

Ephesians 2:1-10
March 14, 2021
“Saved By Grace Through Faith”
Rev. Randy Smith

*Well, where oh where can my baby be?
The Lord took her away from me.
She's gone to heaven, so I got to be good,
So I can see my baby when I leave this world.*

This was the *refrain* to a Top Ten hit in the fall of 1964, by a group out of TX by the name of J. Frank Willison and the Cavaliers. It was entitled "**Last Kiss**". The story of a young woman whose life was cut short by a car accident, it was one of several big hits in the early 1960s that created a genre called "teen tragedy" songs. Cf. "Teen Angel", "Dead Man's Curve", and "Leader of the Pack".

These lyrics suddenly popped into my mind this week as I have been preparing to preach on today's Scripture reading from Eph. 2. All week long I have been pondering verses 1-10, but especially **v. 8**: "For **by grace**," Paul says, "you have been **saved through faith**, and this is not your own doing; it is the **gift** of God..." All week long I have been asking myself: What is "**grace**"? What is "**saved**"? and What is "**faith**"?

In seeking answers to these questions here, it's important to remember that, in all of Paul's letters, he is almost always, i.e., addressing himself *first of all* to the Church *as a whole* and *not* to individual believers. It is always a mistake, then, to read his letters as though they were aimed at providing some kind of formula for personal, individual salvation. When, e.g., he says here, "**you** have been saved" here, the "you" is *plural*: Christians are *all, always*, in this thing called "Church" *together*.

In his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul is writing to an exclusively Gentile (non-Jewish) congregation and, over the first two chapters, he **lays out** a *comprehensive* understanding of the Church's reason for being. And that understanding comprises a **grand, breath-taking vision** of what God has accomplished in the life of the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It was *all*, Paul says, a revelation of "the mystery of [God's] will...a plan for the fullness of time, to **gather up** all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (1:9-10). And, before the end of the present chapter, we come to see that this "gathering up" means **reconciling** *all* humankind -- Jews *and* Gentiles (*viz.*, everybody else) -- together, through Jesus, into a new "household of God" (2:19) or, i.e., a new **temple** of the Lord in the world, a new dwelling place for God in the world (2:21).

This is, obviously then, a *great deal more*, some kind of formula for personal, individual salvation. It is *instead* an urgent summons to wholly give

ourselves to being a part of what is nothing less than the *world-redeeming* work of God, what Paul in another place calls "**new creation**" (2 Cor. 5:17).

And this is the reason why I began today's sermon with the refrain from an early '60s "teen tragedy" ballad: I want to try -- as Paul was, in his own time, trying -- to **vastly enlarge** what I believe is the **typically "reduced"** understanding of Christian faith, and of the life and work of the Church, which **guides** most believers, day by day and week by week. And that typical understanding and vision is that -- really, bottom-line, when you get right down to it -- what Christianity, what being "**saved**", is really all about is *going to heaven* when you die, and -- **especially** -- that, in order to *go* to heaven when you die, you -- as the song says -- "**got to be good**".

Now, I **know** that all good Protestant Christians are *supposed* to know that we are "saved" by "grace alone" (*sola gratia*), and not by any amount of goodness we might be able to generate on our own, and that all good *Methodist* Christians are *supposed* to know it's *absolutely* all grace, even before we know, or care, anything about God at all ("**prevenient grace**"). And, **intellectually**, i.e., Christians know this. But, in our heart of hearts, we really **struggle** to **believe** this, to **trust** this, to have **faith** that this is **true** -- **don't we?** Is it because we don't really **want** to believe it, that we actually -- for perhaps several reasons -- *prefer* a "merit-based" system?

Or is it because we simply cannot **imagine** that it could *really* be true?

Grace (*charis*) -- as Paul makes clear in v. 8 -- is a **gift**. It is the **free**, **unmerited**, and **unmeritable**, love of God for us, a love which -- as real love for another always does -- is always, *actively* and even *sacrificially*, seeking our best, **regardless** of our **deserving**. If we *could* deserve this **gift**, or qualify for it, it would be an *award*, or a *reward*. If we *could* earn it, it would be a *wage*. In both cases, we fundamentally **misunderstand** grace, and -- depending on how rigidly we *cling* to these fundamental misunderstandings -- we can even **corrupt** grace, for ourselves and *even* -- when we fall so deeply into this trap as to end up in the **very deep pit** of **self-righteousness** -- corrupt grace for *others*.

