

Poetry In Motion

Ephesians 2:8-10 (2:1-10)

(Ephesians: Navigating An Alternative Reading of Reality)

I do not think we can find a clearer articulation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ than in the biblical text just read, especially in the section we are going to focus on today. After a series of long, complex, exquisitely crafted sentences, the Apostle Paul sums it up in two simple sentences, both of which can easily be tweeted, each within the 140-character limit. Chapter two, verses 8 through 10, of the letter to the Ephesians:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Bottom line stuff.

A number of you have told me that you committed Paul’s articulation of the Gospel to memory when you first came to life in Christ.

“For by grace you have been saved though faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”

About as clear and concise as it can be. Yet, for reasons that will become clear in a few moments, easily forgotten.

Here is how I would like us to explore the text this morning. I want to simply ask a series of questions. Clearly the text is about *salvation* in Jesus Christ. Verse 8 - “By grace you have been **saved** through faith.” Echoing the earlier outburst of the Gospel in verse 5 - “By grace you have been **saved**.” I want to explore this salvation by simply asking a series of questions.

But before I do, let me say a word about reading and preaching Paul’s letters. No one “gets it” all on the first reading. No one “gets it” all on the second, third, fourth ... tenth reading!! Is this not part of the reason why the Holy Spirit saw fit to have God’s Word written? There is no way anyone would have listened to Paul speak his articulation of the Gospel and “get it” all right away. People of the first century would “get it” quicker than we do, for they lived in an oral culture; they were able to listen with much greater comprehension than we can. But even they did not “get it” on first hearing. They would not have been able to take in everything Paul was announcing and developing on first hearing. They too needed the words on paper, on parchment, so they could go over them again and again.

A number of you have told me that you are finding Ephesians and my sermons on the letter too much to process. I am sorry about that. But it is ok. No one “gets it” all right away. I want to free you from the sense that one ought to be able to take everything in a sermon home with you. Take in what you can. Even little bits of the Word of God work wonders in the human soul. Besides, the function of the Word of God is not just to

inform, but to transform. As we soak in the Word, written and spoken, something is happening even if we do not “get it” all.

OK, to the questions.

Question 1 - *What does it mean to be saved?*

Someone asks you, “Are you saved?” What do they mean?

You or I say, “I have been saved.” What do we mean? What does it mean to be saved?

- It means to be forgiven of all our sins.
- It means to be cleansed of our sins.
- It means to be justified before the Judge of the universe.
- It means to be reconciled to the Creator.
- It means to be adopted into the family of God; into the Family that is God; into the Friendship of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

On and on it goes! Finally coming down to what Paul is announcing in the text before us: to be saved is to **become a new creation!**

Where does Paul say that in the text? In verse 10 – “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus ...” The actual word Paul uses is “poema,” from which we get our English word poem. Not that the word was used only for poems. It meant “handiwork” of all kinds. With the particular nuance of rhythm, orderliness, and beauty (G. Campbell-Morgan). Poems being one expression of this, but paintings too, and gourmet meals, and buildings, and administrative systems. On it goes. “For we” ... we who were once dead in sin, sold out to ways of life that brought disorder and bondage ... “we are His poems, His handiwork, created in Christ Jesus.” THAT is what it means to be saved.

The word “poema” is used only two times in the NT, both by Paul. The first use is in his letter to the Romans, referring to God’s first work of creation, Romans 1:20, “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made ...” The phrase “what has been made” is translating the word “poema.”

In the beginning God wrote a poem, through which He made Himself known. God made the world and we who dwell in it. The world and we were His first poem, His first work expressing rhythm, and orderliness, and beauty. God’s first poem got ruined. A fact with which everyone on this planet is painfully aware.

So God wrote a new poem, God painted a new picture, God made a new creation. God made us ... people alive in Jesus Christ. We are His new work, expressing rhythm, and orderliness, and beauty. So Paul can say in his second letter to the Corinthians, “If anyone is in Christ – new creation! the old things passed away; look! new things have come” (5:17). THAT is what it means to be saved.

Paul will develop this further in the fourth chapter of his letter. It will be the basis for Christian ethics. He will appeal to us: “lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit ... and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God (!) has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (4:22-24). To be saved is to become a new creation.

We have been saved **from**:

- from the stronghold of sin,
- from the finality of death,
- from bondage to the powers of evil,
- from the wrath of God.

