**Grace Alone**

**Ephesians 2:1-10**

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***1*** *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins* ***2*** *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—****3*** *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.* ***4*** *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,* ***5*** *even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—****6*** *and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,* ***7*** *so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.* ***8*** *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,* ***9*** *not a result of works, so that no one may boast**.* ***10*** *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

Five hundred years ago, a German monk named Martin Luther became very concerned about the spiritual direction of the church. He was particularly upset by the work of a Dominican friar by the name of Johann Tetzel. Tetzel was sent to Germany by the Roman Catholic Church to sell indulgences to common people in order to raise money to rebuild St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. An indulgence is a grant by the Pope for the forgiveness of temporal punishment in purgatory. So if a person purchased an indulgence for another person, then that person would be given the equivalent of time served. So you can see why there would be people very interested in giving their money in order to acquire an indulgence.

Tetzel was particularly adept as a salesman of indulgences. He would enter a village in this grand wagon. Banners would be unfurled. Trumpets would blast announcing his arrival. An armed guard would surround him. It’s all very regal, all very serious looking. He could be heard crying out, “Friends of this town, you have heard how your loved ones suffer in purgatory. You have heard their cries. The flames have reached up and licked your very own boots. How shamefully you go about your business. You spend your money on every little trifle. And, oh, how your loved ones suffer. Enough! Step forward. Leo X, the Pontifex Maximus, Vicar of Christ on earth, has been gracious and merciful to you and has affixed his seal to this indulgence. Now come and do your duty. And now you have a very special deal reserved for you. For a little extra guilder you can free yourself from purgatory. Yes, God be praised, give to the church your mite and the gracious Holy Father in Rome will see to it that you and all your dead relatives will be in Paradise itself, not enduring for a moment the purging flames of purgatory.” And then he would add a little rhyme. “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs.”

Well, this deeply disturbed this monk, Martin Luther. He saw impoverished people using money to buy indulgences, considered worthless indulgences, using money that they needed for their food. And he would ask the question, “Why does the pope, whose wealth today is greater than the wealth of the richest [Crassus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crassus), build the basilica of St. Peter with the money of poor believers rather than with his own money?” Luther was a fiery guy and when he saw something wrong, he couldn’t let it go.

Luther furthermore insisted that God alone had the power to forgive sins and the church was in error for teaching that indulgences would bring forgiveness of any sin. And so, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed a copy of his complaint on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenburg, Germany. Now please understand that this was not as dramatic as it sounds. It was frequent that scholars would nail theses and notices upon the church door. Certainly Martin Luther did not intend to confront the church strongly. He thought that his objections would be met with hearty agreement once they were considered, and that the church would reform herself. But she did not. She dug in and she resisted. The church would excommunicate Luther a little more than two years later. An arrest warrant would be issued. This arrest warrant made it illegal for anyone to give Martin Luther food or shelter. Indeed, people were now free to kill Martin Luther without any legal consequence whatsoever.

As time went forward, Luther’s objections became more doctrinally focused as the church resisted reforms. He became convinced that the Gospel had been lost and that what was needed was a renewal of the Gospel. And thus, it was through the Reformation that God brought the light of the Gospel back into His church. Today, we speak of Five Solas that the Reformation celebrated. These five doctrines were highlighted not only by Luther, but by many, many other Reformers as well. Now, the word Sola simply means “alone” or “only.” In brief, here are the Five Solas of the Reformation:

1. Sola Scriptura: The Bible alone is our sole authority for faith and practice. Church teaching, church tradition, church authority does not come alongside as an equal authority to the Bible, but every other authority comes underneath the Scripture and is submissive to it.

2. Sola Fide: Faith alone! We are saved from the punishment that our sins deserve by faith alone in Jesus Christ apart from any good works on our part.

3. Sola Gratia: God saves us from His wrath by His grace alone and not by any effort of our own doing. Salvation is entirely a free gift of God. God Himself takes the initiative to save us. We don’t take the initiative to save ourselves. The grace of God sends Jesus to die upon the cross as an atoning sacrifice for sin. The supernatural work of the Holy Spirit brings faith in the crucified and risen Jesus.

4. Sola Christus: Jesus alone is our Savior, Lord and King. It is His sinless life and His atoning death that are completely sufficient to reconcile us to God. The righteousness of Jesus is imputed to us through faith in Jesus and we can take no credit of our own.

5. Sola Deo Gloria: God alone deserves the glory in our salvation and in our lives. Our very chief end and purpose is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

This morning, we’re going to take up this one doctrine: Grace Alone, Sola Gratia. We open up our Bibles to Ephesians 2:1-10. Here we discover that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This passage presents to us five reasons why our salvation must be by God’s grace alone, with no part whatsoever of our own.

