

8.

HOW TO EXPLAIN SALVATION BY FAITH

LESSON 8 TEXT HANDOUT

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the Bible's doctrine of "salvation by grace through faith" is vital to salvation. In Paul's day, some misunderstood grace, thinking they could "continue in sin so grace may abound" (Romans 6:1). Today, others say that since salvation is a gift, "we can do nothing toward our own salvation," or "the gracious God we know in Christ promises to save us without our help." These comments imply no commands to obey and suggest that if one must do anything before receiving forgiveness of sins, that would be "salvation by works." These differences in view have arisen, in part, because of some scriptures which seem, on the surface, to be confusing. Paul said, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned as righteousness.'" Yet James says, "Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works. And the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'" (James 2:21-22). At first glance, these sound contradictory. Are they? Or how about these two: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; ... not because of works" (Ephesians 2:8-9) but "we are saved by works, and not by faith only" (James 2:24)? What is God's message about "salvation by grace through faith?" People take one of four basic views about salvation by faith. Understanding these can help us in dealing with many religious questions which arise. The best way to learn about these, and to explain them to others, is with the simple chart on the next page.

In our desire to go to heaven, where do we all begin?

All of us have sinned (Rom. 6:23) and so are under God's condemnation. This is where we start. Our goal should be to move away from that sinful condition. So the chart shows where we begin and where we want to be—God counts us as righteous. We will now see four different proposals for how we can get from the sinful state to being counted as righteous. Note the significance of the direction of the arrows in each case.

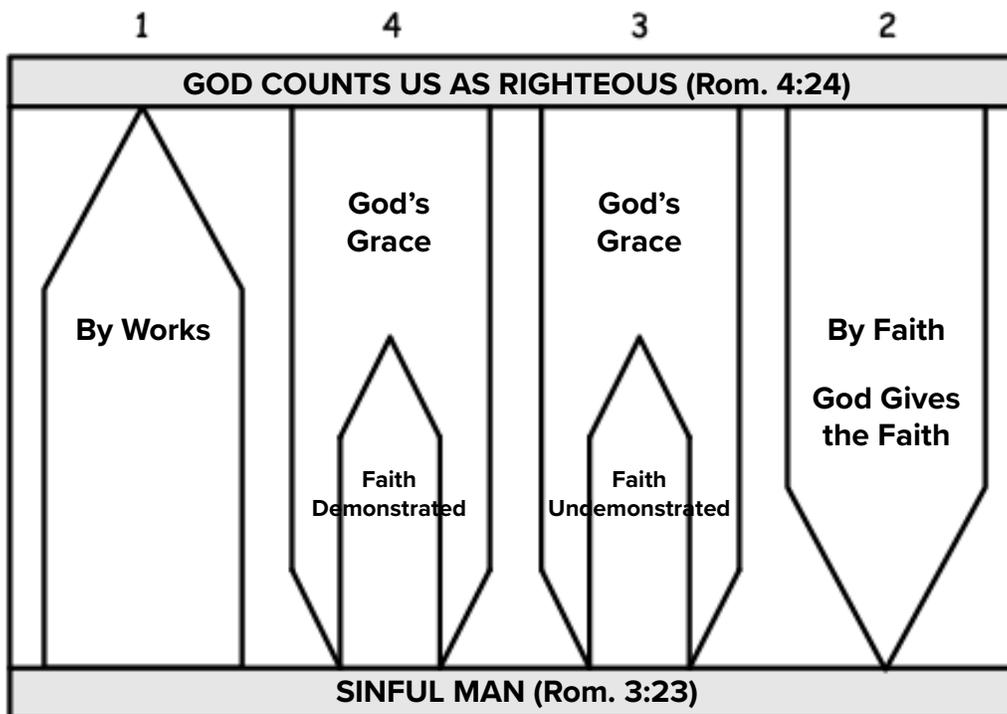
1. CAN I BE SAVED BY WORKS?