And saved **for**:

- for being alive with Christ,
- for being raised up with Christ,
- for being seated with Christ,
- for living as new creations!

THAT is what it means to be saved. We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus.

Question 2 – *Who does the saving?*

Who makes this all happen? Who does the saving in the world and in the church? Why we do, of course.

- We make ourselves into new creations.

Right?

- We make ourselves into rhythmic, orderly, beautiful poems and works of art.

Right?

- We free ourselves from the stronghold of sin;
- we break the hold a rebel world has on us;
- we overcome the power of death;
- we avert the wrath of God.

Right?

- We make ourselves alive with Christ;
- we raise ourselves up with Christ;
- we seat ourselves with Christ in the heavenly places.

Right?

NOT!

But we act as though we do. What else accounts for all the striving and agonizing?

WE do not make it happen.

Ah, but the Ministers do. Right? They make it happen. They pull us out of the pit. Right?

Especially the Senior Minister; he makes us alive, raises us up, seats us. The Senior Minister, as a kind of junior-saviour, creates the new creation. Right?

NOT!

Who does the saving around here? God!! The Living God. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as Paul delights to call Him. If we are really going to be saved we have to get this clear. No one can write the poem of the new creation but the Re-Creator. "His" workmanship, says Paul. "His" – God's. Not "ours." Only one Person does the saving: the God who comes to us in and as Jesus Christ.

Question 3 – *Why does He do it?*

Why does God do it ... save us?

- Because we deserve it. Right?
- Because we have done so much good.
- Because we are, after all, inherently good people. Right?

NO!

God does it because of His grace. “You are saved by grace.” Paul says it twice. He needs to say it a hundred times! God saves us by grace.

- Unmerited favor.
- Undeserved kindness.
- Unearned blessing. Grace.

This is both good news and offensive news. Which is why it takes so long for us to really get it. We want to be able to say we made it on our own. Jacques Ellul says, “Grace is odious.” It stinks in the nostrils of we who want to say we did it ourselves. Grace humbles us. And then lifts us. But first it humbles us. We cannot make it on our own. We are desperate for grace.

Jesus tells the parable about the two men who went to the Temple: one a Pharisee, the other a tax-collector. One who thought himself quite the godly man, thank you. The other who knew himself to be broken and helpless. The Pharisee stood off by himself; that is usually our posture when we do not know grace. “God,” says the Pharisee, “I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all I get” (Luke 18:11-12). Not bad things to do! Just that they do not earn God’s favor. The tax-collector, says Jesus, “was standing some distance away.” He could not even lift up his eyes to heaven, says Jesus, “but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me, the sinner’” (Luke 18:13). Who goes away the new creation? The tax-collector. Because of grace.

You know the name Bernie Madoff: swindled people of millions of dollars, now serving a 150-year jail sentence. In a recent interview in *McClellans* he says, “I just want people to know that I am basically a good person.” As I read the article I wanted to say to Bernie, “Forget trying to justify yourself; throw yourself on grace. Only grace can free you.”

I have a friend who is processing having done something very hurtful. The person keeps going around and around the deed. The person keeps saying, “But I am basically a good person. You believe that of me, don’t you Darrell?” During the most recent session I simply said, “Don’t go there. Whether or not you are a good person is not helpful right now. Accept the grace of God. Only grace sets you free.”

Church historian Richard Lovelace is right. He says that too few of us believers know how to take our stand on the Gospel of grace.

“Many (professing Christians) draw their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance, or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience.

Few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther's platform: looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance." (Dynamics of Spiritual Life, 101).

"Saved by grace," says Paul. "That no one should boast," says Paul. It all comes down to grace.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound;
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I'm found;
Was blind, but now I see."
Was dead but now I live!
God saves us by grace.

Question 4 – *So, what is our role in this salvation?*

Faith, says Paul. "Saved by grace through **faith**." Our role is to believe, to trust, to bank it all on God's grace. That's it? Faith? Yes. That is all it can be. When we are given a gift, all we can do is accept it. It is the only way to honor the giver.

And what is faith? I used to say, "faith is reaching out and taking the gift." But the verb "reaching out" comes too close to "works." We are not saved by works, says Paul. And "reaching out" can too easily become a "work." So I started saying, "faith is throwing oneself on grace, on God and His grace." But the verb "throwing" also comes too close to "work." So now I am saying, "faith is falling into grace. Faith is giving into the new reality shaped by grace, and simply falling into the new reality."

