

Righteousness by Faith Alone

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Mankind's Debt to God

All human beings owe God a debt of two things. First, we owe Him a debt of perfect righteousness. When Jesus told us to pray that God would *forgive us our debts* (Matthew 6:12), the parallel passage in Luke 11:4 has Jesus saying, *forgive us our sins*. Sin makes us indebted to God precisely because we owe Him the opposite of sin, which is righteousness. Since God is perfectly righteous, and this is how mankind was created in the beginning (Genesis 1:26-31), we owe Him perfect righteousness. God's very character cannot change (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8), so He cannot simply overlook mankind's sinful state or eliminate his debt arbitrarily. It can only be done on a just basis. Therefore, we owe Him 100 percent perfect righteousness.

Second, we owe God the death penalty for our sinful condition and actions, for a just God reckons death as the *wages* of sin (Romans 6:23), wages being something that is earned. The debt of perfect righteousness we cannot possibly pay because we are born with this debt and cannot undo the spiritual condition we were born into even if we could somehow learn to produce perfect righteousness later in life, which because of our very sinful nature, we cannot do (see our "The Origin and Nature of Sin"). The debt of the death penalty we can pay, but it would not bring us salvation, just death.

Jesus the Savior

Because we cannot pay either debt, of perfect righteousness or of death, and be saved, God must provide us a Savior to pay these debts on our behalf. He would have to be a Substitute who enters the world without sin, lives a perfectly righteous life, pays our death penalty, and rises from the dead in order to somehow offer us His perfect righteousness as a gift. As Christians we believe this Savior-Substitute to be Jesus, for before His birth Mary was told to *call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins* (Matthew 1:21). The name *Jesus* means *Savior*.

What kind of Savior must this Jesus be? First, He must be human because it is human beings who owe these debts to God, and God cannot die (I Timothy 6:16). Second, He must be a man rather than a woman because He needs to take Adam's place since it was Adam's willful sin that specifically changed the world's citizenship from God's kingdom to Satan's kingdom (see our "The Origin and Nature of Sin"). Third, He must also be God because (1) a man would need all of his righteousness just to keep himself right with God, (2) only God has righteousness (like life)

intrinsically within Him and can thus afford to give righteousness as a gift to others (I Timothy 6:15-16; I John 5:11), and (3) Satan's rebellion in heaven challenged *God's* authority so that God must answer the challenge. Therefore, the Savior must be fully and really man and fully and really God.

Since Jesus is human He must be born of a woman, from whom He would receive His human nature. Therefore, His divine nature must come from God Himself. This points to a miraculous conception in which God impregnates a woman. For God to be *understood* as the real "father" of Jesus, the woman must be a virgin. Thus, Christians believe in the virgin birth of Jesus.

Matthew 1:22-23 quotes Isaiah 7:14 when stating that Jesus would be born to a virgin. The Hebrew word for *virgin* in Isaiah 7:14 means a *young woman* who may or not be married; the Hebrew had a word that specifically meant a *virgin*, but that is not used in that prophecy. A later inspired writer must agree with earlier inspired writers (Isaiah 8:20), which means the earlier prophecies must either require or at least allow for the newer fulfillment. When you examine Isaiah 7's prophecy in context, the emphasis is not on the *nature* of the birth of that son but on his *name* and the *time* of his birth. Judah was facing an invasion from Samaria and Syria, and the Lord told Judah's King Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah that He will save Judah from this threat. A sign of that future salvation was a son named Immanuel in 7:14 and named Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz in 8:3. The name Immanuel means *God with Us*, and the name *Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz* means *Speed the Spoil, Hasten the Booty*.

Apparently, the two names refer to one son, and the first name (Immanuel) could not be used because Ahaz did not respond positively to the promised son's name and thus Judah could not be spared the wrath (which later came from Assyria itself). This fact at least allows for a later Immanuel to fulfill the prophecy in a typological manner when God's people need to be saved. And a type does not have to embody *all* aspects of its antitype. Matthew 1:22-23 applies that later Immanuel to Jesus, whose name we already noted means *Savior*. This means that the emphasis is on the names *Immanuel* and *Jesus* rather than on His virgin birth. The virgin birth is required by the nature of the Savior as the God-Man, but that virgin birth is not actually the emphasis of Isaiah 7:14's prophecy, although the Hebrew word in Isaiah 7 *can* refer to a virgin.

This is confirmed by the prophecy of another *son* in Isaiah 9:6-7, which is still in the context of Assyria's invasion of Israel (see Isaiah 8). This son is clearly a Divine Being since He is called "Mighty God" and "Everlasting Father" whose kingdom "will be no end" (9:6-7) on "the throne of David" (9:7). This is strong evidence that the Messiah will be a God-man. And since the birth of a son implicitly means He will have a human mother, then His Father must be God Himself. Thus, the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 is a dual prophecy, and the use of the generic Hebrew word to describe the mother enables it to apply both to Isaiah's wife and to the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus.

More than that, in taking Adam's place, Jesus must be conceived without having corporately participated in Adam's original sin and thus be born without a sinful nature, which we established in "The Origin and Nature of Sin." If Jesus had been born with either of these conditions—with participation in Adam's sin and with a sinful nature—then He would have needed a Savior Himself.

The New Testament clearly teaches that Jesus was fully and really man. His human birth (Matthew 1:1; Luke 1:31; John 1:1-4) and human development (Luke 2:40, 51-52) demonstrate this, as well as He is called a *man* in I Timothy 2:5. Furthermore, it tells us that Jesus suffered from the same needs or limitations that all mankind has. He became hungry (Matthew 4:2; Mark 11:11-12), thirsty (John 4:7; 19:28), needed rest (Matthew 8:20, 24-25; Luke 9:58), and could die (Matthew 28:50, 63; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46).

