

## **ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE: UNDERSTANDING THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE OF OUR SALVATION (EPH 2:7)**

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*Ephesians 2:7 teaches that God saves sinners by His great grace in order to put the glory of His marvelous grace on public display. Paul answers five important questions about this grand demonstration: (1) When Is the Exhibition?; (2) What Is the Exhibition?; (3) How Does God Exhibit His Grace?; (4) Who Is the Audience?; and (5) What Are the Implications? Each question and Pauline answer is carefully discussed, concluding with four implications for true believers, which include humility, assurance, privilege, and priority.*

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Our culture is defined by ancient philosophies, and our thoughts are shaped by ancient ideas. No ancient idea more shapes our world than that of the Greek philosopher Protagoras, the father of agnosticism and, consequently, of moral relativism.<sup>1</sup> It was Protagoras who wrote, “Of all things the measure is man, of the things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not.”<sup>2</sup> That is the ultimate statement of human autonomy. Man is the measure of everything. He determines both the reality and the rightness or wrongness of everything. Man is, in fact, at the very center of the universe. The people of Athens, the city from which Protagoras came, were attracted to all kinds of new and strange ideas and different philosophies (Acts 17:21). But even the

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<sup>1</sup>*The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy - Protagoras (c. 490 - c. 420 BCE)*, Accessed: October 22, 2010. “While the pious might wish to look to the gods to provide absolute moral guidance in the relativistic universe of the Sophistic Enlightenment, that certainty also was cast into doubt by philosophic and sophistic thinkers, who pointed out the absurdity and immorality of the conventional epic accounts of the gods. Protagoras’ prose treatise about the gods began ‘Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not or of what sort they may be. Many things prevent knowledge including the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life.’” (DK80b4)

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, DK80b1.

Athenians saw the bankruptcy of Protagoras' ideas. They threw him out of their city and burned all his works.<sup>3</sup>

Tragically, the ideas that Protagoras promoted are alive and well in the twenty-first century. The stepchild of his philosophy is humanism, which continues to assure us that man is the measure—that he is the center of the universe. Reduced to its simplest and most individualistic expression, it teaches that the end of all being is the happiness of man. That assertion resonates deeply in the human heart because it is the essence of the fallen human condition. It is a part of who we are as sinners to think that the universe revolves around us. Taken a step further, we can be tempted to think that the universe itself *exists* for us.

When we start with man as the center, we can quickly come to the conclusion that even God exists for us—that God's chief end is to make us happy and to meet all our needs. Instead, Scripture declares that God's chief end is His own glory.

Within the last 150 years under the influence of humanism, Christians have unwittingly adopted the humanistic idea of 'man as the measure' and have concluded that our salvation is primarily about us.<sup>4</sup> Compare that to Paul's threefold affirmation in Ephesians 1: "He predestined us to adoption as sons to the praise of the glory of His grace" (Eph 1:6); "to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory" (Eph 1:12); and "to the praise of His glory" (Eph 1:14). God designed our salvation with the ultimate goal of His own glory. In Ephesians 2, Paul returns to this great theme and develops it further.

The first 3 chapters of Paul's letter to the Ephesians are entirely about what God has already done for us in Christ. In the first 3 chapters, there is only one command ("remember" in 2:11). Paul does not give his first real imperative until the fourth chapter. And when he finally does get to the imperatives, he builds those commands on the foundation of the knowledge he has taught in the first 3 chapters. So, in this book, we learn that nothing is as important to our spiritual growth and development as growing in our real knowledge of what God has done for us. We need no additional resource beyond what God has already given us in Christ. Instead, our growth in grace will be directly tied to our true understanding of the blessings we already enjoy. For Paul, a Christian is not ready to address the practical issues of chapters 4-6,

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<sup>3</sup>Cicero, *de Natura Deorum*, 1.23.6.

<sup>4</sup> Twentieth-century liberalism was heavily influenced by secular humanism and therefore tended to redefine salvation as the improvement of human conditions and the promotion of man's happiness in this world—what has historically been called "the social gospel." Many in today's Emerging Church have returned not only to tenets of the theology of liberalism, but also to its social gospel under the new, less pejorative name of *social justice*. Tragically, as others have observed, the twentieth-century response of traditional fundamentalism to liberalism was equally tainted by the prevailing philosophy of humanism. Often, therefore, the focus of their evangelism was still on man's happiness—not in this life but in the eschatological future.

unless he has begun to understand the doctrine on which they rest. Chapter 2, then, continues to explain what God has done for us in Christ. Specifically, in the first paragraph Paul explains how we, as individuals, came to enjoy the incredible spiritual blessings outlined in chapter 1—how sinners who deserve only God's wrath, came to be trophies of His grace. It is the spiritual biography of every Christian. We can reduce the powerful, life-changing message of this passage to one simple sentence: Salvation is entirely the work of God from beginning to end.

