

This Great Mystery

Ephesians and the Secret God Kept for Ages

Session 3. By Grace You Have Been Saved

Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

Part One

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

The group discovers that grace, faith, and works prepared beforehand all live inside one sentence, and that verse 10 answers the objection verse 9 seems to raise.

Catholic Touchstone

Justification is God's free gift from first to last: no one can merit the initial grace of justification, and the good works that follow are themselves God's gift working in us, so that boasting stays impossible.

This is the session where the study walks straight into the oldest argument between Catholics and Protestants and refuses to flinch. Ephesians 2:8-9 is the flagship text for salvation by faith alone, and your group has almost certainly met it that way, on a t-shirt, in a worship song, or from a roommate. The good news is that the answer is not hidden in a footnote; it is verse 10, in the same breath. Your job tonight is not to win a debate but to slow the room down enough that they read the whole sentence. Before that, verses 1 to 7 give you one of the most dramatic paragraphs Paul ever wrote: a corpse, two words that change everything, and a triple resurrection. Let the drama land before the theology starts.

What You Need to Know

One sentence, one delayed verb

In Greek, verses 1 through 7 are a single sentence, and Paul withholds the main verb until verse 5. He piles up the description of our condition (dead, walking in trespasses, following the world, the prince of the power of the air, the flesh) and leaves it grammatically hanging, a subject with nothing happening to it, until *synezōpoiēsen*: he made us alive together with Christ. The grammar performs the theology. Nothing happens to the dead until God acts.

Walking bookends the passage

Verse 2: you once walked in trespasses and sins. Verse 10: created for good works, that we should walk in them. The paragraph begins and ends with walking. Same legs, new road, and God laid the road. If your group finds this frame themselves in question 8, do not steal it earlier.

You have been saved: the tense matters

The phrase in verses 5 and 8 is *este sesōsmenoi*, a perfect periphrastic: a completed act whose effects stand and continue. Paul is not describing a feeling or a future hope here but an accomplished gift with ongoing force. Elsewhere Paul also says we are being saved (1 Corinthians 1:18) and will be saved (Romans 5:9-10). The Catholic instinct to answer the question with all three tenses is Paul's own range.

The Catholic grammar of grace

Be crystal clear on what the Church actually teaches, because tonight's steelman only works if you do not misstate our own position. The Council of Trent's Decree on Justification teaches that nothing which precedes justification, neither faith nor works, merits the grace of justification itself; it is free. The Catechism says no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification (CCC 2010), and that even our preparation for grace is already grace's work (CCC 2001). Merit, when the Church speaks of it, arises only because God freely chose to associate us with the work of his grace (CCC 2008); our merits are his gifts. In 1999 the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, affirming in substance a shared confession that we are accepted by God by grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work, and not because of any merit of our own. That does not dissolve every remaining difference, but it does mean the crude version of the dispute (Catholics think they earn heaven) is a caricature both sides have formally rejected.

Read the room

Two kinds of people will hear tonight's passage differently. The perfectionist, quietly exhausted from trying to be good enough, needs verses 8 and 9 like water. The drifter, comfortable with a faith that asks nothing, needs verse 10. Paul wrote one sentence for both of them. Try to notice which person is asking which question, and let the text answer each.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Ezekiel promised both halves

Paul's whole paragraph is Ezekiel kept. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet stands over a valley of dry bones and is asked whether they can live; only God's breath raises them, and the bones contribute nothing but their deadness. In Ezekiel 36:26-27, God promises a new heart and adds something startling: he will put his Spirit within his people and cause them to walk in his statutes. God promised not only the raising but the walking that follows. Verse 10's works, prepared beforehand that we should walk in them, is that promise arriving. This is tonight's live discovery; let the group find it.

Rich in mercy

"But God, who is rich in mercy" reaches back to God's self-description at Sinai, merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love (Exodus 34:6). Paul is not inventing a new face of God; he is naming the face Israel always knew, now turned toward corpses.

Israel was warned against boasting first

Deuteronomy 9:4-6 tells Israel, on the edge of the land, that they are not receiving it because of their righteousness. The gift-not-wages logic of verse 9 is old covenant bedrock. Paul learned "lest any man should boast" from Moses.

Voices of the Church

Read these aloud where they land. Each is either a direct citation or an honest summary, labelled as such.