Before we dig into Ephesians 2 though, let’s define God’s grace. God’s grace is God’s undeserved, unearned favor upon sinful man through the atoning death of Jesus. If man had not sinned, God would not have shown Himself gracious. Indeed, He could not. Apart from sin, grace does not exist. Grace, by definition, can be offered only in the context of a person’s meriting the opposite of favor. So in one sense, we are right to say that the Fall of man into sin opened the door for this world to experience God’s grace.

God’s grace is God’s lovingkindness freely bestowed upon a person who only deserved God’s punishment. And that grace is bestowed by means of Jesus taking God’s punishment upon His own Person. It’s very important that we not sentimentalize grace. Grace never trifles with sin. It never ignores it. God’s grace is not merely sort of this sentimental response from God wherein God looks upon us and says, “Oh, I wish they hadn’t sinned. So I’m just going to overlook their sin, because indeed, they have. And then I’m going to gather them to myself and give them a warm hug.” No! That’s not grace at all.God never discounts the infinite wickedness of our sin in order to give us favor. He is forever eternally just, righteous in extending grace. God does not simply wish away our sin from His presence and then shower us with His love. Grace is freely given by God’s definite action in Jesus’ crucifixion. So when we think of God’s grace, we must think of a bloody cross.

Carl Trueman writes this, and I thought this was superb! “Sin is violent lethal rebellion against God; and biblical grace is God’s violent, raw, and bloody response.” I thought that was a great definition of sin. It’s never something light. “Oh, we sin a little bit. Let’s try not to do that next time.” Sin is violent lethal rebellion against God! Biblical grace is God’s violent, raw, and bloody response. There is nothing cheap about God’s grace!

Now keep in mind that the church in Rome taught in Luther’s day and in our day too, that sinners are saved by grace. So it’s not grace that really is the touchpoint of conflict. It is grace alone! The Reformer’s emphasized that it is grace apart from anything else. Today, the Roman Catholic Church does not teach that we are saved by works apart from the grace of God. Again, let us not misrepresent anyone. The conflict is whether we sinners cooperate with God in any way in order to participate in our own salvation. As we will see, the answer is “No, we do not.” We do not contribute even the tiniest measure through our actions, through our attitudes, to our own salvation. God saves us from beginning to the end and He does it without any of our help.

Five reasons that our salvation must be by grace alone:

**1. Salvation is by grace alone because our problem is beyond our remedies.**

Paul states the problem for us in Ephesians 2.

***1*** *And you were dead in the trespasses and sins* ***2*** *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—****3*** *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.*

Paul describes the original, natural spiritual condition of every person, indeed of every believer. He’s talking about believers. “You *were* dead in trespasses and sins.” God in grace gives us a new nature. So that’s no longer true of us, but that’s who we once were. We were not merely sickened by our sin. We were not merely weakened by our transgressions. We became utterly and completely hopeless. Notice the three truths that Paul teaches in these three verses about our sin.

Truth #1: We were dead in our trespasses and sins.

It’s not that we were in danger of dying, but that indeed we were dead. It is not that we were gasping for our last breath, spiritually. It is that there was no breath at all. So, in what sense are people who are mentally, intellectually, emotionally, physically alive, in what sense are these people spiritually dead?

People who are physically dead are unable to interact with, relate to and experience in some measure the physical world in which they live. This is how we know they’re dead. They can’t breathe physical air. Their brain can’t respond to certain stimulus or touches. Their physical heart can’t pump physical blood through their system. If a person cannot breathe, pump blood or respond in any way neurologically to the physical world, then we conclude that they are physically dead.

In the same way, someone who is spiritually dead is unable to interact with, relate to and personally experience God. They do not see God’s glory and His infinite value. They are not able to listen to God’s true voice through His Word and through His Son, nor will they follow Him. They are not able to receive God’s Holy Spirit indwelling in them whereby they cry out to God, “Abba, Father!” They have no spiritual longing for true fellowship with God’s people. They have no zeal to proclaim God’s good news, the Gospel of Jesus. They do not live as though the whole purpose of their lives is for the praise of the glory of Jesus. Such a one is spiritually dead. It is vital that we agree with God about this truth. Let me illustrate why.

