

**FAITH, WORKS, AND ASSURANCE:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE FREE GRACE VERSES
LORDSHIP SALVATION CONTROVERSY**

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INTRODUCTION

No greater subject can be addressed by sinful man than eternal salvation. Scripture addresses this topic with clarity and precision. Concerning this matter, the Philippian jailer, a Gentile, inquired of two Jews, Paul and Silas, after he almost committed suicide. The answer was cogent and simple, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:31). The simplicity of the answer and plan of salvation is profound. Paul and Silas revealed to this man that nothing could be done to earn salvation; he must believe (i.e., rely upon Him for eternal life) in the Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing else was prescribed for his everlasting rescue.

Salvation is a work of God, by God, for God, to God. It is not man’s work for God: it is God’s work for man. Nothing man can do in mind, attitude, or action can add anything to God’s provision of salvation.¹ Adam’s transgression negatively affected the entire human race and caused a sin problem that separated man from God indefinitely. Because of Adam’s sin, he and the entire human race were condemned to death for eternity in the Lake of Fire. However, God in mercy already had a plan to redeem the race by means of the substitutionary death of Himself in the Person of the second member of the Godhead, the Lord Jesus Christ. Truly, “Salvation is of the Lord,” as Jonah 2:9 explains. Paul teaches this truth by saying, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Man’s salvation is a result of the grace of God, and the medium through which he extends his grace is faith. Faith is belief or reliant trust in someone or something. Faith in the finished work of Christ cannot be improved upon by man. The core of Christianity is the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith, plus nothing, minus nothing. Any attempt to add to or circumvent this truth is subject to the curse of God (cf. Gal. 1:8-9).

LORDSHIP SALVATION AND FREE GRACE VIEWS

Among fundamental and evangelical groups, a debate ensues over the requirements for salvation. The perspectives of Lordship Salvation and Free Grace stand out as opposing viewpoints on this subject. Both views acknowledge the primacy of the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. Both also realize salvation does not occur because one walks down the isle, prays, repents, confesses, or responds emotionally to a charismatic speaker. Each view recognizes all who think they are saved are not in fact born again. The deplorable state of much of the twenty-first century church is lamented by both views. The major dispute centers on the meaning and ramifications of faith.

Lordship Salvation emphasizes the need for commitment or obedience from the sinner at the time of initial belief and throughout his redeemed life. If this quality is missing, the individual’s salvation is called into question. Lordship Salvation proponents believe “the only validation of salvation is a life of obedience. It is the only possible proof that a person really knows Jesus Christ. If one does not obey

¹ Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, a unit of Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2000), 9.

Christ as a pattern of life, then professing to know Him is an empty exercise.”² This view inherently denies assurance of salvation at the moment of belief. The new birth cannot be certain unless a life of obedience follows. This view stems from the reformed theology, referred to as scholastic Calvinism, which identifies believers as those who persevere in faith and moral practice until death. Justification and sanctification are inseparably linked, and the lack of evidence for sanctification casts doubt upon the reality of justification. This system looks at works as the primary evidence for the reality of justification.

The natural outcome of this system is a life of introspection, doubt and questioning the reality of the salvation experience. As it relates to scholastic Calvinism, “this is the key point: there is an introspective tendency built into the very foundations of scholastic Calvinism.”³

Free Grace Theology stresses the gift of salvation by grace through faith alone in Christ alone. The Free Grace view does not focus on works as the necessary proof of salvation nor the means by which salvation is secured or kept. The work or works of believers are not brought into view as it relates to the justification aspect of salvation. All focus is on Christ’s work for justification—not on any of man’s work. The Free Grace view believes “the only condition of eternal life is faith in Christ. Even a casual reading of the Gospel of John, the only book in Scripture whose purpose is evangelistic (John 20:31), makes this clear.”⁴

Justification and sanctification are related, but they are properly understood as distinct aspects of salvation. Justification is by grace through faith and sanctification involves grace, faith, and works. Thus, one may be justified, but the evidence of justification is not always consistently seen in one’s Christian walk. Scripture is replete with examples of disobedient believers. Examples of disobedient believers include: Abraham, Moses, Aaron, Saul, David, Solomon, Peter, Ananias, Sapphira, and the unnamed Corinthian believers described by Paul.

The Free Grace perspective correctly evaluates the evidence of Scripture and accurately proclaims the message that justification is God’s work, not man’s work. Because man is justified, he is instructed to perform good works (cf. Eph. 2:10); but his performance does not determine whether or not he is justified.

Every believer’s works will be evaluated at the judgment seat of Christ. The judgment seat of Christ will entail only believers from the age of grace and the evaluation will not involve eternal verities (i.e., determination of eternal life). The verdict will be reward or loss dependant upon the believer’s obedience and faithfulness (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-15; Matt. 25:14-30). The loss is not one’s justified status in Christ but rather a loss of additional eternal benefits that would have been given as a result of obedience and faithfulness.

