

May13, 2012
 Isaiah 55:1-13 / Titus 3:3-8 / Ephesians 2:8-9
 What It Means To Be Saved by Grace

Today we come to a "grand finale" of sorts. We come to verse 8 where Paul takes and summarizes everything he's said in vv. 1-7 in one very clear, concise and extremely crucial verse of Scripture. A verse we could call the "ultimate guide" when it comes to correctly understanding the Christian concept of how one comes to be saved.

In fact, here in these two verses, we see salvation presented as two different things at once: Humanities greatest need and God's greatest gift. And not just His greatest gift, but His free gift to us. The one thing we need the most, given freely to undeserving sinners as a gift of sheer grace.

And I say sheer grace, because there was nothing God required of us that He didn't either do for us, supply for us, or make us able by His grace, to do. That's why Paul can say here in v. 8 (just as he did in v. 5): ***"It is by GRACE you have been saved..." "For by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not of yourselves, it is the free gift of God -- not of works lest anyone should boast."***

It's a precious, precious, precious verse! One we should not only memorize / but dig into / and tear apart / and pray over / and meditate upon / and know so well / that we can, "give an answer to anyone who asks us about the reason for the hope that is in us with meekness and fear."

And what's the truth it teaches? That God saves undeserving sinners by grace, through faith, as a free gift. And He does it that way, says Paul, so that no one will have any ability whatsoever to boast in themselves.

So with that as our introduction, let's dissect this text, and consider every aspect of what it says, since it is so absolutely foundational to everything we believe as Christians. And let's do so by taking each key word in the order in which it comes, starting **FIRST** with the word "grace" -- "For it is by GRACE you have been saved..."

Actually it's the second time Paul has said the exact same thing! For in verse 5 we read: ***"God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive when we were dead in transgressions and sins -- it is by grace you have been saved."***

And what did we say grace was last week? Undeserved favor. It is getting something you've done everything NOT to deserve, could never earn, and would never be able to make yourself worthy enough to receive. And in that sense, it's not just a gift, and it's not just given freely, it's a gift given to people that we would probably never chose to give a gift to! (Especially when one considers it's the greatest of all gifts that anyone could ever be given).

If you had a billion dollars to give away, chances are you'd probably do what Will Smith did in the movie "Seven Pounds." You'd try to find the most worthy, appreciative, deserving people you could. Not God! "While we were still powerless," says Paul in Rom. 5:6, "Christ died for the ungodly."

He "demonstrated His love in this: that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." / And to heighten the sense of God's grace, he adds: "While we were still His enemies we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son."

That's grace my friends. The Pharisees made people earn their favor by jumping through all sorts of man-made hoops. The Legalists of our day make people perform to an acceptable degree, reform their lifestyle (or promise to reform it) before they will welcome them into their fellowship.

And most everyone in general would be more likely to give the most valuable gift they have to someone who did something to make themselves worthy of receiving it. But not God. When God gives salvation, His purpose is NOT to reward people for their merit, virtues or worthiness. It is to display the incomparable riches of His grace by showing us mercy and a kindness that we've done nothing to deserve (as Paul makes clear in v. 7).

So if some unbeliever asks you: "How were you saved?" what's the only suitable answer one can give and still be in line with Scripture? "I was saved by nothing other than the sheer grace of a merciful God who did for me what I could never have done for myself."

Grace means that God gets all the credit for us being saved. Because everything that needed to be done for me to be saved was done by Him.

