

THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF GRACE, FAITH, AND WORKS

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One of the least recognized and yet one of the most serious problems of our day (or any day) is a correct understanding of what is involved in man's salvation. This is critically important. Misinformation or partial information concerning a business investment may cost a man his money, but it will not cost him his soul. Misinformation or partial information concerning his physical health may cost a man his life, but it will not cost him his soul. On the other hand, however, misinformation or partial information concerning salvation may cost a man his eternal destiny in heaven.

There are three key words which must be understood in their relationship to each other if one is to have a correct understanding of the subject of salvation. These words are: Grace, Faith, and Works. There are those who feel that man is saved by God's grace alone. Others feel that God's grace must be met by faith on the part of man. By faith they mean belief, plus mental commitment to the Lord. Still others feel that in addition to grace and belief there are certain acts of obedience which are necessary in order for man to be saved.

What do you think? Or, perhaps it would be better to inquire why you believe what you believe about salvation. Still better, we might ask what the scriptures teach about salvation. What is the Biblical doctrine of salvation? Let us turn to the scriptures themselves for our answer.

Grace

As we come to this first key word in our study, we need a brief definition. Grace literally means "unmerited favor." It means blessings from God which the sinner does not deserve or merit. Salvation is thus conceived as something given to man, not as a matter of debt, but as an undeserved gift. In short, man cannot achieve heaven by works of merit.

As we think of the scriptures our minds immediately go to Eph. 2:8-9, which reads, "For by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory." Salvation is a gift from God, not achieved by man's own works of merit. A similar passage is found in Romans 5:8, where the apostle Paul says, "But God commendeth his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,"

A very significant passage on the subject of grace is found in Titus 2:11-14, where we learn that God's grace has already appeared. "For the grace of God hath appeared (past tense), bringing salvation to all men, instructing us, to the intent that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly and righteously and godly in this present world; looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a people for his own possession, zealous of good works." Notice that God's grace has already come.

It is at this point that many people have a basic misunderstanding. Many expect the grace and mercy of God to be extended to man at the judgment, whereas we have no such promises in God's book. Rather, as in this passage, the grace of God has already come in the person of Jesus Christ. In other words, salvation and the freedom from sin which it implies are possible only in Christ. Man has the privilege of accepting God's gift of salvation by coming to Christ or of rejecting it by staying away from Christ, Nineteen hundred years ago God's grace was made available to all men regardless of color, race, and background.

God's part in salvation is suggested by the word grace. It is the larger part; man's part is the smaller part. It is not possible to say that grace is ninety percent of salvation, or even that it is ninety-nine percent, but such figures do indicate at least something of the right kind of balance. When compared with man's part in salvation, God's part looms so large as to make man's part seem relatively insignificant. However insignificant man's role is in comparison with God's role, man's role is also necessary and is therefore vitally important.

Faith

As we turn from God's part in salvation to man's part we immediately come to the second of our key words, the word faith. In Heb. 11:6 we find this definitive statement, "Without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him."

Just here I should like to turn back to the gospel of John and read verses 14-16 from chapter 3, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life." This passage shows that so far as man's obligations in salvation are concerned faith is necessary and obligatory.

One of the most significant statements concerning faith in all the New Testament is that found in Rom. 1:16-17, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith: as it is written, But the righteous shall live by faith."

This scripture became Martin Luther's favorite text. He was repelled by the idea of salvation by works of merit, such as pilgrimages, the climbing of stairs on one's knees, fasts, vigils, penance, and the like. With Luther the pendulum swung from the extreme of merit works salvation all the way to the opposite extreme of salvation by faith alone--apart from the doing of any good work.

Is this the end of the story of salvation? Hardly. There are other scriptures which must be read.

Works (or Obedience)

While the emphasis on faith is fresh in our minds, I want to read other scriptures that are equally inspired with those that we have just read. For example, from the final portion of the greatest sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount, I read, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven ... Everyone therefore that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man, who built his house upon the rock; and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon the rock. And everyone that heareth these words of mine and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man who built his house upon the sand: the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and smote upon that house; and it fell; and great was the fall thereof." (Matt. 7:21, 24-27). Notice the emphasis upon doing the will of God in this passage.

In II Cor. 5:10 the apostle Paul wrote, "For we must all be made manifest before the judgment-seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he hath done, whether it be good or bad." I Peter 4:11 is a similar statement, "For the time is come for judgment to begin at the house of God: and if it begin first with us, what shall be the end of them that obey not the gospel of God?" In this connection we also need to remember the words of James, the Lord's brother, who wrote, "Even so faith, if it have not works, is dead in itself ... Ye see that by works a man is justified, and not only by faith ... For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, even so faith apart from works is dead." (James 2:17, 24, 26).

Finally, in this connection, I would read II Thess. 1:7-9, "To you that are afflicted rest with us, at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus: who shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might." Notice that the vengeance of the Lord at the time of judgment will be rendered against: (1) them that know not God, and (2) them that obey not the gospel. These passages obviously indicate that obedience to the commands of God is imperative if one expects to be saved eternally.

Solution to the Problem

Are we to understand that the scriptures contradict themselves? Was it a matter of Paul versus James, or Christ versus Peter, or even Paul versus Paul? The solution to the seeming contradictions among the passages read is found in a phrase in Gal. 5:6, where the apostle Paul says, "Faith working through love."