However, His virgin birth makes His humanity different from all other human beings (Matthew 1:20-23; Luke 1:26-35), and thus making it possible to believe that He did not participate corporately in Adam's sin. Furthermore, the New Testament is clear that Jesus had no sin in Him, that is, the principle of sin reflected in a sinful nature was not present in Him (Luke 1:35's reference to *that Holy One*; Hebrews 7:26; 9:14; I Peter 1:19). In addition, Jesus never once committed an actual act of sin either by thought, word, or deed (John 8:46; II Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; I Peter 2:21-22). All of this indicates that He was *affected* by the *results* of human sin but was not *infected with sin*. Therefore, Jesus had Adam's *physical* nature *after* the human fall into sin, but He had Adam's *spiritual* nature *before* the human fall into sin.

So did Jesus actually take Adam's place, live a perfectly righteous life for us, die the death penalty that we deserve, and rise again? The answer to each of these questions is *Yes*. First, Romans 5:12-19 contrasts Adam and Jesus in a way that means Jesus is the human representative of the human race that Adam was initially. Then I Corinthians 15:45 explicitly calls Jesus *The last Adam* (cf. vv. 20-22). Second, we already established that Jesus lived a 100 percent perfectly righteous life in both His nature and behavior. That this was a Substitutionary life is made evident in Romans 3:21-22 (cf. 4:6, 11) and in Romans 5:18-19. The former states that God's righteousness is revealed *through faith in Jesus*, and the latter says that *by one Man's righteous act...and obedience many will be made righteous*. The context makes clear that this does not refer to Christ's obedience as an example for other people to follow and thereby leads to righteousness, but to that which results directly in *justification* and *righteousness*. *Justification* is a courtroom term and is used in Romans 5:18 as the opposite of *condemnation*, another courtroom term. In this way, Paul teaches that Jesus' perfect life was lived as a Substitute for us. At the same time, however, other passages plainly teach that Jesus' life was an example for us to follow. But that is another subject for a later discussion.

Third, the Scriptures also teach that Jesus died as our Substitute in our place. Note Romans 5:8, which declares that *Christ died for us*, and I Corinthians 15:3 *that Christ died for our sins*. Hebrews 2:9 puts His death this way: He *taste[d] death for everyone*. Other New Testament references that speak of Jesus' death as a substitute for what we owe to God include Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45, John 3:14-16, I Corinthians 5:7, II Corinthians 5:14-15, Galatians 1:4; 3:13, Ephesians 5:2, Titus 2:14, and Hebrews 9:26, 28. Matthew 28:20 and Mark 10:45 says that Jesus would die as a *ransom for many*. Faith in His death brings salvation (John 3:14-16). I Corinthians 5:7 calls Jesus the Passover, a reference to the Lamb of God represented by the Passover lamb, who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29, 36). II Corinthians 5:14-15 and Titus 2:14 tell us that Jesus' death was our death so that He died for all. Galatians 1:4, Ephesians 5:2, and Hebrews 9:26-28 says that Jesus died for our sins. Finally, Galatians 3:13 tells us that Jesus became a curse for us on the cross. Therefore, it is extremely clear that the New Testament teaches that Jesus died as our Substitute for our sins; He paid the death penalty that we all owe to God.

Since crucifixion was always a slow death, taking at least a few days, and Jesus died within hours (Matthew 27; Mark 15; Luke 23; John 19), surely it was the spiritual weight of all mankind's sins that actually killed Him. Yet it was also a death penalty, for Jesus felt forsaken by God the Father (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34) in fulfillment of another prophecy: *Yet it pleased the Lord [Father] to bruise Him [Jesus]* (Isaiah 53:10). Finally, as we learned in a previous paper, Jesus was resurrected from the dead (Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20-21).

Therefore, Jesus met all the criteria required of a Savior from sin. He was fully man and fully God who lived a perfectly righteous life from conception to the end of His public ministry and then paid the death penalty all as our Substitute. Finally, in order to be a Savior worth anything, He rose again from the dead. This is all that is meant by the theological term of the Substitutionary Atonement.

It should be added that the entire sanctuary system of the Old Testament taught the idea of the Substitutionary Atonement in types. The person or priest would place his hand on the head of the animal (Leviticus 1:4; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33), signifying that the animal is *accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him* (Leviticus 1:4). Then the animal was sacrificed and sometimes some of its blood was sprinkled in the Holy Place of the sanctuary (Leviticus 4:6-7, 16-17). This symbolically represented the transfer of the people's forgiven sins to the sanctuary itself. Then on the annual Day of Atonement the sanctuary was symbolically *cleansed*, also indicating a final cleansing from the people's sins at the end of the world (Leviticus 16). Thus, each animal sacrificed must have represented one later human sacrifice as a substitute for mankind that would bring forgiveness and righteous acceptance to God's people (and would not need to be repeated). This is the theological reason for Christians not to offer animal sacrifices, even if the Temple were rebuilt, because as the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36), Jesus offered Himself in that once-for-all sacrifice for sin.

The Moral Influence Theory of the Atonement

The most important challenge to the Biblical doctrine of the Substitutionary Atonement is called the Moral Influence Theory of the Atonement. Although someone else may have first taught this view, it was most notably promoted by Peter Abelard, a French professor of philosophy and theology who worked and wrote in the early twelfth century. It was thoroughly condemned by the Roman Catholic Church and by most of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers. To this day, it is taught by more liberal Protestant thinkers, notably some in the Anglican, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches, and vehemently opposed by more conservative Protestant thinkers.