You see the good news is not that the Savior came to the side of the pit into which we had fallen, and extended His hand, calling us to take hold. The good news is that the Savior dove into the pit, all the way down to the bottom. And at the bottom calls us to fall into His arms! I am even willing to say that "faith is collapsing into grace." After all the striving and agonizing, simply stopping and collapsing into the new creation.

"Saved by grace through faith." Christ alone. Grace alone. Faith alone.

"And that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." Verse 8. To what is the "that" referring? "And that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God." To salvation? To grace? To faith? Could be referring to each or to all. Many take it to refer to faith, maintaining that even faith is God's gift; that anyone believes at all is gift. That is theologically true. But it does not seem to be what Paul is emphasizing in Ephesians. The word "that" is neuter. The word "faith" is feminine. So is the word "grace." So it is most likely "that" refers to the whole package: "saved by grace through faith." "Saved by grace through faith" – that is the gift of God.

Question 5 – *Where is grace taking us?*

Or, where is faith in grace taking us?

- We just sit around and wait for Jesus to come. Right?
- We just wait for Him to bring in the new heavens and the new earth.

- And when He brings in the new heaven and the new earth, we just sit around on clouds singing songs of praise. Right?

NOT!

Grace picks us up and puts us to work. We begin to walk; we begin to walk in good works, says Paul. We are not saved by good works. But we are saved for good works. “We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we would walk in them.”

You see, salvation is not just a new state of being, a new status. Salvation is a vocation. Not a vacation - ☺ But a vocation. To be saved by grace through faith is to be given a new, glorious vocation. New creations walk in good works God has designed for them.

We “walk.” A new walk. We used to walk in the death of our sins, and according to human society organizing itself without God, and according to the prince of the power of the air, and according to the lusts of our flesh. Awful. Awful. Now we walk a new walk. It will be the major verb to describe the Christian life in the rest of the letter to the Ephesians.

- “Walk worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (4:1).
- “Walk no longer as the Gentiles do in the futility of their mind” (4:17).
- “Walk in love” (5:2).
- “Walk as children of the light” (5:8).
- “Walk ... filled with the Spirit” (5:15,18).

And here in the text before us today,

- “walk in good works.”

Which God has prepared for us.

What is Paul referring to? He is referring to a wide range of good works all new creations are created to walk in.

- As a lifelong Jew, he would certainly have in mind the Ten Commandments. We are not saved by keeping the commandments; but we are saved to walk in them.
- As a lover of Jesus, Paul would certainly have in mind Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. We are not saved by living the new, radical Kingdom commands Jesus speaks; “love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you; do unto others what you want them to do to you.” We are not saved by doing those good works, for no one can do them perfectly; but we are saved to walk in them.
- As a disciple of Jesus, as a witness to the works of the Spirit in the early church, Paul would also be thinking of Jesus’ works of healing and deliverance the Spirit continues to perform in the world. We are created in Christ Jesus to do the works of Christ Jesus!

This is how Paul puts it in a letter to his friend and colleague Titus. “Our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people zealous for good deeds” (2:13-14).

I think Paul also has in mind God’s unique and specific call upon each new creation. Of all the possible “good works” in which all disciples walk, He calls us to particular “good works,” for which He uniquely equips us. No one disciple can be engaged in all the “good works” of God’s people. Each of us is “wired” for a few “good works.”

We are not to expect everyone to be doing the same work. We are to encourage one another to do one or two or three of the works of the Kingdom of God.

We see this being worked out in the early church. A dispute arose about the feeding of widows; a very “good work” in which the church was walking. Things were getting out of hand, taking up a lot of the apostles’ time and energy. They say to the church, “it is not good for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables” (Acts 6:2). They were not saying it was not good to wait on tables, not at all. No one worthy of the name of Jesus would ever say or feel that. They were saying that they could not do the good work of waiting on tables AND do the hard work of the good work of teaching and preaching the Word. Just as those waiting on tables could not do the work of the Word AND do the good work of table service well. We are each called to do the good work uniquely prepared for us. And we are to encourage and free others to do the good work uniquely prepared for them.

I bless you who are called to the good work of administration. I bless you who are called to the good work of nursing. I stand in awe of those of you called to the good work of caring for children, and those of you called to the good work of engineering...and counseling.

We are not saved by doing the good works. But we are saved for walking in good works of the Kingdom of God.