FAITH

The gospel of John is the gospel of belief. At least 98 times the word “believe” is used in John. The purpose of the book is summarized by John in the twentieth chapter, “And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:30-31). To believe is synonymous with faith. Faith is reliance or trust in someone or

² John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According To Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean When He Says "Follow Me"?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic and Professional Books, Zondervan Pub. House, 1988), 194.

³ Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 19.

⁴ Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living By Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 5.

something. Faith is defined as “a confident belief in the truth, value, or trustworthiness of a person, idea, or thing.”⁵ Believing involves more than a simple acknowledgement of facts. Faith occurs when one becomes aware of the facts and is persuaded or convinced they are true. Saving faith occurs when one understands the facts of the gospel and then trusts the promises found therein for personal benefit. Faith is a simple concept and can be exercised by children and adults alike. The brilliance of the gospel is its simplicity. Zane Hodges has defined faith by saying, “What faith really is, in biblical language, is receiving the testimony of God. It is the *inward conviction* that what God says to us in the Gospel is true. That—and that alone—is saving faith [emphasis the author’s].”⁶ Charles Ryrie has explained faith by saying, “To believe Christ for salvation means to have confidence that He can remove the guilt of sin and give eternal life. It means to believe that He can solve the problem of sin which is what keeps a person out of heaven.”⁷ Charles Bing has summarized faith, “The lexical evidence shows that faith is trust, reliance upon, or confidence in something. Biblical passages demonstrate its simplicity as a human response. It involves man in his intellectual and volitional capacities which should not be separated.”⁸

The key to saving faith is the object, the Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation is given to the sinner when the Holy Spirit convicts of sin, convicts of righteousness, convicts of judgment (cf. John 16:8), and the Word of God is believed. When the sinner is persuaded God’s Word is true and he believes Jesus’ promise to give eternal life to all who believe (cf. John 3:16; 5:24; 6:40, 47; 11:25-27), he is saved or justified. Faith is the means whereby the gift of salvation is received by the unworthy sinner. Paul makes this truth clear, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1).

FAITH AND LORDSHIP SALVATION

Lordship Salvation adherents tend to focus on the kind of or the quality of faith instead of the object of faith for salvation. Lordship Salvation gets its name from the emphasis upon the sinner’s willingness or obedience to make Christ Lord of one’s life at conversion. Robert Lescelius has explained the Lordship Salvation position, “The issue centers around what is saving faith and what is meant by ‘Jesus is Lord.’ The lordship position does not teach that submission to Christ’s lordship is an *added* condition to faith, but that it is an integral part of repentant faith [emphasis the author’s].”⁹ John MacArthur has emphasized, “Thus, in a sense we pay the ultimate price for salvation when our sinful self is nailed to a cross. . . . And it denotes implicit obedience, full surrender to the lordship of Christ. Nothing less can qualify as saving faith.”¹⁰

Jesus is Lord, and He is worthy of complete praise, honor, and submission. This fact should never be subdued or minimized. However, the noted Lordship Salvation position takes this truth to the extreme and advances a theology that suggests a works based system of justification. The simplicity of the Gospel is destroyed by claims that “true” saving faith also demands surrender, lifelong obedience, or

⁵ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), Online, www.yourdictionary.com.

⁶ Zane Clark Hodges, *Absolutely Free!: A Biblical Reply To Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books Zondervan Pub. House, 1989), 31.

⁷ Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe In Jesus Christ* (United States: SP Publications, 1989), 119.

⁸ Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response*. GraceLife Edition (Burlson, TX: GraceLife Ministries, 1992), 58.

⁹ Robert Lescelius, *Lordship Salvation: Some Crucial Questions and Answers* (Asheville, NC: Revival Literature, 1992), 10.

¹⁰ MacArthur, 140.

a willingness to obey all of Christ's commands. By impregnating the meaning of faith, this view demands works or fruit as the evidence of "true" faith. The amount and frequency of fruit is not clearly defined. According to MacArthur, implicit obedience or at least a willingness to obey is required. As a result, doubts arise in the mind as to whether one has completely obeyed or submitted. It is impossible under this system to have assurance of salvation because the proof is always in the future and is dependent upon works.

James 2:14-26 is the foremost proof text for the Lordship Salvation "false faith" argument. Lordship Salvation advocates distinguish the faith of which James speaks as saving faith. Their interpretation perceives those who do not have works to prove their faith have false faith.¹¹ They claim the dead faith to which James refers is of a false or spurious nature. MacArthur has asserted concerning faith and fruit, "Faith obeys. Unbelief rebels. The fruit of one's life reveals whether that person is a believer or an unbeliever. There is no middle ground."¹² This absolute declaration is footnoted and he qualifies the statement by acknowledging "true" believers can fall into sin, but they will not continue in sin until death. If they do continue in sin, they are not "true" believers.¹³ This qualified view is flawed. Scripture provides examples of believers who died in a sinful state and out of fellowship with the Lord (cf. Acts 5:1-10; 1 Cor. 11:30).

