

God's Work

Ephesians 2:10 | Bryce Beale | Oct. 29, 2017

The glory of God is the best friend of every believer.

To the regenerate, the glory of God is like a sweet fruit, or a pleasant aroma, or happy news. We read the Reformation sola, *Soli Deo Gloria*, "to God alone be glory," and our hearts pick up apace. We are like a young romantic who has just seen the face of his love.

We read from Edwards' pen that the end for which God created the world was his own glory, above everything else, and we are like fans in a football arena. It is hard to explain this impulse, but it runs through the Christian vein.

This is all the more amazing because we are not this way by birth. Before we knew Christ, God's glory was a threat. It imposed itself on our lives unpleasantly, and stared down our desire to get glory for ourselves.

The thought of election disgusted us, not for logical reasons, which some believers wrestle with, but because if God elects, what glory is left to us?

But now election is our song.

Like Johann Sebastian Bach, we scrawl onto the top of our works the initials of *Jesu Juva*, "Jesus, help," and we are happy to write onto the bottom of our best compositions the letters he wrote: S.D.G., "Soli Deo Gloria."

This is the unifying principle of the galaxies, because it is the heart of God himself. Nothing is more central, and nothing more significant. Every fact is traceable to the glory of God as its source, and the knee of every fact one day will bow before that glory again.

Our culture runs no headlines about God's glory; you do not find his praise in movie theaters or magazines. But do not be deceived; our intentional neglect does not harm him. One grain of sand far upshore may never touch the ocean, but that does not lessen the glory of the sea. One culture may turn its eyes from God's glory, but still that ocean laps and laps upon the billions of grains of sand on the thousands of beaches and spread across the ocean floor.

America is not the principle that moves the ages. We are one minute within one age. The glory of God towers over the wrecks of time.

Who speaks this way but Christians?

We are in love with the glory of God—we seek it in our times of prayer, and with the Psalmist ask no more but this, that we may dwell in God’s presence, to gaze upon his beauty. We assess our days by the measure of whether they rendered glory to the Creator, and how well.

If this is your heart, and if this is your appetite, then God provides you with a feast today, in one verse of Ephesians 2. We agree that the glory of God is the very key to the Scriptures, as it is the key to understanding anything truly; but in this one verse, that glory is set forth clearly and without apology.

EPHESIANS 2:10

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

This verse begins with “For,” which points us back to the verses preceding. Remember that Paul’s concern since the beginning of this chapter has been to take away from us any ground for boasting in the matter of salvation. The glory in salvation is God’s, not ours.

We come to the table dead in sins, depraved in our corruptions, and hostile to our Creator. This pile of steaming refuse slides off our hands onto the bartering table; this is what we have to offer God for our salvation.

And so, if we are to be saved, it must be free. It must be by the initiative of God, and by the work of Christ. Therefore God slides our useless offer off the table, and Christ places on the table in its place the priceless coins of his own blood. He pays the ransom himself, and so by grace the believer, once dead in sins, is made alive with Christ.

“For by grace,” writes Paul in verses 8 and 9, “you have been saved through faith. And this is not your doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

But more must be said. Yes, God must have the glory from our justification; he gave his Son, and we had no part in the matter. But what about now, as we who are his people perform good deeds? God saved us in the past, and to him be the glory for it; but now we are serving him and others, and may we not claim some of the glory for that? After all, it is our effort. We are working out our salvation. Who gets the glory for this work? That is the question we are answering this morning: Who gets the glory for the good we do?

God changes us

And we answer first by looking at the start of verse 10: “For,” it reads, “we are his workmanship.”

When the Spirit of God moves upon a soul and inspires in it a trust in the Lord Jesus, the man or woman to whom that soul belongs is changed. The nature is altered. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."¹

If you took the nature of some creature—say, a turtle—and observed its natural instincts, you would find one set of habits. The turtle without training knows to snap at those who approach. It knows at times to retreat into its shell, though this was never taught in turtle school, of course. It is a matter of instinct, and these are the instincts that belong to the nature of a turtle.

