

Isaiah Thomas is a point guard for the Boston Celtics. At five feet nine inches, he is tied for the shortest player in the NBA. Monday night would have been his sister's birthday. She was killed in a car crash the day before the playoffs started. On top of that, he had spent four hours in the hospital that day in oral surgery for a tooth he lost in the prior game. But spurred on by the memory of his sister, he had the best game of his life by scoring 53 points. [video](#)

Brett Favre did the same thing in 2003. The day after his father died, whom Brett said had been to every football game he ever played since fifth grade, according to Fox Sports¹, Favre had the best game of his life. In the first half he scored four touchdowns, threw for 311 yards and had a passer rating of 158.3.

Both Thomas and Favre were gifted athletes but they were raised to heights of unparalleled achievement through the death of someone they dearly loved. The deaths of their loved ones became their motivation, their purpose for playing so hard, their passion to succeed and rise above their circumstances.

Everyone needs motivation. Some are simple. I eat because of the motivation of hunger and the desire to taste good food. I go to work out of the motive of serving the Lord and providing for my family. Every action we do has some motivation as its source.

I heard two very different conversations with two people this week. The first conversation was about a couple who have been living together for a while but claim to be Christians. They know what's right but can't seem to match their actions to their beliefs. The second conversation was about a man who is a president of a company making truckloads of money every year but who has decided to resign in order to go to Moody to get a Divinity degree. Now these two examples may not quite span the distance between the most immature believers and the most mature, but they're pretty close. Most of us are probably somewhere in the spectrum between these two examples. How does one move closer to the second example? What is our motivation for serving the Lord, for doing right, for following after him? Of course there are always bad motivations for appearing to do the right thing. That's called faking it. We don't want to take that route either.

I can say with absolute confidence that the couple living together is not motivated to follow the Lord and the second man is motivated. Why? How do we move from one to the other?

Ephesians chapter two is one of the most beloved passages on salvation. Two weeks ago I preached on the bad news—verses 1-3. If you recall, this is the dark backdrop which helps us to better see the good news in verses 4-10. This is the gospel. This is our motivation. Allow me to read all ten verses.

1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in 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 coming ages 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 a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

I want to start by giving you my entire 4 point outline so you can see where we are headed.

Who He is.

What He did.

Why He did it.

Our response.

1. Who he is.

But God, being rich in mercy... The first two words of verse four are the turning point. But God. Our sin was the central theme of the first three verses on sin but in the section of the good news, God is the central theme. But God. God is the fulcrum in the gospel which pries us loose from our slavery to sin. God, not us, is doing all of the heavy lifting of our salvation. Verses 1-3 is all bad news. As a summary, here is my sermon outline from two weeks ago.

We were spiritually dead—sinners by nature

We actively sinned—sinners by choice

We were controlled by the axis of evil

We were children of wrath.

It was as bad as it could be. But God. But God stepped into the scene at just the right time and the first thing we learn about him is that he is a God of mercy. In fact, he is rich in mercy. Mercy is who he is. Mercy is the very core of his being. But how can he be a God of mercy if we were children of wrath? Aren't wrath and mercy mutually exclusive? How can both be true?

When we hear of atrocities in the world, of tremendous injustices, what emotions rise to the top for you? Assuming we are not overly hardened by the endless exposure to bad news in the world, usually we feel a great deal of compassion. But your compassion is almost always paired with anger at the injustice, at the person or persons who caused such pain and suffering. This happens

to believer and unbeliever alike—an emotional smorgasbord ranging from love and compassion to anger and wrath. Therefore, if even unbelievers can rightly hold both mercy and wrath at the same time, how much more can God handle the combination of these opposite emotions? As we said last week, salvation is ultimately being saved from the wrath of God. The merciful actions of the Son save us from the just wrath of the Father. And if you truly comprehend verses 1-3, you will see why God’s wrath was justified. But we blaspheme the gospel if we see this as a cosmic battle between the Father and the Son. It’s not as if daddy is angry and so the son had to calm him down. The Father sent the Son. This is a collaborative act of mercy. “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us.” Mercy and great love were bound up in the cross because God could only act according to his character. It is who he is.

2. What he did

There are three main actions that God did. Notice that God is still the one doing the action here. God made us alive, raised us up and seated us in the heavenly places. But in each case, we are united with Christ. We are made alive *together with Christ*; raised up *with him*; seated us *with him*. And this unity with the Son is all the more amazing when we see that the Father did exactly the same for the Son, which Paul describe in chapter one. *that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places*

made us alive together with Christ

(by grace you have been saved)