The faith spoken of in James does not contain a soteriological force. James does not use the word "dead" to refer to false or spurious faith. But rather it is inactive or unfruitful faith. This understanding of the word and passage is congruent with the context of the chapter and the entire book of James. David Anderson has emphasized, "James does not use *dead* to mean 'fake, false, or spurious' in either the English language, or in the Greek language. To that end, in the context of James 2:14-26, it means inactive, not vibrant, not on fire [emphasis the author's]."¹⁴

There are four reasons why true faith can neither be established nor proven on the basis of good works. Firstly, good works can characterize the lost. Secondly, good works can be hard to define. Thirdly, good works can be inconsistent. Fourthly, good works can be unobserved. Scripture does not teach works are a determining factor of regeneration. Paul's words to Titus explain, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5). The focus is not on works for salvation or verification of faith. The determining factor for salvation is whether or not a person has believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ. Works may help corroborate the evidence, but they cannot prove or disprove one's conversion.

CALVINISM AND LORDSHIP SALVATION

Underlying and supporting the above-described Lordship Salvation position is the scholastic Calvinist system of theology. Although some Calvinists are not Lordship Salvation proponents, reformed theology lends great strength to the Lordship Salvation position. Scholastic Calvinism asserts faith is a gift of God. MacArthur has purported, "faith is a supernatural gift of God. . . . the passage (Eph. 2:8-9) teaches that faith is not something conjured up by the human will but is a sovereignly granted gift of God. . . . As a divine gift, faith is neither transient nor impotent. It has an abiding quality that guarantees its endurance to the end. . . . The faith God begets includes both the volition and the

¹¹ Lescelius, 124.

¹² MacArthur, 178.

¹³ Ibid, 178.

¹⁴ David R. Anderson, "The Nature of Faith," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* Volume 5, #4 December 1999, Online, www.chafer.edu, 14.

ability to comply with His will.”¹⁵ MacArthur’s comments stem from the scholastic Calvinist view of the total depravity of man. It asserts man is unable to save himself, and he is unable to believe the message of salvation in his fallen state. It is agreed man is unable to save or remedy his fallen condition. If he were, then Christ’s work of redemption was unnecessary. However, it is tenuous to assert man cannot believe the gospel unless God gives him a special gift of faith. MacArthur’s view stems from his interpretation of Eph. 2:8-9. Instead of the gift of God being salvation, “MacArthur has here confused three distinct categories: (1) the gift itself (salvation); (2) the grounds on which the gift is given (“by grace”); and (3) the means by which the gift is received (“through faith”).”¹⁶ Fallen man can believe the gospel, and God invites him to believe (cf. John 3:16; 7:37-38; Rev. 22:17). Paul explains the role of faith succinctly, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Man is able to believe after he has the facts. The Word of God contains facts concerning the good news of God’s gift of everlasting life. Upon hearing this good news, man can believe and be saved by grace through faith. The sovereignty of God and the crucial role of the Holy Spirit in conviction and regeneration are not compromised with this view.

Understanding the typical connection with Calvinism enables one to understand why Lordship Salvation advocates have difficulty admitting the possibility of failure in the Christian life. They see faith as a gift of God that cannot be thwarted. They cannot conceive of anyone who has been born again failing in the grace of God.¹⁷ Their system of theology usually interprets a warning passage as an admonition to a false professor who does not possess true faith. The book of Hebrews is especially difficult because of its five warnings. They see the warnings as applicable to professing believers with spurious faith. Some admit when the writer of Hebrews includes himself in the warnings it is because he may not persevere until the end, thus proving he was never regenerated.¹⁸ This approach to Scripture leaves the believer unsure of his justified status unto death. Such a view is void of assurance of the new birth and produces a life of introspection.

FAITH AND WORKS

Much of the disagreement centers around the role of works in relation to faith. Faith does produce works that are pleasing to God. Hebrews 11:6 proclaims, “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” Christians presently walk by faith not by sight. In order to please God a Christian must walk or live his life by faith. Works which do not emanate from faith are not pleasing to God (cf. Rom. 14:23b). Believers are saved to produce good works (cf. Eph. 2:10). However, the amount and quality of good works are not detailed in the Scripture. A certain number or quality of works is not guaranteed because one is justified. Producing good works occurs when believers submit to the Lord and allow the Holy Spirit to produce good works through their lives. Paul contrasted the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:16-26. Believers are able to exhibit both the works of the flesh and fruit of the Spirit. Hence, believers allow God to use them when they are obedient and they have a submissive role in producing fruit or works in their lives.