Verses 1-10 translate what is probably one, long Greek sentence.<sup>5</sup> In this pericope, Paul describes how God rescued us. Paul develops this theme of monumental spiritual change that has occurred in three simple movements. In the first movement, Paul rehearses 1) What we were (2:1-3). The second movement details 2) What God did (2:4-6). In fact, the subject of the sentence comes in verse 4—"God." Three main verbs follow and tell us what God has done.

- a) "Made us alive together with Christ." (v. 5)
- b) "Raised us up with Him." (v. 6)
- c) "Seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus." (v. 6)

Each of those verbs provides rich insight into what God has done for the believer—the change He has accomplished.

Verse 7 begins the third movement in God's great plan: 3) Why God did it (2:7-10). In light of what we were when God found us (1-3) and what God did in rescuing us (4-6), Paul explains why God saved us (7-10). "So that<sup>6</sup> in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."<sup>7</sup>

In those verses God tells us why He acted to rescue us. And His reasons are not primarily about us. Of course, it is true that God loves individuals. He describes us as His sheep that He knows by name. There is an intimacy in each believer's relationship with God. But the apostle explains that

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<sup>5</sup> See Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 306.

<sup>6</sup> ἵνα introducing a purpose-result clause; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 473-74. Wallace writes, "Not only is ἵνα used for result in the NT, but also for purpose-result. That is, it indicates *both the intention and its sure accomplishment*" (author's emphasis). Wallace lists Eph 2:7 as one possible example.

<sup>7</sup> According to Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart, Germany: German Bible Society, 2002) 533-34, there are no significant textual issues to be addressed in these verses.

what really lay behind God's plan was much bigger than any individual. There were cosmic reasons God acted to rescue us from sin. In Ephesians 2:7-10, Paul identifies three reasons that God acted in sovereign grace to rescue sinners: 1) To display the glory of His grace (v. 7); 2) To destroy all human boasting (vv. 8-9); and 3) To guarantee good works (v. 10).

In this article, we will consider only the first of those three reasons because it is the greatest and grandest reason of all. God acted to rescue us in Christ in order to display His own glory. In *As You Like It*, in one of the most famous monologues in English literature, William Shakespeare wrote these words:

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits, and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts.<sup>8</sup>

Shakespeare was right in ways he could not have imagined and in ways he never intended. The world *is* a stage. This planet that we call home--this pale blue dot in the Milky Way galaxy, hurtling through the blackness of endless space, is a stage. It is the greatest stage in the universe, because it is the stage on which the eternal God is putting His character on display.

In verse 7 Paul writes, "so that in the ages to come He might *show*..." The Greek word is ἐνδείκνυμαι. It literally means "to display" or "to give proof." It is to demonstrate something either by argument or act, to make something evident and obvious.<sup>9</sup> God is engaged in a grand demonstration on a cosmic, universal, eternal scale. And He is doing it right here on this planet we call home. Francis Foulkes writes:

The purpose of God for his church, as Paul came to understand it, reaches beyond itself, beyond the salvation, the enlightenment and re-creation of individuals, beyond its unity and fellowship, beyond even its witness to the world. The church is to be the exhibition to the whole creation of the wisdom, and love, and grace of God in Christ.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>"As You Like It," *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974), Act 2, Scene 7, lines 139-42.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 213. Thayer defines ἐνδείκνυμαι as "to show, demonstrate, prove, whether by arguments or by acts."

<sup>10</sup> Francis Foulkes, *The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 82.

William Hendricksen states the same great truth: “God’s purpose in saving His people reaches beyond man. His own glory is His chief aim.”<sup>11</sup> God is engaged in a grand demonstration, and it is happening right here on earth.

There are several important questions about this grand demonstration<sup>12</sup> that Paul answers in Ephesians 2:7.