As a young person, **I misunderstood grace**. In a story I think I shared with you a while back, I was a very *serious* and *thoughtful* Middle-Schooler, back in my Baptist days. All of my Baptist peers had, by 6th-grade or so, already been baptized and joined the church. But *I* -- without really *intending* to be -- was a *hold-out*, to the point where my parents apparently got *worried* about me, and so arranged to have the pastor come to our home for a visit. The pastor's name was Earl Crumpler. When he left my church in Columbia, he came to Edwards Road Baptist Church here in Greenville and served as pastor there until he retired. He died just last July, at the age of 86. I mention this because I regret that I failed to look him up before he died to tell him the story I share with you today.

Earl came to our house, and he and I met, one on one, in the downstairs den of our split-level house. He very *gently* asked about why I had yet to come for baptism, as all my peers had done. I then explained to him -- long story short -- that I just did not feel *deserving* of being baptized, that I wasn't -- at least not yet -- **good enough**. And then he very *lovingly* said, "Listen, no one is *ever* good enough." And that **word of grace**, coming from the pastor, was all it took to *enable* me to ask to be baptized, and I was, just a few Sunday mornings later, in the baptistry of North Trenholm Baptist Church in Columbia -- by *grace*, and not by *goodness*. Thank God.

A colleague of mine, Mark Lewis, once preached a sermon entitled "Grace: God's Welfare Program". It was back in the Reagan era, when, as some of you will know, there was a political *revolt* against the "Great Society" **welfare** programs of LBJ stemming from the 1960s, as being unproductive and even *counter-productive*. Mark titled the sermon as he did on purpose, *not* with the goal of trying to change the congregation's political views, but simply to *remind* them that, in God's eyes, we are **all** -- absolutely, every one of us -- "**welfare cases**", and in need of help, *despite* how **undeserving** we are of such help.

Being God's "welfare recipients" -- this *should* be **good news!** This *should* be incredibly **liberating!** And yet, it continues to make us incredibly **uncomfortable**. We just find it almost impossible to imagine -- even if we *are* undeserving -- that there are not *others* who are **far more** undeserving than we are!

And therein lies **the problem**, *namely* that we are caught up in living according to what Paul here terms the "**course**" -- the standards and values, attitudes and perspectives -- "of this world" (2:2), which lead us to being -- perpetually -- "**children of wrath**" (2:3) or, i.e., lead us into a style of life, ways -- and systems -- of living and relating with others, which makes us incapable of being *truly* "reconciled" with others, and living together with others in "**peace**" (cf. 2:16-17. A condition of being which Paul frankly characterizes as our being "**dead**" (2:1). **Dead**.

Whenever you hear someone talking about being "**saved**", it's important to ask them, "Saved **from** what?" and also "Saved **for** what?" And be sure to listen carefully to their answers. Christians -- by the grace of God demonstrated through Jesus Christ -- have been **saved from** a "**web**" of **moral perspectives and practices** in which we were **hopelessly entangled, hopelessly trapped**, a web which makes and keeps us "children of wrath". Call it "**sin**". And in which we are -- for all practical purposes -- **dead**. Dead to God, to ourselves, and to others. Which means we can't do the "**good works**" Paul says we have **saved for** (2:10).

Yes, that's right. The very things which can never *save* us are the very things we have been saved *for*.

It's sounds contradictory, I know. But, you see, unless and until we can all fully accept that we are *all* signed up for God's "Welfare Program", we won't be able to do works which are truly good. ***Because they won't be done from grace.*** They won't be **gifts**. There will always be some kind of **strings attached** ("tit for tat"), always some degree of **begrudging**, and so lacking **humility**, and the sense of being **privileged** to help, to give. There will always *some* evaluation of the **others' deserving**, and -- finally -- always some **limit** we place on the good we do -- **all** of these being, of course, 180-degrees *opposed* to the kind of good Jesus has done for us.

In the brand-new Men's Group on this past Monday night, we spent time considering Paul's words from Phil. 4:8, which reads in part (NIV): "Finally, brothers and sisters...whatever is **lovely**...think about such things."

"Whatever is lovely". Is it not among the greatest joys we can experience when, we do some "good" work for others and they respond by saying, "How **lovely**"? What we do may be thoughtful, helpful, needed, and we may be thanked for doing it. But "lovely" is somehow, for me, beyond these things. It means we have **surprised**, and **delighted**, **overwhelmed**, and left others almost speechless.

"Good" works are "lovely" works. They are what we have been **saved for**. Jesus started it, by living, dying and rising, as a life-saving, and world-redeeming gift, or **grace** to us. May he grant us all the one further gift of the kind of **faith** which trusts this to be **true**.