

The Gospel In A Nutshell

Ephesians 2:8-10

As we continue our tour of the Grand Canyon of Scripture, we notice several small items lying beside the path. They are small, but very significant, and there are hundreds and hundreds, even thousands, of them. As your tour guide, I stop and wait for everyone to gather around. “Now,” I say, “be careful where you step! Reach down and pick up one of these tiny little things lying all around. Be patient! There’s one for everyone who will pick one up.”

Look at it lying now in the palm of your hand. It’s a nut, fallen from the tree just over head. Now, open the shell, because inside there are amazing things! What we have here in the palms of our hands is The Gospel In A Nutshell:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

We use the phrase “in a nutshell,” when we are talking about something, and we want to use as few words as possible. Or we have condensed what we are saying into a few words or sentences.

The Bible is a very big book, but someone came up with what they called “The Bible in 50 words.” It’s what we could call “The Bible in a Nutshell”:

- God made, Adam bit
- Noah arked, Abraham split
- Jacob fooled, Joseph ruled
- Bush talked, Moses balked
- Pharaoh plagued, people walked
- Sea divided, tablets guided
- Promises landed
- Saul freaked, David peeked
- Prophets warned, Jesus born
- God walked, love talked
- Anger crucified, hope died
- Love rose, Spirit flamed
- Word Spread, God remained

A “creed” is a formal statement of Christian belief. Baptists do not have a “creed,” but it’s been said that if we did, it would be Ephesians 2:8-9. What is “The **Gospel** in a Nutshell”?

1 We have been saved by grace through faith, v. 8

Look at those precious words once more—see them, if you can, as if for the very first time: “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith.*”

Let’s remind ourselves what grace is. As we began our tour of Ephesians, we talked about grace being a key theme of this book. This is what we said:

God never deals with believers apart from grace. The word translated “grace” (*charis*) was used to describe a kindness that one did for a friend. But then Jesus came along, and the whole idea of grace changed, another part of the mystery which has been revealed. Instead of meaning a kindness you do for a friend, it now means something else entirely. It means that kindness is shown even to enemies, to those who least deserve it. The Bible makes it clear that because of sin we are the enemies of God, but He has shown us a kindness we did not deserve. That’s what grace is.

We see an amazing thing in 1:7-8, that God has “lavished” this grace on us “with all wisdom and understanding.” That word tells us that God has given us grace above and beyond anything we might expect, that the grace of God is so great that it cannot even be measured, comprehended by the human heart, or even described with human language.

The emphasis in Ephesians 2:8 is on grace. You see, we could have the strongest faith ever known in the entire history of the world, yet without the grace of God, it would be for nothing. Grace means that I can do nothing to save myself. That beautiful hymn *Rock of Ages*, expresses it very well in a stanza not found in our current *Baptist Hymnal*:

*Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to thy cross I cling.
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless look to Thee for grace;
Foul I to the fountain fly:
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.*

(Augustus Toplady, 1740-1778)

But we need to understand that grace and faith work together in bringing us salvation. One without the other could never be enough. The grace of God has been extended to us, and has made it possible for us to be saved and go to Heaven, but it does not guarantee it without our faith and trust in what Jesus did for us when He died on the Cross. I must agree that the Bible is telling the truth when It says

that Jesus died to pay the penalty for my sins, but I must also cast myself upon that truth in an act of trust and faith, that I depend on nothing else—not my accomplishments, not my righteousness, not my heritage, not my possessions or connections.

Someone has said that “faith is like the hand of the beggar that takes the gift while adding nothing to it.” (Thomas Chalmers)

When the Bible talks about faith, It makes it clear that this faith must be placed in the finished work of Christ on the Cross. When we say “finished” we mean that everything that *could* be done on God’s part to secure our salvation *has* been done, with nothing left for God to do. But that’s His side. Our side is to believe this amazing truth. “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved*” (Acts 16:31).

It is very sad, though, to hear someone say that it doesn’t really matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. A *Peanuts* comic strip once featured Charlie Brown on the way home from a baseball game. He is saying to himself, “174 to nothing! How could we lose when we were so sincere?”

You see, the Bible teaches that it really does matter what we believe, that mere sincerity has nothing to do with it. Jesus said, “*I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and **believes him** who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life*” (John 5:24). He said in John 11:25, “*I am the resurrection and the life. He who **believes in me** will live, even though he dies.*” And don’t forget that precious word in Romans 10:9—“*That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and **believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead,** you will be saved.*” It **DOES** matter what you believe!

Charles Spurgeon wrote in his autobiography a long time ago: “My life was full of sorrow and wretchedness, believing that I was lost. But, oh, the blessed gospel of the God of grace came to me, and with it a sovereign word, “Deliver him!” And I who was but a minute before as wretched as a soul could be, could have danced for the very merriment of heart. And as the snow fell on my road home from the little house of prayer, I thought every snowflake talked with me and told of the pardon I had found, for I was white as the driven snow through the grace of God.”

When he got home, his mother saw the expression on his face and said, “Something wonderful has happened to you.” Well, it sure had! He had been saved by grace through faith! This was the man who would preach to ten million people

in the nineteenth century before he died at the age of 57—and the formula remains the same to this very day.