But what if we were to imitate the Spirit's work and turn the turtle into a creature of an entirely new nature?

Let us say we could enter into the fairy tales of our childhood and turn the turtle into a squirrel. And somehow, we preserve the personality—what was once the turtle is now the squirrel, the same being, but now with a new nature.

Would that squirrel snap? I hope not; there are enough dangers in the world without adding snapping squirrels. No, the squirrel would not snap because snapping is an instinct of turtles, and this squirrel is no longer a turtle. And he would of course not attempt to retreat into his shell, not only because he has no shell, but also because he has no instinct, being a squirrel, to pull in his arms and legs and head.

What then would this squirrel be doing, if he is not snapping or contracting his limbs?

He would be running up a tree. "Wait," you say, "turtles cannot run up a tree." Yes, you are right, but this is no turtle. He was a turtle, but that nature is gone; now he is a squirrel, and it is in the nature of squirrels to run up trees.

And he would flee at the sound of an approaching stranger. "Won't he hide himself in his shell," you ask? No! He would have, when he had the nature of a turtle; but now he has the nature of a squirrel, which comes with a whole new set of instincts.

We cannot of course turn a turtle into a squirrel—it would require that we recreate the turtle, and we, as mortals, can create nothing.

But this is the marvel we behold in Scripture, that God, who created us, is able and, in fact, intends to recreate men and women. He means to give them new natures, and rid them of the old. We call this work regeneration, or more familiarly, the new birth. The true believer is born

¹ 2 Cor. 5:17 (ESV).

again—but he is not born again into a new version of what he was. Rather, he is born again as an entirely different creature, a new creature with a new nature.

The instincts that the believer had as an unbeliever are no longer his instincts; he is a new creature, with new instincts. He once snapped; now he runs up trees.

Or more accurately, he once walked, as verse 1 says, in transgressions and sins, but now, verse 10, he walks in good works. Sin is in the nature of the old man; good works are in the nature of the new.

“We are his workmanship” means that salvation is not the mere recital of a prayer. It is not a simple changing of the mind. It is not taking up the facts about Jesus and choosing to believe those facts as true. Salvation is something much more marvelous than all of that—it is a recreation of the entire person, a rebirth as a being with a brand-new nature.

Every human is God’s creative workmanship, it is true; but those who believe, they are God’s workmanship a second time over. They are created by God not once, but twice—first into their creaturely existence, and then again into a Christian. This is what Paul means, this second creation, when he writes, “we are his workmanship.”

You see, salvation is not some small thing; it is not the whim of a young man looking for a new outlook on life. It is not the mere sensible decision of a mother who wants religion as a seatbelt for her adolescent sons. It is not the signing of a card, nor the walking of an aisle. It may involve these things, but it is not these things.

Salvation is not a work of man at all. In the Greek, our text puts emphasis on this fact: “*His* workmanship we are,” it reads. Salvation is a work of God, not of man. It is not the decision of a man, but the powerful recreation of the man by God himself.

The same is said in the Gospel of John: “But to all who did receive [Christ], who believed in his name, [God] gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”²

This is the answer to the age-old question—if we are truly justified by grace and grace alone, then why don’t we all “pray the prayer” of salvation, get that out of the way, receive our ticket to heaven, and then live however we please. Many hold this opinion today.

² 1:12-13.

And here, as in his letter to the Romans, Paul answers that question by pointing to what salvation actually is—a work of God, not of man, by which a man is recreated.

If you think it possible to have salvation and keep your sinful way of life, you misunderstand salvation. If salvation were some bare decision of the mind, accomplished by a human thought, you could do that and then live you as you pleased. But if salvation is the work of God, the work whereby he recreates a man, reforms his soul so that his nature is a new nature, then how could that transformed individual persist in his old ways, and live according to his old nature?

The new man will do good works, not because good works make the new man, but because the new man makes good works.

