

Salvation by Grace: the Gift of God

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The biblical truth of salvation by grace is a fundamental concept which should be understood by every Christian believer. As a result of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven to be Lord over God's people a new era has begun in God's plan of salvation for mankind. A new covenant relationship has been established between God and his people. No longer is God's relationship with his people based upon the imperfect sacrifices, rituals or legal code of the Old Testament Mosaic Law. Instead, it is based upon the perfect "once for all time" sacrifice of Christ and is "sealed" by the Spirit of the living God which is given to all of God's people (Heb. 9:15; II Cor. 3:6; Eph. 1:13-14). Those who believe in Jesus Christ, accepting him as their Lord, are born of God's Spirit becoming children in God's family and members of the church of the body of Christ. As a result, God's new covenant people are now able to know God as their own personal Father and to worship him "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:21-24; Eph. 2:18-22; Phil. 3:3). For believers in Christ, therefore, the blessings of salvation begin in this present life and will be brought to their glorious completion in the life of the coming age at Christ's second coming. The Book of Romans tells us specifically how God's gift of salvation may now be received in this age of the new covenant in which we live:

That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved (Rom. 10:9-10).

The "how" of receiving salvation is to confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and to believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. In these verses the words "confess" and "believe" are simply two sides of the same coin. To believe that "God raised Jesus from the dead" is to accept this testimony of God's word as being true and then to hold to it within your life. To confess that "Jesus is Lord" is to acknowledge, or state outwardly, what

you believe to be true inwardly. This belief and confession are based upon the freewill decision of any individual and mark the beginning of a lifetime relationship of living in faith under Christ's lordship.

Biblically, Jesus is Lord because as the Son of God he died for our sins purchasing us for himself and then was raised to life by God to rule as Lord over God's people and creation. The Book of Acts explains:

God has raised this Jesus to life and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

'The Lord [God] said to my Lord [Christ]: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:32-36).

Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming Christ by dying for our sins and then being raised from the dead. He was then exalted to God's right hand in heaven and "enthroned" or "coronated" as Lord and Christ in fulfillment of Psalm 110. There he will "reign" until the time, in God's eternal plan, when he will come again to bring complete salvation for God's people, destroy God's enemies and establish God's kingdom forever (I Cor. 15:24-25).

It should be understood that the terms "Lord," "Christ" and "Son of God" are all messianic titles which refer to the same essential truths in the Bible. "Lord" means "ruler or master." "Christ" means "God's anointed Savior and King." And the term "Son of God," when speaking of Jesus, refers to the one born by divine conception and then sent by God to fulfill all the Old Testament prophecies concerning the promised Messiah or Christ. All of these terms can, therefore, be used interchangeably because when we speak of Jesus as "Lord," "Christ" or "Son of God" we are speaking of the same person. Compare the following verses:

Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved ... (Acts 16:31).

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God (I John 5:1).

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life (I John 5:13).

These are all different ways of expressing the same essential truths. If we choose to believe this testimony, the biblical promise is that we will be "saved," "born of God" and have "eternal life."

By Grace You Have Been Saved

Salvation, or eternal life, is a gift from God to man. It is not something that we can work to earn by our own good works nor is it something that we deserve because of our own inherent worthiness. All men have sinned and fall short of God's perfect standard of righteousness (Eph. 2:1; Rom. 3:23; James 2:10). This is precisely why Christ came and gave himself as the ransom sacrifice on behalf of all mankind. By his sacrificial death he paid the price for the sins of all people for all time. Those who choose to accept him receive the benefits of this - the gift of eternal life. Look at the Book of Romans:

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:23).

Sin pays a wage and that wage is death. Since all men have sinned, the Bible says that all men will also one day die (Rom. 5:12; Heb. 9:27). Simply put, man is mortal and not even all the wonders of medical science can solve this, the greatest of all problems. But this is precisely what God has done through Christ. For Christ is the firstborn from the dead, guaranteeing that all who believe in him will also receive the gift of immortality at his second coming.

The Books of Romans and Ephesians emphasize the truth that this salvation is a gift from God and cannot be earned either by works of religious ritual or by good works of service to others. Instead, salvation is received through faith - a humble trust in God and his Son:

Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the

wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness (Rom. 4:4-5).

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:8-10).

If righteousness, or salvation, could be earned by working for it then some would be able to boast before God about their goodness. However, the Bible clearly teaches that no one can be good enough to attain salvation through their own merit - because we all fall short. Good works in a Christian's life are the *fruit* of salvation - not the means to attaining it. Salvation is totally by grace; that is, undeserved divine favor from God to man. This absolutely rules out any possibility for man by his own merit or good works to be good enough to earn salvation. As the Apostle Paul states:

And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace (Rom. 11:6; cp. Rom. 4:1-5).

Paul elaborates even further on this subject in another section of the Book of Romans:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:21-24).

Through believing in Jesus Christ we are forgiven of our sins and justified, or made righteous, in God's sight. This is a result of Christ's sacrificial death in which he redeemed us, or set us free, by paying the ransom price for our sins. Therefore, this righteousness and salvation are now available to all who desire to receive it through faith in Christ (Rom. 10:9-10). All of this is by grace. Why? Because "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Therefore, we all need a savior, and when we accept him the same gift of righteousness, salvation or eternal life is given to all.

