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# ONLY GOD SAVES

EPHESIANS 2:8-9

*By: H.B. Charles, Jr.*



# SERMON MANUSCRIPT

Ephesians 2:8-9 are the golden verses of Ephesians. It is arguable that no passage in the New Testament is more known, beloved, or memorized among Christians, except John 3:16. R. KENT HUGHES wrote: “This is the gospel in a nutshell – the most cogent summary of the dynamics of salvation to be found in Scripture.”

Verse 8 begins with a purpose clause that points back to verses 1-7. Verses 1-3 declare the bad news of sin. We were dead in sin. We were enslaved in sin. We were condemned in sin. But verses 4-7 declare the good news of salvation. We are made alive with Christ. We are raised up with Christ. And we are seated with Christ in the heavenly places. This is the difference Jesus makes. In sin we are lost and on our way to hell. In Christ we are saved and on our way to heaven. But as we celebrate this good news, we must not forget how we got from what we were to what we are. So verses 8-9 explain: *“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.”* The message of this text can be stated in three words: Only God saves. Jonah 2:9 says: *“Salvation belongs to the Lord.”* Ephesians 2:8-9 teaches that salvation is a divine act and not a human accomplishment.

#### I. SALVATION IS A DIVINE ACT.

Ephesians 2:4-5 declares the divine intervention that saves sinners: *“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.”* The verb “saved” means to rescue or deliver. It is the biblical word for the forgiveness of sins. But it is more than that. Salvation is deliverance from the death, bondage, and condemnation of sin described in verses 1-3. But it is just as much about what we are saved to as it is about what we are saved from. We have new life in Christ. Verses 4-7 declare we are made alive and raised up and seated with Christ.

How does this miracle of salvation happen? Verse 5 answers: *“by grace you have been saved.”* We have been saved. It is a fact. And you can know it. The grammar indicates a completed act in the past with abiding benefits today and tomorrow. We have been saved. We are saved. We will be saved forever. This passage is not evangelistic. It tells the lost how to be saved. It is written to tell the saved how

they were saved. Believers need to know how they were saved as much as unbelievers need to know how to be saved. Verse 5 says: *“by grace you have been saved.”* Verse 8 repeats and expands this great truth: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith.”* Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone.

#### A. SALVATION IS BY GRACE ALONE.

Some years ago, a conference on comparative religions debated what makes Christianity distinct from other religions. Is it Incarnation? What is the unique message of Christianity? While they debated, C.S. LEWIS wandered into the meeting. He asked what the subject was and they told him. “That’s an easy question,” LEWIS replied. “The thing that makes Christianity unique is the doctrine of grace.” He was right. The good news of amazing grace is uniquely Christian. Every other religion teaches people how to reach up to God, one way or another. But Christianity begins by declaring that all of us are sinners that have fallen short of the glory of God. But God has reached down to reconcile us to himself by the righteous life, atoning death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. Verse 8 states this truth in simple terms, *“By grace you have been saved.”* What is grace? Grace is God’s unmerited favor. Grace is God’s scandalous love. Grace is God’s redeeming sacrifice. Romans 3:23-24 says, *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”*

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

JOHN NEWTON wrote these famous words. Newton was born to a godly mother and irreligious, seafaring father. His mother died when he was six. Newton became a vile, slave-trading sea captain. But he is remembered as a beloved pastor and hymn writer. Yet it was the memory of the sinful life from which he was redeemed that moved Newton to write, *Amazing Grace*. Could it be grace is not amazing to us because we have short memories? Have you forgotten the sinful life from which you were saved? You may not have done the things John Newton did. But you have done more than enough to send you

to hell a thousand times. But by grace you have been saved. Newton's story also speaks to those who have not trusted Jesus as Savior and Lord. It is the good news that you cannot be so bad that grace cannot save you. Run to the cross and trust the blood and righteousness of Christ to save you.

#### B. SALVATION IS THROUGH FAITH ALONE.

Verse 8 says, *"By grace you have been saved through faith."* The language here is important. Salvation is by God's grace, not by our faith. But grace is received through faith. Grace is the source of salvation. Faith is the means of salvation. Grace is the basis of salvation. Faith is the instrument of salvation. Grace is the grounds of salvation. Faith is the agent of salvation.

What is faith? It may be best to begin with what faith is not. Faith is not mental assent. It is not theological agreement. It is not personal determination. It is not warm feelings. And it is not positive confessions. Saving faith is biblical knowledge that leads to abiding trust and results in spiritual transformation.

Faith is not passive. It is the gospel's call to action. Faith is what we do. But it does not contribute anything to salvation. God's grace does it all. Faith simply receives what the grace of God has done.

There is no such thing as self-produced faith. All faith is the work of the object. Think about it. You trust who you trust because of what they have or have not done. And you do not trust who you do not trust because of what they have done or have not done. So it is with saving faith. The faith that saves is about the worthiness of the object, not the work of the believer. It is not the size or strength of your faith that saves you. It is the object of your faith. Do not make a savior out of your faith. Jesus Christ is the object of saving-faith. This was the material cause of the 16th Protestant Reformation that divided Christianity into Catholics and Protestants: sola fide. The faithful recovered the gospel by insisting that faith is not about what we do but about what

Christ has done. We are saved by faith alone. The Philippian jailor asked Paul and Silas, *"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"* In Acts 16:31, they answered, *"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household."* Praise God their answer was no longer than that. Christ did it all. All we must do is trust that Christ has done it all.

