

# Grace All the Way

MAY 23, 2012 JUSTIN HOLCOMB

There is a damaging idea floating around that says, “God saved you, now what are you going to do for him?” This is a recipe for failure. If you come to the Christian life believing you can do anything for God in your own strength or repay him on any level, you fall back to the self-dependent spiritual death from which Jesus saved you.

[Ephesians 2](#) frees us from this lie by showing that the Christian life is completely fueled by God’s grace. The chapter is filled with the high-octane gospel of grace for both our justification and also our sanctification. It begins with how believers were dead in their sins, then moves to how God loved us and rescued us from this death by his grace, bringing salvation to all in Christ, uniting Jews and Gentiles as one people in whom the Spirit of God dwells. The first half of the chapter focuses on God’s rescue operation, which delivered us from our sin and God’s wrath, and ends with the verse 10, which centers on how God’s deliverance means we are created anew for lives of righteousness. As Peter O’Brien [notes](#), Paul has already described salvation as “a resurrection from the dead, a liberation from slavery, and a rescue from condemnation”; he moves now to the idea of a new creation.

## Ephesians 2:4-5

[Ephesians 2:4-5](#) proclaims God’s grace clearly: “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace have you been saved.” Regeneration takes place when the spiritual dead come alive in Christ. Dead people do not cooperate with grace. Without regeneration, there is no possibility of faith. Paul got this from Jesus, who told Nicodemus: “Unless a man is born again first, he cannot possibly see or enter the kingdom of God” ([John 3:3](#)).

## Ephesians 2:8-9

The theme of [Ephesians 2:8-9](#) is clear: grace. This theme was already mentioned in [Ephesians 2:5](#), but as Tet-Lim Yee [points out](#), what was then more of an “undercurrent” now becomes the main point. We are saved by grace, not anything we have done. The passage has often been used to support the idea that justification before God is by grace alone, and not anything we do. And for good reason: the verses strike with great emphasis the note of salvation as a complete “gift of God.” We have done *nothing* to bring it about that could lead us to boast. And yet it is nearly impossible *not* to boast in the radical love of God when we grasp this reality.

# Ephesians 2:10

We now move to [Ephesians 2:10](#) with its focus on “good works.” It is tempting at first glance to think that verses 8-9 are about grace and verse 10 is about works. But this would be to miss something very important that we easily neglect: everything is grace. Or, as commentator Andrew Lincoln says, “It is grace all the way.” But what does that mean exactly?

Ephesians has focused on the work of God from the very beginning in 1:1. Now it all reaches a crescendo. Notice God at the center of [Ephesians 2:10](#). The first word in the original Greek sentence is “his,” an unusual placement that puts the emphasis squarely on God. We are “*his* workmanship.” We “*are created* [by God] in Christ Jesus” for good works. These good works were those “that *God* prepared beforehand.” Clearly works are important to Paul, but his emphasis here is on *God* bringing them about within us.

Frank Thielman notes that this verse does three important things. First, it gives the reason *why* Paul can say in verses 8-9 that salvation is a complete gift of God: because we are *his* workmanship, re-created in Jesus Christ. Second, it points forward to other places the new creation idea can be found in Ephesians ([Eph. 2:14-15; 4:24](#)). Third, it completes the section of [Ephesians 2:1-10](#) in a fitting way by using again the idea of “walking,” which contrasts with [Ephesians 2:2](#) where Paul talks about how we used to “walk” in sin, following the “course of the world.” Now we “walk” in good works God has set before us.

## God’s Workmanship

The word for “workmanship” here, *poiēma*, is used elsewhere in the New Testament only in [Romans 1:20](#), though it connects to other words in the Bible used for the idea of “work” or “something created/made.” The word is related to the verb *poieō*, “I make,” and is often found in creation contexts in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (for example, see [Ps. 92:4; 143:5](#)), as Thielman points out. In [Romans 1:20](#), God’s “eternal power and divine nature” are perceived in creation, in the “things that have been made” (*poiēmasin*, from *poiēma*). Both in that passage and also here the context is the creation of God.

The theme of the people of God being God’s workmanship runs throughout Scripture. In the beginning, of course, God took some dirt and made a man—a clear image of God as workman. But beyond this we see the idea in reference to God’s people Israel, as well the church in the NT:

Is not [the Lord] your father, who *created you*, who *made you* and established you?” ([Deut 32:6](#); see also v. 15).

Thus says the Lord who made you, who *formed you* from the womb and will help you ([Isa 44:2](#)).

Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who *formed you* from the womb ([Isa 44:24](#)).

Upon you I have leaned from before my birth; you are he who took me from my mother's womb ([Psalm 71:6](#)).

Before I *formed you* in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations ([Jer 1:5](#)).

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ ([Phil 1:6](#)).

For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure ([Phil 2:13](#)).

In Scripture we see both the idea of humans as creatures of God, as well as believers redeemed and *re-created* in Christ as his workmanship.

[Ephesians 2:10](#) continues by saying that we have been created in Christ Jesus “for good works.” So we are saved *for the purpose of* walking in good works. Good works are never the ground or cause of our salvation. They can't be. As [O'Brien emphasizes](#), works are not the cause but the “*goal* of the new creation.” And God has already prepared them for us ahead of time.

## How Do We Then Live?

We must always hold [Ephesians 2:10](#) together with 2:8-9. The Bible paints a holistic picture of the believer as one whose lives in grace that continually bears fruit, which is used by God to bless others.

How do we then live? If our works are “prepared beforehand,” what do we do? Paul says we “walk in them.” We show up. We abide in the vine of Jesus ([John 15:4](#)). We walk by the Spirit ([Gal. 5:16-25](#)). We do our best not to muck it up. But we will; and when we do, grace picks us up again. It's like the old Rich Mullins lyric: “If I stand, let me stand on the promise that you will see me through, and if I can't, let me fall on the grace that first brought me to you.”

The idea that we can or should try to “repay” God for his grace cuts away the source of power that saved us in the first place—God's grace. It's exactly what Paul so vehemently rejected when he cried, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” ([Gal 3:3](#)) It is God who saves, and God who sanctifies—all by grace.

Above all else and before any discussion of what we should *do*, we must understand deeply in our bones who we *are*: the workmanship of God. You are his project. So you are invited to be who you are. Your life is not your own; it was bought with a price. Live with the gratitude, humility, joy, and peace that come from knowing it does not all depend on you. You are loved

and accepted in Christ, so you don't have to focus on what you do or don't do for God. Now you can focus on what Jesus has done for you, and that will cause you to love God more. Then you can't help but walk in grace, realizing how costly God's grace was.

**Justin Holcomb** is an Episcopal priest and a theology professor at Reformed Theological Seminary and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He is author with his wife, Lindsey, of *God Made All of Me, Is It My Fault?*, and *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault*. Justin also has written or edited numerous other books on historical theology and biblical studies. You can find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and at [JustinHolcomb.com](http://JustinHolcomb.com).