Salvation: Present and Future

After the day of Pentecost, when the gift of holy Spirit was first given, the New Testament speaks of two aspects of God's gift of salvation: present and future. Believers in Christ have already "been saved" (Eph. 2:8) and yet they have not yet received the fullness of "the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (I Pet. 1:5). When a person believes in Christ he is at that moment born of God's Spirit (John 1:12-13; 3:1-8; I John 5:1) and becomes a child in God's family (Rom 8:16; Gal. 4:4-7), a spiritual citizen of God's kingdom (Eph. 2:18-19, Phil. 3:20) and a member of the church of the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:12-13, 27). In addition, the believer is spiritually redeemed, justified and righteous in God's sight (I Cor. 6:11; Rom. 8:10; I Cor. 1:30). All of this is a result of the believer receiving the "firstfruits of the Spirit" (Rom. 8:23), because the Spirit is a "downpayment" or "deposit, guaranteeing our inheritance" in the future kingdom of God (Eph. 1:13-14; II Cor. 1:21-22, 5:5). Therefore, the believer in Christ is able to enjoy already, in part, the blessings of salvation which will one day come in all of their fullness. Let's look at some examples of how the New Testament Letters speak of both the present and future aspects of salvation:

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:4-7).

Here we see clearly both the present and future aspects of God's gift of salvation. As believers in Christ we are already saved and justified but we also still have the hope of future eternal life. Look at the Letter of I John which also elaborates on this theme:

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! ... Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he [Christ]

appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (I John 3:1-2).

We are already God's children! And yet, there is something much greater to come in the future when Christ "appears a second time" (Heb. 9:28). For then, we will see Christ "face to face" (I Cor. 13:12) and be instantaneously changed to be "like him." Let's look at one more example of this "already" but "not yet" life of the believer:

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Phil. 3:20-21).

We are already, by way of the Spirit, citizens of God's kingdom which is now in heaven, but the day is coming when Christ will come again to establish God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:9-10). At that time our "lowly bodies" will be transformed to become like his "glorious body." That is the Christian hope; for though even now we are the children of God, we still "groan" in these mortal bodies waiting for the time when mortality will be "swallowed up by life" and we receive "the redemption of our bodies" (II Cor. 5:1-8; Rom. 8:22-23).

The Second Coming of Christ

The Bible is absolutely clear on the truth that the second coming of Christ is the one and only hope of Christianity. It is only then that believers in Christ will be transformed from mortality to immortality so as to enjoy forever "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). The Book of I Corinthians gives the details of this incredible transformation which will take place for all of God's people - whether dead or alive - at Christ's glorious second coming:

I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep [die], but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable

must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true:

'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death is your victory?' 'Where, O death is your sting?'

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (I Cor. 15:50-57).

We are already the people of God - children in his family and spiritual citizens of his kingdom. But the fullness of eternal life will not be ours until "death has been swallowed up in victory." When, then, will this take place? At death? No! Only at the second coming of Christ and not before. Death is an enemy that must be defeated (I Cor. 15:26), not a friend which brings us into immortality with Christ. Believers in Christ who die are said to be "asleep in Christ" and their *next conscious thought* will be their "awakening" to immortality at Christ's second coming. They will then be raised to meet him in the air so as to be with him - from that moment on - forever. The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians pinpoints this climactic moment in God's plan of salvation:

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever (I Thess. 4:13-17).

When will believers be with Christ forever? Only at Christ's glorious second coming and not

before. It is that moment, therefore, that must be the focal point of all Christian hope and expectation. For then, and only then, will mortality be "swallowed up by life" (II Cor. 5:4). Then, and only then, will believers in Christ "inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50; II Thess. 1:1-10). And then, and only then, will God's eternal purpose in Christ - destined for our glory before time began - be fulfilled in all its glory (Rom. 8:18-30; Eph. 1:9-10; I Cor. 15:20-28, 50-58).

Who Can Be Saved?

Many times sincere Christians do not think they are worthy of such grace. They feel that they are so bad that most certainly God could not accept and forgive them. But this is the whole point of why Christ came and died for us. We must always remember that salvation is the free gift of God - available to all who will accept it - because of the sacrifice of Christ on behalf of all mankind. The Apostle Paul speaks directly to this issue:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst. But for this very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life (I Tim. 1:15-16).

Paul knew that if there was ever anyone undeserving of God's salvation then surely it was him. For despite his great learning and rigorous adherence to the religious traditions of Judaism, he was in fact greatly deceived before the time he accepted Christ (Phil. 3:2-9; Titus 3:1-7); so deceived, in fact, that he had zealously persecuted, even to death, believers in Christ. And yet God in his wonderful grace and mercy had forgiven Paul. This incredible "salvation by grace" serves as an example of Christ's "unlimited patience" in waiting for people to recognize their need for him as their savior and to accept his gracious offer of eternal life. The Bible calls this decisive change in a person's heart and life "repentance." It is the recognition of one's unworthy life and a turning to God for the salvation which he freely gives through faith in Christ. It is God's desire "for all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4). He does not wish for any to perish but to come

to repentance (II Pet. 3:9). Therefore, the invitation continuously goes out to all in this day of salvation:

'In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation' (II Cor. 6:2).

Now truly is the time for "our Savior, Christ Jesus, has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (II Tim. 1:10). Let us therefore accept this gift of salvation which God has made available through his Son. The Letter of I John sums up the choice that stands

before us all and the gift that can freely be ours by faith:

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life (I John 5:11-13).

[This article is adapted from chapter three of the forthcoming 3rd edition of this writer's booklet "God's Plan of Salvation" and can be ordered free of charge from this newsletter]