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## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SAVED?

Ephesians 2:8-10

By

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Evangelism, Lesson 2

## What Does it Mean to be Saved? Ephesians 2:8-10

Perhaps when you heard the sermon title, “What Does it Mean to be Saved?” you thought, “Oh no, this is going to be like taking a college graduate back to kindergarten! Why do you need to talk about something as basic as salvation?”

There are several reasons that I want to focus today and next week on the *message* of the gospel as we consider personal evangelism. For one thing, the gospel—the good news about salvation—is foundational to everything else. Because of this, Satan is always attacking the gospel. If he can get us off-track on the gospel, everything else gets messed up. And so he is relentless in attacking the gospel. Also, I want each of you to be crystal clear on the gospel so that you live in light of it daily and you’re equipped to share it accurately with anyone at any time.

Here are a few of the ways that the gospel is currently under attack. Some present the gospel as if Jesus were a better brand of self-help. Do you have problems in your marriage? Try Jesus and you’ll find quick relief. Is your personal life falling apart? Jesus will help you get it together. Whatever miracle you need, just try Jesus! In its most crass form, are you sick or in poverty? Jesus promises to make you well and financially prosperous. So people are encouraged to come to Jesus for whatever help they need. Usually they’re promised instant results.

The truth in that lure is that the Lord does provide us help with our personal problems after we’ve come to Him for salvation. But, those promises are *not* the gospel. In many instances, people have come to Christ for salvation and their problems got much worse. Some have been killed because they trusted in Christ. So the gospel is definitely not about “how to have your best life now!”

But probably the most frequent place where the devil attacks the gospel is confusion over the relationship between faith and good works. Many professing evangelicals today argue that since we are saved by faith alone, any mention of repentance or submit-

ting to Christ as Lord muddies the gospel. Under this teaching, a person may make a profession of faith in Christ and yet later deny the gospel and become an atheist. But he's still saved (John MacArthur refutes this in, *The Gospel According to Jesus* [Zondervan] and *Faith Works* [Word]). This view is confused about the nature of saving faith. Sadly, it gives assurance of salvation to many people who have never truly been saved.

On the other hand, the "New Perspective on Paul" turns salvation into a matter of joining the covenant community and living a life of faithfulness. That's an over-simplification of this view, but it seems fair to say that its proponents deny that sinners are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. (For a critique of the New Perspective, see, "The Old Perspective on Paul," by Phil Johnson, pp. 61-77, in *Fool's Gold* [Crossway], ed. by John MacArthur.) Their view is very similar to the Roman Catholic teaching that justification is by faith *plus works* over a lifetime. There is not any good news in that message! Of course, all of the cults also teach some form of salvation by good works.

On the more practical level, if you ask anyone the question, "Why should God let you into heaven?" the answer you most often will hear is, "I've tried to be a good person." Or, "I've never hurt anyone intentionally, and I've lived a good life." Even many who attend evangelical churches believe this. Surveys have shown that a majority of American Protestants agree that the way to be accepted by God is to try sincerely to live a good life. To bear witness to people who think like that, you need to be clear on what it means to be saved.

So I hope that this message is like spiritual kindergarten for most of you. But whether this is a review the basics or not, it is crucial to understand the biblical truth about salvation for yourself first, and also so that you can clearly present it to others. (I have two messages on Eph. 2:8-10 from the Ephesians series, on the church web site.) Our text teaches us that...

God saves us apart from any human works by grace through  
faith, resulting in a life of good works.

On the relationship between faith and works, John Calvin wrote, "It is ... faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which

justifies is not alone" (*Tracts III:152*, cited in *Calvin's Wisdom* [Banner of Truth], by Graham Miller, p. 106). Or, C. H. Spurgeon put it (*The Soul Winner* [Eerdmans], p. 209):

We are prepared, I hope, to die for the doctrine of justification by faith, and to assert before all adversaries that salvation is not of works; but we also confess that we are justified by a faith which produces works, and if any man has a faith which does not produce good works, it is the faith of devils.... We are saved by faith without works, but not by a faith that is without works, for the real faith that saves the soul works by love and purifies the character.

I want to explain and apply our text with three main points:

1. Salvation is totally of God, apart from any human works or merit.

Paul underscores the truth that no one can save himself by human effort. Just a few verses before, he stated twice that we all were dead in our sins (2:1, 5). Dead men can do absolutely nothing to remedy their condition. They can't work toward being raised from the dead. They can't pray for it. They can't even muster up the faith to get raised from the dead. It takes an act of God to impart life to a dead man. Even so, it takes an act of God to save those who are dead in their sins.

Jesus taught the same truth to the Jewish religious leader Nicodemus when He told him, "you must be born again" (John 3:7). Nicodemus was a devout, moral, religious man. He believed in God and he sought to obey God's Word. But none of those qualities will do anything for a man who is spiritually dead. He needs life from God. Just as we didn't have anything to do with our own physical conception or birth, so we can do nothing to bring ourselves from spiritual death to spiritual life.