Salvation comes before good works like the chicken comes before the egg; and good works come from salvation like eggs come from chickens. Eggs are the consequence of chickenhood; snapping is the consequence of turtlehood; running up trees is the consequence of squirrelhood; and good works are the consequence of Christianhood.

Friends, this is what makes the gospel good. If salvation were us reforming ourselves, why would that make us happy? We can attempt that all on our own, without Christ, without a cross; we have in fact invented a thousand religions to attempt the very thing.

No, the goodness of the news lies in the fact that when we finally abandon all our failed attempts at reform, at cleaning up our lives, at getting our act together—when we abandon trying to remake ourselves, and throw ourselves on the mercy of God (that is, when we believe), then he remakes us.

Think how this snatches every crumb of glory from the world of men, and places all at the feet of Jehovah. The human elders happily cast their crowns around the glassy sea, and we are compelled to gather every so-called crown of glory and set it in the pile with them.

Who gets the glory for salvation? More, who gets the glory for the changed life that follows? Is it the man or woman who believes? Is it the individual who is reasonable enough to choose God, reasonable to reform himself, as opposed to the many masses who are foolish enough to refuse Christ? No.

We may be the workmanship, but we are not the star actors on this stage: “we are *God’s* workmanship, created in *Christ Jesus*,” by his work, or by our union with him. Salvation is of the Lord.

After all, if you turned a turtle into a squirrel, I would not so much marvel that the squirrel runs up trees—I would marvel at you! I would wonder at your ability to transform the creature.

And God has so designed salvation that we would be the beneficiaries of a grand transformation, but that he, and he alone, would be the recipient of all the glory for the act. To God alone be glory.

God prepares the works

See how our verse continues: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

There is a marvelous mystery here, but the text is clear enough. Not only do we do good works because we have a new nature from God that wants to do them, but, further, we do good works because God has prepared those very works beforehand for us to do.

So this morning, I preach. I sat several hours before my computer, trying to discern God’s meaning in this verse, and trying to put that in words that would be helpful to God’s people. And now I am speaking those words to you, because I want your life to be better, to be sweeter, to be more enjoyable in God. This is a good work.

Now imagine a glory committee were to take in hand a certificate of glory, which they wished to reward to the doer of this good work, of preaching this sermon.

They knock, and I open my door, and they say, “Excuse us sir, we are looking for the individual responsible for Sunday’s sermon. We recognize it as a good work, and we would like to award its doer with this certificate of glory.”

Yes, what remains of my old nature, my turtlishness, would love to snatch that certificate and hang it on my wall.

But herein lies the genius of God, who would have all the glory for himself in everything, and who knows our tendencies.

Because of this text, I am compelled to reply: “I’m sorry sirs, but you have come to the wrong door. Someone else planned the entire good work, worked out its details, designed the benefit it would confer on those who heard; and I only stepped in at the very last moment to do what he had already completely planned. You’ll have to take this certificate of glory to him; I have no right to it.”

Now they may answer, “Well, ok, you stepped in at the very end, but you did step in, didn’t you? So perhaps we can snip a corner of this certificate for you to keep.”

Ah, but God is so much wiser than we are! "I'm sorry," I say, "but you cannot do that. You see, I only stepped in because it is in my nature to do so. I would not have stepped into this work if someone hadn't changed my nature first."

They ask, "And who changed your nature then? We'll give this bit of the paper to him."

"The same being who prepared the work!"

To God alone be the glory! He prepared the worker, and he prepared the work. What do we have that we have not received, and if we have received it, how could we boast as if we did not receive it?

You may at this point feel that last objection still in your own mind, so let's address it further.

You look at this text and read, "good works, which God prepared beforehand, *that we should walk in them.*" Yes, God is behind the good works, but aren't we responsible for them as well? We must walk in them. We must choose to do them; in fact, sometimes there are opportunities that we neglect. So don't our wills, our decisions, play some role in these good works? Don't we have to put forth effort to do good? You say it is part of our nature, but it does not always seem to come naturally. Where do our own choice and effort fit into this verse?

That is a fair question. After all, the last half of this letter is full of commands that we walk a certain way. Chapter 4 begins, "I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called."