The basic idea is that since it is not just for someone to die in place of another person, Jesus did not die as mankind's Substitute. Rather, His death was the greatest demonstration of God's love for mankind so that it would transform people's characters and make them safe to save. In this way, Jesus did not suffer from the wrath of the Father. This view so emphasizes God's love so as to redefine His wrath as a sorrowful turning away from the persistent sinner and allowing Satan to bring punishment upon him. In rejecting the Substitutionary Atonement, the advocates of the Moral Influence Theory usually avoid the Biblical courtroom and other legal terms such as guilt, condemnation, justification, imputed righteousness, and blood atonement, as well as substitutionary atonement.

We will take each of the objections and answer them. First, the objection is that it is unjust for one person to die as a substitute for someone else. Normally, that is true. But it can be just if you adopt the view that Adam's willful sin made him the official representative of the human race in transferring citizenship from God's kingdom to Satan's kingdom. Through corporate personality, there is such a thing as corporate guilt. Not only could Jesus, as the Last Adam, give His perfect righteousness as a gift to all who sincerely accept Him, but He can also justly pay the death penalty for our sins. It is only when you ignore the ideas of representatives of humanity and corporate personality that one can reject the death of Jesus as our Substitute.

A second objection is that Jesus' death for our sins is based on a pagan notion that God's anger must be appeased. However, there is a profound difference between God's anger against sin and the pagan notion of appeasing a god. God's anger against sin is based on His just and holy character, while the pagan idea of appeasing an angry god is based on a god who is capricious and whose anger represents a loss of self-control. Therefore, it is completely invalid to compare God's wrath against sin with a pagan god's need to be appeased. Besides that, the New Testament teaches that one Member of the triune God does not need to convince the others to save anyone, for *God is love* (I John 4:8, 16) and *God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son* (John 3:16). The triune God is of one mind, character, purpose, and will, making the concept of appeasement completely null and void.

A third objection to the concept of the Substitutionary Atonement is that God's wrath is not based on a legal, just basis. Instead, it is simply His turning sorrowfully away and allowing people to suffer the natural consequences of their sinful choices. His justice is seen in His willingness to do this. First, God's willingness to sorrowfully turn away reflects part of His justice because it shows His respect for people's choices. It is also true that God often allows people to suffer the natural consequences of their own actions. But that is not the whole story. Second, a just and holy God naturally recoils at evil, for a God of love must also hate evil. By any standard of justice, this must mean that God has direct, active wrath against evil and will exercise righteous indignation against those who insist on clinging to sin. Third, His wrath is not the same as man's wrath, for our anger at best is mixed with selfishness that people will finally get what they deserve. But a God of love must mingle heartbreak and tears with His wrath because He is completely selfless. Finally, this view ignores the plain Bible teaching that God's wrath is often direct, active wrath which cannot be reinterpreted in a passive sense (Genesis 6:5-7; Revelation 14:10; 15:1; 19:15, 21; 20:9).

The Moral Influence Theory of the Atonement concedes that God transferred the sins of the world to Jesus, but not in any legal sense of penalty for sin, but so that He could starkly demonstrate that sin leads to death. First, this is a tacit acknowledgment that this must have been a *legal* transfer so that all of mankind's sins were imputed to Jesus. The irony of this view is that its advocates are famous for denying legal principles and language in the story of salvation. Second, each generation of human beings has seen close up and personal what sin has done to humanity. Jesus' death would not be necessary to prove to them that sin leads to death.

Finally, we agree that Jesus' death on the cross was the greatest demonstration of God's love for mankind. However, that was not the case if His death had not been absolutely necessary. If it were not necessary, it would be equivalent of a husband and wife walking on the beach and the husband telling his wife how much he loved her, and then "proving" it by rushing into the ocean and intentionally drowning himself. That is not love but absolute foolishness! Second, God certainly wants to transform our characters into harmony with His, which will make us safe to save because we will learn to trust God and thus never choose to return to sin. But any suggestion that His moral influence in changing our characters saves us is dangerous and wrong. He wants us to be transformed, but our transformation does not save us, but rather is the fruit of our salvation. This can be seen because we are incapable of saving ourselves by a changed character and by the direct Scriptural teaching that sanctification is the result of our having been saved—a truth we will see in our next chapter.

For all of the above reasons, we reject the Moral Influence Theory of the Atonement and affirm our support for the Substitutionary View of the Atonement.

Righteousness Comes as God's Gift

It is clear from the nature of sin and of God's unchangeable perfect character that He requires perfect righteousness to be saved and that no one can reach that level of perfect righteousness. Therefore, it must come as the result of a gift from God. The Greek word for *grace* essentially means a *gift*. Therefore, righteousness is given to us by God's grace. When that grace is received, it is said that the believer is *declared righteous*, which is the meaning of the Biblical word *justification*. In other words, the believer is declared "not guilty" (Deuteronomy 25:1). This term implies two different but related things: (1) that the believer is forgiven all his or her sins so that the person is "not guilty" (Matthew 26:27-28; Acts 10:43; 13:38-39); and (2) that the righteousness of Jesus the Substitute is given as a positive gift to the believer (Romans 4:3-11; Galatians 3:6-14). Therefore, salvation itself is brought by the justification that the believer is "not guilty" but perfectly righteous before God. In Romans 1:16-17, *salvation* (v. 16) is given to those who are *just* (v. 17), which is the root word for *justification*. In Romans 3:24-26, justification is said to come by grace. And in Romans 5:1-2, 18, justification brings eternal life.