### WHEN IS THE EXHIBITION?

The first and obvious question is when will God make this grand demonstration? Paul identifies the time as “in the ages to come.” What does Paul mean? Commentators are divided between three possible approaches. Some argue that “the ages to come” refers to the ages that occur from the first century when Paul wrote this letter until the return of Christ—the distinct seasons of time between the first century and the Second Coming.<sup>13</sup> And, of course, God is putting Himself on display now. In 3:10, Paul makes it clear that God is *now* putting His character on display *in the church*. A second view argues that Paul is referring to the ages that will take place after Christ returns.<sup>14</sup> It is also true that God will put Himself on display after Christ returns (cf. “the age to come” in 1:21).

But those views are not mutually exclusive. The best approach is most likely a third view which argues that “the ages to come” includes both of the first two views.<sup>15</sup> Paul was living in the first century and looking at time as it unfolds in all the coming ages. Because of the use of the present tense, we could translate his statement as “in the ages, the ones coming and coming and coming.” In this beautiful expression Paul pictures time as a shoreline onto which breaks wave after wave after wave. And the individual waves do not represent days or decades, or even centuries. But each wave as it breaks upon the shoreline represents another age. As another wave comes, another age comes. If you stand on the beach and gaze at the horizon to the vanishing point, all you can see is more waves. That is the picture behind this expression. Age after age breaks upon the shore of time and eternity. When is God going to put Himself on display? He started this exhibition when Christ came, and it will

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<sup>11</sup> William Hendricksen, *Ephesians*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 118-19.

<sup>12</sup> Jay Adams uses this phrase as the title of his theodicy, *The Grand Demonstration: A Biblical Study of the So-Called Problem of Evil* (Santa Barbara, CA: EastGate, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 337. See also H. Sasse on “αἰών” in G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 1:197ff.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 337-38. See also Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 173.

never end.<sup>16</sup> Wave after wave, age after age, God will put His great character on display. F.F. Bruce writes, "...in the limitless future, as age succeeds age, the crowning display of God's grace will ever be His kindness to His redeemed people,..."<sup>17</sup> When is this exhibition? It started with Christ, and it will never end.

#### WHAT IS THE EXHIBITION?

What does God intend this grand demonstration to show about Himself? Paul explains, "So that in the coming ages, He might show *the surpassing riches of His grace*" (emphasis added). God intends to put *His grace* on display. There are times when as a pastor I wish I could explain a truth to my congregation as if they had never heard it before. We easily become so accustomed to great truths that we lose a sense of wonder, of grandeur, of majesty. And no truth suffers more from familiarity than grace. The most popular definition of grace is "unmerited favor." And that is true—as far as it goes. But it is a woefully inadequate definition. A. W. Pink suggests a better one. He writes that grace is "the favor of God to those who not only have no positive deserts of their own, but also who are thoroughly ill-deserving and hell-deserving."<sup>18</sup> A.W. Tozer defines grace as God's "goodness directed toward human debt and demerit. It is by His grace that God imputes merit where none previously existed and declares no debt to be where one had been before."<sup>19</sup> Grace is that reality in God that moves Him because of His own character to do good to those who are not only undeserving, but who deserve exactly the opposite. It is not just unmerited favor; it is favor in spite of demerit. As Tozer wrote, grace is the truth by which God credits merit where there was none, and declares no-debt where before there had been an unpayable debt. His point is that grace is what stands behind the wonderful truth of justification. In an act of grace, God credits my sin to Christ and treats Christ as if He had lived my life. And then He credits Christ's perfect life to me and treats me as if I had lived His life. Justification is the most powerful example of grace. God bestows the best of His goodness on those who deserve the worst of His wrath. G.S. Bishop beautifully describes grace as "a provision for men who are so fallen that they cannot lift the axe of justice, so corrupt that they cannot change their own natures, so averse to God that they cannot turn to Him, so blind that they cannot

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990), 111. Lincoln speaks of "the decisive period of God's redemptive activity, which was inaugurated by Christ's resurrection and exaltation, but which is yet to reach its consummation in the coming ages."

<sup>17</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1961), 51.

<sup>18</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *The Nature of God* (n.d. repr., Chicago: Moody, 1999), 79.