Imagine that you’re out hiking and you’re bitten by a poisonous snake. You call 911. The ambulance comes. Doctors come as the ambulance takes you to the hospital. And at the hospital in the Emergency Room, doctors get to work in flurry of activity. They’re checking your vitals. They’re injecting antivenom if it hasn’t already been given. There is a heart monitor to measure every beat. An IV drip is given to boost your body’s ability to survive this assault. There’s lots of activity because you’re alive. That’s why there’s a lot of activity all around you.

Now imagine another scenario. You’re walking down that same path, you’re bitten by that same snake. Again, you’re way away from civilization, and you don’t have your phone. You try to make it back, but your body gets weaker and weaker with every step. You fall down and then you perish, you die. Hours later, some other hiker comes along and sees your body. They look at you and you are white and ashen. You’re cold to the touch. It’s very clear to this person that you are dead. He calls 911. Again, an ambulance comes. But the activity is entirely different this time. They put a sheet over you and they put you into the ambulance. There’s no IV drips, no chest compressions, no antivenom given, no reading of the heart. You are dead. There’s nothing to do. They take you even to the hospital, perhaps. And again, there’s no flurry of activity, only some forms to be filled out. One of those lines on that form reads “Time of Death.” You see, there is no sense in trying any human measures to bring to life a body that is dead, dead. It’s not just nearly dead, not just almost dead. It is dead, dead! And there’s no sense in trying to bring that body back to life. So there’s no activity.

When you think of your soul, it’s important that you not think of your soul as so weak that the spiritual heart is just barely fluttering, barely gasping. Because if you think that way, you’ll think there’s some human activity that you can do to snap that to life, some IV that you can get in, some antidote, something that you can accomplish for yourself. As long as we think we are only nearly dead with sin, we will attempt to take action to bring life to our souls. And that, beloved, is what we must not do. That is what the Pharisees did. It is not what the Publican did. The Publican knew he was dead and he cried out to God, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” (Luke 18:9-14)

Only when we acknowledge the truth of God’s Word that we are dead in our sins, will we give up all hope of human intervention. When a person believes that they are only nearly dead, prayers will be prayed, church meetings will be attended, commitments to God will be promised, sins will be confessed, the Bible will be read, rituals will be exercised, pastors will be visited. This is all for the purpose of keeping us from dying spiritually. But the Bible says none of that will avail anything, apart from Christ. We are dead in our sins, which means that we cannot do anything to rescue ourselves, and no other human can either.

Here’s what Martin Luther would say: “God has surely promised His grace to the humbled: that is, to those who mourn over and despair of themselves. But a man cannot be thoroughly humbled until he realizes that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will and works, and depends absolutely on the will, counsel, pleasure and work of Another—God alone.”

These verses also teach us that not only are we dead, but

Truth #2: We were enslaved by sin without hope of freeing ourselves.

***2*** *… 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—****3*** *among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind…*

We were enslaved to the course of this world. We were enslaved to Satan. Do you see that the world is emphasized? Satan, the Devil is emphasized, but also our own flesh is emphasized as enslaving us, keeping us from being able to be free to know God and to enjoy Him. We are enslaved in such a way that we are unable to break those chains of our sin and of our condemnation.

Remember Jesus talked to the Jewish leaders and He said, “You’ll know the truth and the truth will set you free.” And the Jewish leaders became offended by that. They said, “We’re Abraham’s offspring. We’ve never been enslaved to anyone. How dare you suggest that we’re not free already. We don’t need anything. How is that you can say, ‘You will become free?’” Jesus answers, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:31-36) You’ll really, really be free. But until the Son sets us free, we are enslaved. It might not feel like it. It didn’t feel like it to these religious leaders. But that is the truth. We’re enslaved to this world and to Satan and to our own flesh. This is why Charles Wesley in his great hymn, would describe his own conversion. He said

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

That is the testimony of the believer!

Do you remember Samson? Samson didn’t know that he was enslaved after his hair was cut off. He felt free, as free as every other time, but he went to break the chains. It was at the moment of wanting to break the chains he realized. And it was too late when he came to realize his enslavement. (Judges 16:18-20) Beloved, our soul, left to ourselves in our natural state is like Samson without his hair. The chains of sin are bound too tight. They’re too strong! We will never open our hearts to God’s grace until we call out to God in the helplessness of a chain-bound slave.

Truth #3: We were condemned by our sin.

***3*** *…and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*

God had already declared us guilty. He’s already set just condemnation in motion. He sentenced us to experience His wrath. Friend, our condition is not like the criminal who is still in the midst of his trial. He still has a defense lawyer pleading his case and he’s still thinking “I might get off! I might get off! I might get off!” No! We are like the thief on the cross who is carrying his cross up Mount Calvary. The trial has already been settled. The judgment has already been passed. That’s who we are spiritually. What a sober word! And that is the reason why our salvation must be by grace alone. It’s because our condition is so miserable. Our problems are beyond human remedy.