But if this walk were completely natural to us, like our instincts, then why would Paul need to command us to do it? If God is doing the good works through us, willing and working for his good pleasure, then why do we even need to try?

Here is a mystery, but a true mystery, and one that plays out every day before our eyes. God's work through us does not happen apart from our work in him.

Here is a mother who hears her child crying in the night. She could pretend to sleep on and wait for her husband to wake up and take care of the child. But she chooses to get up herself so that he can sleep. It is a good work, done in love.

In that instance, what did God do, and what did the mother do?

It is obvious that the mother exerted effort; she is not sleep walking to the child. She had to choose, had to get up, had to go. From a human perspective, she could have chosen otherwise.

And yet now I must speak a mystery: God himself accomplished this good work through her. He prepared it, he intended it, and it had to come to pass. But God decided not only that the good work would be done, but that it would be done through this mother's choice and action. He who chose the work, chose the doing of the work as well. And that is why it never could have happened if the mother hadn't acted. She is no robot; she must choose and do.

But her choosing and her doing are merely the means by which God accomplishes his work.

God's sovereignty and her responsibility are so closely tied together that we cannot by human understanding untie the knot. This will bother some. But I appeal to my text and say, "This is the clear meaning—they are good works which God prepared beforehand, and which we walk in. They are good works to be attributed entirely to God, and yet, behold, we walk in them."

Brothers and sisters, do not let this bother or confuse you. If your heart burns with the sacred flame, you will embrace with simple faith what your heart already desires to be true: though we work, God gets the glory.

As our Savior said with no embarrassment: "let your light shine before others, so that they may see *your* good works and give glory to *your* Father who is in heaven."³ Why not give glory to you, since you are the doer of the good works? Because behind your doing is the doing of God.

And if he is the doer, we must claim him as such. He must get every part of every certificate of glory for any good we ever do.

What a joy this is to the people of God! If you were the only doer of your good deed, how small a good deed it must be! It would be limited to your meager abilities, and dependent for its success or failure on your small arm of power.

But if God is the doer behind our doings, then we are free to dare great good deeds for God. We are not doomed to wallow in the shallows of kindness; we are not bound to pinch our pennies, or to give to others with a generosity as small as we are.

In Christ you are inclined to do good, it is in your new nature; but how often you feel inadequate to offer any good to others. Brothers and

³ Matt. 5:16.

sisters, believe this text! Do not think that your doing is your doing only; work with all the power that God supplies.

See the need of your neighbor, and say, "God, what do you wish to do through me for him or her?" And when the enemy says, "No, no, no, you have nothing to offer," you can reply, "Yes, but I am not the one offering."

You are not engaged in mere good deeds, but in what might truly be called God deeds. Believer, you are compelled to do good, and more, you are freed from the fears that prevent you.

There are homeless in our city who sit like untapped caves of glory; you must go and mine them, and extract the ore of praise that God is due. Do not fear to give much time, to give much thought to how you may help them; do not fear to be creative in your endeavors. Research their needs; read up on how you may help them with wisdom; ask those already involved in the work. Do not think to yourself, "Ah, this may all be wasted, all this time and energy. I can't help them, it's too big a task." Too big a task for whom? You are not the doer, but God, and he can do it.

There are more children in need of foster parents now in Evansville than almost ever before. The system is in a crisis, and the need grows as our opioid epidemic grows. Some children are left with their parents even after their parents lose custody of them, because there is nowhere for them to go. I am confident that God will provide for these little ones somehow—I only ask you to consider if you might be that somehow. We do not live forever; what might God do through your doing in the time you have?

Who will do the good works necessary for these kids? And who will address the underlying problems that are breaking the system? Who will reach out to the addicted parents and offer them a hope better than they can find in prescription drugs or heroine?

So go, as the saying is, and do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, as long as ever you can.⁴

And when you have done all that you were commanded, say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty. *To God alone be the glory.*"

⁴ This saying is popularly attributed to John Wesley.