinking you are taking Tylenol, they may write on your tombstone, “He died in faith.” But it will be faith in an unworthy object.

I believe this is why many struggle with questions of assurance of salvation. Did I really believe? Did I believe enough? Was my faith expressed appropriately with the right prayer? But when we understand that what counts is the *object* of our faith (Christ and his finished work on the cross) and not the *quantity* of our faith (that we can muster up within us), many of these doubts are relieved. We need to remember that we are saved by God’s grace, not our faith. Faith merely takes hold of the salvation already provided.

To illustrate, let’s suppose that you are in financial straights (which some of you are). And let’s suppose that I am extremely wealthy (which I am not!). I decide to write you out a check for \$500,000. It’s yours. No payback is expected, it’s a gift. So I’ve written my check and I’m going to give it to Phil. Phil reaches out and takes my gift. Now it is his. Can you imagine Phil now beginning to focus on how he received my gift? “Look what I did...I reached out my hand and took it. Pretty good, uh?” No, not at all. The focus would be rather upon *my act giving* rather than *his manner of receiving*. And it is the same in salvation. The focus is not so much on our receiving (i.e. the quantity of our faith, the way that faith is expressed), but God’s giving (the value and quality of his gift in Christ). Faith is merely our response of taking hold of the salvation that God so graciously offers.

One last point about the kind of faith Paul is speaking of here. Saving faith should *result in* but does not *consist in* good works. Some, who wrongly understand faith

itself as a “good work,” read verse 8 this way: “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this [faith] not from yourselves, it is the gift of God...*” In other words, in an attempt to safeguard the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, they feel that they must somehow clarify that even our faith to believe is somehow given by God. Some even go further, saying that this faith is only given to certain ones, those whom God has chosen. But grammatically, it is impossible to understand this verse in this way. When Paul says, “*This not from yourselves...*” he is referring not to faith, but to a “by grace through faith kind of salvation.” In the New Testament, faith is always contrasted to good works as the means of salvation (cf.           ). So faith does not *consist in* good works, but it does *result in* good works.

Interview with Jeff Bentley:

1. How was “saving faith” expressed in your life at the point of your conversion?
2. How did that faith begin in your mind travel to your heart in destination for your feet and hands?

The New Testament addresses two heresies related to faith and works. First, there is Paul who condemns the idea that we can work for our salvation. Then there is James who condemns the idea that a person can have authentic faith but no works. Our good works show Jesus is alive and well in our lives. Good works are not the ground and means of salvation; but they are the result and evidence of salvation. We are not saved *because of* good works, but we are saved *for* good works. Faith is sort of like calories; you can’t see them but you can see their results.<sup>ii</sup> And that is the subject that Paul turns to now in verse 10.

### III. DEMONSTRATED IN GOOD WORKS

*For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

We are God’s work of art, his masterpiece. The emphasis is on the “his” which comes, in Paul’s construction of the sentence, right at the beginning. Literally it reads this way, “*His workmanship we are...*”

We are his “workmanship.” Here we have that graphic description of you and me as God’s poem, his work of art, his masterpiece. Just like that Stradivarius violin. It’s interesting that the same word is used in Romans 1:20 of God’s creation:

*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made [workmanship], so that men are without excuse.*

As the creation points to the reality and beauty of God, so our lives are intended to do the same. That which was made brought glory to God. Do I? Does my life better explain God to the world?

As the world was created by God, so you and I have been “created” in Christ Jesus.

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come!*

No one can “create themselves.” Calvin puts it well, “You see then that this word ‘create’ is enough to stop the mouths and put away the cackling of such as boast of having any merit. For when they say so, they presuppose that they were their own creators.”<sup>iii</sup>

And what have you and I been created for in Christ? Good works. We are not recreated *by* good works, but *for* good works. God prepared these good works ahead of time so that we might live in/by them. As chapter two begins with idea of “walking” in sin, it ends with “walking” in good works. Two lifestyles are contrasted. And what makes the difference? God’s grace.

Interview with Salvador Baldizon:

1. When did you first embrace Christ as your savior from sin?
2. How have you recently seen God using you as his “workmanship” to do good works?

Sometimes just how God works in and through our lives leaves us with unanswered questions. This is especially true when someone God is using is unexpectedly taken in what we would understand to be a premature death. Admittedly, I’ve wrestled a lot with this question in relation to Jonathan, our son. But I’ve been learning, particularly during our recent trip to Korea, that the circumstances of our lives are relatively insignificant in comparison to the God of those circumstances who is infinite. Though I still struggle with the pain surrounding the loss of our boy, I’m seeing more and more how this fits into Jonathan being God’s workmanship. Let me explain.

As a family we left for Korea on Friday, March 18, our purpose was twofold: (1) to experience a certain degree of emotional healing as we retraced our son’s steps in

this land that he had grown to love so much; and (2) to follow up on God's work already begun through Jonathan's life. As we did this, I saw how true it is that, though God's workmen pass on, God's work carries on in the lives of those they touch.

We've seen this in several ways. First, there is the lady who owns the inn where Jonathan died of carbon monoxide poisoning. It was in a neighborhood that looks very similar to this (picture). Jonathan would stay at this inn every weekend (picture). He had gotten to know quite well the elderly lady, Buddhist in background, who manages the inn (picture). In fact, she told us while we were there that she considered Jonathan her second son (as she had lost contact with her own son). You can imagine how devastated she was when she discovered Jon that morning he passed into eternity. She also told us on this most recent trip that she hadn't laughed in the last four months.

We had the awesome privilege of sharing via translation Christ and his love and forgiveness with Mrs. Lee. It seems that God is at work in her life through several avenues. Not only was there Jon's death, but also her sister, who is a believer, has been inviting her to church and is giving her a Bible. Yes, we are God's workmanship. His work through us continues even after we pass on.

We also saw God's workmanship continued through Jonathan's life as we visited the middle-school children that Jonathan had been teaching – over a hundred of them (picture). We had prepared a card with a picture of Jonathan on it for each student. There was also a note on the inside with John 3:16 and a word from Jonathan, assuring them that, because of what Christ had done for him, he was now in heaven with God. Yes, we are God's workmanship. His work through us continues even after we pass on.

And lastly we are praying for this work in the life of one of Jon's best friends, Ho-chul (picture). Ho-chul is a strong believer in Christ, but his family are Buddhist. Jonathan had spent some time with this family last October, just weeks before his death (picture). Ho-chul shared with us his desire to see his family come to know Christ and trust him for salvation. We took a gift with us for Ho-chul's family. Yes, we are God's workmanship. His work continues through us even after we pass on.

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<sup>i</sup> Clipped from sermon on Romans 6:1-22 by Gary Regazolli. [www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com).

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. 1Thessalonians 1:9.

<sup>iii</sup> Calvin cited by John R.W. Stott *God's New Society* p 84.