

By Grace Alone

SCOTT HOEZEE

A story is told that many years ago, a theological conference was being held at Oxford University. One day, the topic of debate among the scholars was the question of what made Christianity unique among the world's great religions. The conversation went on and on with multiple suggestions, but no agreement. Eventually the writer and Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis ambled into room a bit late. He asked, "What is the rumpus about?" and was told they were trying to figure out Christianity's uniqueness. Without missing a beat, Lewis said, "That is easy; it is grace," and upon reflection suddenly everyone agreed: Yes, Christianity's message that we are saved by grace alone makes the Christian faith stand out among all other faiths; most of which include a little or a lot of human effort to get saved. Today on *Groundwork*, we will ponder grace and grace alone. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are now on program number four of a five-part series about what happened in the Protestant Reformation...five hundred years since Martin Luther made his objections to some of the teachings of the Church of his day and kicked off the Reformation; and we are doing it through five of the main themes; they are often called the *solas*; so, we have looked at how we are saved through faith alone, by scripture alone, through Christ alone, and now by grace alone, and we will conclude this series in our final program: Giving all glory to God alone; but this program is on grace.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly; *sola gratia*—by grace alone are we saved through faith, and that is actually the theme of a famous and important passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the second chapter. Let's dive right into that immediately today. So, beginning at verse 2 of Ephesians 2:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world, and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. ³All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts; like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved; ⁶and God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus; ⁸for it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.

DAVE BAST

And there it is, right there in black and white: It is by grace you have been saved through faith; not because of works, or as we might say: By grace alone...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Apart from anything we do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Paul here also reminds us of something that we talked about in the first program in this series, when we were joined by theologian Lyle Bierma, that faith is itself a first gift of grace. On the human level, faith looks like something we decide to do: I have decided to follow Jesus...but actually, behind the scenes, grace gives us faith first—hooks us up—it is like a pipeline; grace hooks us up by faith so that we can see and believe all the riches of God; and then, through that pipeline of faith the waters of baptism flow into our hearts and we are saved.

DAVE BAST

Right; you mentioned C. S. Lewis in the intro, Scott. His sort of offhand remark: It is by grace—it is all about grace. It makes me think of a comment of Frederick Buechner, a great Christian writer and preacher—thinker—who says that it is really one of the peculiarities, or *the* peculiarity of the Christian faith that it ascribes everything to God, it is all his doing, all we do is respond to that or accept it; and then he adds: And many think that even the ability to respond is itself an act of grace—a gift of God—and that is where the idea of faith as a gift comes in. It is not our work that we believe; it is really God enabling us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because we would be incapable of that. One of the documents that ultimately spun out of the Protestant Reformation that came in the early Seventeenth Century, 1618-1619, so after the lifetimes of Martin Luther and John Calvin; the Canons of Dordt, from which we get some of those five well-known points of Calvinism sometimes used TULIP, which is not quite accurate, but that is the acronym that is sometimes used, but this lays out...the Canons of Dordt lays out with kind of ironclad logic why it has to be grace alone; and it begins by saying that we are saved by God's unconditional election. God has to choose to come to us because, as Paul said twice in that Ephesians 2 passage we just read, until God comes to us, we are dead. We are not just sick...we are not just a little bad off...dead!

DAVE BAST

Here is another way to think about it: Our salvation has to begin with a decision, and the question is whose decision is it? Is it *my* decision to believe in God or is it God's decision to choose me; and I believe that the proper biblical order of things—what the Bible teaches—is it is God's decision, really. God chooses, and he chooses, as we sometimes say, unconditionally.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is not because of something good in me. Human beings...we all have this natural tendency to think: I somehow deserve it, you know...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