How Grace and Righteousness are Received

Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, and most Protestant Christians all accept this proposition and the terms associated with it. The difference arises over exactly *how* the believer receives God's grace. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches teach that God must make the believer perfectly righteous before He can declare Him righteous or just, or otherwise God would be a liar. Therefore, forgiveness and righteousness comes from God through the sacraments of the Church, especially the sacrament of penance (the confessional) and the sacrament of Holy Communion, which is the reason that those churches teach that the bread and wine of communion become the actual albeit mystical body and blood of Jesus. By partaking of Jesus' "real" body and blood, the person is increasingly made more and more righteous.

This view of grace is often called *infused grace* because it is infused into the believer by his participation in the sacraments of the Church, making the Church the official channel of God's grace. Then, when one has the Holy Spirit, also through a life of participation in the sacraments, his good works have meritorious value and he thus he becomes more and more righteous by doing good works. [The good works of a person outside the communion of the Church are worthless and do not make him or her more righteous.] However, since it is recognized that almost no one is ever made perfectly righteous in this life, purgatory or something like purgatory must exist as a place the soul goes after the person dies, in which all remaining sins are eventually purged from the believer. Then, when all his or her sins are completely purged, the believer's soul enters heaven.

The traditional Protestant view of grace is often called *relational grace*. In this view, when a person has a positive relationship with God through Jesus, Christ's perfect righteousness lived out in His life on earth is *imputed* to him, that is, *put to his account*; the believer is *credited* with perfect righteousness even though he does not internally possess it. This does not make God a liar because it is based on the timelessness of God's nature. As such, He knows that as long as we are faithful to Him, He will give us perfect righteousness (remove our sinful nature) at the Second Coming of Jesus (Philippians 3:20-21). In this sense, Romans 4:17 declares that God *gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did*. Therefore, at any moment in time, a faithful Christian is as good as already perfectly righteous in God's sight. This concept of relational grace is the reason that Protestants generally do not view the Church as the channel of God's grace but only as the proclaimer and reflector of that grace. It is also the reason that they deny the existence of purgatory.

We reject the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox view of *infused* grace and accept the Protestant view of *relational* grace for several reasons. First, infused grace violates the principle of Jesus as our Substitute, for you do not need a Substitute if God is going to make you internally righteous before He saves you. Second, the existence of our sinful nature until glorification at the Second Coming of Jesus (Philippians 3:20-21) makes any effort, even motivated and empowered by God Himself, to make a person perfectly righteous in this life impossible. Third, even when good works are inspired, motivated, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, they still do not earn righteousness or any reward. This latter point is seen in Jesus' words in Luke 17:9-10, *Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'*

Finally, Scripture teaches that salvation, righteousness, or justification is given as a free gift *apart* from our good works, and that righteousness is *imputed* to the believer as seen below:

- Romans 6:23 says that eternal life is the *gift* of God in opposition to the *wages* of sin as death. As wages are something that is earned, so the gift cannot be earned, which precludes the idea that even our Holy Spirit-empowered good works earn us righteousness either.
- Romans 3:20 says that *by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin*.
- Romans 3:21-22 teach that *the righteousness of God [is] apart from the law*.
- Romans 3:28 emphatically declares that *a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law*.

- Romans 4:2-3 tell us that Abraham's belief, or faith, resulted in God accounting righteousness to him. *Accounting* something to someone is *imputing* it, that is, putting it to his account.
- Romans 4:8 says that *Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin*. That means that God will not give man credit for sin if they are forgiven (v. 7).
- Romans 4:23-25 teaches that righteousness (see v. 22) is imputed to all who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead (vv. 23-24).
- Romans 5:1 declares that we are *justified by faith*. Faith is simply the open hand that accepts a free gift.
- Galatians 2:16 says that we are *justified by faith in Jesus Christ...and not by the works of the law*.
- Galatians 3:11 says that *no one is justified by the law*.
- Galatians 3:24 says that we are *justified by faith*.
- Galatians 5:4-5 teaches that *justification or righteousness is by faith*.

In none of the aforementioned New Testament passages is good works or law-keeping explicitly distinguished as having been done within or without the context of being a practicing Christian, as if to teach that Spirit-empowered good works are somehow meritorious while good works outside the Christian context are not. In fact, all of these passages were written to Christian believers, implying that they are Spirit-empowered good works.

Therefore, we are left with the concept of relational grace which best fits the truths we have discovered thus far about salvation. And justification or righteousness is by grace *through faith alone*, just as the Protestant Reformers proclaimed it in the sixteenth century.

Now we have two reasons for rejecting the doctrine of purgatory or any place like it. First, since the grace of perfect righteousness is received by a relationship with Jesus (relational grace), then there is no need for a place like purgatory. By relationship with Jesus we have all the righteousness we need to enter heaven. Second, the very idea of purgatory is a place where the soul goes to (1) receive a temporary punishment for sin and (2) purify the soul from the spiritual wounds caused by sin so that one can then enter heaven. However, that denies the Biblical truth that Jesus paid everything so as to completely forgive all of our sins and that instantaneous glorification at the Second Coming of Jesus removes our sinful nature and thus constitutes a complete healing and

cleansing from sin (Philippians 3:20-21, note that vv. 12-13 concerns spiritual perfection, not only the physical body, in the context of glorification).

Objection Texts

Some have objected to our conclusion that righteousness or salvation comes by grace through faith alone. Two New Testament texts are commonly used, Titus 3:5 and James 2:24.

The Objection from Titus 3:5

Some have objected to our emphasis on justification or righteousness by faith alone, citing Titus 3:5 as teaching that we are saved by *the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit*. There is no doubt that regeneration refers to the new birth spoken of by Jesus in John 3:5 and by the apostle Paul in II Corinthians 5:17. In Romans 6:1-4 water baptism symbolizes our death to the old way of life and our new birth to *walk in newness of life*. Of course, we must be careful not to believe that water and Spirit baptism causes our new birth, for there is no teaching in the New Testament that there is anything magical in the baptismal waters. But it is an important symbol of that new birth. The *renewing of the Holy Spirit* would then refer to the ongoing renewal in our lives that also comes from the Holy Spirit (Romans 12:2). This text is then used by some to teach that we are saved by justification, which they believe is the new birth and consequent sanctified life.