<sup>19</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), 93.

see Him, so deaf that they cannot hear Him, and so dead that He Himself must open their graves and lift them in resurrection.”<sup>20</sup>

Grace is God's character. In Exodus 34:6, when God proclaims His character to Moses, He describes Himself as gracious, or full of grace. By nature, He delights in doing good to those who deserve the opposite. In 1 Peter 5:10, Peter calls Him “the God of all grace.” God the Father is the fountain of grace. Jesus Christ is the channel through which that grace flows to us (1 Cor 1:4), and the Holy Spirit applies it to our hearts (Heb 10:29). Now, we stand in grace (Rom 5:2). We live in an atmosphere of grace, in a kingdom where grace rules. God constantly overwhelms us with goodness that we not only do not deserve, but of which we deserve the opposite.

But Paul does not simply use the word “grace.” Instead, he refers to the “riches of His grace”—and not just the riches or wealth of His grace, but the *surpassing* wealth of His grace. Paul adds term to term in trying to help us comprehend the magnitude of God's grace. The Greek word for “surpassing” is the word ὑπερβάλλω. It literally means “to surpass in throwing; to throw over or beyond any thing.”<sup>21</sup> It is the word from which we get the English word *hyperbole*. When it is used figuratively, as it is here, it expresses the highest or ultimate degree. It describes that which is beyond comparison, beyond comprehension, beyond measurement. Paul uses ὑπερβάλλω several times in Ephesians. He writes that God's power is *surpassing* (1:19). Christ's love for us is *surpassing* (3:19). And here Paul tells us that God's grace is *surpassing*. The wealth of God's grace cannot be compared to anything else. In its fullness, it is incomprehensible to our finite minds. And it cannot be measured. God has put the incomparable, incomprehensible, immeasurable wealth of His grace on display. That brings the careful reader to a third question.

### HOW DOES GOD EXHIBIT HIS GRACE?

“So that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace *in kindness toward us*” (emphasis added). That is a remarkable statement, because in verse 3 Paul has just told us that we were by nature the objects of God's eternal wrath. And now, just four verses later, he tells us that we have become the objects of God's eternal kindness. What a remarkable change God's grace has produced!

The Greek word translated *kindness* (χρηστότης) is difficult to define with one English word. When the Greeks used the word χρηστότης to refer to things, it meant “mild or pleasant” as opposed to harsh or hard or sharp or bitter. For example, in Luke 5:39, it is used of wine that had mellowed and softened

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<sup>20</sup> George Sayles Bishop, *The Doctrines of Grace and Kindred Themes* (New York: Gospel Publishing, 1910), 156.

<sup>21</sup> Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 640.

with age. In Matthew 11:30 Jesus describes being His disciple as taking His yoke.<sup>22</sup> He said that His yoke is “easy,” which is the adjectival form of the same Greek word as *kindness* in Ephesians 2. Jesus said, “My yoke is mild or pleasant”—that is, “My yoke is not harsh or severe.”

When χρηστότης is used of people, it means “kind.” In Romans 11:22, for example, Paul contrasts the kindness of God with the severity of God. *Kindness*, then, is the opposite of harsh or severe. It is tender love in action. In the ages to come, God will display His grace by not treating those who deserve His wrath with harshness or severity, but instead by treating them with kindness.

This too is the character of our God. God demonstrated this kindness for all men to see when He sent Jesus. Titus 3:4 refers to the coming of Christ as “when the kindness of God our Savior appeared.” God is kind to the unrepentant and to those who are His enemies for the purpose of leading them to repentance. In Romans 2:4, as Paul indicts all of mankind for its sin, he says, “Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” God is kind to His enemies in order to provide a path for their repentance. What is this kindness to sinners? Paul partly explains to the crowd in Lystra, “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM. In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:15-17). The temporal blessings and common grace that men enjoy in this life are expressions of the kindness of God. He intends that His kindness bring men to true repentance and faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

But God especially shows χρηστότης to the sinners whom He has chosen and set apart for Himself. In Romans 11:22 Paul says that God shows kindness to those He saves. All believers are to show this quality of kindness to each other as well. Galatians 5:22 identifies part of the fruit of the Spirit as *kindness*—the opposite of harshness, heaviness, and severity. Colossians 3:12 says that “as those who have been chosen of God, ...put on a heart of kindness.” We are to treat others the way God has treated us.

But this quality of kindness is not only how God treated us when He sent Jesus, and it is not only how He treated us in the past when we were unbelievers, but it also describes how God plans to treat us throughout eternity!

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<sup>22</sup>Jesus was known as a carpenter (Mark 6:3). It is even possible that He took over His father's business after Joseph's death. Justin Martyr wrote of Christ about AD 150: “when He was among men He made ploughs and yokes and other farm implements” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. 88). So the image of yokes may have been a familiar one to Jesus.