I somehow...or people have to be set apart, so maybe God foresees those who will believe and that is why he chooses.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is what the Canons of Dordt were written in contrast to, what is sometimes called the Arminian tradition, there were some Christians who came out of the Reformation who thought: Well, what happens is, God gets out a powerful set of binoculars and he looks forward into the future, and he sees the people who will choose him someday, and then he says: Okay, so I will choose them because they are going to choose me; and the Reformed tradition says: No; it is unconditional. God does not choose you because he knows someday you will choose him; he just chooses you, and once that happens, you are made alive; but until then, you are dead. You know, you can talk to any director of a mortuary...go to the local funeral home, talk to the undertaker...he will tell you: Dead people do nothing.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You have to do everything for them; and Paul says: Spiritually we were dead; and therefore, we could not choose God; we could not even move toward him, you were dead; and God made you alive in Christ by grace alone.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, that is the key idea. It is all God's doing, all credit goes to him; if anyone boasts, Paul says in another place, let them boast in the Lord. There is nothing I can brag about; it wasn't my cleverness, it wasn't my superior intellect, it wasn't because I could choose God. It is solely God's decision, God's act, God's pure grace with no relationship to my deserving or my merit or anything.

Actually, you know that idea that God foresees those who believe is a basic category error because God is outside of time. For God there is no future to foresee. There is no past; it is all an eternal now for God...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But the key thing is, we were helpless and we were hopeless. It was like being caught in the Niagara River, you know, in the middle of the current, and you are being swept to the falls. You can swim as hard as you want, you are getting nowhere...

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are going over.

DAVE BAST

Only God's wonderful act of grace is what is going to save us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I remember one of my Bible teachers...I think it was in high school...said: If your dog is sick and he is curled up in the corner of the room, you can sit on the other side of the room and call him: You know...(whistling sounds)...you can whistle for the dog; and if he is sick there is a shot he might be able to drag himself over to you. If he is dead, you can whistle for a really, really long time, that dog ain't gonna move. Paul is saying God had to move toward us because we could not do it, and God did that out of his... I love that phrase from Ephesians 2: Out of his great kindness. You know, kindness sometimes seems like a weak word. It is: Oh, how kind of you; and yet, Paul says salvation comes from God's kindness. It really kind of beefs up what kindness means. That is why he moved toward us.

DAVE BAST

Well, as we said earlier, though, Scott, as human beings, fallen, sinful human beings, we have this incredible capacity for thinking: There is something about me that is special; there is something about me that makes me deserving; and consequently, people are often tempted to mess with grace somehow; or somehow they just cannot leave it alone and give God all the credit; that doesn't seem right somehow; so we are going to look in just a moment at another passage from Paul, where he deals pretty severely with people who want to mess about with the idea of grace alone. We will turn to that in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you were just saying, Dave, that we kind of like to mess with grace sometimes. There is something inside us that makes us want to contribute something or think that we have something to contribute; and even if we are willing to acknowledge: Yeah, yeah, we need God's grace; we are so often tempted to add a but maybe, also, and Paul had to deal with this already in the very earliest days of the Church.

DAVE BAST

He certainly did; and I think there are a couple things that work against the idea of grace alone—salvation by grace alone. One is pretty understandable because it seems on a superficial view of things that if it is all on God then those who are not chosen do not have a chance, and how can that be fair? That is one reason why people tend to shrink from the idea of grace alone. The other reason, I think, as we have been saying, is because they want to leave room for human good works and human responsibility and human deserving.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and as we said, Paul had to deal with this. You know, Paul wrote basically half of the New Testament. He has thirteen letters out of twenty-seven New Testament books; so that is basically half of the New Testament; and anybody familiar with Paul's thirteen letters knows he almost always opens warmly: Oh, I thank God for you people; grace and peace to you. There is one big exception to that and that is how he begins his letter to the people in Galatia, where Paul is hot under the collar; he dispenses with the usual niceties and dives right in with a rebuke.

DAVE BAST

So he writes this in Galatians 1:6: I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ (there is grace) and are turning to a different gospel, ⁷which is really no gospel at all. Evidently, some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the Gospel of Christ; ⁸but even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse. (And then he goes on a little bit later): ^{2:19}For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing. Strong words!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Very strong words, those last verses coming actually from Galatians 2 as well. So, what has Paul in such a lather? Well, he says it. After he left Galatia, at some point some false teachers snuck in and said: Look, Paul talked to you about grace, and that is fine; that is fine. You are saved through grace, and you have to do a few