St. John Chrysostom, d. 407

Preaching through this passage, Chrysostom presses Paul's word dead with full force: a dead man cannot

cooperate in his own resurrection, so the beginning of our salvation is entirely God's doing, and even faith itself is God's gift, since had Christ not come and called, there would have been nothing to believe. And yet, he insists, God does not save us the way one moves a stone. Once we are made alive, God asks the living to move.

Homilies on Ephesians, on chapter 2. Summary of St. John Chrysostom's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. For the perfectionist in the room, the first half; for the drifter, the second. Chrysostom refuses to let either of them off the hook.

St. Augustine of Hippo, d. 430

Augustine teaches that when God rewards what we have done, he is honoring what he himself accomplished in us: in crowning our merits, he crowns nothing other than his own gifts. Even the beginning of faith is gift, not our contribution that grace then tops up. The Church still prays in this key in the Preface of the Saints, confessing that in crowning the merits of the saints God crowns his own gifts.

Letter 194, to Sixtus (in substance). Summary of St. Augustine of Hippo's teaching, not a direct quotation.

For the group. This is the sentence that dissolves the caricature. If merit is itself gift, boasting stays impossible, which is exactly the design of verse 9.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux, d. 1897

In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works.

Act of Oblation to Merciful Love, quoted in CCC 2011.

For the group. A Doctor of the Church, at the end of a life of heroic virtue, refusing to hand God a resume. If anyone had works to count, she did. Empty hands are not despair; they are accuracy.

Catechism Connection

The Catechism says

CCC 1996. Justification comes from the grace of God: a free and undeserved gift, the help God gives us to respond to his call.

CCC 1998. This vocation is supernatural; it depends entirely on God's gratuitous initiative, for he alone can reveal and give himself.

CCC 2001. Even our preparation for grace is already grace's work. God's free initiative calls for our free response, and both belong to him first.

CCC 2008. Merit in the Christian life arises only because God has freely chosen to associate us with the work of his grace.

CCC 2010. No one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification. This is the Church's own text for tonight's steelman.

CCC 2011. The charity of Christ is the source in us of all our merits before God; this is the paragraph that quotes St. Thérèse's empty hands.

Thread Watch

Thread Watch

The mystery (develop). Do not name it tonight, but notice for yourself: Paul's pronouns slide from you

(Gentiles, verse 1) to we all (verse 3). Jew and Gentile share one grave and one raising. That is quietly setting the table for 2:11-22 next week, where the wall comes down. Say nothing; let next session find it.

In Christ, in him, in the Beloved (develop). Tonight the phrase becomes three verbs with *syn* welded on: made alive with, raised with, seated with. The 'in Christ' thread planted in session 1 now has a mechanism. When question 4 lands, name the thread's growth explicitly to yourself, not to the room.

Inheritance and possession (develop). Riches keep compounding: riches of grace (1:7), riches of his glorious inheritance (1:18), and now immeasurable riches of his grace in the coming ages (2:7). Touch it lightly in question 9.

Head and body (develop). Last week they found the Church is the body of the enthroned head. Tonight verse 6 says the body is seated where the head is. If someone connects 2:6 to 1:20-23 unprompted, celebrate it; that is the thread doing its work.

The powers (develop). The prince of the power of the air (2:2) is the same vocabulary family as 1:21. The powers we saw under Christ's feet turn out to have had us walking in step. Now we are seated above them (2:6). Plant nothing new; just water.

Objection Bench

Leader only. Do not raise these unless someone in the room does.

Doesn't 'by nature children of wrath' mean God hated us before we were baptized?

It names our condition under judgment, a nature wounded by sin, not God's disposition toward us. Read one verse further: God loved us with a great love even when we were dead. Wrath is what sin deserves; love is what God does. The passage puts both truths in the same sentence precisely so neither can be dropped.

If God prepared my works beforehand, am I a robot?

Grace creates freedom rather than canceling it. A composer who writes a part for you does not play your instrument for you. The Catechism holds both together: God's free initiative demands man's free response, and even our free response is grace's gift (CCC 2001-2002). Ezekiel said it first: I will cause you to walk. The walking is still yours to do.

Session Goals

1. Trace Paul's diagnosis in verses 1 to 3 and feel its weight: death, not weakness.
2. Discover the three 'with Christ' verbs in verses 5 and 6 and connect them to what God did to Christ in 1:19-20.
3. Find Ezekiel behind the passage: God promised both the raising and the walking.
4. Discover that grace, faith, and prepared works share one sentence, and that verse 10 answers the boast verse 9 forbids.
5. Face the faith-alone reading at full strength and answer it from the text, not from a pamphlet.
6. Send everyone home with verse 8 on their lips.

