

NOTATIONES

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REDEMPTIVE ACHIEVEMENT AND PERSONAL FAITH

by John Y. May

REDEMPTION IS THE grand theme of the Bible. The Scriptures highlight God's overall plan of salvation, that is, his deliverance from the penalty and guilt of our sin.

In the opening portion of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul discusses several aspects of the scheme of redemption. He sees the starting point in a God-initiated strategy that is in accordance with his own eternal purpose (Eph. 3:11) and pleasure (1:5). God's design includes a series of events to prepare for the Savior. Then comes the timely appearance of Christ with his saving death (2:16) and authenticating resurrection (1:20).

Faith's Antecedent: Redemptive Grace

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace. . . ." (Eph. 1:7)

With these words, Paul highlights the redemptive accomplishment of Jesus Christ and its originating source in God's grace. It is, he clearly writes, "by grace you have been saved, through faith" (Eph. 2:8). Salvation is a gift of God, not to be gained or earned by works (2:9) or human effort.

Why grace? One answer is to be seen in the deplorable moral condition in which humans find themselves. We are dead in transgressions and sins (2:1). Our life history, furthermore, is one of having followed the inclination of a rebellious, sinful nature (2:3); asserting our independence of God and his will; and in living in personal violation of his moral standard. We are, by disposition and deeds, the objects of God's wrath (2:3). In reality, says Paul, we were not merely "without hope and without God" (2:12), but are even "far away" (2:13) and separated from him by an impenetrable barrier (2:14).

This insistence of Paul, in his Ephesian letter, on the absolute necessity of grace is consistent with his other writings. In his final letter, he later stresses to the Romans that justification was freely available only by grace through the redemption that came by Christ (Rom. 3:24). To his associate Timothy, he reminds him that salvation was possible "not because of anything we have done but because of God's own purpose and grace (2 Tim. 1:9). And with Titus, he emphasizes that their trustworthy message includes the universal offer of "the grace of God that brings salvation," which grace appeared to all men (Titus 2: 11) .

Salvation, then, is first of all "by grace" (Eph. 2:8; Acts 15:11) and incapable of being earned through human effort or achievement of any kind. This grace is recognized as the "undeserved and unexpected"¹ gift of God (Rom. 5:15, 17; 2 Cor. 9:14, 15), especially and initially as it pertains to the provision of saving forgiveness (Eph. 1:7; 2:5, 8; 2 Tim. 1:9). Both the grace that makes redemption possible and even salvation itself, Paul claims, "came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:15).

Although grace is seen as the originating source of salvation, the Bible's central focus of the whole saving process is on Christ and his work. After all, it is Christ who supremely exhibited this grace in redemptive achievement. "In him we have redemption" (Eph. 1:7), Paul assures us.

¹ John M. G. Barclay, lectures on "The Dynamics of Grace: A Conversation with the Apostle Paul" (University of St. Andrews: Joint Institute of Theology, August 18-21, 2003). James L. Garrett, Jr. also cites the undeserved and unexpected features of grace in his *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 298; as does Donald G. Barnhouse, cassette tape on "How God Saves Men – Part 1" (Philadelphia: Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, n.d.).

In the biblical portrayal, Jesus is consistently presented as the indispensable Savior. Paul reminds his friend Timothy that there is only “one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). There is no suitable alternative. Paul outlines just one plan of forgiveness, one remedy, one solution, not several. That plan mentions only one Savior, one hope and one Lord (Eph. 4:4, 5); it is not a multiple-options situation.² God’s eternal purpose, Paul concludes, is “accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:11). It is an unequaled plan with a unique Person at its center.³

Other Pauline sources inform us too that Christ makes reconciliation available through his saving death and guarantees it by his rising from death.⁴ “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). Although distanced from God by our failure to measure up to his standards, there is now the awesome possibility of being “brought near through the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13). Paul would elsewhere emphasize that it is the message of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18)—the gospel that points to Christ’s death—which is part of the very provision of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16). It is in his reconciling death that Jesus was “making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Col. 1:20).