Four reasons exist to explain the purpose for works. Firstly, good works are to bring glory to God (cf. Matt. 5:16; John 15:8). Secondly, good works are for the benefit of all men (cf. Gal. 6:10). Thirdly, good works are the path in which God has ordained for believers to walk (cf. Eph. 2:10).

¹⁵ MacArthur, 172-173.

¹⁶ Hodges, 218.

¹⁷ Richard Alderson, *No Holiness, No Heaven* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 3.

¹⁸ Randal C. Sauer, Hebrews Lecture Number 7, “We Must Give Heed”, *Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary DLP*, Lynchburg, VA.

Fourthly, good works will result in reward for the faithful obedient believer (cf. Phil. 3:10-14; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; Rev. 3:22).

Difficulty in biblical interpretation can be resolved if the distinction between the gift and the prize is recognized. The gift of God is justification received by faith in the promise of God's Word. Upon regeneration the believer is placed in the body of Christ and entered into a race (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24; Heb. 12:1). The end view of the race is to run and finish victoriously and be awarded a prize. Passages that seem to imply justification is earned or assured based on conduct can usually be explained by recognizing the teaching of reward (i.e., attainment of the prize). The doctrine of reward for faithful service permeates Scripture. The vast majority of the New Testament is written to believers with this teaching in view. In numerous passages Paul encourages believers to conduct themselves in such a way so as to gain this prize (cf. Rom. 8:17; 1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:8-11; Eph. 4:1; Phil. 2:12-16; 3:10-14; Col. 3:23-25; 1 Thess. 2:12). He, himself, gives testimony at his death that he was victorious in his race: "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:6-8). Recognizing God saves by grace through faith, but He rewards according to works is paramount for proper biblical interpretation.

FAITH AND ASSURANCE

Assurance is inherent with faith. If one believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, he is assured of what he believes. Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life" (John 5:24). Those who believe Jesus' words also have assurance of eternal life. The words "Verily, verily" can be translated "Most assuredly." If one has at one time believed, he has at one time had assurance. It is also correct to conclude if one has never had assurance, he has never believed.

Scholastic Calvinism does not equate faith with assurance. It assumes one must experience a life of faith in order to have assurance of salvation. A traditional passage used to defend the doctrine of experiential faith or observatory faith is found in 2 Cor. 13:5, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?" Some have surmised Paul was instructing the Corinthian's to question their justification. The Corinthian's were extremely carnal, and Paul was upset with their behavior. In neither of the Corinthian Epistles does he assume he is correcting or instructing lost people. Thus, it would be incongruent for Paul to end his second letter to the Corinthian's and question their justification. If the question of justification is the subject matter of 2 Cor. 13:5, several problems exist. One can never know if he is saved if the focus is on works. The number of times one must examine one's self before assurance is possible is unanswered. Assurance is impossible based on the actions of one's life. This interpretation is fraught with difficulty.

The logical and practical interpretation of 2 Cor 13:5 understands Paul was encouraging the Corinthian's to evaluate their fellowship, not their relationship, with the Lord. Hence, to be "in the faith" means to be walking according to the doctrines of the faith as outlined in Scripture.¹⁹ Paul ends his second letter by encouraging his readers to make sure they are in fellowship with the Lord. A believer should not periodically question justification because of actions or feelings. Justification is assured and

¹⁹ Compare with Paul's use of imperatives: "stand fast in the faith" (1 Cor. 16:3); "be sound in the faith", (Titus 1:13); and "established in the faith" (Col. 2:7). These are not instructions for unbelievers.

what should be at the forefront of every believer's mind is fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ. If fellowship is a pattern of life, abundant reward will result at the judgment seat of Christ. If fellowship is not a pattern of life, great loss will result at the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 3:14-15; Col 3:23-25; 1 Pet 1:4-11).

CONCLUSION

Truly, salvation is the sovereign work of the Lord. The gift of salvation from eternal damnation is full and free. Reliance on the promise of the Savior is the only way of salvation and assurance of salvation. Faith in Christ alone for salvation is the unmovable foundation of Christianity.

Equating faith with submission, obedience, and perseverance does injustice to the biblical meaning of faith. Lordship Salvation's desire for holiness may be sincere, but the doctrine is laden with difficulty. Rather than motivating believers with fear and doubt over their eternal destiny, Free Grace invites believers to walk in faith and love. The believer should also fear the Lord as Scripture admonishes. The fear of the Lord is the foundation of wisdom. Holy living should be the result of a believer who is growing in grace. God has commanded his people to live holy lives, but He has not commanded them to determine the authenticity of His work for them based on their work for Him. The saints can be edified and encouraged by walking in faith and relying upon the finished work of Christ for their assurance of eternal bliss. The sinner, under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, can be rescued by relying upon the finished work of Christ for deliverance from everlasting damnation in the Lake of Fire.

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