Time Note

Planned for 75 to 90 minutes

Win and opening prayer, about 12 minutes. Reading, 5. Questions 1 to 4, about 25. Question 5's discovery, 10. Questions 6 to 8, the grace and works core, about 25. Question 9, Send, Live It, and closing, about 13. Protect questions 5 and 7 absolutely; the discovery and the steelman are the reason this session exists.

If you are running long, cut in this order.

1. Cut the Dig Deeper boxes first.
2. Then merge questions 1 and 2 into a single diagnosis question and take the answers together.
3. Then shorten question 9 to its second half only, the 'are you saved' exchange, and state the verse 7 point yourself in one line.

Part Two

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Pray together

Father, rich in mercy, you loved us even when there was nothing in us to love back. Tonight, open the eyes of our hearts to see the gift as a gift. Quiet whatever in us is still trying to earn what you have already given, and wake whatever in us has gone to sleep on your grace. We ask this through Christ our Lord, who raised us with himself. Amen.

Win

Open questions. No wrong answers. Let everyone speak before you move on.

W1. Tell us about a gift you once received that you could never have gotten for yourself. What did it actually feel like to receive it?

W2. When you hear the word 'saved', what picture comes to mind, and where do you think that picture came from?

Both questions are about receiving. Keep them light and human; do not steer toward the theology yet.

Read

Read aloud

Two readers. Reader one reads verses 1 to 3 and stops cold. Let the silence hold for a beat; the sentence is grammatically unfinished and the room should feel it hanging. Reader two begins at verse 4, 'But God', and reads through verse 10.

Build

Numbered inductive questions. Ask, wait, let the group work the text. The ANSWER boxes are for you to share after the discussion, not before it.

The grave (verses 1 to 3)

1. Before verse 4, Paul paints the 'before' picture. List every word and phrase in verses 1 to 3 that describes what we were. Then the harder question: what can someone in that condition do to fix it?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Dead through trespasses and sins; walking in them; following the course of this world; following the prince of the power of the air; living in the passions of our flesh; by nature children of wrath. The controlling word is dead, and dead is not sick, struggling, or having a bad decade. A corpse contributes nothing to its own resurrection. Paul chose the one human condition that has no self-help section. One caution to offer gently if it comes up: 'children of wrath' names our position under judgment, not God's feelings; hold verse 4 in reserve.

2. Verse 2 says we 'walked'. Following what, exactly? Count the influences Paul names in verses 2 and 3.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Three: the course of this world, the prince of the power of the air, and the passions of our flesh. The world, the devil, and the flesh: the classic trio, and this passage is one of the places the Church learned to name them. Notice also the pronouns. Verse 1 says you (Paul's Gentile readers); verse 3 widens to we all, and Paul puts himself and his own people in the same grave. Nobody in this paragraph gets a better starting position.

Dig Deeper

The 'prince of the power of the air' belongs to the same vocabulary family as the principalities and powers we found under Christ's feet in 1:21. Worth a quiet flip back if the group remembers.

But God (verses 4 to 7)

3. What are the first two words of verse 4? What do they do to everything that came before? And according to verses 4 and 5, what moved God to act?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

'But God.' Two words that function as the hinge of the paragraph, and arguably of the whole letter. Everything before them is the grave; everything after them is God's action. His motives are named: rich in mercy, the great love with which he loved us, and the timestamp matters most: even when we were dead. He loved corpses, not converts. God did not wait for improvement, because from the dead there is none to wait for.

4. God does three things to us in verses 5 and 6, each of them 'with Christ' or 'with him'. Find all three. Then flip back to 1:19-20 and compare: what did God do to Christ?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Made us alive together with Christ; raised us up with him; made us sit with him in the heavenly places. In 1:20 God raised Christ from the dead and made him sit at his right hand. The moves are identical, and in Greek each verb has *syn*, meaning with, welded onto the front. Paul's claim is staggering: Christ's resurrection and enthronement were not a solo event we watch from the ground; they already include us. Last week we found that the Church is the body of the enthroned head. Tonight's verse says the body sits where the head sits. And notice the reversal: verse 2 had us under the prince of the power of the air; verse 6 seats us above him.

