

Saved: God's Plan of Salvation, Teacher's Guide

Week 8: Saved by Grace Through a Living Faith

Ephesians 2:1–10

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is the most doctrinally sensitive lesson in the study, because Ephesians 2:1–10 is the passage most often pressed into the service of “faith only.” What is at stake is the very balance the whole study has been defending: salvation by grace, received through a living and obedient faith, neither earned by human merit nor received by bare belief. Teach the grace of this passage with full, unembarrassed force; our heritage has sometimes been so eager to defend obedience that it has muted the sheer gift of grace, and that is a mistake. Paul could hardly be clearer: we were dead, God was rich in mercy, and “by grace you have been saved.” We contribute nothing to the ground of our salvation. At the same time, follow Paul all the way to verse 10, where the same grace that saves apart from works creates us “for good works.” Grace and obedience are not rivals in this text; they are sequence and source.

Handle the key terms with precision, because the whole faith-only argument rests on a misreading of one word: “works.” In Ephesians and Romans, the works Paul excludes from salvation are works of human merit, especially law-keeping performed to earn a standing and to boast (v. 9, “so that no one may boast”). These can save no one. But the obedient response of faith, turning from sin, confessing Christ, being baptized into Him, is of an entirely different order. It is not an attempt to earn or to boast; it is the empty hand of faith receiving the free gift in the way God appointed. The proof that Paul does not mean “no response whatsoever” is that he immediately commands a life of good works in verse 10, and that the only place in all of Scripture where the phrase “faith alone” appears is James 2:24, which says a person is justified “not by faith alone.” Let Scripture interpret Scripture. Be equally careful in the other direction: do not let the defense of baptism slide into the idea that we earn salvation, and do not soften the radical grace of “But God.”

One further point of care: the word “dead” (v. 1) describes the lost person's real bondage and helplessness to save himself, and it magnifies grace. But do not press it into the Calvinistic doctrine of total inability, as though the sinner cannot hear or respond to the gospel until irresistibly regenerated. The same Paul who says we were dead also commands all people everywhere to repent and believe; the gospel call is genuine and the human response is real. Aim the lesson at the heart: lead students to lay down every hidden scoreboard and rest in grace, and at the same time to rise from that rest and walk in the works God prepared. The fruit of this lesson should be both deep security and glad obedience.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says we were “dead in the trespasses and sins” in which we once walked (vv. 1–2). What does it mean that we were spiritually “dead,” and how does this picture of our condition apart from Christ deepen our understanding of why salvation must be a gift of God’s grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open the diagnosis of verses 1–3. Paul says the lost are not merely weak or misguided but “dead” in trespasses and sins. The image conveys helplessness: a dead person cannot resuscitate himself, cannot earn his own rescue, cannot contribute to his own resurrection. This is why salvation must be God’s gift; the dead do not save themselves.

Let the picture magnify grace. The deeper we feel our former deadness, the more astonishing the mercy that made us alive. This connects directly back to Week 1: all have sinned, and apart from Christ we are not in a recoverable position but a lost one.

Guard the boundary carefully. Scripture’s language of death describes real bondage to sin and the inability to save ourselves, but it does not teach the Calvinistic notion that the sinner cannot even respond to the gospel until God irresistibly regenerates a chosen few. The same God who says we were dead also commands everyone to repent and believe and holds them responsible for refusing. Death here is helplessness to self-rescue, not the inability to hear and answer the genuine call of the gospel.

Apply it pastorally. Knowing we were truly dead keeps us humble and grateful; it forever removes the notion that we partly saved ourselves. We are trophies of mercy, not partners who met God halfway.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual death as real helplessness to self-rescue (vv. 1–3)
- The deadness of the lost magnifying the greatness of grace
- Connection to Week 1: the universality and seriousness of sin
- Distinguishing biblical “death” from Calvinistic total inability; the gospel call is genuine
- Humility and gratitude: trophies of mercy, not partners who met God halfway

Discussion Prompts

- Why does the picture of being “dead” show that salvation must be a gift?
- How does feeling our former deadness make grace more amazing?
- How is being unable to save ourselves different from being unable to respond to the gospel?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul describes a former way of life, “following the course of this world” and “the passions of our flesh” (vv. 2–3). Even as a Christian, where do you still feel the pull of that old way, simply going along with the world or following your cravings? What does honesty here reveal about your ongoing need for grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question keeps the diagnosis honest and personal. Paul describes the old life as “following the course of this world” and “the passions of our flesh.” Even redeemed people feel these pulls. Ask students to name where the old current still tugs.