But does this text actually teach that we are saved by the new birth and the sanctified life? Verse 7 says that justification comes first and is then followed by becoming *heirs according to the hope of eternal life*. And verse 5's declaration that believers have been regenerated points to the act that makes us heirs. That is, when we are born again we become sons and daughters of God and thus heirs of eternal life. Therefore, the order in which these three elements occur is as follows: First, we are justified by grace, which gives us credit for Jesus' perfect righteousness and thus saves us. Second, we are regenerated in the new birth, which makes us God's children and heirs. Finally, the continual process of renewal occurs. Paul is here consistent with his theology expressed in Galatians 3, where he begins with justification (v. 11) and ends with God's people as heirs (v. 29).

In this way, Paul is not here teaching that we are saved by having been born again and by the ongoing process of sanctification but that being born again and living the sanctified life are the results of our having been justified. Paul contrasts the new life in the Holy Spirit with the pre-conversion old way of life (vv. 1-3), which is the reason he puts an emphasis on the new birth and sanctification. In this sense, we have been saved from the power of our past sinful lives.

But a careful reading does not warrant the conclusion that the new birth and resulting sanctified life is what causes us to be saved. As always with Paul, they are the result of having already been

saved. But it is also true that we have been saved in order to live holy lives.

James 2:24

In this text we are told that *a man is justified by works, and not by faith only*. The sixteenth-century German Protestant Reformer Martin Luther once called James an “epistle of straw” because James appeared to him to conflict with Paul’s teaching that justification is by faith apart from the law or good works (Romans 3:21, 28; Galatians 2:16; 3:11). However, James is not a theological treatise as is Romans or Galatians, where Paul taught his doctrine of justification by faith alone. Instead, James is exhorting his readers to apply Christian principles to everyday practical life. His emphasis in James 2 is on the fact that good works always accompanies genuine faith. Thus he declared that *I will show you my faith by my works* (v. 18) and *faith without works is dead* (v. 26). In other words, good works is the evidence that a person’s faith is genuine. Therefore, there is no actual conflict between James and Paul, and the former cannot properly be used against the latter’s teaching that justification or righteousness is by faith alone. James simply adds that it is by a faith that results in good works.

Before moving on, perhaps we ought to define faith a bit further. The Greek word for *faith* is linguistically related quite closely to the Greek words for *belief* and *trust*. If you looked up each New Testament occurrence of the word *faith* you would find that *trust* fits nicely as the best synonym. For a Christian, faith in God is trusting Him to keep His promises, whether we are talking about His promise of salvation or any other promise. Therefore, faith is the act of trusting God and the means through which He gives His promises to us. Faith produces more positive thinking, but they are not the same thing; positive thinking is simply focused thinking on positive things. While faith leads to positive thinking, positive thinking can also be manufactured by a person’s own mind. Norman Vincent Peale (d. 1993), the American minister of the Marble Collegiate Church (a Reformed Church in the Calvinist tradition) in New York City for several decades, became the famous Father of positive thinking. His best-selling book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, tended to conflate faith and positive thinking.

Five-Point Calvinism

The sixteenth-century French Protestant Reformer John Calvin adopted some of the salvation theology of Augustine, the bishop of Hippo (in North Africa) from 396-430. Essentially, both leaders emphasized man’s total depravity in sin and God’s sovereign nature so that they taught men have no free will with which to choose salvation. Therefore, God predestines before anyone was born who He would elect to save and who He would choose for damnation. Then He offers what is called His irresistible grace to the elect on the basis of His limited atonement on the cross, which was only for the elect. Finally, the elect are given the gift of perseverance so that once God gives them His irresistible grace, they will continue in the faith. Interestingly, Augustine’s own

Roman Catholic Church never accepted Augustine's theology in this matter. Historically, the Protestant churches which arose from Calvin's teachings did, although not many strict believers in Five-Point Calvinism exist today.

The five points of this Calvinistic doctrine are listed below:

- *Total Depravity of Man*—Mankind is so depraved as a result of sin that he cannot choose to be saved.
- *Unconditional Divine Election*—God predestines those He will save and those He will damn because man cannot make that choice himself.
- *Limited Atonement*—Christ's atoning death on the cross was limited to the elect whom He predestined to be saved. Thus, He did not die for the sins of the whole world.
- *Divine Grace is Irresistible*—Because man is incapable of choosing salvation, God's grace that draws them to salvation must be irresistible. After all, He is sovereign and lord over all beings and things and can do as He pleases.
- *The Gift of Perseverance*—The elect are given the gift of perseverance. In this way, once they have received God's irresistible grace, they are guaranteed to persevere in the faith.

Like the large majority of Christians, we reject Five-Point Calvinism for a variety of reasons. First, we accept the reality of total depravity. However, the Holy Spirit works to influence people and thus supernaturally enables them to be able to accept or reject the free gift of salvation. His work outside of people (unbelievers) is called *prevenient* grace. The goodness of God leads to repentance (Romans 2:4).

Second, the whole idea that God predestines those who will be saved and those who will be lost violates the core tenant of the Christian view of God as Love Personified (I John 4:8, 16). God wants us to love Him back, but love absolutely requires free will. If people choose to serve God because He predestined them to do so, then that is not love but robotic service. Therefore, while God is sovereign, His sovereignty is balanced by the fact that He is also Love and thus values free will. Although man is depraved because of sin, and could not on his own come to God, it is He who makes it supernaturally possible through the power of His *prevenient* grace. The same reason means that God's grace is not irresistible, for if it were, then people are not really given a free choice.