The basis of salvation, then, is found solely in grace— independent of human works, devotion, or merit. Most importantly, the central focus of the whole redemptive plan is on Jesus Christ himself. He is the key to God’s saving activity, the unique remedy, and the indispensable Savior.

This being the case, what then is the relationship of belief or faith to this overall redemptive scheme?

Nature and Role of Personal Faith

To understand the relationship of personal faith to redemptive

² Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 119.

³ Frederick F. Bruce, *Jesus: Lord and Savior* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 114.

⁴ Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Risen Christ” in *The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1950), 544. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 50, 66, 72, 81.

achievement, we need to observe at least four characteristics of biblical faith.

Faith Founded on Redemptive Event

Personal faith, in its biblical portrayal, is not conjured up by one's own origination. It is not some sort of vague, generic believing or wish-making. The first step of faith starts with knowledge,⁵ however limited, of redemptive events seen as God's answer to our need. "Faith comes," Paul writes, "from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10: 17). Elsewhere, he indicates that one becomes a believer "when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation" (Eph. 1:13). This gospel is the essential or core content of the message about Jesus Christ. James I. Packer rightly insists that faith starts where the gospel, "the central message, is heard or read, and the realization dawns that this is the very truth of God."⁶

⁵ J. Gresham Machen reminds us that "it is impossible to have faith in a person without knowledge of the person." *What Is Faith?* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 46. He adds in *What Is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 120-21, "A very little knowledge is often sufficient if a man is to believe, but some knowledge there must be."

⁶ James I. Packer, "Faith," in *God's Words: Studies of Key Biblical Themes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 132. Hermisson and Lohse insist that "faith means confident trust that depends on God's promise, a promise given through his word . . . authenticated for all time in the gospel. . . . Faith says yes to this message and accepts it by recognizing it as true." Hans-Jurgen Hermisson & Eduard Lohse, *Faith*, trans. Douglas Stott (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 104. Jonathan Edwards maintained that the "written word of God is the main instrument Christ has made use of to carry on his work of redemption in all ages since it was given." *The History of Redemption* (Evansville, IN: Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1959), 76. On the importance of believing the truth of the gospel, see also George R. Beasley-Murray, "Faith in the New Testament," *American Baptist Quarterly* 1 (1982): 140; H. D. McDonald, *Salvation* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), 74-77; David F. Wells, *Turning to God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 65; Samuel Davies, "The Nature of Justification," in *Sermons*, vol. 2 (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995): 652-54; Benjamin B. Warfield, "Faith," in *Biblical Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 329-330; James W. Alexander, *Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1867), 73, 80, 94, 132; Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 32;

Real faith is the response to redemptive realities which are rooted in external events in history, that is, those key events that comprise God's redemptive program.⁷ Those events are recorded in Scripture in order to form the solid foundation for belief, to urge appropriate individual response in reliance upon the gospel's truth-claims, and to serve as an anchor for lifelong commitment to Christ.⁸ Scripture targets past events in God's redemptive scheme already "accomplished in Christ Jesus" alone (Eph. 3:11, 12). It was a task that Christ completed in his death at Calvary and subsequent resurrection, and is part of the finished work of salvation.

So faith is inseparably related to the gospel record of salvation's events—their facticity and their meaning. It is specifically based on gospel-related content; it is a response to clearly identified events and persons (Rom. 1:2, 3; 1 Cor. 15:2-4). Such a gospel, Paul informs us, is the "power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). It is, he says, "by this gospel" that one responds to the fact of salvation's gracious achievement (1 Cor. 15:2).

and Earl F. Palmer, "Trust God: The Possibility of Christian Faith in an Age of Uncertainty," *Crux Journal*, 40 (June 2004): 14-15.