Ephesians 2:7 says that He made us alive, raised us up with Christ, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, “so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” For eternity, God plans to treat us with kindness and not with the harshness and severity our sins deserve. How can a holy God respond to those who have accumulated such guilt, like that? On what basis can God show kindness? The answer is found in the last three words of the verse: “in Christ Jesus.” Every kindness God shows sinners was purchased at the cross. That is true of unregenerate, unbelieving sinners. The fact that God lets a sinner live a moment longer than his first sin is a demonstration of His kindness purchased at the cross (Rom 3:25-26). Every temporal blessing human beings in rebellion against God enjoy, was purchased at the cross. God vindicated His righteousness in letting sinners live, at the cross.

For believers, this is true as well. The only reason we are accepted today is that we are in Christ. The reason we will be accepted for the rest of this earthly life is that we are in Christ. We know that we could never get into heaven on our own. But it is easy to think that once we are there and are made perfect, that somehow from that point on, we partly deserve to be there. But that is the devil's lie. From the moment we came to Christ, throughout this life, and until the endless ages sweep across eternity, the only reason we will ever be accepted in the Father's presence is that we are in Christ—He is permanently our representative, and we are permanently united to Him as the source of our spiritual life. Like the vine and the branches, eternal life will for eternity flow from Him into us. If this relationship were to be severed—and thank God it is not possible for it to be—even if we had lived in perfection for ten thousand years, at the very moment our union with Christ ended, we would immediately be damned. The fact that God will continue throughout eternity to show kindness to us is not because we will ever deserve it. It is because Christ deserves it, and we are connected to Him. We are in Christ.

God's grace is incomparable. It is incomprehensible. It is immeasurable. And by treating us with kindness for all eternity, God puts the riches of His grace on display. William Hendrickson recounts the story of a Roman noblewoman who was asked, “Where are your jewels?” Then, as now, wealthy people delighted in the luxuries of life. But she responded to the question by calling her two sons. She put her arms around them and said, “These are my jewels.” Hendrickson goes on to say:

Throughout eternity, the redeemed will be exhibited as the monuments of the marvelous grace of our loving Lord, who drew us from destruction's pit and raised us to heights of heavenly bliss, and did all this at such a cost to himself that he spared not his own Son, and in

such a manner that not a single one of his attributes, not even his justice, was eclipsed.<sup>23</sup>

#### WHO IS THE AUDIENCE?

There is a fourth question raised by this text, but not answered. Whenever there is an exhibition or a display, there is always an intended audience, someone expected to see it and benefit from it. For whom is God making this display, this exhibition? In other places, Scripture gives four answers.

First of all, it is for all humanity. God's acts of redemption always are. In Exodus 9 when God rescued His people Israel from Egypt—that great Old Testament picture of spiritual redemption—what reason did God give? God tells Moses to warn Pharaoh that greater plagues are coming. In verses 15 and 16 He explains: “For *if by* now I had put forth My hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, you would then have been cut off from the earth. But, indeed, for this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth.” God told Moses, “I will rescue My people, Israel. I will redeem them from Egypt and slavery. And I will do so, in order to show all humanity Who I am.” Throughout the Old Testament, God continues to put Himself on display to all humanity through the grace He shows the redeemed. For example, in Psalm 67:1-2, the Psalmist writes, “God be gracious to us and bless us, *And* cause His face to shine upon us—That Your way may be known on the earth, Your salvation among all nations.” God saves and rescues in order to put His glory on display to all humanity.

But there is a second audience God had in mind—not only all of humanity, but specifically, the redeemed. Paul hints at that in Eph. 2:7: “in kindness *toward us*” (emphasis added). God intended that the redeemed would benefit from this display. In 2 Thessalonians 1:10, Paul says that when Christ returns He will be glorified in His saints, and He will be “marveled at among all who have believed.” We will be overwhelmed at the display of the grace of Christ in us. And we will worship and adore Him forever. In Revelation 4 and 5, the redeemed praise God for His grace that has been displayed in them (4:11; 5:9-10, 12-13). So not only does all humanity see and glorify God and His grace, but we will glorify God because of His grace put on display *through us* and *to us*.