Moreover, Bible predestination is not based on God's choices of individuals that are saved or lost, but on the relationship that people choose to have or not have with Jesus. In other words, Biblical predestination teaches that everyone who is in Christ has been predestined to be saved, not that

those who accept Christ are the ones God has foreordained to do so. It is possible to read the two Bible passages that mention predestination either in the Calvinistic way or in this way (Romans 8:29-30 and Ephesians 1:4-6). However, the latter way must be correct because it is the only interpretation that upholds God as Love.

Third, the plain teaching of Scripture is that God desires all people to be saved. I Timothy 2:3-4 declares this truth when Paul states that *God our Savior...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*. And in II Peter 3:9, the apostle Peter says that the *Lord...is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*. There is simply no way around these texts. Under five-point Calvinism, these texts are lying. We prefer that like all Scriptures, Paul and Peter are here telling the truth about God's desire.

Fourth, the concept of Limited Atonement contradicts the plain teaching of Scripture that Jesus died for everyone's sins. In John 1:29 John the Baptist said of Jesus that *He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!* The apostle Paul clearly stated that Jesus *died for all* (II Corinthians 5:14-15). Hebrews 2:9 tells us that Jesus tasted *death for everyone*. Finally, I John 2:2 declares that Jesus *is the propitiation for the sins...of the whole world*. The Greek word for *propitiation* was used for the sacrificial gift given to pagan gods. Here, of course, Jesus is the gift that gave Himself as an atonement for sins. Clearly, then, Jesus' atonement on the cross was made for everyone; it is an Unlimited Atonement because it covers everyone who has ever lived or will live. Of course, it will only be effective for those individuals who choose to accept it.

Finally, the concept of the gift of perseverance as taught by Five-Point Calvinism—as a guarantee that a person will continue to walk with the Lord—is yet another violation of the free will of the person based on the fact that God is Love Personified (I John 4:8, 16). We would agree that perseverance is a gift from God in that He provides the motive and the power to enable a person to continue walking with Him. However, that cannot preclude the possibility of that person turning his or her back on the Lord and walking away from Him. Love continues to require free will.

Faith is Not Meritorious

The Calvinistic tradition insists that if faith is required of the believer to receive God's grace, that somehow that robs God of the glory by making the believer's faith part of the reason he or she is saved. In other words, it is saying that the believer's faith merits God's grace. But Ephesians 2:8-9 declares that *For by grace [a gift] you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast*. This text makes it clear that faith is not works or any other basis on which to claim even partial credit for one's gift of salvation. Faith, therefore, is simply the means by which one accepts the gift. Likewise, when you accept a birthday or Christmas gift, you did not earn that gift just because you accepted it. Accepting it was merely the action required to receive it. Such action is passive, not active, and thus gives you no credit for having received the gift.

Perhaps we should define faith a bit further. The Greek word for *faith* is linguistically related quite closely to the Greek words for *belief* and *trust*. If you looked up each New Testament occurrence of the word *faith* you would find that *trust* fits nicely as the best synonym. For a Christian, faith in God is trusting Him to keep His promises, whether we are talking about His promise of salvation or any other promise. Therefore, faith is the act of trusting God and the means through which He gives His promises to us. Faith produces more positive thinking, but they are not the same thing; positive thinking is simply focused thinking on positive things. While faith leads to positive thinking, positive thinking can also be manufactured by a person's own mind. Norman Vincent Peale (d. 1993), the American minister of the Marble Collegiate Church (a Reformed Church in the Calvinist tradition) in New York City for several decades, became the famous Father of positive thinking. His best-selling book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, tended to conflate faith and positive thinking.

Once Saved, Always Saved (or Eternal Security)

Some believers teach a doctrine of eternal security, better known as “once saved, always saved.” But since salvation is a gift, it implies that a gift can be thrown away later. Moreover, I John 1:7 speaks of the need to continuously *walk in the light...so that...the blood of Jesus...cleanses us from all sin*. The continual cleansing is dependent upon the continuous walking in the light. But one can choose to stop walking in the light and start walking in spiritual darkness. According to I John 5:12, eternal life is found in a relationship with Jesus: *He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life*. This relationship metaphor means that we can always choose to end that relationship and thus lose that eternal life. Therefore, “once saved, always saved” is not a Biblical teaching.

Besides, this popular doctrine does not really give the believer assurance of their salvation anyway because those who teach this doctrine also say that the one who turns his back on Jesus simply proves that he was never saved in the first place. Since a person cannot know with certainty that he will not someday turn his back on Jesus, he cannot know with certainty that he is saved! Thus, a doctrine that professes to give Christians assurance of their salvation actually robs them of it. The Biblical response is easy: a believer's assurance of salvation at any given moment is based on having a positive relationship with Jesus (I John 5:11-12). As long as he knows he has that relationship he can have the full assurance that he is saved.

Popular New Testament Passages Used to Support “Once Saved, Always Saved”

Despite the sanctified logic presented concerning the doctrine of eternal security, we will examine the most popular New Testament passages used to support this doctrine.

1. John 6:37-40—*All that the Father gives Me and the one who comes to Me I will by no*

means cast out....that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. The idea is that once a person has come to Jesus and received salvation, he or she cannot be lost because Jesus plainly states that He will lose nothing.

However, this passage only means that Jesus will not lose anyone on account of any decision on His part to reject (*cast out*) anyone. The passage does *not* say that the believer himself cannot change his mind and exercise free will to depart from Jesus.