other things, too; like keep the law, keep kosher food laws; if you are a male, you must get circumcised. So, you are saved by grace and works; and for Paul, if you put anything after grace except an exclamation point, he would see red because to do that is to say Jesus didn't do enough. There are even some people who have seen this maybe on tee shirts or on a church sign somewhere. It is a terrible heresy, I am afraid, but we have maybe heard the phrase: Jesus did his best, you do the rest. Paul is saying if Christ did not do it all then he died for nothing.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I nullify the grace of God, he says, if I add anything to Christ and his sacrifice and the message of salvation by grace alone. So, Paul calls it the gospel of grace—the good news of grace. Anything else is not gospel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is a false or perverted gospel. It is not good news; it is bad news. If Jesus did not do it all, you know...something is up to me to keep these rules or to follow this way or to adopt this kind of religion in order to be saved; well, that is not good news at all, that is bad news for me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, if it is up to me I am in a lot of trouble if I am honest, and it is only deceiving ourselves to think we could do something. In Galatians it really is that cross of Jesus that convinces Paul of this. I mean, Paul is saying: Look, Jesus was the incarnate Son of God—he was God; and if God had to go all the way to a cross...God had to go all the way to a cross, who are you that you think you could chip something into this? I mean, God had to go that far, what in the world do you think you could add to that; you puny little human being who've got nothing but a bundle of troubles without Jesus. If God had to go that far, just accept that it is all God and you have nothing to say, nothing to add. Just receive grace through faith.

DAVE BAST

Yes, another way of putting it...I think this has been noted before, but I like to think of it this way: The only thing we contribute to our salvation is our sin...our need. We are dead, as Paul says earlier in the verse from Ephesians Chapter 2; and really, this kind of picks up something we were talking about in the previous program in this series, that salvation is in or through Christ alone. If Jesus is not a complete and perfect savior, if we have to add anything to him, then something is wrong; but if we trust in Christ, we have everything we need. He has got it all. He has paid it all, as the hymn goes. All we need to do is to kind of rest in that by faith in him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it is Paul echoing Jesus himself from John 3 in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus: ^{3:16}For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. It is the one son that God gave. And you know, Dave, I think we have noted this in different contexts on *Groundwork* before, but people have sometimes observed that isn't it interesting in the Bible that the Bible has two primary great acts: Creation and redemption; but in the Bible, creation seems to go pretty quickly and smoothly for God. God spoke: Let there be light; and there was light. So, you know, it goes boom, boom, boom; but redemption took longer. It seemed harder. God did not just speak redemption into being; in fact, the deal wasn't sealed until Jesus cried out from...screamed from the cross...

DAVE BAST

On the cross, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, redemption was no cinch, even for God apparently, which is only again a reminder that we little human beings got nothing to add.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; and yet, we keep trying. There is a famous incident in Church history: The great St. Augustine was a champion of the gospel of grace after Paul. Probably the greatest figure in the Church between Paul and the Reformers, who also reechoed and echoed and hammered away at this point, that it is all by grace, and we don't do anything; and one of his enemies—one of the voices that he reacted against—was a teacher called Pelagius in Rome, who was horrified by something St. Augustine had written, where Augustine uttered the prayer: God, give what you command and command what you will. In other words, even when you command me to believe or to do this, you need to give that to me first or I cannot do it. That is the idea of grace, and Pelagius was horrified by this because he said: Oh, that is just going to create all kinds of havoc because people will just not care about how they live; they will go off and do all kinds of things. No, no. We are really blank slates and we have the capacity...maybe grace helps us, but we have the strength to obey God and do what he commands; otherwise it is ridiculous. If we cannot obey God's commands, what is the point?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Pelagius was wrong, but he still asked the right question.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Why do we have to do anything righteous and moral in our lives? If it is all grace, why don't we just live however we want? Paul had to deal with that in the early days of the Church, and it is a very practical consideration for us yet today; and so we will close out the program by looking at that.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are talking about the great biblical truth that was emphasized at the time of the Reformation especially that salvation is by grace alone; and then the question arises: Well, then why...if it is all God's doing and I don't have to do anything, why should I try to live a good life? Why not just sin?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

