

**“Work of Art”**  
**Ephesians 2:8-10**  
**08.15.21**

**Introduction**

Admittedly, I don't have many hobbies, and I have even fewer skill sets. But I've always admired people who have the ability and vision to take something that is either old or broken and make it like it's new.

There are people who can do this with houses. They are able to walk into places that are completely dilapidated—places that are falling apart—and they can picture what it will look like by moving a wall. or using a certain color. And with a sweat, blood, and tears, they can make it look like a totally different place.

There are people who can do this with furniture as well. And I'm not just talking about sanding a table and refinishing it to use as a table. There's this whole movement of people who are able to take things like an old piano, they remove the insides, and then use it as a bookshelf. In other words, they completely repurpose it.

One of my favorite examples is a story about an elderly gentleman who passed away. His family did not want to simply sell his old pick-up truck, and so they removed part of the cab and the bed to make a tailgate to create a bedframe. Then they gave the bedframe to his great grandson, who would never remember him but would have a special way to stay connected to his deceased great grandfather.

Then, of course, there are those who are able to take old vehicles and restore them. They spend countless hours, rummaging through junk yards finding parts that aren't manufactured any longer because they want the right parts to restore it to original condition.

And if you're like me, it's hard to see such a project as something that is valuable while it is still in the making. It can seem like a waste of time and money, especially when you don't have the skills and vision of an artist, and all you see is a big chunk of rusted metal. But for the artist, they have a vision. They have the finished product in mind, and they see it's potential.

The old car might be parked in their garage for years. They might only be able to work on it a few hours a week or a few hours a month, but through their patience, perseverance, and skill, eventually they produce a masterpiece. A work of art. They are able to take something that most of us would throw away or ignore, and they are able to make it appear brand new.

**Digging Deeper**

In Genesis chapters one and two, we actually find two separate creation stories. And I agree with the majority of biblical scholars that we're not supposed to extract scientific data from these texts. They don't tell us how old the earth is or how long it actually took

for the world to become the way we know it today. Instead, they are theological texts that are written in the form and meter of Hebrew poetry. They are designed to capture the beauty and majesty of God's creation and help us appreciate it.

We're fairly familiar with certain parts of the story. For instance, most of us remember when God says, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God speaks life and matter into existence over and over again.

But if we go back to the beginning of the story, we find that in the beginning when God began creating the heavens and the earth, it was an empty void. It was a chaotic mess that was without form. And God shaped it and made it into something new. We repeatedly see the phrase in response to God's creation, "And it was good."

This begins a pattern throughout Scripture where God takes the messes we make and makes something new out of it. The theological word for this idea is *redemption*. God takes our messes and creates a masterpiece. God creates a work of art.

And this is precisely what Paul has in mind in Ephesians chapter 2 when he says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; <sup>9</sup> not as a result of works, that no one should boast.<sup>10</sup> For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:8-10 NASB).

The Greek word translated "workmanship" is *poiēma*, which is where we get our English word *poem*. We are God's poem. We are God's craftsmanship. We are God's work of art.

And I think it's safe to say that God doesn't find us with a blank slate. God's work of art isn't like when we order something from IKEA and we simply need to assemble the pieces. Instead, God finds us in our chaotic mess. God finds us with all of our brokenness, baggage, sin, and shame, and God is able to take our lives and make something new out of who we are. God is able to repurpose our lives.

It reminds me of this passage in Jeremiah where the prophet of God says, "You are the potter, and I am the clay." This word picture gives me the image of a big lump of clay sitting on God's table. And unless you're an artist, you don't really see the potential in it. But God works, and teases, and molds us into something. And it is certainly a long process.

God does not give up on us. God has this remarkable amount of patience, and love, and care because in God's indescribable imagination, God sees us for who we can be rather than the condition we are in when God finds us. God can see the finished product and is willing to put the work into our lives to make us a new creation in Christ Jesus.

And if we're honest, we have to acknowledge that this process of God shaping us is painful. When God shapes our lives and makes us new, it's so that God's priorities become our priorities. God shapes us so that God's values become our values. God is the potter, and we are the clay. God is molding us into a work of art.

When we read all of Paul's letters, we discover that this is one of his soap boxes—this idea of God making all things new. Paul sees Jesus' death as this definitive point in human history where it's almost like time stops and it starts anew with Jesus' resurrection. Through Christ's death, God destroys and conquers sin, and through his resurrection, God destroys and conquers death. But instead of making everything new all at once, God gives us the choice of whether we want to participate in this new creation or not...and so new creation begins with each of us one at a time.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul says, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2Co 5:17 NRSV). It almost seems like God does not want to usher in new creation alone. God wants to make us a new creation, and then invites us into the process of bringing new creation to all the world.

And God does not make us into something new simply to put us on display. Think about it this way: Someone who flips a house intends for it to be inhabited. A person who restores an old vehicle puts an antique license plate on it so they can drive it in a parade. A craftsman who refinishes an old cabinet uses it to hold their good china, or as a bookshelf. In other words, an artist does not simply make something new to put it on display—they also use it for a functional purpose.

In the same way, God has saved us for the good works that God prepared for us beforehand. God has freely offered us grace, mercy, and forgiveness through Christ so that we might initiate the work of new creation in the world. We get to be a part of the process. We get to be a part of the redemptive work.

### **Theological Reflection**

I think for all of us listening, we face various challenges when we try to process this kind of message. I think for some of us, if we're honest, we might ask, "Do I really even need religion? Can't I just skip ahead to the good works because that seems like 'the point' in the end." But the hurdle is that we've still got to resolve the problem of sin that Paul talks about.

This was a hurdle for John Wesley (the founder of Methodism) in the early part of his life. Wesley believed that if he did enough good works he could be in a right relationship with God, and so he spent a lot of time serving and doing many remarkable things, but it never resolved the problem of sin. It's not that he was some kind of terrible person, but the truth is that as human beings, we are incomplete without being in a relationship with God.

And so eventually John Wesley had this experience when realized that he had gotten the cart before the horse. It's not good works that put us in a right relationship with God, but it is a right relationship with God that enables us to carry out good works. Wesley

had to humble himself before God and realize that there was nothing he could do to earn God's favor. There was nothing he could do to resolve the problem of sin in his life—he could only receive God's grace through faith.

Maybe there are some of us today who need to acknowledge this in our own lives. Maybe there are some of us who need to humble ourselves before God in order to become a new creation in Christ Jesus.

On the other side of the same coin, there might be some of us who grew up in church and we gave our lives to Christ at an early age; but it's kind of like we stopped there, and we've forgotten to live into the good works that God prepared beforehand for us. We've become a new creation in Christ Jesus, but we've stopped short by not fully participating in what God wants to do in the world.

### **Invitation**

Obviously, we are all in different places in our faith journey, but I hope you will take the time to be still and listen for God to lead you and direct you in how you need to take the next step on your faith journey. Maybe for some of us it begins with identifying the chaotic mess in our lives, and instead of giving up on ourselves or feeling like God has given up on us, it is time for us to turn over the mess we've made to let God to begin shaping us and molding us into something new.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Do you have any hobbies? If so, share what they are with the group.
2. Redemption is God taking the messes we make and creating something new. What does your story of redemption look like? (it's okay if it's a work in progress!)
3. When considering the relationship between faith and works, have you ever gotten the cart before the horse and tried to establish a right relationship with God on the basis of good works rather than grace? If so, please share.
4. If God is the potter and you are the clay, how is God shaping you right now?
5. How have you experienced God recently?

6. How can we pray for you?