Identify the two pulls. “The course of this world” is the pressure to conform, to go along with the crowd and its values. “The passions of the flesh” is the pull of our own cravings. Most of us have a characteristic weakness toward one or the other.

Connect honesty to grace. Naming the lingering pull is not despair; it is the ongoing recognition that keeps us leaning on grace rather than on our own progress. We never graduate from our need for mercy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The old life as conformity to the world and the passions of the flesh (vv. 2–3)
- Identifying one’s characteristic pull, outward (the crowd) or inward (cravings)
- Honesty about lingering sin as the soil of ongoing dependence on grace
- Never graduating from the need for mercy

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you still feel the pull of the world or the flesh?
- Which pull is stronger for you, conforming to the crowd or following your cravings?
- How does naming this keep you leaning on grace?

Question 3

Student Question:

The whole passage turns on two words in verse 4: “But God.” What is the great reversal Paul describes, and what does it tell us that God acted in mercy and love “even when we were dead in our trespasses,” before we had done anything to deserve it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Center on “But God” (v. 4), the hinge of the passage and of the gospel. Everything before is death and wrath; everything after is mercy and life. The decisive actor is God, not us.

Stress the timing: “even when we were dead.” God did not wait for improvement; He acted while we had nothing to offer. This is the very definition of grace, love given to the undeserving, and it echoes Romans 5:8, “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Trace what God did: made us alive with Christ, raised us up, seated us with Him in the heavenly places. Salvation is union with the risen, exalted Christ (recall Week 6). Our new life is bound up with His.

Name the purpose (v. 7): that God might display “the immeasurable riches of his grace” forever. Our salvation is ultimately for the praise of God’s grace, which is why no one but God may receive the credit.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- “But God” as the hinge of the gospel (v. 4)
- Grace defined: love given “even when we were dead” (Romans 5:8)
- Salvation as union with the risen, exalted Christ (vv. 5–6; Week 6)
- The purpose of salvation: the eternal display of God’s grace (v. 7)
- God as the decisive actor, so the credit is His alone

Discussion Prompts

- What is the great reversal contained in the words “But God”?
- What does it mean that God acted while we were still dead in sin?
- How does the purpose of verse 7 keep the glory on God rather than us?

Question 4

Student Question:

It is one thing to believe in grace as a doctrine and another to live as a person who has actually received mercy. Where in your life do you find it hardest to believe that God loved you “even when” you were at your worst, and how would receiving that mercy change you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question moves grace from doctrine to experience. Many affirm grace yet cannot quite believe God loved them at their worst. Invite honesty about the specific place where mercy feels hard to accept.

Name the obstacles. Often it is a particular sin we feel is unforgivable, a season of failure we are sure disqualifies us, or a performance mindset that cannot fathom unearned love. Bring the “even when” of verse 4 directly against that place.

Move toward receiving. Receiving mercy changes a person: it softens self-condemnation, frees us from having to prove ourselves, and produces grateful love. Encourage students to preach “But God... even when” to their hardest memory.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gap between affirming grace and receiving mercy
- Common obstacles: an “unforgivable” sin, a disqualifying failure, a performance mindset
- Bringing the “even when” of verse 4 against our worst moment
- Received mercy producing freedom and grateful love

Discussion Prompts

- Where is it hardest for you to believe God loved you at your worst?
- What memory or failure most needs to hear “But God... even when”?
- How would truly receiving that mercy change you?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says, “by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (vv. 8–9). What are the “works” that Paul says cannot save us, and why does ruling them out protect both the glory of God and the security of the believer?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open verses 8–9 carefully and joyfully. “By grace you have been saved through faith.” Grace is the ground; faith is the receiving instrument. “Not your own doing... the gift of God... not a result of works.” Salvation, considered as a whole, originates in God, not us.

Define the excluded “works” precisely. The clue is in verse 9: “so that no one may boast.” The works Paul rules out are works of merit, supremely law-keeping done to earn a standing and create grounds for boasting. These cannot save, because if they could, salvation would be a wage and the saved could brag. This is the same point as Romans 6:23 (Week 1): life is a gift, not a wage.

Show what is protected by excluding such works. First, the glory of God: all credit goes to Him. Second, the security of the believer: a salvation we did not earn is one we cannot un-earn by failing to perform well enough. Grace that we could not achieve is grace we cannot forfeit by imperfection.