and **raised us up** with him

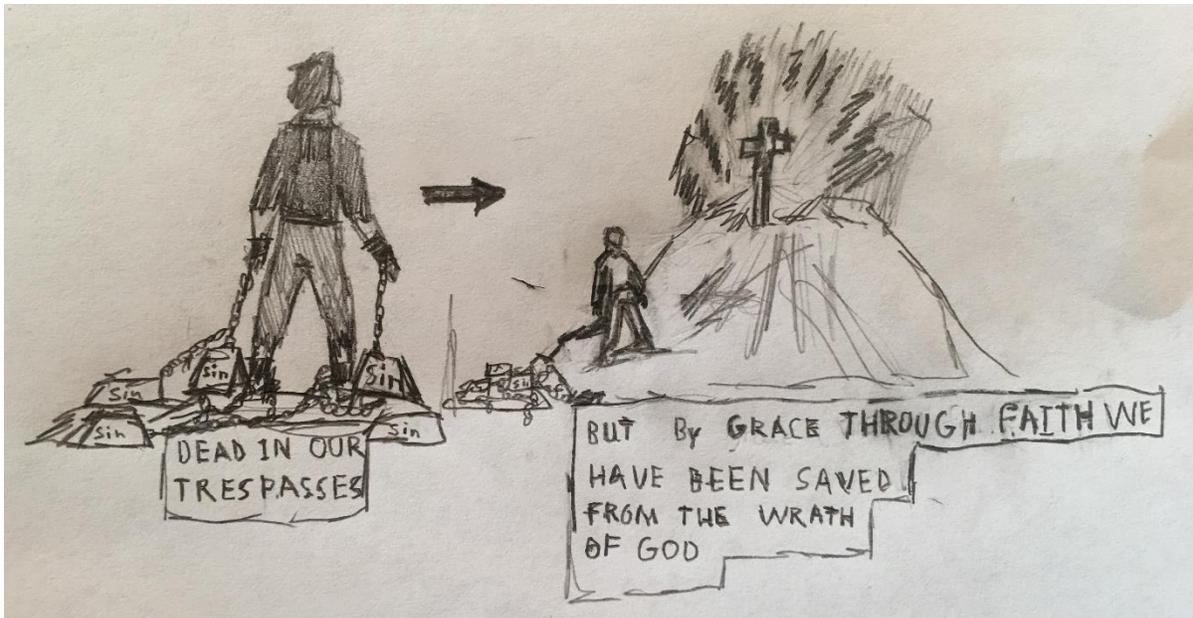
and **seated us** with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus

when he **raised him** from the dead

and **seated him** at his right hand in the heavenly places

And our final position is almost the same. We are in the heavenly places. The only difference is that believers are no seated at the Father’s right hand. That position is reserved for Jesus alone.

Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words and I love this sketch. I am adding a new idea to the weekly Table Talk. Each week I am inviting any youth to prepare a drawing or a powerpoint slide to be used in my message. It could be hand drawn like this one or created on a computer like I do for my intro slides. But the idea is to work your way through the Table Talk questions and once you understand the basic theme, you can try your hand at creating something for use that Sunday. I will use at least one each Sunday and if we get lots of submissions, I will rotate whose picture gets used. I thought it might be an interesting way to draw out the theme each week.



This is a great representation of what God did for us. We were chained to our sin and dead in our trespasses. Grace is the key word. Grace is the summary of all that the Father and Son accomplished on our behalf. Making us alive, raising us up and seating us in the heavenly places are all part of God's grace, his free miraculous gift.

In all of this, there is a substitution taking place. We get:

- Kindness in place of wrath
- Children of God instead of sons of disobedience
- Life instead of death
- Freedom in place of slavery
- Mercy in exchange for judgment

Last week while surfing off the coast of Northern Ireland, Matthew Bryce was swept thirteen miles out to sea and spent 32 hours floating on his surfboard. The sun was setting on his second evening and he was certain he would not last the night when all of a sudden a rescue helicopter flew overhead and lifted him out of the frigid waters to safety.² Not surprisingly, he has vowed never to surf again. Matthew understands how bad his situation had been. He knew that he was a mere hours from perishing before he was rescued. His dire condition was all too apparent to him and therefore his rescue was more meaningful. Matthew said this about the Coast Guard who rescued him. "These guys were the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. I owe them my life."

That's motivation, isn't it? In an infinitely greater way, who God is and what he has done for us is meant to turn into pure motivation to serve him. We owe him our life—our eternal life.

3. Why he did it.

Verse seven tells us the reason for this magnificent gift: "so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." Why did the

Father send the Son? Why did the Son gladly take our place and satisfy his Father's wrath? So that for all eternity we might see the immeasurable riches of his kindness for us. In other words, God saved us for his own glory. He wants us to understand, see and experience his greatness. That's what it means to glorify him.

I've use this illustration before and I stole it the first time from John Piper. The Grand Canyon. As I mentioned, we are going there at the end of May. I've been hoping to see it one day. When you walk to the edge for the first time and take in its majesty and grandeur, what are you thinking about at the moment? Are you thinking about yourself? Are you wondering about how great you are that you found the canyon? Are you tempted to boast about anything in yourself right then? As you stand careening your neck over the edge and taking in the colors and depth of the—that's why they call it the GRAND Canyon. As you stand there, you are caught up in something outside of yourself. Even a diehard atheist enjoys it and doesn't think about the greatness of himself or mankind. He may ascribe it to the randomness of nature but he knows he has nothing to do with that amazing sight. But for the believer, you know how it got there. There is no boasting in yourself but only in the Creator.

