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SALVATION BY GRACE
THROUGH FAITH ALONE

Ephesians 2:8-9

By

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October 21, 2007
Ephesians Lesson 14

Salvation by Grace through Faith Alone Ephesians 2:8-9

One of the questions that we ask on our membership application (which comes from the Evangelism Explosion training) is, "If you were to die today and stand before God and He asked, 'Why should I let you into My heaven?' what would you say?" The question gets to the heart of, "What are you trusting in for eternal life?"

As such, there is no more important question in the world to be crystal clear on! If you place your hope of eternal life in something, only to find when you stand before God that it will *not* get you into heaven, you're doomed! There are no makeup exams at the judgment seat! You'd better get it right before you die!

From every possible angle I try to make clear what the Bible says about this crucial question. But even so, it is not uncommon to have people that have sat under my teaching for months answer, "I've lived a good life and done the best that I could do." Or, "I am a basically good person and I've never tried to hurt anyone."

Those are wrong answers when it comes to getting into heaven! Of course, getting into heaven is not just a matter of answering a question correctly. It requires a spiritual resurrection from the dead, as we have seen. It requires having God forgive your sins, so that you are truly reconciled to Him. But for that to happen, you must be clear on the biblical truth of how that happens. And Satan has worked overtime to sow confusion among the world's religions, including the major branches of Christianity, on the question of how a person gets eternal life.

Paul answers this crucial question in these verses. He wrote these truths to those who were already saved, to clarify and solidify their understanding of these vital matters. When you share the gospel with others, their misunderstanding of God's grace and the relationship between faith and works will be the major issues you will need to clarify.

Also, as I mentioned last week, even if you have known Christ for many years, you should be growing in your understanding of

the gospel. It is an inexhaustible subject and it should thrill your heart every time you think about it or hear it proclaimed. If you find the gospel boring, you should be concerned about your own soul! We all need to be clear on these matters for our own sakes, and so that we can share it clearly with others.

When you include verse 10, Paul's message is that salvation is by grace through faith apart from good works, but it inevitably results in a life of good works. But we are only going to focus on verses 8 & 9 today, where Paul says,

Salvation is by grace through faith alone, not as a result of good works, so that God alone gets the glory.

To get a handle on this text, you must understand five key concepts: "saved"; "grace"; "faith"; "gift" (as opposed to "works"); and, "boast" (or, glory).

1. To be saved means that the Lord Jesus Christ has rescued us from God's wrath and judgment.

As we saw in 2:1-3, we were formerly dead in our trespasses and sins, and "were by nature children of wrath." God's wrath is not a popular topic in our day, but if you get rid of the concept, you may as well throw out your entire Bible, because it is throughout both the Old and New Testaments. It reaches a climax in the Book of Revelation, which shows that God will pour out His wrath on this evil world, culminating in the final, eternal judgment of the lake of fire. Because of sin, we all are alienated from God in His holiness. All who are not saved are under God's righteous judgment, objects of His wrath.

Theological liberals have always emphasized God's love and denied His wrath. But in our day, this kind of watered down thinking is not only in liberal circles. It is also popular among those who profess to be evangelicals. Last Sunday, the TV show, "60 Minutes," did a segment on Joel Osteen, pastor of America's largest church and author of the best seller, *Your Best Life Now* [Warner Faith]. Host Byron Pitts was surprised at the absence of any mention of God or Jesus Christ in the main points of Osteen's latest book, *To Become a Better You*, which was just released last week.

Osteen's response was, "That's just my message. There is scripture in there that backs it all up. But I feel like, Byron, I'm

called to help people...how do we walk out the Christian life? How do we live it? And these are principles that can help you. I mean, there's a lot better people qualified to say, 'Here's a book that going to explain the scriptures to you.' I don't think that's my gifting." He got that right! But then why is he a pastor? How can you genuinely help lost people if you don't point them to the cross of Christ?

Pitts got Michael Horton's take on this. Horton is a professor of theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, California. Horton rightly observed: "[Osteen's] core message is God is nice, you're nice, be nice...." (The above taken from, <http://psalm8611.blogspot.com>.)

The point is, if we are not under God's wrath, then Jesus didn't need to go to the cross and we don't need to be saved. By going to the cross, Jesus paid the penalty that we are under because of our sin. Paul here says, "For by grace you *have been* saved...." Either you have been saved or you haven't. There is no middle ground. Either Jesus has rescued you from God's wrath or you are not saved. The next word to understand is, "grace."

2. Salvation by grace alone means that we did absolutely nothing to earn or merit salvation.

Simply defined, *grace is God's unmerited favor*. If you did anything to earn it or deserve it, it is not grace. If God owes it to you because you're a pretty good person or you've tried to do the best you can, it is not grace. If God gives it to you because He foresaw that you would believe in Him of your own free will, it is not grace. Grace means that you get the opposite of what you deserve. You deserve God's wrath because you have sinned against Him. Instead, He saves you by His grace.

Grace cuts directly against the grain of human thinking, because it is not fair. We value fairness. If someone does wrong, he should get what he has coming. If someone does right, he should be rewarded. But if someone does wrong and gets rewarded in spite of it, we protest, "That's not fair!"