The story is told of a man who came eagerly but very late to a revival meeting and found the workmen tearing down the tent in which the meetings had been held. Frantic at missing the evangelist, he decided to ask one of the workers what he could do to be saved. The workman, who was a Christian, replied, "You can't do anything. It's too late." Horrified, the man said, "What do you mean? How can it be too late?" The work has already been accomplished," he was told. "There is nothing you need to do but believe it."

#### II. SALVATION IS NOT A HUMAN ACCOMPLISHMENT

Ephesians 2:8a is a positive statement of the nature of salvation: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith."* The rest of the passage negatively states the antithesis of the way of salvation. It is just as important to know what salvation is not as it is to know what salvation is. So verse 8b-9 teaches us what salvation is not: *"And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."* Salvation is not a human accomplishment. Paul emphasizes the fact that only God saves with two negative statements.

##### A. SALVATION IS NOT YOUR OWN DOING.

Verse 8 says: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."* How do you know you are saved? The typical answer to that question consists of a list of things one has or has not done. But to make a list of things done is to walk in a false assurance of salvation. Verse 8 is clear: *"And this is not your own doing."* It is not of yourself. No human virtue, performance, or accomplishment can save. One night, a religious man came to talk to Jesus. He commended Jesus for his works. And he expected Jesus to commend him in return for being a good and moral person. But in John 3:3, Jesus responded to Nicodemus by declaring, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* You contributed absolutely nothing to your physi-

cal birth into the world. And you contribute nothing to your spiritual birth into the kingdom of God. Salvation is not your own doing.

- Living right won't save you.
- Doing good won't save you.
- Getting baptized won't save you.
- Joining church won't save you.
- Giving money won't save you.
- Loving others won't save you.

Verse 8 says: *“And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”* What is the gift of God? I believe the gift is faith. The fact that you trust Jesus the blood and righteousness of Christ for salvation is not your own doing. Saving faith is a divine gift. Philippians 1:29 says, *“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.”* It is theologically true that God grants us faith in Christ. You can't even take credit for believing in Jesus. It is the gift of God. But the grammar here is tricky. And it may be best to understand the text to mean that the entire grace-through-faith experience is from God. The bottom-line is that salvation is free. It is a gift we receive, not a reward we earn. You cannot earn a gift. You cannot buy a gift. You cannot win a gift. It is freely given or it is not a gift. This is how God saves us. It is not your own doing. It is the gift of God.

A missionary in a foreign land became friends with a native pearl-merchant. But he would not believe the gospel. His culture and background would not let him believe that salvation is a free gift God gives to those who believe in God's Son, who died on the cross and rose from the dead. He was convinced the sinner must do something to pay for his own sins. When the missionary finished his term and prepared to go home, the unbelieving merchant gave him a costly pearl to remember by. The missionary insisted the only way he could take it was to pay for it. The pearl merchant was offended. He explained that his son had died in the process

of acquiring that pearl. But as he argued that no price was enough, the truth of the gospel dawned on it. Nothing we do can compare to the sacrifice God's Son made at the cross. It offends God to even try. Salvation must be a gift of God!

#### B. SALVATION IS NOT ACCORDING TO WORKS.

Verse 9 records the second negative statement Paul makes to emphasize the fact that only God saves. Salvation is *“not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”* There is a sense in which this is restatement of the negative statement in verse 8. But it is more than that. It is a statement that explains why salvation is not your own doing and must be a gift of God.

Salvation is an issue of the righteousness of God. God is holy and we are not. And the holiness of God demands that sin be punished by death. Guilty sinners are doomed to suffer the wrath of God in hell forever. How can we acquire the righteous merit needed to satisfy the holy justice of God? The gospel is that God provides what he demands in the bloody cross and empty tomb of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are saved through the perfect righteousness of Christ. And Paul emphasizes this by saying it is not the result of works. Salvation is not your own doing because it cannot be the result of works. Romans 3:20 says, *“For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”*

As grace and faith are organically connected, grace and works are inherently opposed. Romans 11:6 says, *“For if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.”* If salvation is by grace then it cannot be the result of works. But grace is not cheap. Ephesians 2:10 says, *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”* Feel the tension in the text. We are not saved by good works. But we are saved for good works. Salvation is through faith alone. But true saving-faith is not alone. It is always accompanied by good works that demonstrate our profession of faith is real. But good works only prove salvation. They do not produce salvation. Good works affirm salvation. They do not accomplish salvation. Salvation is not the result of works.

Why is Paul so emphatic about the truth that only God saves? Verse 9 answers: *“not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”* Salvation is all of grace so that it will be all of God so that it will be all for his glory! This is not just a theological claim. We believe in everyday life that the one who does the work deserves the credit. It is not only immoral to take credit for someone else’s work; in some instances, it is also illegal. And so it is with the saving work of God. This is why salvation is a divine act and not a human accomplishment. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 says, *For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”*

If salvation was your own doing or the result of works, you would have something to boast about when you get to heaven. But let him who boasts, boast in the Lord. JOHN STOTT commented: “We shall not be able to strut round heaven like peacocks. Heaven will be filled with the exploits of Christ and the praises of God.” Indeed, there will be no place for self-congratulations. Christ did it all. And all the glory, honor, and praise belong to God. Those who are saved and on their way to heaven have learned to sing how to sing Psalm 34:1-2 with David: *“I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.”*