- 1.) Because our salvation demanded a sacrifice for sin that was free from the polluting effects of original sin, He sent Christ to be born of a virgin, by the overshadowing power of the Holy Spirit. It demanded One who was "NOT (like the rest of humanity) an object of wrath by nature." (Grace, because it was something we could never be nor do.)
- 2.) He came as both human and divine, because the Law demanded a sacrifice for sin that was both human (and thus the only fitting sacrifice for human sin) and also divine (and thus a flawlessly perfect and acceptable sacrifice). (Grace, because it was something we could never be nor supply.)
- 3.) In His LIFE of perfect obedience to the Law He provided for sinners the only righteousness God accepts -- 100% flawless, sinless, perfect obedience. (Grace, because it was something we could never have provided.)
- 4.) In His SUFFERINGS and DEATH He shed the blood of atonement which paid the penalty for sin and purchased forgiveness for all our sins. (Grace, because our sin-stained blood could never atone for even one minor sin.)
- 5.) In His RESURRECTION from the dead, He secured our justification or right standing with God that we might live at peace with Him. (Grace, because we would only have remained in death.)
- 6.) In His ascension and exaltation He went ahead of us to secure our place in heaven and prepare a place for us. (Grace, because man can neither secure it for himself, nor lift himself to heaven.)
- 7.) (And bringing us to our passage) by His Holy Spirit He "made us alive when we were dead in trespasses and sins." (Grace, because spiritually dead people can do nothing to make themselves alive.)
- 8.) In making us alive, God also joined us to Jesus (as we saw last week) thereby joining us to Him in His life, death, resurrection, ascension and present exaltation at the right hand of the Father! (Grace, upon grace, upon

grace, because no person has the ability to obey perfectly, put the sin nature to death, give themselves life, raise themselves up with Jesus, and seat themselves with Him in the heavenly realms.)

Folks, could it be any clearer that if anyone is saved, they owe it all to the sheer grace of God from beginning to end? Because what was needed from our end, WE could never have provided. But to the glory of His grace HE provided it for us. Which gives us another definition of grace: ***"Grace is God doing for helpless, powerless, sin-bound and undeserving people what they could never have done for themselves."***

The American Gospel (which comes from Ben Franklin and only serves to feed human pride and give us abundant reason to boast) is: "God helps them who help themselves," while the Biblical Gospel (which crucifies all human pride and gives us no reason to boast at all) is: ***"God helps those who are unable to help themselves. He saves those who are unable (in any way, shape or form) to save themselves."***

That's why Paul can stress twice in this one passage: "It is by GRACE you have been saved." And to suggest otherwise is not only to contradict the entire message of the NT, it's to make the Gospel a non-Gospel.

Which brings us to the **SECOND** word -- "saved." "For it is by grace you have been saved." And I won't spend too much time here, since I preached a whole series of messages on this word not too long ago.

So let it suffice to say that "salvation" (according to the Bible) is primarily, first and foremost, to be "saved" from the POWER and the PENALTY of SIN.

It's a gift of God whereby He saves us from the control and dominion and enslaving bondage sin has over our lives (Matt. 1:21 / Rom. 3, 5, 6 & 7) / as well as the horrible penalty of sin, which is death / divine wrath / or eternal destruction (Rom. 6:23 / I Thess. 1:10 / II Thess. 1:5-10).

That's why you can never speak of the topic of salvation (in a biblical sense) without addressing the topic of human sin. Because that's what salvation is: Deliverance, rescue, shelter or liberation from the enslaving power and horrible

penalty of sin. Or as Alexander Maclaren once put it: ***"Christian salvation is, on its negative side, a deliverance from something impending -- peril [or divine wrath] and a healing of something infecting us -- the sickness of sin."***

And lest we ever forget, let me add what Paul makes so clear today: Salvation, in its entirety is something God gives us as a gift of His grace. It's both our greatest need and God's greatest gift. Enough said!

Then **THIRD**, we come to the word "faith." "For by grace you have been saved, through faith..." And what is this nebulous, hard to picture thing we call "faith"?

Faith is reliance. / Faith is trust. / Faith is looking out from the self to the promise-keeping ability, and trustworthiness (or integrity) of another. It means to lean upon / confide in / commit to / entrust into the care of / and so forth. That is what God calls us to do when He calls us to believe. He calls us to rely upon what He's done for us and not upon anything we do for our salvation. Faith is simply trusting in everything that's been provided for my salvation by God. That's what he means to saved "through faith."