Take a guy who is a thief. He has stolen from hardworking people. On some occasions, he has hurt his victims or even killed them. But he shrugs it off and continues his life of crime. Finally, he is apprehended and convicted. On death row, he hears that God

will forgive all of his sins if he will trust in Christ, even though he does not deserve it and he cannot make up for what he has done. At first, he can't believe it. It sounds too good to be true. But then he does believe it. He trusts Christ to save him from eternal judgment. He dies and goes to spend eternity with God in heaven. That's not fair!

Or, take the case of a guy who is very religious. He prays several times a day. He fasts twice a week. He gives ten percent of his income to charitable causes. He doesn't swindle people out of money. He treats others fairly. He has been faithful in his marriage. He thinks that doing all of these things will commend himself to God. But, he dies and goes to hell. We cry, "That's not fair!"

But, I didn't make up these stories. The thief was hanging next to Jesus on the cross. Jesus paid his debt and the thief went to heaven that very day (Luke 23:39-43). The religious man was the Pharisee in Jesus' parable who thought himself to be righteous (Luke 18:9-14). He was not justified from his sins, because he was trusting in his own good works to save him.

If God were fair, we'd all go to hell, because we all have sinned. God did not compromise His righteousness or justice to forgive us. His justice demands that the penalty be paid. Jesus paid the penalty on the cross for all that trust in Him. In that way, God can be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). Someone has rightly described G-R-A-C-E as, "God's Riches At Christ's Expense." We naturally resist God's grace because it robs us of all our pride. But there is no other way of salvation. It is by grace alone. But we also need to understand, "faith."

3. Salvation through faith alone means that we receive salvation through trusting in what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Many people misunderstand the nature of saving faith. Some have a sort of general, vague faith in God, whoever He may be, that is kind of like positive thinking. "I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows! I believe in the basic goodness of people and the goodness of God. Everything will turn out for the good in the end." But that is not saving faith.

Some think that faith is mere assent to certain facts. In other words, they think that making a decision to accept Christ constitutes saving faith, even if there is no repentance and no subsequent obedience to Christ as Lord. That kind of mere assent to the facts of the gospel is *not* saving faith. To understand saving faith, you need to grasp two things:

A. Saving faith includes knowledge, assent, and trust.

First, there must be *knowledge*. There is content that must be understood. Some say, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere." That's like saying, "It doesn't matter what medicine you take, as long as you're sincere." It matters greatly that you take the right medicine in the right dose, or you could die!

To be saved, you must know something about God. He is righteous, holy, just, and loving. You must also know that you have sinned against God and stand guilty and condemned before Him. You must know that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, who took on human flesh, born of the virgin Mary. He lived a perfect life and died on the cross as the substitute for sinners, paying on their behalf the penalty that God demands. But God raised Him from the dead and He ascended into heaven. He will return bodily to judge the living and the dead, but also to save all that have trusted in Him. These are basic facts, revealed in the Bible, that you must know to be saved.

But, also, you must give *assent* to these facts, or agree that they are true. A student could know all of these facts well enough to pass an exam, but not affirm that they are true. Saving faith includes intellectually assenting to the truth of the gospel.

But if that is all that saving faith entails, then Satan and the demons are saved. They know these things and they know that they are true. The third element in saving faith is *personal trust, or commitment*. To illustrate, you may be an expert on aircraft. You know that a certain plane is well constructed and mechanically sound. You may also agree that the plane will fly. You've watched it fly many times. You affirm that it is a good plane. But knowing these facts and agreeing to them will not get you anywhere. To get to a destination, you must commit yourself to get on board the plane.

Saving faith is personally trusting Jesus Christ, committing your eternal destiny to what He did for you on the cross. Just as you entrust your life totally to the pilot when you get on board a plane, so you entrust your eternal destiny totally to Jesus and His death as your substitute on the cross. You trust God's promise that He will justify the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). And, implicit in "getting on board" with Christ is that you can't keep one foot on the "terminal" of sin, and the other on board with Christ. You must commit yourself to follow Him as your Lord.

B. Saving faith does not originate with us.

After saying that we have been saved by grace through faith, Paul adds, "and that not of yourselves...." There is debate about what "that" refers to. In Greek it is neuter, whereas both "saved" and "faith" are feminine. Grammatically, it is possible that it refers to faith, and no less a scholar than Charles Hodge argues for this interpretation. He argues that it best suits the design of the passage, where Paul is arguing, "You are not only saved by faith in opposition to works, but your very faith is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." Also, to say that salvation is not of yourselves doesn't add anything to what has just been said, that you are saved by grace.

But Calvin and most modern expositors argue that "that" refers to the entire process of salvation by grace through faith. It is all from God, not of ourselves. Whichever view you take, there are other Scriptures that show that saving faith and repentance (which are inextricably linked) are not from ourselves, but are God's gift. For example, in Philippians 1:29, Paul says, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake." In Acts 11:18, the response of the Jewish Christians when they hear of the Gentiles getting saved is, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life." (See, also, Acts 3:16; 5:31; 2 Tim. 2:25; Heb. 12:2.)