But God also intended this display for a third group—a group we rarely think about, and yet a group of whom the Bible makes much. That is the other intelligent beings God created besides man—the angels. The New Testament often portrays these powerful, intelligent beings as spectators of God's work of redemption in the world (1 Cor 4:9; 11:10; 1 Pet 1:12). In Ephesians 3, the

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<sup>23</sup>Hendricksen, *Ephesians*, 119.

apostle Paul directly states that God intends the angels to be the audience. Ephesians 3:8-10 reads, "To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church." The church is going to put the wisdom of God on display. To whom? Paul continues: "...to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places...in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Jesus Christ our Lord" (3:10-11). There is an audience to the drama of redemption occurring on planet earth. And that audience is not just all humanity and specifically the redeemed, but also a universe of magnificent angelic beings. Jay Adams writes, "God's grand demonstration has been taking place and still continues to take place before hundreds of thousands of intelligent beings throughout the universe."<sup>24</sup>

There is a fourth audience to this exhibition—and it is by far the most important of all. It is the eternal Son of God! In eternity past, God made a promise to His Son. Titus 1:1-2 alludes to this promise: "Paul, a bond-servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness, in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago." Literally, Paul says that God promised "before times of ages" (πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων). Clearly, God made this promise before the creation, when there was nothing but the eternal Triune God. The question is to whom did God the Father make this promise? John MacArthur answers:

The promise that the Father made...He made to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a staggering reality, absolutely staggering. In... the mystery of the Trinity there is an ineffable love, an indescribable and inexplicable love.... That love must find its expression. You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving. And the Father in a demonstration of this indescribable, supernatural, perfect love... promises to the Son that He will give to Him a redeemed humanity, justified, sanctified and glorified.... Why? Because the Father loves the Son so greatly He wants to grant this redeemed humanity to Him as an expression of His love.<sup>25</sup>

Many New Testament texts allude to this eternal gift of love between Father and Son (John 6:37-39, 44; 17:2, 6, 9, 12, 20, 24; Rom 8:29-30; 2 Tim

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<sup>24</sup>Adams, *The Grand Demonstration: A Biblical Study of the So-Called Problem of Evil*, 33.

<sup>25</sup> John MacArthur, "Why I Love the Church," a sermon preached on March 24, 1996. Transcript accessed at [www.gty.org](http://www.gty.org) on November 2, 2010. Available from [http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/80-157\\_Why-I-Love-the-Church?](http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/80-157_Why-I-Love-the-Church?)

1:9; Heb 13:20). Although there are eternal benefits and blessings for us, God's great plan of redemption is not primarily about us. It is about Christ. The people whom God is rescuing are His love gift to His Son! They are designed to be with His Son and to reflect the glory of His Son for all eternity. The Father intends to present to His Son a redeemed humanity, and those whom He has rescued will bring Him glory forever by loving and praising and adoring Him and by reflecting the beauty of His own moral character forever. God is not only rescuing a people *by* His Son but also *for* His Son.

Of course, the ultimate end of this great eternal plan of redemption is the exaltation of the Father. John MacArthur points out from 1 Corinthians 15:24-27.

When the Son brings the whole redeemed humanity to glory and the Father gives them all to the Son as a love gift, the Son will turn around and give it all, including Himself, back to the Father.... [We are caught up in] an immense, transcendent, incomprehensible expression of love within the Trinity of which we are the gifts exchanged.<sup>26</sup>

The greatest audience for the display of the Father's grace is the eternal Son of His love.

#### WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

What are some of the lessons from this amazing statement in Ephesians 2:7 for us who serve in Christ's church?

##### A Sense of Humility

It should produce in us a sense of humility. Life and eternity are not about us. God is doing something far greater. We are so bound by time that it is hard to think beyond our own lives. We think about our problems and our issues and our sins. But right now, while we are living on planet earth, there are almost seven billion other people experiencing exactly the same thing. And ours is only one generation in thousands of years of human history. If our Lord tarries, there will be hundreds or thousands of years more with the world filled with people just like us. We will all live and die on a tiny cosmic speck of dust hurtling through space on the edge of a small galaxy twirling amidst billions and billions of other galaxies. The universe is not about us. Instead, God has a great cosmic, eternal plan to put His character on display—and to do so before all humanity, before those He redeems, before the entire intelligent creation, and before His Son. He has made us part of that plan by an act of sovereign grace alone. That is very humbling. The Christian life does not begin and end with us. We are only a small part of a great, cosmic, eternal plan.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