And here, the great John Murray (who taught down at Westminster here in Philly), reminds us of what Paul stresses here when he wrote: ***"It is to be remembered that the efficacy of faith does not reside in itself. Faith is not something that merits the favor of God. All the efficacy unto salvation resides in the Savior. As one has aptly and truly stated the case: 'It is not faith that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ; strictly speaking it is not even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ who saves through faith.' Faith unites us to Christ in the bonds of abiding attachment and entrustment and it is this union [with Christ] which insures that the saving power, grace and virtue of the Savior becomes operational in the believer. The specific character of faith is that it looks away from itself [that is, our faith is not in our faith]... it finds its whole interest and object in Christ. He is the absorbing preoccupation of faith."***

We are called to look to the Christ "who is our righteousness, holiness and redemption." For everything we need for salvation is found in Him.

Which brings us to the **FOURTH** word (or phrase) we need to consider, where Paul says: "And THIS not of yourselves, it is the free gift of God." Or from the beginning: "For by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not of yourselves, it is the free gift of God..." This is where Paul "pulls the rug out" from underneath the very last thing that we could possibly hold on to that would serve to feed human pride and boasting in regard to salvation.

Because in this little phrase he assures us that even the faith through which we are saved is part and parcel of the gracious work of salvation which He gives to undeserving sinners as a "free gift." **Murray** was right: "***Faith is NOT something that merits the favor of God.***" God does not see our faith and then give us salvation as a reward. He saves us by grace and includes with the gift of salvation the ability to believe.

Yet many people refuse to see it that way. Because they think (and I've met many evangelicals who think this way) -- that although they are NOT saved by works or good deeds or the performance of any religious rites and rituals, there is a sense in which their faith (as something they conjured up or produced and then offered to God in return for salvation) somehow merited God's favor and thus earned them their salvation.

They may not say it that way, but deep down inside they can't help but feel that's the case, because we so want to believe there was something we did that caused God to choose us. And if it wasn't their "works" (they reason), it must have been their "faith" -- not realizing that when you attribute merit to faith, you make it a work!

Yet Paul will have nothing to do with it! For as he tells us in verse 9, the whole purpose in God saving us by grace and giving us that salvation as a free gift, is, "so that no one can boast." The purpose of grace is to make sure that no one will have a leg to stand on when it comes to anything we could somehow take credit for, or use to suggest it made us worthy or deserving of God's saving favor, including the faith through which God saves us. Even that, says Paul, comes to us as a gift of God's grace.

So let me read this verse again, in the way I believe Paul means for us to understand it: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this faith is not of yourselves, it is the free gift of God -- not of works lest any man should boast."

Now, why do I say the word "this" refers back to faith, instead of grace, or salvation?

1st) Because the most normal way of reading it is to connect the word "this" to what immediately precedes it, and what immediately precedes it is the word faith.

2nd) It surely doesn't refer back to grace, since no biblically literate person would suggest that they are the source of a divine grace they don't deserve!

And **3rd)** We could say the same for the word salvation. No Gospel-believing person would suggest that they are the source of the salvation they are given! In both those cases it would be a somewhat foolish and unnecessary redundancy to say that either salvation or grace is, "not of yourselves."

No, there's only one thing in the list of three that one could say is, "of our-selves -- Faith. That's the one thing out of the three that we could say we produced, or we could say was, "of ourselves" -- thus requiring Paul's corrective statement if his goal (as he states) is to remove every possible ground for human boasting.

As R. C. Sproul points out: ***"One way to err on faith is to turn it into a "work." And many have. "Yet the Westminster Divines, in their Shorter Catechism wisely ask, "What is faith in Jesus Christ?" and answer, "Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, whereby we receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered to us in the gospel" (question 86). Faith [then] is not a work on two counts. First, it is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8). It is not just received by grace, it is a grace. Faith is something God gives to us. On our own it is not possible, for we are dead in our trespasses and sins... Second, faith, by its nature, is passive. We rest; we do not work. We receive; we do not earn. / There is more to resting than mere assent, but there is not more work. Indeed there is no work at all -- just resting and receiving the very ground of our salvation -- the work of Christ for us. Rest. Receive. And rejoice."***

He goes on (referring to Eph. 2:8): ***"This passage teaches we are saved by grace, through faith, "this" faith being not of ourselves but of the Lord... Much debate has ensued as to whether the word "this" refers to grace or to faith, and the conclusion drawn is profoundly vital to theology... [Yet] much evidence suggests the 'gift' is our faith. First, Greek grammar allows for this passage to teach that the gift is our faith. / Second, grace by definition is unmerited favor from the Lord. It would be unnecessarily repetitive if grace is the gift Paul speaks of here. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that grace is the antecedent of the word "this." / And Finally, other New Testament passages say faith is a gift from God..."*** (Matt. 11:27 / 16:17 / John 3:3 / John 6:44 / John 6:65 / Acts 13:48 / Acts 16:14 / I Cor. 15:22 / Eph. 2:1).