2 Our salvation is a gift of God, vv. 8-9

Paul says, “...*this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*” First, look at that word “*not.*” As I’ve said before, one of the wonderful things about the Greek language is that it can be so precise, that the writer could say exactly what he meant. In the English language there are many ways to indicate a negative; for example, the words, “no,” “nothing,” “no way,” “nah,” “nope,” and even “unh-unh” are all negatives. It’s the same way in the Greek language, and Paul very carefully used one here that means “absolutely not”: “*this is absolutely not from yourselves.*” There is absolutely nothing that any of us could do to produce the grace and faith that lead to salvation. Not even a little bit.

Then there’s the word “*gift.*” We know what a gift is—something that becomes ours usually because someone who loves us has handed it to us without expecting us to pay for it. Matthew 2:11 uses the word to describe the gifts the wise men brought to the Baby Jesus. Had the Christ Child done anything at all to earn the gold, frankincense and myrrh? Of course not. Those were *gifts*.

But what we see in Ephesians 2:8 is far more than a birthday present. Sure, God loves us, and that Love certainly is the source of our salvation—“*For God so loved the world...*” But this particular gift has been made available to us **even when we did not deserve it—because of grace.**

And this is the only way we can get it. It is not available anywhere else by any other method. The Bible is emphatic when it tells us that there is absolutely nothing that any of us can do to earn this salvation that is so freely offered to us as a gift. That’s why it is so sad that many people think that they can purchase their entrance into Heaven by being good enough, or because they are a member of a church, or even because they are Americans! And yes, I’ve talked to people just like that. But there’s nothing we can do to deserve it or earn it.

George Beverly Shea worked with Billy Graham as a soloist for six decades. When he was only 23-years-old, he composed the music to one of his best known solos, “I’d Rather Have Jesus.” He recorded more than 70 albums of Christian music. He sang at prayer breakfasts for U. S. Presidents. He sang “How Great Thou Art” by popular demand for 108 consecutive nights at the Billy Graham Crusade in New

York City in 1957. But when George Beverly Shea died on April 16, 2013, he had not done one thing to earn one second in Heaven.

I think of people I have known who have gone on to Heaven who were godly men and women. Take Gycelle Tynes, for example. Well-respected, quiet in his faith, but standing tall in his living for Christ, Mr. Tynes, as everyone called him, was a man who was known for his wisdom. Many times we would be discussing something in a deacons' meeting that seemed to have no easy solution. He would remain silent throughout, and finally would begin to speak. Everyone else would fall silent and listen to what he had to say, and then usually, would follow his suggestions. Mr. Tynes was a wonderful man whom I look forward to seeing again one day. But none of the good things he did earned him one second in Heaven.

Or take Charles Shaffer. I've never met a more humble, more compassionate human being. And he would do anything for anyone, many times without most people knowing about it. He stood by me as his pastor through a pretty rough patch when others looked the other way. But none of the good things Mr. Charlie did earned him one second in Heaven.

I also have to mention Esther Maddox. Mrs. Maddox was a member of my home church at Forest Hill Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi. I met her when I came to know Christ in April of 1969, and instantly fell in love with her. She had had several strokes by that time, which had left her right side almost useless. She could still walk, to the amazement of her doctors, and her speech was unaffected. She loved young people with a genuine love, and when my brother and I would go to her house on Ellis Avenue to weed her flower beds and cut her grass, she would gather us to herself and pray for us before we left. I distinctly remember thinking during one of Mrs. Maddox's prayers that if I dared to open my eyes, I might actually see God! When she moved to Heaven, her body was placed in Lakewood Cemetery beneath a headstone on which are inscribed the words, "Do you know my Jesus?" And yet none of the good qualities of Esther Maddox earned her a single moment in Heaven.

But I also think of a boy I knew about the same time. His name was Kenny, and he was a rough character. His parents loved him, of course, but Kenny's goal in life seemed to be to stretch the boundaries of right and wrong as far as possible. He rebelled against anyone in authority, and seemed to have no feeling for anyone weaker than he. One day Kenny was gloriously saved from his sins, and Jesus came into his life in a powerful way. Shortly afterwards, Kenny was killed in an automobile accident—and even though Kenny had lived most of his life thumbing

his nose at God or at any form of authority, his first sight when he woke up on the other side of eternity was Jesus with His loving arms stretched out wide to welcome him home.

The same grace that allowed Gycelle Tynes, Charles Shaffer, and Esther Maddox to enter Heaven, was also extended to Kenny. And not only that, there was absolutely no possibility that any good thing they did would buy them eternal life. It's not that they almost reached it, and just barely missed. They could be very sincere, and as far as human effort is concerned, they may have been very righteous. What they had in common was that not one of them—not one!—earned that privilege. It was a gift of God—a gift that is extended to any of us today who chooses to accept it, and confess Jesus as Lord of our lives.

I once spoke with a man who told me that he believed all he had to do to go to Heaven was to keep the Ten Commandments. So I asked him, “And exactly how many of the Ten Commandments have you broken?” With a stunned look on his face he said, “All of them.” He realized that the very thing he was depending on to get him into Heaven had failed.

The Gospel in a Nutshell is just this: That our salvation comes to us as a result of the grace of God extended to us, and our faith in what He did; and that it is a gift of God bestowed on us without our having to earn it. And aren't you glad that we don't have to earn it? If salvation was a reward for living good enough to satisfy God's standards, none of us would stand a chance.

And that, folks, is why Jesus came. What remains is for you and me to accept it.