2. John 10:27-30—*I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand....and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand.* Allegedly, when a person receives eternal life in Jesus, he or she cannot be lost because no one can snatch them from either Jesus' or the Father's hand.

However, the fact that no one can snatch God's people out of His or Christ's hand does not prevent a Christian believer individually deciding to leave that hand. The language is clearly concerned with the inability of a third party to snatch someone from God's and Christ's hand.

3. Romans 8:31-39—*who can be against us?...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Allegedly, since nothing can separate a Christian believer from the love of God, then no such person can ever be separated from that love and thereby lost.

As with John 10:27-30, the focus here is on the inability of a third party to separate the believer from the love of God in Jesus. Nothing is said which would prevent the exercise of a believer's free will to separate himself from God.

4. Ephesians 4:30—*And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.* Allegedly, the past tense of *were sealed* means that the Holy Spirit keeps you forever for the ultimate redemption at the return of Jesus.

Actually, this verse teaches just the opposite by plainly declaring that a genuine Christian can *grieve the Holy Spirit*. Isaiah 63:10 associates spiritual rebellion against God with grieving the Holy Spirit, so that God becomes the enemy of those who so engage themselves.

5. Hebrews 7:25—*Therefore He [Jesus] is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.* Allegedly,

Christ's continuous intercession before the Father in heaven means that genuine believers are continuously in a saved condition, from which they cannot leave as long as Jesus intercedes for them.

When Jesus makes *intercession* for people, the word means that He is petitioning or pleading to God the Father on their behalf. But this is not the same as one person simply praying to God on someone else's behalf because verses 26-28 inform us that Jesus is fit to be our High Priest because of His absolute perfection. Thus, Jesus is our intercessor in that He is pleading His own blood representing His righteousness, so that the Father can justly save the sinner whose perfection is literally in Jesus (not in the believer). It is inconceivable and totally unbiblical to think that Jesus would ever intercede His righteousness on behalf of anyone who does not want it. Therefore, unless one takes the position that God determines whether a person wants Christ's righteousness, this passage does not teach a "once saved, always saved" doctrine.

6. Hebrews 13:5—*I will never leave you nor forsake you*. Allegedly, since God promises never to leave or forsake genuine believers, then they are eternally in a saved condition.

The fact that God promises never to leave or forsake any of His people does not mean that none of them has the possibility of choosing to leave Him.

7. I Peter 1:4-5—*reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*. Allegedly, the true believer cannot be lost because he or she is kept by God's omnipotent power, which naturally cannot fail.

Note that while Christians *are kept by the power of God* (v. 5), the text also declares that this keeping *is through faith*. Obviously, this is not God's faith, but the believer's faith. This text reminds us of the modern proverb that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Translation: If an individual believer forsakes his faith in Jesus, then even the omnipotent power of God will not keep him *for salvation* against his will.

8. Jude 24—*Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy*. Allegedly, God's power will keep His people from stumbling on their spiritual journey; thus, they cannot be lost.

All this text says is that God is capable of keeping a believer from stumbling. But like I Peter 1:4-5, God's power to do this is still contingent upon the believer allowing Him to do it. To use this text to teach that a believer cannot fall out of grace is to throw out the entire concept of man's free will, which is really at the heart of the entire debate over eternal security.

New Testament Passages Teaching that One Can Lose His Salvation

The following New Testament passages emphatically declare the teaching of Scripture that a genuine believer can choose to depart from the Lord, and that upon doing so, he becomes subject to the wrath of God. In other words, the Bible does, in fact, teach that a saved person can lose his salvation—not because of any capricious act of God—but as a result of his own choice:

1. Matthew 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13—*But he who endures to the end will be saved.* Clearly, the implication is that those believers who fail to endure to the end will be lost.
2. Revelation 2:25-26—The command is given to *hold fast what you have till I come. And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations.* Plainly, what those readers of Revelation had was their salvation status; but keeping that status depended on overcoming and keeping the Lord's works *until the end.*
3. Revelation 3:11—The warning to believers is to *Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown.* Such a warning would be meaningless if it were not possible for a third party to convince you to abandon your crown of life in Jesus.
4. John 15:6—Jesus here is talking about those who were presently abiding in Him because He speaks of the possibility of them (as branches) being cast out and burned. Thus, His clause, *If anyone does not abide in Me* constitutes a warning that those presently in Him must continue to abide in Him, or else they will be lost.
5. I Thessalonians 5:19—When the apostle Paul admonishes Christians not to *quench the Spirit*, he is stating that it is possible to lose one's salvation status because in Romans 8:9 the same apostle has made it clear that anyone who has the Holy Spirit belongs to Christ. In other words, a believer (who, by definition, has the Holy Spirit) can lose that Spirit by quenching it. And when he loses the Spirit, he is no longer saved, just as Paul said in Romans 8:9: *if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.*
6. I Timothy 4:1-2—Paul could not be clearer when he wrote, *Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith.* Note that it is *the faith* rather than the church which is specifically said to be departed from. Because it is impossible to please God without faith (Hebrews 11:6), anyone who departs from *the faith* must also depart from God, and is therefore lost.
7. Hebrews 3:12—This text is a warning to readers that they not obtain *an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.* It is obvious that he is writing to those who are saved, as the advocates of eternal security also believe. Therefore, the warning not to

depart from God must constitute a warning not to lose one's salvation. Such a warning would be meaningless if it were impossible for them to lose their salvation because God neither speaks unnecessarily nor in riddles.

