

January 10, 2021

Created for Good Works



Ephesians 2:1-10

Central Question

How does God inform my purpose?

Scripture

Ephesians 2:1-10

1 You were dead through the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. 3 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us 5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.



Reflecting

Every tourist who goes to Florence, Italy, wants to see Michelangelo's *David*. That famous statue is definitely worth seeing, but for my money the best thing to see in the Accademia Gallery in Florence is not *David* but a series of unfinished carvings you pass on the way to the better-known masterpiece.

These are four marble pieces that appear to be unfinished. Art historians and scholars now debate whether they actually are incomplete or whether Michelangelo intended the unfinished appearance to be part of the story. In each of the four, we see huge pieces of marble with human figures straining to emerge from the stone. Each one shows different parts of a human torso, legs, arms, face, head. Some appear to be pushing the stone away, as though emerging from bondage.



"Atlas Slave" by Michelangelo
(Credit: Jörg Bittner Unna / Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Collectively, these works dated to 1534 are known as *The Prisoners*.

Individually, they have been named by scholars as "The Awakening Slave," "The Young Slave," "The Bearded Slave," and "The Atlas."

The statues exemplify Michelangelo's practice known as *non finito* or "incomplete." According to the museum's official interpretation, they also symbolize the struggle of humankind to free the spirit from matter:

They evoke the enormous strength of the creative concept as they try to free themselves from the bonds and physical weight of the marble. It is now claimed that the artist deliberately left them incomplete to represent this eternal

struggle of human beings to free themselves from their material trappings. (“Michelangelo’s Prisoners or Slaves”)

Further, the Accademia Gallery website explains, “Michelangelo believed the sculptor was a tool of God, not creating but simply revealing the powerful figures already contained in the marble. Michelangelo’s task was only to chip away the excess, to reveal.”

This is a beautiful picture of what it means for us to break free from the bonds of sin, as described in today’s Scripture passage, and to be “God’s workmanship.” As you read the words of the Apostle Paul, think of Michelangelo’s *non finito* concept that shows humans as works in process. And imagine God as the sculptor, shaping us to emerge as new creations.

Studying

One of the most frequent questions pastors, teachers, and spiritual leaders are asked is how to unlock the secret of “God’s will for my life.” It seems all of us carry an innate need to understand our purpose, why we are here on earth, and what we are to do.

Sadly, some folks skip right by this question and blithely chart their own course, often toward disaster. Others spend so much time fretting over finding God’s will that they have no time left to actually do it.

Notice the personal nature of Paul’s writing, the initial use of “you” rather than “I” or “we.” Within the letter, the Apostle is moving our focus from the “you” of a Jewish audience to the broader “we” of the Jewish-Christian audience. Note the shift that happens between verses 2 and 3.

Each of us may find ourselves described in these verses, which are intended to be read as about us, not merely about other people. If we’re honest, we know that we live too often in trespasses and sins. We may debate how we got into such a sorry state, though. Did we put ourselves in such a

predicament, or did unseen forces lead us there against our will?

What are we to make of the evil powers described in verse 2? The phrase referencing “power of the air” or a “destructive spiritual power” makes sense to those who see everything about this world as a cosmic struggle between good and evil.

Some of us have dismissed this view of evil lurking around every corner as a fantastical exaggeration. By doing so, however, we may have become inattentive to the things that are genuinely evil all around us. The Apostle calls us to a reality between these two poles. We must acknowledge that there is an evil power at work in those who do wrong, but we must also confess that this doesn’t have to be the case.

Verses 5-6 describe how we are able to escape our lives of sin because of God’s great mercy. Note the four actions in these verses: God loved us, made us alive, raised us up, and seated us in a place of glory. Note as well that all of these things happen to “us” and not just to “me” or “you.” These are collective actions that God does for the sake of the body of Christ, the church. This should be further evidence that the individualistic “me and Jesus” theology so prevalent in worship and Christian self-help literature today misses the mark.

The big picture Paul paints is that God through Jesus Christ is able to make alive things that are dead (v. 5). This is a resurrection message. It parallels what we read elsewhere, such as 1 Corinthians 15 about our hope for eternal life through the resurrection of the dead.

The day I am writing this, I have just returned from the cemetery, where I officiated the graveside service of a



Go back to Socrates: “Know thyself.” For Socrates, there are only two kinds of people: the wise, who know they are fools; and fools, who think they are wise. Similarly, for Christ and all the prophets, there are only two kinds of people: saints, who know they are sinners; and sinners, who think they are saints. Which are you?

—Peter Kreeft

Christian woman I never had met before and who had only seven friends in attendance at her send-off. In that moment, I declared the same message I declare when hundreds of mourners are gathered: that in Christ our mortal flesh takes on immortality and our perishable bodies become imperishable.

That this is God's plan does not depend on how many mourners are assembled or how a person dies. Instead, this is "God's will" for our lives in eternity.