⁷ J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?*, 87. Philip E. Hughes observes: "The very essence of the biblical gospel is its indissoluble connection with particular historical events proclaimed as the acts of God Himself sovereignly intervening in the midst of human history for the purpose of reconciling the world to Himself." "The Truth of Scripture and the Problem of Historical Relativity," in *Scripture and Truth*, eds. Donald A. Carson & John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 178. Yale professor Kenneth S. Latourette also insisted that "The distinctively Christian understanding of history centers upon historical occurrences." "The Christian Understanding of History" in *God, History, and Historians*, ed. C. T. McIntire (NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), 52. Edinburgh University professor James S. Stewart acknowledged that the Christian proclamation, among other things, "was dealing with events, not abstractions or theories . . . but concrete, actual events localized in time and space." Stewart, *A Faith to Proclaim* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 16. Charles H. Hayes, "What Have Facts to Do with Faith?" *Harvard Theological Review* 2 (July 1909): 361, said the great truths of Christian conviction "are made known through occurrences in time, on our earth, which were observed by plain, straightforward men who used their eyes and ears. . . ."

⁸ John Y. May, "Faith and Knowledge," *Evangelical Journal* 8 (Fall 1990): 87.

Faith Focused on Christ

Besides the recognition of objective data in history, faith is individual trust in a person, the person of Jesus Christ. The scriptural concentration here is always on Jesus, the object of the believer's reliance, not on the activity of believing itself. Genuine faith is marked by receiving him (John 1:12), his finished, reconciling death (Rom. 5:10), and his convincing resurrection (Rom. 4:24).

Faith is the reliance solely upon and acceptance of Christ and his finished saving action on our behalf (Rom. 4:5; Titus 3:5; 1 John 5:10, 11). Machen aptly clarifies that "faith consists not in doing something but in receiving something. To say that we are justified by faith is just another way of saying we are justified . . . simply and solely by the One in whom our faith is reposed."⁹

Faith as the Means to the Redemptive Benefits

It is abundantly clear from the Bible that the exercise of faith—accompanied by true repentance¹⁰—is the necessary condition for a person to receive the benefits of Christ's redemptive achievement (John 3:36; 20:31; Acts 10:43; 16:31; Rom. 5:1). The provision of the saving benefits (accomplished once for all time by Christ) and the possession of them are two distinct things. Packer says, "reconciliation was made by Christ's death, but it is not possessed till it is received. And it is received by faith; not by working and earning it, but by believing and taking it . . . by receiving a living Saviour."¹¹

⁹ J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?*, 172. Michael Green affirms that salvation "is done for us; we are recipients, not contributors." *The Meaning of Salvation* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1998), 151.

¹⁰ Mark 1:15; Luke 13:3; Acts 3:19; 20:21.

¹¹ James I. Packer, "Reconciliation," in *God's Words: Studies of Key Biblical Themes*, 125. William Barclay, "Paul's Conception of Faith" in *The Mind of St. Paul* (N.Y.: Harper & Bros., 1958), 146, concurs: "The consequence is that what we cannot earn, we must freely accept and trustingly take." Edinburgh's Thomas F. Torrance, in *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 66, remarks that "by accepting men purely on the ground of divine grace, Jesus . . . exposed the hollowness of the foundations upon which man tries to establish himself before God."

On this matter, Robert P. Lightner's comments are helpful: "It is readily admitted, of course, that no one benefits from that purchased redemption until he believes in Christ as his Redeemer."¹² "Scripture," he says, "makes personal faith the sole condition for the appropriation of Calvary's benefits to the individual."¹³ "God has conditioned His full and free salvation upon personal faith in order to appropriate its accomplishments to the individual."¹⁴

Leon Morris concurs that "reconciliation is accomplished by Christ, indeed, but it must be received if it is to be effective."¹⁵ He insists that "if Paul can argue strongly that sinners do not obtain right standing before God by their own efforts, he can argue just as strongly that it is necessary that they exercise faith."¹⁶ This exercise of repentant trust, then, is absolutely essential in order for forgiveness to be applied to the individual.