**2. Salvation is by grace alone because God acts alone to deliver us.**

***4*** *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,* ***5*** *even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—*

Have two more precious words ever been written in the English language? “But God.” When all was hopeless. “But God.” When we were utterly helpless. “But God.” When no one could do anything to reverse our tragedy. “But God.” Notice, not that God helped us but that God, singular, alone, made us alive. It is not God coming alongside of us to give us a boost, to give us an energy drink. It’s God! God alone, when we were dead, made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved.

When Adam and Eve sinned, immediately they became aware of it. Immediately they died spiritually. Immediately! And the story tells us that they sewed fig leaves for themselves. There were just the two of them. They’d been naked from the very beginning. They didn’t know anything but nakedness, but now all of a sudden they’re filled with guilt and shame that “we have to cover up.” God went out and found them. “Where are you?”

“We’re over here.”

“Who told you, you were naked?”

And they tell the story and God issues out these judgments. But then in verse 21 of Genesis 3, there’s something that happens here that’s so important for us to observe. It’s that God acts alone in grace to bring them from death to life.

**Genesis 3:21** And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

Think of this for a moment! Here’s Adam. He’s placed in this lush garden and he’s told to name all the animals. And all these animals I can imagine, are like pets to him. He loves every one. He’s named every one. He’s familiar with them. Never once has he seen any animal die. Death hadn’t entered the world. He has a problem and he thought, “Well, I can solve my problem. Here’s a fig leaf.” But it didn’t solve the problem. He needs something more, something raw, something bloody, something violent. And who made the clothes for Adam? It didn’t say God gave Adam the animal and said, “Go kill it and skin it and make yourself some loin cloths.” God made these clothes for Adam. God slew this animal. Now, it doesn’t tell us whether Adam and Eve saw the bloody mess. I think they did. That’s my imagination. And I imagine they gasped. Think of the blood as they’re clothed the first time. God’s solution is raw. It’s violent. It’s bloody, but it’s grace. God did it. If we’re ever going to be saved, it’s because God will act alone to deliver us.

**3. Salvation is by grace alone because it requires a miracle that only God can perform.**

I emphasize those little words “he made us alive together with Christ.” God did what no one else could do. He performed a miracle in each of our hearts so dramatic, so large, so powerful, so amazing! Jesus’ raising Lazarus’ body from the grave is a small miracle in comparison to the large miracle of raising a dead soul to life forever and ever. I want you to think about that.

Remember, Lazarus had been dead for four days. Jesus came to Mary and Martha. These were His friends. He came to Bethany to console them concerning their brother. “Lord, if you had been here my brother would still be alive,” Martha would say. Jesus would reply to her, “Didn’t I tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” And so He says. “Take away the stone.”

“But by now he stinks! Don’t you know what the condition of his body is? This is impossible! It’s too late!”

“Remove the stone! Father, I thank you that You’ve heard me. I know that you always hear me and I said on account of the people standing around here that they might believe that you sent me.” And after He prayed He cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus! Come forth!” Can you imagine being there? The man who had died came out. First, his hands and feet were still bound. Jesus said, “Someone help this guy out here. Unbind him and let him go.” (John 11:17-44)

Let me ask you: What part did Lazarus play in his own resurrection? Because that’s the part you and I play in our salvation. All the part Lazarus played was he heard the life-giving voice of Jesus and after he was made alive he heard the command, “Come forth!” And he said, “I’m getting out of here. I’m not going to spend one more day in this stinky tomb. Why would I spend it in this stench and this darkness?”

If you are alive, it’s because God independently, completely, utterly apart from anything you’ve done, spoke and then you became alive. And then He said, “Follow Me. Believe.” And you get out of your tomb. Why would I stay back here in this world of sin, darkness and stench? Jesus is calling me to experience life. Our spiritual lives cannot be explained by anything we have done. We have been made alive solely by the work of God in Christ Jesus upon us. We have no part in this miraculous work.

**4. Salvation is by grace alone because God desires all the glory.**

***6*** *and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,*

That’s where we are spiritually already. That’s where our life is. It’s hid with Christ in God. Well, why did He do that?

***7*** *so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

God doesn’t want any part of us to boast in any way in our salvation. He says, “I did this to display My glory in My grace and in My mercy.” You see, God is passionate for His own glory. He is the God of infinite worth and desires that everyone sees Him as the great treasure of life and that we would rejoice in Him as such. So God made salvation available in such a way that all our boasting would be excluded. That He alone would receive the praise and honor. That’s the reason why it is by grace alone that we’re saved. So that God would receive all the glory.