Paul now tells us that the same transformation is available on this side of the grave. We who are spiritually dead have been made alive through Jesus Christ. Resurrection happens in us every day, not only at the end of time.

And then he inserts an important parenthetical statement in the middle of this good news: We are saved by grace (v. 5). Salvation is God's doing, not ours. That is why this morning I was able to stand at a graveside and declare the hope of eternal resurrection for a woman I had never met without having to interrogate her seven friends about her list of good and bad deeds.

This message of being saved by grace is so important that it recurs in verse 8; Paul tells us the same thing twice just to be sure we got the message.

God's will for us is goodness and mercy. God wants to lavish grace and redemption upon us. This is God's will, and knowing it does not require extensive research or even a prayer retreat. Further, we learn in verse 10 that God's will for our lives is that we do "good works." Paul says this is what God has made



For Paul, faith was indeed primary, but it was not a lonely faith: proper ethics were proof of one's conversion and also assured one's salvation. Faith must be active in positive, constructive human interaction (Gal 5:6). This explains why Paul believed that those "in Christ" are completely new people and should be irrevocably good moral agents (e.g., Rom 6:1-14; 2 Cor 5:17). This is also why v. 10 ends with another purpose clause, in order that Christians might live as God wants. (Slater, 65)

us to do; this is our purpose. What those good works are is perhaps less important than that we do them.

We might end right there on a very happy and agreed-upon note. But instead, our passage adds one last twist that could distract us from the larger message of Ephesians 1. That is the statement that God intended us "beforehand" to do these good things, these good works.

What does that mean? To Christians in the Calvinist tradition, it means God knew in advance exactly what good works (and bad works) we would do. To other believers, though, it means that God has foreordained us *in general* to do good works. In other words, it is God's purpose that we do good, even if God hasn't predetermined which specific good works we will do.

We can agree that God's intent is for us to be raised from death to life, from blocks of stone to animated creation. And once we are raised up from death, we will naturally do the good works of God, who in mercy has saved us.

Understanding

A few days ago, I met with a German pastor who is involved in a church-planting movement unlike most churches I know. Living in what has been described as a "post-Christian" culture in Europe, he and his congregants are rethinking what it means to be Christians and what it means to be church.

This congregation owns no property. They meet in a couple dozen coffee shops and pubs each Sunday. And their major activity is to perform direct acts of compassionate service throughout the city.

One of those congregations has taken as their mission to minister among the prostitutes of the Red Light District in Frankfurt. A group of about thirty women go regularly into the brothels to sit with the sex workers in their rooms, listening to them and befriending them.

Recently, one of these women asked if she could attend a coffee shop worship service on Sunday. She is an Eastern European woman who seldom leaves the Red Light District. She supports about fifteen family members back home with what she earns legally as a sex worker in Germany.

At the small worship service, when they passed an offering plate, the prostitute opened her purse and pulled out a 100-Euro note (a little over 100 US dollars) to put in the plate. It was obvious to others in the small group what was happening, and most of them had been in the habit of scraping together spare change for the offering. Yet here the sex worker led the way with generosity.

What's more, that day the worshipping community announced an upcoming mission trip to Calcutta to help poor and struggling women there. And the first person to sign up was the prostitute. In fact, that very summer she went on the mission trip, but only after fundraising for weeks with the other prostitutes in the brothel where she works.

When Paul says we are created to do good works, he means all of us. And sometimes we can learn that lesson from the most unusual examples.

What About Me?

- *Have you ever questioned what God's will is for you?* If so, how does today's lesson help you answer that question? What new ideas or information have come to you about the quest to do God's will?
- *Why has God lavished grace upon us?* As we read today's passage, it becomes evident that we are the beneficiaries of



We usually think of faith preceding works, but is it possible that engaging in good works can lead someone to faith? Explain.

overwhelming kindness from God. But why would God do such a thing? Perhaps you intuitively understand that you are not worthy of this gift. If so, how can you explain from today's passage what motivates God's love?

- *How are you made alive with Christ?* Think about Michelangelo's four figures breaking free of the marble that entombs them, and imagine yourself as one of them. What are the ways in which God is chiseling and shaping you into a new creation, even if you're not completely unbound yet?
- *What does it mean to be "saved"?* We use this terminology freely in Christian circles—and often with little real understanding. We talk about someone "getting saved" by walking the aisle at church or praying a certain prayer. Is that all it takes? How does today's Scripture cause you to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (see Phil 2:12)?

Resources

"Michelangelo's Prisoners or Slaves," Accademia.org <<http://www.accademia.org/explore-museum/artworks/michelangelos-prisoners-slaves>>.

Thomas B. Slater, *Ephesians*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2012).

EASTER RESOURCES

Retail \$5.99 | eBook \$4.99

Visit www.nextsunday.com/nss or call 800-747-3016