While recognizing the absolute necessity of faith, we should not

¹² Robert P. Lightner, *The Death Christ Died*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 15.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 52. Mark Hopkins, president of Williams College, in "Faith," *The Princeton Review* (Sept. 1878): 513, correctly noted "God would, of himself, wholly self-moved, so do all that was needed, all that could be done for salvation, as to leave nothing for man to do but to accept what had been done and provided as a free gift. . . . Whoever accepts the provision made and freely offered will be saved." Samuel Davies, "The Nature of Looking to Christ" in *Sermons*, vol. 2 (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 338 insisted: "Our personal consent is required as much in this age as when the gospel was first published to the world. . . ."

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56. Bernard L. Ramm, "Steps to Redemption," *His Magazine* (May 1965), 27, observed that from the perspective of the individual, "all the sufferings of Christ are of no value until we ourselves put our own faith and trust in Christ [T]his love and death [of Christ] only mean something as we avail ourselves of them." Richard Baxter, *Universal Redemption of Mankind* (London: J. Salisbry, 1964), 40, 64, also explains that "we shall not be actually pardoned till we believe." "The covenant or promise is indeed conditional; that is, there are conditions required on our part to the fulfilling of it, that we may have right to the benefit."

¹⁵ Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 150.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 196. H. D. McDonald, *Salvation*, 65, also emphasizes that "where there is no faith, the saving benefits of Christ are of no effect. . . . No man can merit salvation; nor can he buy it. But the one thing he must do is receive it by faith."

overlook the fact that faith itself doesn't save. Only Christ can do that (Acts 4:12: 15:11). We are reconciled to God by the life-transforming work of Christ on our behalf. Genuine faith is only the means of appropriating to ourselves the offered salvation already obtained in Christ's saving death and authenticating resurrection. And our faith, Lightner rightly contends, "does not add anything to the full and complete redemption procured by Christ."¹⁷

Faith, then, is seen as the means to obtaining the salvation already accomplished by Christ's death on our behalf. Salvation comes to us by grace, *through* faith (Eph. 2:8; Phil. 3:9; 2 Tim. 3:15; Rom. 5:1, 2). J. Gresham Machen insists "the New Testament never says that a man is saved on account of his faith, but always he is saved through his faith or by means of his faith; faith is merely the means which the Holy Spirit uses to apply to the individual soul the benefits of Christ's death."¹⁸

¹⁷ Robert P. Lightner, *The Death Christ Died*, 55.

¹⁸ J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?*, 180. Samuel J. Mikolaski, "The Theology of the New Testament," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 474, argues too that "faith is never associated with the ground of salvation but is always presented as the means of or channel for receiving salvation." Horatius Bonar, *The Everlasting Righteousness* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 1994), 61, adds: "Faith can expiate no guilt, can accomplish no propitiation, can pay no penalty. . . . It brings us to the cross, where there is . . . cleansing and righteousness; but in itself it has no merit. . . ." Pierre Courthial, "Faith," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 4, ed. Philip E. Hughes (Marshallton, DE: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1972), 167, puts it this way: "The saving power of faith resides, thus, not in itself, but in the Almighty Savior on whom it rests. . . . It is not faith that saves. . . . [I]t is Christ that saves through faith. The saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith, the attitude of faith, or the nature of faith, but in the object of faith." Peter Jensen, *At the Heart of the Universe* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997), 146, agrees that "the way in which God brings us to be 'in Christ' . . . involves genuine human response. . . . But the Bible's way of talking about this never jeopardizes the essential point that salvation is by God's grace not by human merit." G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 195, insisted "Scripture, then, established the necessity of faith, and that without giving us a shred of argument for ascribing merit to faith itself." Joachim Jeremias, *The Central Message of the New Testament* (New York:

Faith as a Deliberate Activity

Authentic faith is the decisive and deliberate placing of one's trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Scriptural language about initial faith provides a rich and varied description of this personal activity. The Bible portrays this believing as actively "*hearing*" the gospel (Rom. 10:17; John 5:24; Col. 1:23; Eph. 1:13); "*coming*" to Christ (Matt. 11:28; Rev. 22:17); "*turning*" to God (Isa. 45:22; 55:7; Acts 3:19); "*looking*" to Jesus (John 6:40; Heb. 12:2); "*calling*" on God and Christ (Ps. 145:18; Isa. 55:6; Rom. 10:9, 13); "*trusting*" the Lord (Prov. 3:5; Ps. 13:5; Isa. 25:9; Rom. 4:5); "*receiving*" God's saving provision in Christ (1 Thess. 5:9; Rom. 5:17; John 1:12); "*accepting*" the redemptive message (1 Thess. 2:13; Acts 2:41); "*confessing*" Jesus as Lord (Rom. 10:9); "*opening*" the door of one's inner life to Christ's control (Rev. 3:20); "*choosing*" God's life-giving plan (Deut. 30:19, 20); "*taking*" Christ's gift of eternal life (Rev. 22:17; 1 Tim. 6:12); and intent on "*following*" the Lord (Deut. 13:4; John 8:12).

What is clear from this terminology is that faith is not a passive, non-participative experience. The benefits of God's salvation are not absorbed by some sort of passive, spiritual osmosis. Each individual is invited and commanded (Isa. 55:6, 7; Acts 17:30; Rom. 10:13) to respond to the gospel in personal, decisive, and intentional trust in Christ. Although always initiated by the convicting influence of God's Spirit, man's exercise of faith is not forced upon him by God. Nor can other persons or God himself do the "believing" for us. We must individually reach out in believing acceptance of God's gift of new life for us personally. To ignore or reject the gift (the pardon, the Savior) is to remain under God's condemnation (2 Thess. 2:10; John 3:18, 36; 1 John 5:12).¹⁹

Whatever else faith may be, it is clearly a personal, conscious affirmation of Christ and his truth, a deliberate calling upon him for forgiveness, and an intentional reliance solely on his saving work.²⁰

Scribners, 1965), 56, clarifies: "Faith is not an achievement in itself, rather it is the hand which grasps the work of Christ and holds it out to God."

¹⁹ See Edward J. Carnell, *Christian Commitment* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 255.

²⁰ H. D. McDonald, *Salvation*, 83, mentions that "there are throughout the New Testament, in connection with salvation, a number of divine calls,

In this conscious activity, Machen maintains, the believing person specifically “resolves to cease trying to save himself and resolves to accept, instead, the salvation offered by Christ.”²¹

In summary, the *provision* of salvation is entirely God’s doing and nothing of man’s doing (2 Cor. 5:18; Titus 3:5).²² It is the completed, once-for-all-time redemptive achievement of Jesus Christ.

The *appropriation* of the offered redemption is dependent on man’s receiving the provision, the gift of salvation by grace. The means or vehicle for applying Christ’s offered provision of forgiveness to the individual is personal faith—a deliberate, confident reliance on his reconciling work alone. This initial believing is both (1) a response of confidence in the scripture-based promises of God’s redemptive provision, and (2) personal trust in Christ—the central figure of this acknowledged gospel.

challenges, commands, appeals, and invitations which can be answered only in the spirit of a decisive act of response. . . .”

²¹ J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?*, 197. Timothy Dwight of Yale noted that whenever a person gives himself to Christ he places his entire confidence in Christ “and in the declarations he has made. . . . On this he trusts himself, his soul, his eternal well-being.” Dwight, “The Nature of Faith,” in *Theology Explained and Defended*, vol. 2 (N.Y.: Harper and Bros., 1858), 332-33.

²² Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians*, 23.