And do you know what the reward is for walking in the good work? A surprising reward: the joy of being given more of the good work to do!

I like what Dallas Willard develops in his “The Divine Conspiracy.” Many of you know the passage. Speaking of the coming the new heavens and the new earth, he writes:

“We will not sit around looking at one another or at God for eternity but will join the eternal Logos, ‘reign with him,’ in the endlessly ongoing creative work of God. It is for this that we were each individually intended, as both priests and kings (Exodus 19:6; Rev. 5:10). A place in God’s creative order has been reserved for each of us from before the beginnings of cosmic existence. His plan is for us to develop, as apprentices to Jesus, to the point where we can take our place in the ongoing creativity of the universe” (398).

Isn’t that cool! ☺

Willard continues.

“In due time ... we will begin to assume new responsibilities. ‘Well done, good and faithful servant,’ our magnificent Master will say, ‘you have been faithful in the smallest things, take charge of ten cities,’ ‘five cities,’ ‘many things,’ or whatever is appropriate (Luke 19:17; Matt. 25:21).”

Then this:

“I suspect that there will be many surprises when the new creative responsibilities are assigned. Perhaps it would be a good exercise for each of us to ask ourselves: Really, how many cities could I now govern under God? If, for example, Baltimore or Liverpool [...or Vancouver] were turned over to me, with power to do what I want with it, how would things turn out?”

New creations ... created to do good works.

No, I did not quote Paul accurately. Paul does not say, “good works that we would do them.” He says, “good works that we walk in them.” A big difference. For the good works are not our good works! They are God’s good works ... works God is doing. And we are invited to join Him in His good works. It is not that we are working FOR God in the world; we are working WITH God in the world.

So, question 6 – *How to we do this? How do we live saved?*

How do we live as God’s workmanship in the world?

- By pulling up our boot-straps and exerting all the human energy we can muster. Right?
- We do it by working harder. Right?

NOT.

We are beginning to get it that we do not save ourselves; that we do not make ourselves new creations. But we still think that we live the saved life by our own effort. Right?

Here is the good news. We do not live the new creation ourselves. “In Christ Jesus,” says Paul. Created in Christ Jesus. IN. He uses the little preposition 36 times in his letter. IN. In relationship, in relationship with a Person. In intimate relationship with a Person. “Abide in Me, and I in you,” He says. We need to hear it again and again. So clear ... yet so easily forgotten. “Abide in Me, and I in you; for **apart from Me you can do nothing**” (John 15:1-5).

- Apart from Christ we cannot save ourselves.
- Apart from Christ we cannot live the life for which He saves us.
- Apart from Christ we cannot become new creations.
- Apart from Christ we cannot live as new creations.

It is as we live IN Him that He equips us for walking in His good works. He goes before us, preparing the good work in which he calls us to walk. Someone has said:

“I know He will not permit that to come to me for which I am not prepared. We are His workmanship. He is equipping us in Christ for all His will appoints. He is appointing in His will things for which we were created in Christ.” (G. Campbell-Morgan).

We are created for good works. And good works are created for us. Not to work them. But to walk in them...by walking in the Saviour.

Which explains the rhythm and orderliness and beauty of the letter to the Ephesians. Paul is in prison, in Rome, chained to a soldier. But he is also, and primarily, in Christ. You know he wanted to be “out there”, proclaiming the Gospel in the cities of Ephesus. But instead he is locked up in a room somewhere in downtown Rome. Yet, “in Christ” he was still able to walk in the good work which had been prepared for him. Indeed, it turns out that locked up in a room, he fulfilled his call to proclaim the Gospel in ways he could never have imagined!

It is in relationship with the Master Poet that the poems begin to emerge. When we live in the Master Poet, wherever else we live, we begin to walk like Him, like “poetry in motion”.

Irenaeus of the 2nd Century (130-200AD) got it, he read Paul and got it. And he then wrote, “The glory of God is a human being made fully alive.” That is what it means “to be saved... by grace...through faith.”

I conclude with the prayer by O.T. Nils of Sri Lanka, which I have written on the first page of my journal.

“Jesus, Master Carpenter of Nazareth, who on the cross through wood and nail has wrought our full salvation, wield well Your tools on us, that we who come to You rough-hewn may by Your hand be fashioned to a truer beauty; for Your name’s sake. Amen.” (*Living with the Gospel*, 8)