**Romans 11:36** For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

A long time ago, I went to Junior High. And in Junior High there were some other friends that were really good at basketball. I was on their team and we won some trophies. Then we had our picture taken because we almost won State and that was something that little school had never done before. If I go back to that school, which I haven’t for a long time, but last time I went do you know what I do? I go look at that trophy case. It’s still there. They keep it dusted. And there’s a little bit of pleasure that wells up in me. I don’t think it’s wrong to have that. There’s a little bit of pleasure that we did that. That was a great accomplishment. Those were great days. That was something. God allowed us to experience that joy together.

God has a trophy case, too, and we are His trophies representing His work of making dead souls live, of making dirty souls clean, of making enslaved souls free, of making enemies friends, of making blind people see, of making poor people immeasurably rich. He says, “And I want you to be My trophy case. So for all of eternity, all of My creation, the angels, the redeemed and the unredeemed will walk by you and say ‘Wow! Look at how gracious God is!’”

Some parts of God’s creation display His power. I think of mountains and oceans. Other parts of God’s creation display His wisdom. I think of galaxies and the DNA in our bodies. Other parts of God’s creation display His righteousness. I think of angels, both the elect and the evil ones. But what part of God’s creation displays the glory of His grace? It’s you and me. We are shiny trophies displaying the grace of God. But then we ask ourselves the question because this is where our worship lies. This is what it means to present our bodies to Him as a living sacrifice. Am I a dusty, tarnished trophy, or am I a shiny reflecting one? God designs to use us as a trophy case of His grace for all of His creatures to see and marvel in His saving love and power.

Salvation is by grace alone because our problem is beyond our remedies, because God acts alone to deliver us, because it requires a miracle that only God can perform, because God desires all the glory, and finally

**5. Salvation is by grace alone because it is received by faith as a free gift.**

***8*** *For by grace you have been saved through faith.* *And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,* ***9*** *not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

You know, in this world, we are right to be skeptical when we’re offered free gifts. There is a common phrase, “There is no such thing as a free lunch.” Businesses make a lot of money giving out free gifts. A business might offer a free home inspection, a free vacation, a free coffee, a free tote bag, all with the idea that we’re going to spend some money on some goods, something in exchange for the value that they offer. But God is not like that. When God offers a free gift, it is all grace. It’s not cheap. It cost Him His very own Son.

***8****…And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,* ***9*** *not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

When we enter God’s family, we enter in the most humble of ways…by grace alone. So we never look down on other fellow sinners. We never hold any other sinner with contempt. We know that’s where we once were and that’s where we would be had not God initiated and enacted and completed a work of salvation in our own soul. Friends, beware of pride. Our proud self-righteousness will keep us from God’s salvation and will keep us from bringing glory to God. If you are one who chafes at Ephesians 2:8-9 it is because you want to contribute in some way to that salvation, but you cannot. Grace is a free gift. And faith is simply an empty hand that opens itself and says, “God, my hand is empty and I need something that You have that I don’t. I can never obtain it. I need You to give me this free gift of eternal life.” So, we cannot be saved or rescued from our sins by following the Ten Commandments, attending church, doing our best every day, being a good neighbor, being kind to one another. We cannot do what God requires. Only God can do what He requires. And that’s what grace is all about.

***8*** *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,* ***9*** *not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

I want to close with a little illustration for those of you who may be wondering “Have I received this free gift?” Imagine after the service you came up to me and you said some kind word and I said, “Here’s what I’m going to do for you. I want to give you a gift.” I take out a check book and I write $10,000 and put your name on it and give you a check. You might laugh it off and think I’m joking, which frankly, I would be. (Laughter!) But imagine that I was serious, but you thought I was joking. You have a $10,000 gift in your hand. But what would you need to do in order to benefit from it? You’d have to believe that I’m actually giving it to you, that I’m actually offering it. You’d have to take that check and write your name on the back, go to a bank, and deposit it. You don’t have to work for it. You have to believe in it. You have to believe that it’s real. You have to believe that you need it and that I am generous and that I have resources to be able to give this gift to you. So there is no reason why anyone should be outside of God’s salvation. No one can say, “It’s too high! I can’t reach up there and grab it.” It’s a free gift. It’s for the person on their face before the Lord saying, “God, I’m dead in trespasses and sins. I need to be rescued.” God says, “Here is this gift. It comes through My Son. Receive it by faith and be saved.” And then

***10*** *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works…*

To God be the glory!