

This Great Mystery

Session 3. By Grace You Have Been Saved

Dead people do not climb out of graves; God raises them, and then he teaches them to walk.

What We Found

Paul's 'before' picture is not weakness or bad habits; it is death. And the turn of the whole passage is two words: But God. Rich in mercy, out of great love, he acted while we were still dead, not after we improved. Dead people contribute nothing to their own resurrection, which is exactly Paul's point.

God did to us the same three things he did to Christ: made us alive with him, raised us with him, seated us with him in the heavenly places. Christ's Easter was not a solo event we watch from the ground; it already includes us. And the prophet Ezekiel had promised both halves centuries before: that God would raise the dead, and that God himself would cause the walking that comes after.

Then the famous sentence, and we read all of it. By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not because of works, so that no one can boast. And 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. Works are not the cause of our salvation; they are its purpose. That is Catholic teaching in miniature: no one can earn the first grace, and even our merits are God's gifts, so boasting stays impossible from start to finish.

The passage begins with us walking in sins and ends with us walking in good works God prepared. Same legs, new road, and God laid the road.

Voices of the Church

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, the first half; for the drifter, the second.

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. 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. If merit is itself gift, boasting stays impossible, which is exactly the design of the passage.

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. If anyone had works to count, she did. Empty hands are not despair; they are accuracy.

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

Ready Response

If a friend says Ephesians 2:8-9 disproves Catholic teaching about good works, you can say:

I agree completely that salvation is by grace, and so does the Catholic Church: no one can earn the initial grace of justification (CCC 2010).

But read one more verse. Verse 10 says we were created in Christ Jesus for good works God prepared beforehand. The same sentence that removes works as the cause of salvation restores them as its purpose.

So the Catholic claim is not faith plus my own achievements. It is grace producing both the faith and the works, so that no one can boast.

Go Further in the Catechism

- CCC 1996. justification is free, undeserved gift
- CCC 2001. even our preparation for grace is 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

Before next session. Read Ephesians 2:11-22 before we meet again.