This is not to say that we should not urge people to believe in Jesus Christ for eternal life. Jesus went on to tell Nicodemus that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life (John 3:16). Jesus' preaching is summarized as (Mark 1:15), "Repent and believe in the gospel." Paul told the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31), "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...." So we should urge people to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation.

But here's the point to keep in mind as you bear witness: unless God imparts life to this dead sinner, he will not believe (see the sequence in John 1:12-13). Thus evangelism is much more than persuading someone to make a decision for Christ. As we present the gospel, we must pray for God to work the miracle of regeneration in this dead sinner.

I want to explore three aspects of this truth, that salvation is totally of God, apart from any human works:

A. To be saved, a person must have some realization of the fact that he is lost.

People who need to be saved don't just need a little boost from God. They aren't basically good people who mean well, but just need a little help. As we've seen, they're spiritual corpses. Or, to use the opposite of the word *saved*, they're *lost*. Because of their sin, they are cut off from the very life of God, living in spiritual darkness (Eph. 4:18). As such, they are under God's just condemnation and wrath (John 3:36). They need the Holy Spirit to convict (or convince) them regarding sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11).

This means that we must share the bad news before we share the good news. If someone doesn't know that he's lost, he won't be interested in your directions as to how to get saved. To be more specific, if we're too quick to tell an unbeliever who does not sense that he is lost, "God loves you and Christ died for your sins," he will probably respond, "Yes, thank you for reminding me." He won't appreciate the good news or respond to it because he doesn't understand the bad news.

This means that sometimes as we talk with someone about Christ, we need to bring up the sin issue, drive it home to his conscience, and leave him to think about it. We might do this by going through the Ten Commandments and showing him how he has broken them all. Or, show him what Jesus said, that if we have been angry we're guilty of murder; if we have lusted we have committed adultery in God's sight (Matt. 5:21-30).

Jesus did this with the rich young ruler when He told him to go sell everything he owned and give it away (see Luke 18:18-23). The young man prided himself in his obedience to the command-

ments. But Jesus was saying, in effect, "You haven't even kept the main commandment, which is to love God and have no other gods before Him." And when the young man went away sad, Jesus didn't go after him to soften the message! He let him go.

When Paul witnessed to Felix, he did not tell him, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Rather, he talked to him about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come (Acts 24:25). It frightened Felix, and rightly so! It showed him that he was a sinner who would face God's judgment. So before we try to tell people about God's salvation, they need to have some sense that they are lost and under God's condemnation.

B. To be saved means that the Lord Jesus Christ has rescued us from God's wrath and judgment.

I realize that the idea of God's wrath and judgment are not popular in our day. Our culture would rather believe in a God of love who would never judge anyone. They want a God who will give them a happy life. But Jesus warned often about judgment and hell (see Matt. 25:31-46; Mark 9:43-49; Luke 13:1-5; John 5:22, 24; 8:23-24, 42). We cannot legitimately claim to be followers of Jesus and at the same time deny the reality of the coming judgment. To be saved from drowning means that you were about to die when someone rescued you. To be saved spiritually means that you were on your way to hell when Jesus Christ rescued you. Thus the gospel is not about how to have a better life now, but rather about how to have eternal life and not come into judgment (John 5:24).

C. God saves us by His grace alone, which excludes human works or merit.

The best news in the world is that God saves us by His grace alone! Paul hammers it home in Ephesians 2. In verse 5 he says, "by grace you have been saved." In verse 7 he adds, "so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." Then, so we don't miss it, he repeats (2:8), "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."

Again, because this concept is so crucial, the enemy relentlessly attacks it. He tries to get us to tone it down or to make it into something less than it is. For example, one well known Christian

seminar leader defines grace as the motivation and power to do God's will. Certainly God gives us the motivation and power to do His will, but that isn't grace. Pure and simple, God's grace is His *unmerited favor* shown to those who deserve His wrath. If we get what we have coming, we will spend eternity in hell. Instead, God forgives all our sins and bestows the unfathomable riches of Christ on us (Eph. 3:8), apart from anything that we do or deserve.

If you understand God's grace properly, Paul knew that you would think, "If God gives grace to undeserving sinners, then I can sin all I want so that grace may abound!" He anticipates that reaction and says (Rom. 6:1-2), "May it never be!" But you don't understand grace unless that thought pops into your mind.

Practically, this means that God can save the worst of sinners just as they are, without any penance or good works to qualify for salvation. Paul said that he was the chief of sinners, but God showed him mercy (1 Tim. 1:15-16). He said that God justifies the ungodly sinner who does not work, but believes in Christ (Rom. 4:4-5). He said (Rom. 5:6), "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." Again (Rom. 5:8), "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." There is hope for any sinner, no matter how evil, who abandons the idea of good works as the way to heaven and rather believes in Christ. So we need to understand what saving faith is.

## 2. God's gift of salvation is received through faith alone.

Saving faith is not a vague, general belief in God. Nor is it merely agreeing with certain facts. Saving faith has three elements:

### A. Saving faith includes knowledge, assent, and trust.

First, there must be *knowledge*. Faith is not a blind leap into the dark. Some say, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you're sincere." That's like saying, "It doesn't matter what medicine you take, as long as you're sincere." That's crazy!