Clear away the misunderstanding in advance. To say works do not save is not to say no response is required, for verse 10 immediately commands works. Paul excludes meritorious, boast-worthy

works as the ground of salvation; he does not exclude the obedient response of faith by which the gift is received. Set this up for the heavy question to come.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Grace as the ground, faith as the receiving instrument (v. 8)
- The excluded works defined by verse 9: works of merit and boasting (law-keeping to earn)
- Salvation as gift, not wage (echo of Romans 6:23)
- What excluding merit protects: God's glory and the believer's security
- Excluding boast-worthy works is not excluding the obedient response of faith

Discussion Prompts

- What kind of "works" does Paul say cannot save, and how does verse 9 tell us?
- How does ruling out merit protect both God's glory and our security?
- Why is denying that works save not the same as denying any response is needed?

Question 6

Student Question:

Pride loves to find something to boast about, even in religion. In what subtle ways are you tempted to take credit for your standing with God, whether through religious performance, moral effort, or comparing yourself to others? What would it look like to lay that boasting down?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question targets the pride that hunts for something to boast in, even in religion. Paul says salvation is arranged "so that no one may boast," yet the human heart keeps finding angles. Help students spot their own.

Name the religious forms of boasting: pride in knowledge, in moral respectability, in spiritual disciplines, in being more committed than others. Comparison is the usual engine: we feel righteous by measuring ourselves against someone we judge to be worse.

Apply the cure. Boasting dissolves at the foot of the cross, where we remember we were dead and God was merciful. Encourage one concrete practice of humility this week, perhaps refusing a comparison, or giving God the credit aloud for something we are tempted to claim.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pride's search for a boast even within religion
- Religious forms of boasting: knowledge, respectability, discipline, commitment
- Comparison as the engine of self-righteousness
- Boasting dissolved at the cross; humility practiced concretely

Discussion Prompts

- In what subtle ways are you tempted to take credit for your standing with God?
- How does comparison feed self-righteousness in your heart?
- What is one concrete way to lay down boasting this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

After insisting we are not saved by works, Paul immediately says, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (v. 10). How can Paul deny that works save us and in the very next breath say we were created for good works? What is the right relationship between grace and the works that follow?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open verse 10 as the deliberate climax Paul intends. Having excluded works as the ground of salvation, he names works as its purpose: “created in Christ Jesus for good works.” The relationship is sequence, not contradiction. We are not saved by good works; we are saved for them.

Use the language of source and fruit. Good works are the fruit of salvation, not its root. A tree does not produce apples in order to become an apple tree; it produces apples because it already is one. Likewise, the saved do good works not to get saved but because they have been made alive in Christ.

Stress “his workmanship.” Even our good works are, at bottom, God’s doing in us; He “prepared beforehand” the path we walk. So even our obedience gives us nothing to boast about; it is grace working itself out (Philippians 2:12–13).

Apply against two errors at once. Against faith-only-ism that treats obedience as optional: we were created for these works and are meant to walk in them. Against works-righteousness that treats obedience as earning: the works are the fruit and gift of grace, prepared by God. Grace and obedience are perfectly reconciled in verse 10.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saved not by good works but for good works (v. 10): sequence, not contradiction
- Good works as the fruit of salvation, not its root
- “His workmanship”: even our obedience is grace at work (Philippians 2:12–13)
- Verse 10 answering faith-only-ism (obedience is not optional) and works-righteousness (it does not earn)

Discussion Prompts

- How can Paul deny that works save and then say we are created for good works?
- Why are good works the fruit of salvation rather than its root?
- What does it mean that even our good works are God's "workmanship"?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul says God prepared good works "beforehand" for you to walk in. What are some of the specific good works, the acts of love, service, and obedience, that you sense God has placed in front of you in this season? Where have you been hesitating to walk in them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question makes verse 10 concrete. God "prepared beforehand" specific good works for each believer. Ask students to discern what He has placed in front of them in this season.

Help them look near, not far. The prepared works are often unglamorous and close at hand: a neighbor to help, a relationship to mend, a ministry in the church, a hidden act of service, a person to forgive. Discernment usually means noticing the need already in our path.

Name the hesitation. We often see the good work and hold back out of fear, busyness, or comfort. Encourage one concrete step of walking in a prepared work this week, trusting that the God who prepared it will also empower it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's good works "prepared beforehand" for each believer (v. 10)
- Looking for the prepared works near at hand, not only in grand projects
- Naming the hesitation that keeps us from walking in them
- Confidence that the God who prepares the work also empowers it

Discussion Prompts

- What good works has God placed in front of you in this season?
- Where have you been hesitating to walk in them, and why?
- What is one prepared work you could step into this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

This passage is the one most often used to teach that we are saved by "faith alone," apart from any obedient response, and to argue that repentance, confession, and baptism cannot be part of salvation because they would be "works." Yet Paul never uses the words "faith alone" here, and

he ends by insisting we are created for good works. How does this passage actually hold grace and obedient faith together, so that the “works” that cannot save are works of merit and boasting, while the faith that saves is a living faith that receives the free gift God’s appointed way, through turning from sin, confessing Christ, and being baptized into Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block in the entire study, so prepare thoroughly and teach it with both clarity and warmth. The faith-only argument from this text runs like this: we are saved by grace through faith, not of works, therefore any required response, especially baptism, would make salvation a work and overturn grace. The error lies in equating the obedient response of faith with the meritorious works Paul actually excludes.