I like to sin, God likes to forgive, some wag said, everything is admirably arranged.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so why not? Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we are forgiven; and interestingly enough, Paul encountered this also in the early Church; and we read this and his reaction to this in Romans Chapter 6, where Paul asks the question he has heard other people ask and he writes it down:

¹What should we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ²By no means. We are those who have died to sin. How can we live in it any longer? ³Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

DAVE BAST

Right; so Paul is reacting here, again, in no uncertain terms; very strong language against the kind of facile argument that would say: Oh, salvation is by grace; forgiveness is by grace; grace is a good thing. If I sin some more there will be more forgiveness and more grace; even more of a good thing; so why not go ahead and sin? And Paul comes down with his fist on the table and says: God forbid! Let it not be! Very strong negative: Absolutely not, he says. That is not how grace works.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but it is interesting though. Paul knew that that is a possibility. People could make that bad conclusion: Let us eat, drink and be merry and tomorrow God will forgive us and we will keep the cycle going; but that never made Paul pull back on the message of grace. I think it was the great preacher and theologian J. I. Packer who once said that if a preacher today is never accused of being soft on sin, then that preacher might not be preaching grace robustly enough. You have got to run the risk of somebody making the conclusion that Paul was reacting against in Romans 6. That is going to be in the neighborhood if you are really, really strong on grace, but there are good reasons not to go that way, and Paul lays them out; and in Romans 6 the reason was you died to that.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You cannot go back and die... You know, you are done with that. That is dead to you, so it makes no sense to go back to it.

DAVE BAST

So actually, it is very important that we understand the connection between grace and good works; and when we quoted the famous verses from Ephesians Chapter 2 earlier in the program, we intentionally left off the very last verse in that section: Ephesians 2:10, which brings back the idea of good works. So, just to recap, Paul says in Ephesians 2:8:

For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.⁹ Not by works so that no one can boast. (And then he adds)¹⁰For we are God's handiwork created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

So, the whole point of salvation by grace is that it is going to transform us; it is not just going to save us, but it is going to change us and lead us into doing the very works God has prepared for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So it is both; and interestingly, you know, Paul...we quoted from Galatians 1 and 2 earlier in the program...Paul spends the first half of Galatians...a little more than half...screaming at the Galatians, saying: It is not about you, it is not about your works, forget about yourselves; and then in Chapter 5 he give the famous list of the fruit of the Spirit, and says: Oh by the way, you do have to do some things, as a result...not to get saved...but as a result of being saved, of being transformed.

DAVE BAST

You have to stop doing some things, he says, and he lists them in Galatians; and you have to start doing these others.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you will automatically, Paul says, if grace really grabs ahold of you. It doesn't just forgive you, it changes you; and living that way, doing the good things that God has laid out in the Law, which is his blueprint for creation, that is just part and parcel of the whole arrangement, and it shows that you get it: I get it. I remember Philip Yancey writing once, he said: You know, you just cannot imagine this. A man and a

woman get married, and it is their wedding night and they are starting their honeymoon and the new husband says to his new wife: Well honey, now that we are married and that is settled and all, I think we can negotiate a little bit for the future when I would like to chase after other women. Would that be okay with you?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. How is that going to work out?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, I mean, it is like wait a minute. That is not what marriage is. Don't you get it? And that is kind of what Paul says. To live it up...to live however you want...to revel in your sin and not even try to stop, that just shows you don't get it. You don't get married to start negotiating on adultery. You don't become a Christian to start negotiating with God over how much sin you can get away with. You are changed.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely changed; so radically that Paul compares it to dying and rising again. In baptism we have been buried with Christ, he says in Romans 6, so that we can be raised to a new kind of life, a life that is given to God and given to good; and these are the things that God has prepared for us. So, it is that radical. If you are still thinking about the old way of life, you are pointed in the wrong direction as a Christian. Grace transforms us; grace brings us to Christ so that we die and rise again; and the new life that we live we live to the glory of God alone. Let's think about that in a future program.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time, as indeed, we conclude our study honoring the Reformation by studying biblical passages that led Reformers to the fifth and final *sola*, glory to God alone. Connect with us on our website, groundworkonline.com, and let us know passages and topics you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/by-grace-alone>

Printed on April 20, 2025