Dig Deeper

The phrase 'heavenly places' has now appeared three times: the blessing (1:3), the throne (1:20), and our seat (2:6). Ephesians keeps returning to it. Keep count as the study goes on.

Live discovery

Split the room. Half turn to Ezekiel 37:1-14 and half to Ezekiel 36:26-27. Read your passage, then report back:

what does God promise to do, and what does the person contribute?

Let them find it. Ezekiel 37:1-14; Ezekiel 36:26-27

5. Where did Paul learn to talk like this? Dead people made alive, and God promising to produce the walking himself: a prophet said all of this six centuries earlier. Let's go find him.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The valley of dry bones: God asks whether the bones can live, and the only honest answer is that he alone knows; the bones contribute nothing but their deadness, and God's breath raises an army. Then the promise of the new heart: God will put his Spirit within his people and cause them to walk in his statutes. Ezekiel promised both halves of Paul's paragraph: the raising of the dead AND the walking that follows, both of them God's own doing. Hold onto that second half. In about two verses, Paul is going to need it.

The sentence with everything in it (verses 8 to 10)

6. Read verses 8 and 9 slowly, twice. What, precisely, is 'not your own doing'? And why does Paul say works are excluded, what is the stated reason?

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. If the grammar point is too much for the room, simplify: is Paul saying we saved ourselves by believing hard enough? What in the verse rules that out?

Depth. For a sharper room: if even faith is enabled by grace, what does that do to the idea that faith is our contribution and grace is God's?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

In Greek, 'this' (*touto*) is neuter, while 'faith' (*pistis*) is feminine, so grammatically 'this' does not point at faith alone; it points at the whole event, the entire package of by-grace-through-faith salvation. All of it is gift, which means even the hand that receives the gift was opened by the Giver. And the stated reason works are excluded as the cause: 'lest any man should boast.' God has deliberately designed salvation so that no one can take a bow. Dead people do not get medals for being resuscitated.

Dig Deeper

This is old covenant bedrock, not a New Testament novelty. Send someone to read Deuteronomy 9:4-6 aloud: Israel, entering the land, is told it is not because of your righteousness. Paul learned 'lest any man should boast' from Moses.

7. Now the question this passage has carried for five hundred years. Let me put the strongest version of the Protestant reading on the table, and I want us to feel its force before anyone answers.

Take it as far as the room wants

Floor. If the room is new to this debate, keep it to one move: does verse 10 belong to the same sentence as

verses 8 and 9? What does that do to a reading that stops at verse 9?

Depth. For a room that knows its theology: once both sides confess salvation by grace alone, as the 1999 Joint Declaration did, what actually remains disputed? (Real answers include the nature of justification as transformation versus imputation, and the role of the sacraments; it is honest to say real differences remain while the caricature does not.)

Build then press

The strongest form of the objection. Ephesians 2:8-9 is the clearest statement in Scripture that salvation is by grace through faith and emphatically not by works. Catholicism, with its sacraments, its cooperation with grace, its language of merit, smuggles works back into salvation, and so falls under Paul's censure. Be honest: any system in which what I do contributes to whether I am saved gives me something to boast about, and boasting is exactly what Paul says God designed salvation to exclude. Faith alone protects grace alone. Anything added corrupts it.

Answering from the text. Read one more verse, because Paul did not stop at verse 9. Verse 10, in the same sentence, in the same breath: we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus FOR good works, which GOD prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. The same sentence that throws works out as the root plants them as the fruit. And that is precisely what the Catholic Church teaches. The Council of Trent says nothing that precedes justification, neither faith nor works, merits the grace of justification itself; the Catechism says flatly that no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification (CCC 2010), and that any merit afterward exists only because God freely chose to associate us with his own work (CCC 2008). St. Augustine's summary became the Church's: when God crowns our merits, he crowns his own gifts. So boasting stays just as impossible on the Catholic account: what have you that you did not receive? (1 Corinthians 4:7). The real disagreement is not whether salvation is by grace; both sides confess that, and said so together in the Joint Declaration of 1999. The real question is whether grace stops at forgiving us or goes on to remake us into people who actually walk. Verse 10 answers: workmanship, created, prepared beforehand, walk. Ezekiel told us tonight that God himself promised to cause the walking. Grace that produces no walking is not the grace Paul is describing.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The objection is right about everything it affirms and wrong only in what it thinks Catholics deny. Salvation is by grace; the initial grace of justification cannot be merited by anyone, ever; boasting is excluded by design. The Catholic claim is not faith plus my own achievements but grace producing both the faith and the works. Verse 9 and verse 10 are not rivals; they are one sentence. Works are evicted as the cause of salvation and immediately reinstated as its purpose.