This proposed path says I can move from my sinful state to a saved state by my own works. I will just be good enough to earn my way to heaven. This arrow goes up from "man" to "God" because this view suggests that it is "man" who does this by himself. Martin Luther accused the Catholics of his time of preaching this view. He was particularly repulsed by their sale of "indulgences," the right to sin. While Catholics would deny that they practice "salvation by works," their views about such things as penance, purgatory, communion, and the use of rosaries can give rise to such a charge. Many un-churched people in our communities, however, do believe in salvation by works. The person who says, "I believe

I am as good as those who go to church," is saying, in effect, I believe I can earn my way to heaven. I am good to my family, honest in my business, and helpful to the poor. I don't believe God will turn me away. What does the Bible say about being saved by works? Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For by grace have you been saved, through faith; not of works, that no one should boast." This statement is quite clear. We cannot be saved by our works. Once I have sinned, how many good deeds does it take to erase that one sin? The truth is that good deeds do not erase bad ones. By myself, I can never remove my sins. The only one who could claim salvation based on works is one who has lived a perfect life. Yet, the Bible says, "all have sinned". The Law of Moses offered this approach. Keep the law perfectly and you could be saved. But Paul says, in chapters 1 through 3 of the book of Romans, that no one ever kept the law this well. He made the same point in Galatians 2:16: "by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."

So, we must reject this path as having any prospect of getting us to God. We cannot earn our way to heaven. We cannot get there by our own works.

SALVATION BY FAITH



2. DOES GOD CHOOSE WHO WILL BE SAVED?

Now look at "arrow" 2 on the right. This arrow suggests that some are saved "by faith" and that "God gives them the faith." Faith saves but God chooses to whom he will give the faith. This was the view promoted by John Calvin who said, "God is sovereign." If someone is saved, it is because God chose him to be saved. If he is lost, it is because God's will was for him to be lost. Those holding this view sometimes illustrated it like this: when Lazarus was in the grave, he could not do anything to raise himself, but when Jesus called, he could do nothing to resist. So it is with us. If God has chosen us to be in the elect, nothing we do can cause us to be lost. If, on the other hand, God has not chosen us to be in the elect, there is nothing we can do to be saved.

Often those holding this view suggest that one can know he is chosen of God for salvation by whether he/she has had a spiritual experience. This experience is "a feeling" that one has been saved. One might fall on the floor and stay there unable to get up (the falling exercise), one might make animal sounds uncontrollably (the barking exercise), one might jump up and down (the dancing exercise), or one might have the laughing exercise or the singing exercise.

Any of these "experiences" is a sign that the person having that particular exercise has received the Holy Spirit and thus is chosen of God. One who never has such an experience has no hope of going to heaven because he/she is not of the elect.

Is this view that of the Bible? Those who support it quote Ephesians 1:4: "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world." Thus, they say, God chose who would be saved before He made even the first man. This view says that God chooses "individuals" to salvation and chooses them "unconditionally."

There are, however, a number of passages that would oppose such a conclusion. In Ephesians 1:13, just a few verses after the verse just quoted, Paul writes that the Ephesians "heard and believed." Thus, their salvation was not unconditional. They did something. Paul also had said, "He chose us," including himself in the group. Yet, his salvation involved making the choice to accept Jesus and to obey the command to be baptized (Acts 22:16).

Other passages also suggest that God does not choose individually and unconditionally. Acts 10:34—"God is no respecter of persons but in every nation he that fears him and works righteousness is acceptable to him." I Timothy 2:6—"Christ died as a ransom for all." II Peter 3:9—"God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

Yes, God chose His elect before the foundation of the world. But this verse means that He chose "corporately" not "individually." That is, he chose what would happen to those who were in the body of the saved but did not choose individually who would be in that group. And those who get in that group do not get in it "unconditionally" but "conditionally" because they make their own choice, deciding whether to believe, repent, and be baptized into Christ.

So we must reject the view that God chooses individually some to be saved and relegates all others to be lost.

3. IS SALVATION BY FAITH ONLY?

A third possible view is represented on the chart by an arrow going downward with another coming up into it, arrow 3. The words "God's Grace" are written in the downward portion to suggest that "we are saved by grace." God extends His mercy to us and we are saved entirely by grace—nothing we do can merit salvation. The upward arrow, however, suggests that we must do something to accept this grace. While our part in no way earns any of our salvation, God does require that we do something to accept His grace. According to this view, the only condition is just to believe and so the words "Faith Undemonstrated" are written in the "arrow."