Grace is God's part in man's salvation. Faith working is man's part. Notice that it is not mere belief. "The demons also believe and shudder," (James 2:19) yet the demons are not saved. It is not mere belief, but belief which results in obedience to God's commands. If it is not working faith, it is not Biblical faith and it is not saving faith.

Bible students usually agree that the theme of the book of Romans is faith. Many fail to realize that the faith of which the apostle Paul speaks in the Roman letter is an obedient faith. This is quite obvious, for in the opening paragraph of the book, Romans 1:5, we find the apostle using the expression, "Unto obedience of faith." At the opposite end of the book, in the final paragraph, Romans 16:26, we find him using the expression, "unto obedience of faith" again. Thus, he frames his entire discussion with the idea that the faith of which he is speaking is an obedient faith. For Paul, faith signifies a way of life, rather than an intellectual concept. For Paul, faith includes the living of a life of obedience and trust to God.

It is just here that we can well ask the question, "How does faith save?" The answer is found in the fact that faith always saves as it leads a man to do the Lord's will. Notice, for example, the story of the conversion of the Philippian jailor, which we find in Acts 16. The pagan Roman jailor, after the earthquake has jarred loose the doors of his prison, falls down before Paul and Silas and says, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house. And they spake the word of the Lord unto him, with all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his immediately. And he brought them up into his house, and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God." (Acts 16:3-34). Notice that this Roman jailor believed, but also notice that a part of "having believed in God" was obedience to God's command of baptism. Inseparably bound up with his hearing and accepting of the gospel was his doing of what the gospel required.

In a second example we turn to Gal. 3:26-27, where we read, "For ye are all sons of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus." Notice, however, how the matter of becoming sons of God was accomplished as set forth in the following sentence, "For as many, of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ."

Yet another evidence suggesting plainly that faith involves obedience is found in the great eleventh chapter of Hebrews. Notice that in each case mentioned, the person being eulogized by the Lord is a person whose faith was made meaningful by obedience to God, "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice ... By faith Noah ... prepared an ark to the saving of his house ... By faith Abraham ... obeyed to go out ... By faith Abraham ... offered up Isaac ... By faith Moses ... refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God." (Heb. 11:4, 7, 8, 17, 24). In each case the man spoken of as a man of faith did something.

Grace is God's overture toward man; obedient faith is man's response toward God. Faith is a condition of heart, which involves obedience to God's commands. If faith does not involve obedience it is not Biblical, saving faith. Grace is salvation made possible; obedient faith is salvation made actual. Grace made salvation available to all men of all time, but only obedient faith makes salvation a reality for any man at any time. When one separates faith from action he has destroyed faith.

At this point I should like to say again that man does not earn salvation. Luke 17:10 reads, "Even so ye also, when ye shall have done all the things that have been commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do." When man obeys God's commandments to the very best of his ability he still has not earned heaven as a matter of right or of debt. Even when man has done all he is yet an unprofitable servant and salvation is a free gift from God. However, man does have the responsibility of complying with God's conditions of pardon in order to receive the gift of salvation.

Conclusion

Do you see the tragedy of the situation when man is led to believe that salvation is by God's grace apart from anything that he must do? This has led thousands of people back through the ages to feel that they were saved when actually they were not saved. God's grace must be met by man's response in order for salvation to become actual.

Do you see the tragedy of the situation when man is led to believe that salvation is by faith alone, and faith is defined so as not to include obedience? Literally millions of people have been led to believe that they are saved upon their faith in Christ and their private commitment to him. This is a doctrine that cannot be squared with all of the plain teachings that one finds in the New Testament, as we have just shown in this study. The only possible, consistent explanation of all the passages taken together is that faith must involve obedience to God's will in order to be called Biblical faith. Only open, obedient faith will save the sinner from his sins.

It is vital on a theme of such magnitude as this that we reach the whole gospel of Christ, rather than a partial gospel. Grace must be preached. Faith must be preached. Obedience must be preached. It is in this vein that I would remind you that the apostle Paul wrote, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved: for with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." (Rom. 10:9-10). Also, I would remind you, that the apostle Peter on Pentecost, after he had led the multitude to believe in Christ as God's Son, heard them ask, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter then replied, "Repent ye, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:37-38).

When standing upon Mars Hill in Athens, Paul said, "The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent: inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world." (Acts 17:30-31). Notice also the instructions given by Ananias, when the Lord directed him to Saul of Tarsus in the city of Damascus. Saul had spent three days and three nights in fasting and prayer after having come to believe that Jesus was the Christ. At this juncture Ananias said, "And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name." (Acts 22:16). These and other simple commandments must be accepted and obeyed in order for one to demonstrate that he has faith in God and in his Son Jesus Christ.

Friend, I would ask, "Have you believed in Christ as the Son of God? Have you turned away from or repented of past sins? Have you confessed the name of Jesus before men? Have you been buried with your Lord in Baptism?" If the answer is no to any one of these three questions, I beg of you to delay no longer in carrying out God's instructions in order that your faith may become full and complete as it is demonstrated by obedience, in order that the grace of God may become operative in your life.

Finally, I would remind you that misinformation or partial information concerning a business investment may cost a man his money, but it will not cost him his soul. Misinformation or partial information concerning his physical condition may cost a man his life, but it will not cost him his soul. However, misinformation or partial information concerning salvation may cost a man his eternal destiny in heaven. The apostle Paul wrote concerning the gospel of Christ in Romans 1:16, "It is the power of God unto salvation." He was speaking of the whole gospel, which included God's grace, and man's obedient faith.