To be saved, you must know something about God. He is righteous, holy, just, and loving. You must also know that you have sinned against this holy God and stand condemned before Him. You must know that God sent His eternal Son Jesus, who took on human flesh through the virgin birth. He lived a perfect life and

died on the cross, bearing the penalty that sinners deserve. But God raised Jesus bodily from the dead and He ascended into heaven. He will return bodily to judge the living and the dead, but also to save all that have trusted in Him. These are essential facts to know in order to be saved. If a person lacks basic knowledge of the gospel, I urge them to read the Gospel of John.

But also, you must give *assent* to these facts. You must agree that they are true. A student could know these facts well enough to pass an exam, but not affirm that they are true. Saving faith includes giving intellectual assent to the truth of these facts.

But if that is all that saving faith entails, then Satan and the demons are saved! They know these things and they know that they are true. So the third element in saving faith is *personal trust*, or commitment to Jesus as your Savior and Lord. For example, you may be an expert on aircraft. You know that a certain plane is mechanically sound. You agree that it will fly. But knowing these facts and affirming them will not get you anywhere. To go anywhere, you must entrust yourself to the plane by getting on board.

Saving faith means that you personally trust Jesus Christ to deliver you from God's judgment by what He did for you on the cross. You trust God's promise to justify the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). Implicit in "getting on board" with Jesus is that you don't keep one foot on the ground. You commit yourself totally to Jesus as your Savior and your Lord. He is both Savior and Lord. You can't take Him as one without the other.

But, some may wonder, "If God saves us through faith in Christ, then can't we take some of the credit for our salvation?"

B. Saving faith is God's gift to us.

Scholars debate about what "that" (Eph. 2:8) refers to. In Greek, it is neuter, whereas "grace" and "faith" are feminine, and "saved" is a masculine participle. Charles Hodge argues that "that" refers to faith, which best suits Paul's argument here. But Calvin and most modern expositors argue that "that" refers to the entire process of salvation by grace through faith. Whichever view you take, other Scriptures indicate that saving faith and repentance (which are inextricably linked) are God's gift to us (Phil. 1:29; Acts 11:18; Acts 3:16; 5:31; 2 Tim. 2:25; Heb. 12:2).

The Bible is clear that to the natural man, the cross is foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18). He cannot understand the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14). He is blind to the light of the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4). He is unable to submit to God or please Him (Rom. 8:7-8). So for an unbeliever to move from his natural condition of spiritual darkness to one of light and faith in Christ, God must graciously open his eyes and impart saving faith to him. Salvation is God's free gift to us. We cannot take any credit for our faith. Faith is the hand that receives the gift of salvation, but unless God has opened our eyes, none of us would have received that gift. Salvation is totally from God, so all glory goes to God (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

Thus, salvation is totally of God, apart from any human works or merit. God's gift of salvation is received through faith alone.

### 3. Salvation results in a life of good works.

We are saved by grace through faith apart from works, but the faith that saves always results in good works. G. H. Lang wrote (cited by F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* [Eerdmans], p. 493), "None more firmly than Paul rejected works, before or after conversion, as a ground of salvation; none more firmly demanded good works as a consequence of salvation." If God has imparted new life to us, that life will manifest itself by a life of good works. The root of salvation bears the fruit of a godly life.

Paul emphasizes that even our good works subsequent to salvation come from God (Eph. 2:10): "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." Paul is saying that salvation is entirely of God and it results in a life of good works. Just as we cannot claim any glory for ourselves in salvation, neither can we claim any glory for our subsequent life of obedience and good works. It all comes from God and so He gets all the glory.

True, we are responsible to walk in these works which God prepared for us beforehand. But the motivation to walk in those works comes from God's gracious salvation. Because He rescued me from an awful punishment, I should delight to do His will. If a person claims to be saved but has no desire "to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously, and godly in

the present age" (Titus 2:12), then he needs to go back and determine whether he has truly experienced God's grace in salvation.

### Conclusion

So the core message that we need to get across when we share the gospel is that God saves us apart from any human works by grace through faith, resulting in a life of good works. To share that message effectively, you have to get across to people some awareness of the grim truth that they are lost. Because of their sins, they are alienated from God and unable to do anything to earn His favor. The good news is that what we cannot do, God did. He sent His own Son to bear the penalty that we deserve. Through Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, God now offers forgiveness of all sins and eternal life as a free gift to any sinner who will receive Christ by faith.

As you're able to share that good news and you sense that the Holy Spirit is convicting the person about his need for the Savior, invite him to stop trusting in his good works and instead, to trust in Jesus alone for eternal life. As God works the miracle of regeneration, the person will trust in Jesus and move from Satan's domain of darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:13-14). That's what it means to be saved!

### Application Questions

1. Some would argue that fallen sinners can, on their own free will, choose to believe in Christ. What Scriptures refute this? Why is it important to refute it?
2. How can we impress on lost people the serious place they are in before God without alienating them with a message of "hell-fire and damnation"?
3. Is it mixing works with grace to appeal to lost people to submit to Jesus as Lord? Why/why not? Give biblical support.
4. Why does Paul state that God prepared our good works beforehand? What is his practical aim?

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