### A Sense of Assurance

When we look at ourselves and our failures and those of our flock, it is easy to doubt whether any of us will ever end up perfected in God's presence. If our salvation were up to us, that would be a natural and justified fear. But our salvation is so much bigger than we are. God chose us in eternity past to be part of this grand demonstration. If God were to fail to bring our salvation to its completion, He would undermine the grand demonstration that He Himself has set up. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

My assurance is based on this, that God, the infinite, eternal God, is vindicating His own eternal character through me. And if He started saving me and then left the work undone or unfinished, and I duly arrived in hell, the devil would have the greatest joy of eternity. He would say, "There is a being that God began to save, but it all ended up in failure...." It is impossible. His object is not merely to save me, it is to vindicate His own being and nature, and I am being used to that end. The end is absolutely certain....<sup>27</sup>

So we can rest in confidence and assurance that God, who began a good work in us, will be faithful to perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:6).

### A Sense of Privilege

Paul is saying that it is as if God will point to us in eternity and say to the angels and to every other intelligent being in the universe, "Look at him, look at her, and see the greatness of My grace!" We will literally be trophies of God's grace. Again, Lloyd-Jones writes:

This is to me the most overwhelming thought that we can ever lay hold of, that the almighty, everlasting, eternal God is vindicating Himself and His holy nature and being, by something that He does in us and with us and through us... At the consummation, God is going to open His last great exhibition and all these heavenly powers and principalities will be invited to attend. The curtain will draw back and God will say, 'Look at them!' [Through us] God is going to vindicate His own eternal wisdom and His majesty and His glory and all the attributes of His holy person to the principalities and the heavenly powers.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God's Way of Reconciliation: An Exposition of Ephesians 2*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 116.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-13.

The question that follows is, “Why us?” Why would God choose us to be part of such a grand demonstration? Often, art galleries will solicit the collections of a famous painter and feature his work. The gallery will display the paintings carefully with just the right lighting in order to bring out the skill of the painter in light or color or texture or hue. But, in reality, the point is not the paintings. The point is the skill of the painter. Through God’s spiritual rescue of us, we have each become one of God’s masterpieces,<sup>29</sup> displayed for the universe to see, to examine, and to marvel at. We are the exhibition. But neither we nor our salvation are the point, any more than an individual painting on display in an exhibition. The point, in our case, is not only the *skill* of the Artist, but His *character* as well. The incomparable, incomprehensible, immeasurable grace of God! Our salvation is not all about us. It is all about Him. “Throughout time and in eternity the church, this society of pardoned rebels, is designed by God to be the masterpiece of his goodness.”<sup>30</sup>

#### A Sense of Priority

If God’s ultimate purpose in salvation is the exaltation of His own character, it reminds preachers and teachers that when we handle God’s Word, we should never make our people and their needs the ultimate point. Moreover, we should not even make the great characters of the Bible the main point. The Bible is intentionally theocentric. Everyone else, including the biblical characters and our audience, is merely the supporting cast. We must never shine the brightest spotlight on the supporting actors or the walk-ons. That must be reserved for the Main Character and His story. We must always remember that the grand theme of the Bible is that the one true God is redeeming a people by His Son, for His Son, to His own glory. We must exalt our great God by constantly reminding those we shepherd that He has rescued us “so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

#### A Personal Sense of Gratitude

For twenty-five years it has been my deepest joy and greatest privilege to watch firsthand as John MacArthur has faithfully taught the truths outlined in this text and daily modeled them in his life and ministry. His entire ministry has been spent in defense of the gospel of grace in Christ. He has guarded it at great personal cost against attacks that arose from the extreme positions of both antinomianism and legalism, as well as from evangelical complacency and

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<sup>29</sup> In Eph 2:10, Paul uses the Greek noun ποιήμα, which was used in classical Greek for a work produced by a craftsman. Herodotus uses the word to describe the making of a crown, hence a “masterpiece.” See Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 347 (including footnotes 1 and 2).

<sup>30</sup>F.F. Bruce, “Ephesians,” *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 288.

compromise. And in that fight he has never once wavered in his conviction of the veracity, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture. He has taught and modeled a philosophy of ministry that demands a high view of God in the worship of the church. And he has remained faithful to a deep commitment to the supremacy of God in all things, especially in the preaching of His Word.

May God enable us who stand on his shoulders to be equally faithful!  
*Soli Deo Gloria!*