God is at the center. God's greatest gift to us is God. He cannot give us something of more value than Himself. He must seek his own glory because he is the greatest possible thing he could give to us. The more we see his inherent worth, the more joy we will experience as a result. And we will never exhaust the wonder of God for all eternity. "so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." That's even more motivation.

4. Our response

We are responding to God's grace—all that He is, what He has done and why. Verses 8-9 are core to the gospel. **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 a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Remember that grace is the summary of all that God has done for us. The Father made us alive, raised us up and seated us in the heavenly places. The Son satisfied the Father's wrath, took our sins upon himself and gave us his perfect righteousness. We have been saved by grace through faith. Belief is always a necessary response to the gospel message. Faith yes, boasting no. We should see nothing but pure grace.

And therein is our motivation. We serve out of gratitude and humility. We deserved nothing but were given everything. That is supposed to make all of the difference in the world to us. But one source of motivation yet remains. **10** *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

This word workmanship is really important. The Greek word is poema. If you enter the word poem, into Google translate, the Greek word that pops up is poema. That's a modern translation and it doesn't mean that workmanship exactly means poem, but it's close.

The only other time this word is used in the New Testament is Romans 1:20. "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been **made**. So they are without excuse."

Workmanship means that we have been created by God. But we already knew that, right? But this is a special kind of creation—we are a workmanship created for good works. This means that we were specially crafted by God to serve him, to do good works. And incredibly, these works are prepared beforehand. The text does not specifically say that the works were created from before the foundation of the world, like we were chosen before the foundation of the world, but that is the implication. We were chosen and predestined by grace not only before we were born but before anything was created. And the grace that saved us also prepared work to flow from this saving grace. All of the good works in the world will never save you. Good works are utterly useless to earn salvation but they are absolutely necessary to prove your salvation.

Toyota just broke the world record for the fastest SUV in the world. They took their Land Cruiser and beefed up the 381 HP engine to make a 2000 HP engine. It just set a record, traveling 230 MPH. This SUV was specially created for one purpose—to go really fast. Every detail was redesigned in order to make the fastest possible SUV. In the same way, every believer was designed for a very specific purpose—to do the good works that God has prepared for us.

Do you ever run out of motivation to do the right thing, to serve God? Can I tell you how that happened to me this past week? I love to preach. It is a labor of love but it is also labor. It's hard work. At some point while preparing sermons, I get stuck. It happens every week. But this week was one of the worst in a long time. I got to Wednesday and thought to myself, I just don't have another sermon in me.

Now I fully get the fact that sermons don't come from me. They are supposed to be Holy Spirit driven, but Rich Maurer still has to sit down and write them. And in each sermon I strive to be, above all, thoroughly Biblical. You don't want it to be boring. And it has to be relevant to everyone listening. On top of all of that, you want it to be from the Holy Spirit and I need to be actively doing what I am preaching about, otherwise I am a hypocrite. So all of that is wrapped up in every weekly sermon so by Wednesday I had visions of what my Sunday morning was going to look like. I pictured myself lying up here, curled up in the fetal position and sucking my thumb.

And the sad irony is that I was supposed to be preaching a message about how the glorious gospel motivates you for good works. I was supposed to stand up here and declare to you about who God is, what he had done for us, why he has done it and that we are his workmanship, created to serve him but at the same time I was in a sermon death spiral. There I was, spinning out of control, the ground was fast approaching and I couldn't seem to pull the sermon plane out of its death spiral no matter how hard I pulled back on the stick.

At Thursday night's LEAD session on prayer, I'll tell you what Scripture God used to pull me out of my tailspin. How's that for motivation to attend! But pull me out, he did. Tomorrow the labor of love begins all over again, but that's OK. It's my calling. It's just part of the good works that God prepared beforehand that I should walk in.

What about you? What are the good works that God has prepared for you to serve him? To serve him out of the reality of this glorious gospel? If you are the man I mentioned before, you leave your million dollar a year salary and attend Bible college. If you are Tim and Mindy Seeley, you leave behind the comforts of the US—and all of their children and grandchildren—to serve in the Bahamas. If you are a parent, you need to do all that you can to disciple your family. If you are a child or teen, you need to honor your parents and respect their authority.

At the same time, don't get too concerned with your "big purpose in life." Young people tend to worry about this. Some people in mid-life crises get lost and want to know God's overarching purpose is for them. Those are important decisions but not the core of this verse. Your purpose is to do the good works which God prepared beforehand for you? Which ones? All of them. But the good works especially matter in the daily grind of life. When all you can do is put one foot in front of the other. One step of obedience at a time.

Rich Maurer
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¹ <http://www.foxsports.com/nfl/story/the-best-nfl-game-brett-favre-ever-played-080516>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/may/04/certain-i-would-die-surfer-matthew-bryce-rescued-32-hours-sea>