Earlier in my ministry, I did not understand this point. I thought that all people have sufficient faith to believe in Christ. After all, we all exercise faith in many things every day. When we drive, we trust that others will obey the traffic laws. We trust that our food and water are not contaminated. We trust the doctor who scribbles an unreadable prescription and the pharmacist, who looks at this scribbling and hands us a bottle of pills. We trust the bank

with our paycheck. I used to think that people just needed to transfer such faith to Jesus as the object of their faith.

But saving faith is different. To the natural man, the cross is foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18). He cannot understand the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14). He is blind to the light of the gospel (2 Cor. 4:4). He is not able to submit to or please God (Rom. 8:7-8). For the unbeliever in this darkened spiritual state to believe, God must first impart new life to him. His immediate response is to believe in Christ.

C. H. Spurgeon, the great Baptist pastor, explained it this way (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 61:474):

I ask any saved man to look back upon his own conversion, and explain how it came about. You turned to Christ, and believed on his name: these were your own acts and deeds. But what caused you thus to turn? ... Do you attribute this singular renewal to the existence of a something better in you than has been yet discovered in your unconverted neighbor? No, you confess that you might have been what he now is if it had not been that there was a potent something which touched the spring of your will, enlightened your understanding, and guided you to the foot of the cross.

So Paul has shown that salvation—being rescued from God’s wrath—is by grace alone through faith alone in what Jesus did for us on the cross. Also...

4. Salvation is God’s free gift to us.

He adds, “it is the gift of God, not as a result of works....” He is at pains to show that the entire process of salvation comes to us apart from anything in us or anything that we do. Some will argue that God chose us for salvation because He foresaw that we would believe. But then salvation would not be a gift by God’s grace, but rather something that we merited by our faith. Spurgeon answers this error (*C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography* [Banner of Truth], 1:167):

What did He foresee about my faith? Did He foresee that I should get that faith myself, and that I should believe on Him of myself? No; Christ could not foresee that, because no Christian man will ever say that faith came of itself without the gift and without the working of the Holy Spirit.

Paul adds that God's gift is "not as a result of works." It is completely free, stemming from God's grace alone. The Roman Catholic Church muddies the grace of God at this point, teaching that we are saved by grace through faith, but *not* by grace through faith *alone*. Rather, we must cooperate by adding our works. As a result, not even the pope can say for certain what Paul says in verse 8, "you have been saved." The tense of the Greek participle shows that salvation has happened in the past with continuing results. It's a done deal! But when the last pope died, the present pope urged the faithful to pray him into heaven. If even the pope can't be certain about being saved, how much less the rank and file of the church! Under that system, you can never be sure that you have enough works to merit heaven.

But the Reformers rightly argued that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But there is a final point that Paul makes.

5. Salvation gives all the glory to God and none to us.

He concludes verse 9, "so that no one may boast." Or, as he puts it in 1 Corinthians 1:31 after arguing that salvation rests on God's choosing us, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." If any part of salvation, including the faith that saves, comes from us, then we have some grounds for boasting. No, Paul says, if salvation is totally of the Lord, then He gets all the glory.

Conclusion

Spurgeon tells how he came to see these truths for the first time (*Autobiography*, 1:164-165):

When I was coming to Christ, I thought I was doing it all myself, and though I sought the Lord earnestly, I had no idea the Lord was seeking me. I do not think the young convert is at first aware of this. I can recall the very day and hour when first I received those truths in my own soul—when they were, as John Bunyan says, burnt into my heart as with a hot iron, and I can recollect how I felt that I had grown on a sudden from a babe into a man—that I had made progress in Scriptural knowledge, through having found, once for all, the clue to the truth of God. One week-night, when I was sitting in the house of God, I was not thinking much about the preacher's

sermon, for I did not believe it. The thought struck me, *How did you come to be a Christian?* I sought the Lord. *But how did you come to seek the Lord?* The truth flashed across my mind in a moment—I should not have sought Him unless there had been some previous influence in my mind to *make me* seek Him. I prayed, thought I, but then I asked myself, *How came I to pray?* I was induced to pray by reading the Scriptures. *How came I to read the Scriptures?* I did read them, but what led me to do so? Then, in a moment, I saw that God was at the bottom of it all, and that He was the Author of my faith, and so the whole doctrine of grace opened up to me, and from that doctrine I have not departed to this day, and I desire to make this my constant confession, “I ascribe my change wholly to God.”

If, as Paul here proclaims, salvation is by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for God’s glory alone, then there is hope for every sinner. Salvation does not depend on you, but rather on God, who is mighty to save. Flee for refuge to Christ and these wonderful verses apply to you: “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.”

Application Questions

1. Why is it essential to hold to the doctrine of God’s wrath against sinners? What is lost if we abandon it?
2. How does the doctrine that God chooses us because He fore-saw our faith undermine the doctrine of grace alone?
3. Why must saving faith include repentance and submission to Christ as Lord? Is this adding works to faith, as some contend?
4. How does the view that we can believe in Christ of our own free will detract from God’s glory in salvation? Is this a minor or a serious error?

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