8. Stay in verse 10 and track the ownership. Whose workmanship? Who created? Who prepared the works, and when? And then, whose walking?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

His workmanship; created by him, in Christ Jesus; the works prepared beforehand by God, before we showed up to do them. And yet the walking is ours: that WE should walk in them. Grace does not replace our action; it creates it. The word behind 'workmanship' is *poiēma*, a thing made, a work of the maker's hands; it is the word English 'poem' descends from. Now zoom out and see the frame: the passage opened with us walking in trespasses (verse 2) and closes with us walking in good works God prepared (verse 10). Same legs, new road, and God laid the road.

9. One last look up at verse 7: why did God do all of this? What is the stated purpose, and how long is it scheduled to last? Then the practical question: if someone on the quad asks you 'are you saved?', what does this passage teach you to say?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The purpose: that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us. We are the demonstration; the riches keep compounding through this letter, riches of grace, riches of inheritance, and now riches on display for ages. As for the question: this passage teaches you to say yes, by grace I have been saved, a completed gift I did nothing to earn, and I am walking in works he prepared, a life still underway. Paul himself uses all three tenses across his letters: we have been saved, we are being saved (1 Corinthians 1:18), we shall be saved (Romans 5:9-10). The Catholic answer is not evasive; it is Pauline.

Send

Open questions. Let these land in silence if they need to.

S1. Where in your life right now are you living as if you have to earn what God has already given you?

S2. If you really are God's workmanship, what work do you suspect he may have prepared for you to walk into this week?

Live It This Week

Practices

1. Each morning this week, before your feet hit the floor, say Ephesians 2:8 aloud from memory and receive the day as a gift you did not earn.
2. Do one hidden good work this week and tell no one at all, not even as a funny story. Practice works without boasting.
3. Take ten minutes of prayer (or bring it to confession if you are due) and thank God for one specific 'But God' moment in your own story: a time he acted when you could not.
4. Memorize Ephesians 2:8 by Thursday; we will open next session by saying it together.

Scripture Memory

Ephesians 2:8

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God."

Ephesians 2:8

Closing Prayer

Pray together

Lord Jesus Christ, we were dead and you made us alive; we were walking away and you gave us a new road. Thank you for a salvation we could not buy, could not build, and cannot boast of. Give us this week the grace to walk in the works your Father prepared for us before we ever knew his name. We ask it in your name, seated in

the heavenly places, where by your gift we are seated too. Amen.

Part Three

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in this session, in order. Print this page and keep it in front of you.

Primary text

- **Ephesians 2:1-10** read in two parts, breaking after verse 3

Within Ephesians

- **Ephesians 1:19-20** what God did to Christ; compare the verbs of 2:5-6
- **Ephesians 1:21** the powers vocabulary behind 2:2
- **Ephesians 1:7, 1:18** the riches thread, compounding at 2:7

Discovery passages

- **Ezekiel 37:1-14** dry bones; God alone raises
- **Ezekiel 36:26-27** new heart; God causes the walking

Supporting

- **Exodus 34:6** rich in mercy; God's self-description at Sinai
- **Deuteronomy 9:4-6** not because of your righteousness; the old roots of verse 9
- **1 Corinthians 4:7** what have you that you did not receive
- **1 Corinthians 1:18; Romans 5:9-10** Paul's other tenses of salvation, for question 9

Terms

- ***este sesōsmenoi***. you have been saved: a completed act whose effects stand and continue
- ***synezōpoiēsen, synēgeiren, synekathisen***. made alive with, raised with, seated with: the three 'with Christ' verbs
- ***touto***. this (neuter): points at the whole event of salvation, not at faith alone
- ***poiēma***. a thing made, workmanship; the ancestor of the English word poem

Catechism

- CCC 1996. justification is free, undeserved gift
- CCC 1998. depends entirely on God's gratuitous initiative
- CCC 2001. even our preparation for grace is grace
- CCC 2008. merit exists only because God associates us with his grace
- CCC 2010. no one can merit the initial grace of justification
- CCC 2011. Christ's charity is the source of all merit; quotes St. Thérèse