And of course Sproul is only one of many who see that faith is the gift Paul refers to when he says, "this is not of ourselves." Spurgeon says: ***"Faith, wherever it exists, is, in every case, without exception, the gift of God and the work of the Holy Spirit..."*** As Paul writes, salvation by grace through faith is not of ourselves.

The salvation, AND the faith, AND the whole gracious work together, are not of ourselves.... At every point in the process of salvation this word is appropriate — "not of yourselves." From the first desire after it, to the full reception of it by faith, it is evermore of the Lord alone, and not of ourselves. The man believes, but that belief is only one result among many of the implantation of divine life within the man's soul by God Himself."

And that sheds a whole new light on these two verses! Because what that means that in this verse Paul is not simply interested in dealing with the contrast between grace and works / or even between faith and works / but the contrast between faith as a gift and faith as the "work" that saves us.

It was actually a mistake I myself made in the beginning of my walk with Christ. I was one of those people who wrongly reasoned that "faith" was the "work" (or the thing I need to produce) -- that I would then take and offer to God, in exchange for salvation.

And it only makes sense, when one realizes all the years I had wrestled with sin and doubts and struggled to believe. And thus, when I did come to believe, I reasoned (and I reasoned wrongly) that it was all my efforts and attempts to believe that had finally come together to produce it (instead of seeing it as the result of the Holy Spirit's work in me and God's gift to me).

And let me tell you: When you think that what brought you God's favor was all your efforts to believe, and that what keeps you in the grace of God is all your efforts at sustaining it once you have it, it drives you to utter despair when you lose it.

And it only took about 9 months for that to happen. I now believe it was part of going through culture shock, because I headed off to the mission field within three months of being converted. But that, combined with inner baggage from my past / and wrong theology / and a twisted view of God / and an Arminian view of grace / and devotional readings by authors who bordered on the attainment of perfectionism / and a pastor who told me my conversion wasn't valid because it occurred in a charismatic setting / led me to lose my faith.

And you know what happens when you think your faith saves you, and that it must be perfect faith without doubts, and then you're assaulted by severe doubts? I'll tell you. It leads to despair / and fear / and inner turmoil / and questioning God's love / and feeling like you lost your salvation after you struggled so hard to lay hold of it. In short -- it's a living hell.

And apparently my despair was visible on my face, or in my countenance.

Because one day another missionary, a very large man (from a Dutch Reformed background) came up to me, put his arm around my shoulder, and asked me what was wrong. I was taken back a bit, because I thought that I was hiding my inner struggle well.

(After all, missionaries, I thought, weren't supposed to struggle with such things (or at least, if they did they weren't supposed to show it or admit it).

Yet after some more probing I told him what was going on, and how I had lost my faith, and probably wasn't even saved any more. And all he did was smile,

and then look me straight in my despairing eyes and tell me (quoting this verse):

"Jeff, we're not saved by faith; we're saved by grace, through faith. And there's a big difference. And when we struggle with doubts, it's ok, because God still holds on to us by His grace."

He even went on to explain how faith is a gift. And because it is, we can ask God for it. He doesn't demand we produce it, He gives it freely as a gift.

- 1.) Girl from California in Union Church -- weeping profusely in Sunday School class for the same reason.
- 2.) If salvation is by grace, and God supplies all that is necessary for us to be able to partake of it, no person can be said to be too lost to be saved (John Newton)
- 3.) Likewise, if God holds on to us by grace, with that unbreakable cord, no believer can stray too far to be beyond bringing back.
(Brennan Manning)