8. Hebrews 6:4-6—Here the writer of Hebrews uses four different expressions to describe the believer who is capable of *fall[ing] away*: (1) *were once enlightened*; (2) *have tasted the heavenly gift*; (3) *have become partakers of the Holy Spirit*; (4) *have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come*. Advocates of eternal security use one of two different major arguments to object that this passage does not teach that it is possible for someone to lose his salvation. One argument is that these expressions do not actually describe a person who was genuinely saved in the first place. Rather, the reference to having once been enlightened allegedly refers to merely being made aware of truth rather than actually accepting saving truth. Being *partakers of the Holy Spirit* is often rationalized as meaning that the person has seen the power of the Spirit and been blessed by it in contrast to having actually received the Holy Spirit. Having tasted spiritual matters is then viewed as merely tasting rather than digesting and assimilating these things internally.

However, the word *partakers* implies genuine participation in the work of the Holy Spirit. And the metaphor of tasting also implies a genuine experience of assimilating these spiritual blessings, similarly as the author has already stated in the same book that Jesus tasted death for all people at Calvary (Hebrews 2:9, His taste of death was a genuine experience). Compare also Psalm 34:8, where the metaphor of tasting is parallel in the poetry to trusting in God. Furthermore, the cumulative impact of all four expressions must certainly mean that the writer is speaking of genuine believers who have experienced salvation. Attempts to weaken the impact of these four expressions is analogous to attempting to force a jigsaw puzzle piece into the wrong place.

A different argument that others use is that this passage is hypothetical because of the clause *if they fall away*. These critics acknowledge that the expressions describe a genuine Christian experience. But they argue that the writer is not describing anything which is actually possible, but is merely using hypothetical language in order to convey a very serious point. However, this position is not tenable either because the word *if* is a misleading translation. Instead, the expression is yet another participle in the past tense, and should be literally translated as *[and] having fallen away*. Although the writer is not talking about his readers or any other *specific* person or persons, this participle at the beginning of verse 6 means that he is not speaking hypothetically, but about a *real* possibility.

[NOTE: As a last resort, critics often retort that this passage cannot teach that someone can lose his salvation or else it is also teaching that he cannot get it back again. Whether

it teaches that he can never get it back again or not, this argument fails to impress. First, the original Greek simply has the participle *crucifying* after the word for *repentance*. This may signify time or cause. If it signifies time, the passage is simply stating that a person cannot be renewed to repentance as long as he keeps on crucifying the Son of God by his attitude and actions. In such a case, it would certainly be possible for the person to later change his attitude and be renewed to repentance. On the other hand, if it signifies cause, the passage then must be interpreted as referring to the unpardonable sin, in which the apostate has gone so far from God that he cannot even hear the voice of the Holy Spirit ever again; thus, he cannot be renewed to repentance. In either case, the argument that this passage cannot teach the possibility of losing one's salvation is without merit.]

9. Hebrews 10:26-27—This passage states that *if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment*. That this is *not* referring to those who have merely had the truth explained to them is seen by the context of verses 19 onward, especially verse 23, which admonishes the believers *to hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering*. In other words, the author is speaking to genuine Christian believers. And the act of sinning *willfully* must refer to a willful abandonment of the truth in the context of verse 23's warning to *hold fast*. Those who *sin willfully* are those who do *not hold fast*. See also verse 29 for the further description of such persons as *trampling the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant...a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace*. For all such, Christ's sacrifice does not apply because their hearts are stubbornly rejecting it. Thus, it is possible for a saved believer to willfully abandon the truth and be lost.
10. I Peter 2:20-21—This passage speaks of those who *have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...again entangled in them and overcome*, in which case *the latter end is worse for them than the beginning*. To interpret this passage as a description of people who had moved *toward* Christ but then rejected Him, as most adherents of eternal security allege, does great injustice to the plain words. Besides, Peter had said something earlier in the same epistle that relates to this passage: *His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness...by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust* (I Peter 1:3-4). Note that the escape from *the corruption that is in the world* is by receiving those spiritual blessings which most certainly include salvation. And yet it is possible for such a person to become *again entangled in the pollutions of the world*.
11. Revelation 2:4-5—Jesus warns the church at Ephesus that if they do not *repent and do the first works, I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place*. Revelation 1:20 identifies the lampstands in this vision as churches. This, therefore, is a

warning that Jesus will bring the harsh judgment of removing the believers there from His presence if they do not repent (note that 1:12-13 pictures Jesus walking among the lampstands). Being removed from the presence of Jesus must surely mean the loss of their salvation or else words have lost their meaning.

Conditionality of the Covenant Promises

The Old Testament perspective that God's covenant promises are conditional also reinforces our conclusion that "once saved, always saved" is unbiblical. Note the following Scriptures below:

- Deuteronomy 28—Verses 1-14 discuss the blessings of the covenant, which were conditional upon Israel's obedience; verses 15-68 (a much larger portion) discuss the curses of the covenant, which would come if Israel departed from God's will.
- Exodus 19:5—*If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people.*
- Isaiah 1:19--*If you are willing and obedient, You shall eat the good of the land.*
- Jeremiah 7:23—*Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people* (cf. Jeremiah 11:4).
- Jeremiah 17:24-25—*If you heed Me carefully...this city [Jerusalem] shall remain forever* (cf. Jeremiah 26:3).
- Zechariah 1:3—*Return to Me...and I will return to you.*
- Zechariah 6:15—*And this [glories of a restored Temple] shall come to pass if you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God.*

Conclusion

Given the testimony of both the Old and New Testaments, therefore, we must reject the doctrine of "once saved, always saved" as an unbiblical attempt to derive a doctrine of eternal security. It violates the principle of free will that is necessary because *God is love* (I John 4:8, 16). Nevertheless, the believer should indeed have an assurance of salvation because he should know at any moment in his or her experience whether he has a positive relationship with Jesus, who is the Source of salvation and eternal life (I John 5:11-12).