There are only three possible ways God will save: (1) He will save everybody regardless of what we do, (2) He will choose whom to save and all others are lost (View 2 above), or (3) He will save those who accept His grace and meet whatever conditions He has set. That God will save everyone is certainly not taught in scripture because the Bible tells of people being lost in hell (Matthew 7:13; 25:46,). We have just discussed that God does not choose some to be saved and others to be lost. The third, and

only other option, then, is the scriptural one—God saves by grace but he asks us to do something to accept His offer. The third view on our chart says that we are saved by grace and the only required response is faith. This view says that the moment we believe in Jesus or "accept Jesus as our personal savior" we are saved from sins. No action to demonstrate faith is required before God forgives past sins. Those holding this view would offer such passages as Ephesians 2:8-9: "you are saved by grace through faith," or Acts 16:31: "Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." They might also mention Galatians 3:26, "You are sons of God by faith," or "Romans 5:1" "Being therefore justified by faith."

Certainly these verses teach salvation by faith. Beyond any doubt one thing a person must do before God will extend His grace is to believe in Jesus. But is faith the only condition? What about verses that speak of other commands? While Acts 16:31 mentions only "faith," the next verse says Paul taught the jailor more and then he was baptized. While Galatians 3:26 mentions only "faith," the next verse says, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." So it is at the point of baptism that one "enters Christ."

4. WHAT CONDITIONS DOES GOD REQUIRE OF US BEFORE WE CAN RECEIVE HIS GRACE?

This brings us to "arrow" 4. It is drawn just like arrow 3, but has one difference. Arrow 3 had "Faith Undemonstrated" and this arrow says "Faith Demonstrated." James 2:20-24 is a very important passage here. James makes clearly the point that while salvation is by faith, God has always required some deeds to demonstrate faith before He rewards it. He illustrates the principle in several ways. Would it be of any benefit to a hungry man for you to tell him you hope he gets food but do nothing to demonstrate your concern? What about demons who believe in God but do nothing to demonstrate that faith? And take the case of Abraham. Certainly he was saved by faith but God did not count him as righteous until he had shown his faith. "Even so," James says, "faith without works is dead."

James says, then, that God has always saved by faith. But that He has also always valued faith only after it has been demonstrated by an obedience God has asked.

Our salvation is through the "faith principle," and not the "works principle." We cannot earn it. But the "faith principle" does not mean God has set faith as the only condition for grace. To bring all the passages on salvation into harmony, we must recognize that God has asked for a demonstration of faith.

Note in the passages below the demonstrations God has placed before salvation. Mark 16:16: "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved." Acts 2:38: "Repent and be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins." Acts 22:16: "Be baptized and wash away your sins." Romans 6:4: You were buried with him by baptism into death that like as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father that you also should be raised to newness of life."

These passages not only teach baptism precedes the forgiveness of our sins but also teach that it is at the point of baptism that such forgiveness takes place. Note that it is as baptism that our sins are forgiven (Acts 2:38), that our sins are washed away (Acts 22:16), that we start to live the new life (Romans 6:4), that we enter Christ (Galatians 3:27). So arrow 4 is the one which best describes the process of salvation as presented in scripture. We are not saved by works, but we must obey the conditions God has placed on His grace. This obedience does not earn us any points toward heaven, but it is God's way of distinguishing between those who will receive His grace and those who will not. We are all sinners. We all want to reach the point where God can count us as righteous. We cannot get there by our own good works. God does not arbitrarily choose some to be saved and others to be lost.

We must be saved by doing what God has asked us to do to receive His grace. This means we must believe in Jesus as the Christ and confess that faith for others to hear (Romans 10:10). But it also means we must demonstrate our faith by turning from our sins in repentance and by being baptized for forgiveness of our sins. It is at this point that God has promised to place us under the care of His grace.

CONCLUSION

So, is salvation by faith? Of course it is. But that faith must also be accompanied by obeying those other commands He has said we must do to receive His grace: repentance and baptism. God's grace is conditional, not on any merit on our part, but on our obeying what God has asked us to do to receive His grace.

"Though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered, and being made perfect, he became the author of salvation to all those who obey him" (Hebrews 5:8).