First, define the excluded works again from the text itself. Verse 9 says salvation is “not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” The works in view are works of merit that would give grounds for boasting, the law-keeping by which a person tries to earn a wage from God. Turning from sin, confessing Christ, and being baptized into Him generate no boast whatsoever; no one rises from the water saying, “I earned this.” These are not works of merit; they are the empty-handed reception of a gift.

Second, let Scripture interpret Scripture on “faith alone.” Paul never uses that phrase here or anywhere. The only inspired text that joins those two words is James 2:24: “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” James is not contradicting Paul; the two are answering different errors. Paul excludes meritorious works that boast; James excludes a dead, inactive faith that never obeys. Put them together and the New Testament’s teaching is one: we are saved by grace, through a living faith that works, never by merit and never by bare assent.

Third, show that the same authors who exclude works-salvation also command the obedient response. The Paul of Ephesians 2:8–9 is the Paul of Romans 6, who says we were baptized into Christ’s death (Week 6), and the Paul who calls obedience “the obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:26). The Peter who preaches grace also commands, “Repent and be baptized... for the forgiveness of your sins” (Week 7). There is no conflict, because baptism and repentance are not meritorious works; they are faith receiving grace in God’s appointed way. The condemned man who accepts a pardon by walking through the opened door earns nothing; he simply receives.

Fourth, drive home the positive synthesis the question asks for. Salvation is by grace (the ground and gift), through faith (the receiving instrument), and the faith that receives is a living faith that turns from sin, confesses Christ, is baptized into Him, and walks in the good works God prepared (v. 10). This is neither faith-only-ism (which strips faith of obedience) nor works-righteousness (which makes obedience a wage). It is the obedience of faith. Hold the two together so tightly that students cannot pull them apart: the grace that saves us apart from our merit saves us through a faith that obeys.

Finally, a word of pastoral balance. Teach this without a chip on the shoulder. Many sincere believers hold the faith-only view; our aim is not to win a debate but to help people see the whole counsel of God and rest in a grace that is real and a faith that is alive. Let the lesson produce humility, security, and joyful obedience, not argumentativeness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The faith-only argument and its core mistake: equating obedient response with meritorious works
- The excluded works defined by verse 9: merit and boasting, not the response of faith
- James 2:24 as the only “faith alone” text, and it denies that faith alone justifies
- Paul and James reconciled: grace through a living, working faith, against both merit and dead assent
- The same apostles command baptism and repentance as faith receiving grace, not earning it (Romans 6; Acts 2:38; Romans 1:5)
- The positive synthesis: by grace, through a living faith that obeys, for good works (v. 10)
- Teaching with humility and warmth, not as a debate to be won

Discussion Prompts

- What exactly are the “works” Paul excludes, and how does verse 9 define them?
- How do Paul and James fit together once we see what each is excluding?
- How would you explain that baptism receives the gift rather than earns it, without drifting into faith-only language?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage, from the grave of verse 1 to the good works of verse 10. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this truth. Where is He calling you to rest more deeply in grace, and where is He calling you to walk more faithfully in the works He prepared for you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the whole passage, from the grave of verse 1 to the good works of verse 10, into a personal response. Ask for two movements: where to rest more deeply in grace, and where to walk more faithfully in prepared works.

Discern the room. Some students most need to lay down a hidden scoreboard and finally rest in unearned grace; others most need to rise from passive belief and walk in obedience. A few may realize they have never yet received the gift through an obedient, living faith, and this lesson opens that door.

End where Paul ends, holding both truths. Security and obedience are not in tension; the deeper we rest in grace, the more freely we walk in good works. Let students leave both more settled and more set in motion.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two movements: resting more deeply in grace, walking more faithfully in works
- Discerning whether a student most needs rest or motion
- Space for the one who has never received the gift through obedient faith
- Security and obedience as partners, not rivals

Discussion Prompts

- Where is Christ calling you to rest more deeply in grace?
- Where is He calling you to walk more faithfully in the works He prepared?
- If you have never received the gift through a living, obedient faith, what is your next step?