

Saved Alone?

Bubba Garner

No one who believes in the inspiration of the Scriptures would argue that the theme of the Bible is salvation. It's what man lost in the garden of Eden in Genesis 3. It's what he regains in the garden of Paradise in Revelation 22. No subject is spoken of more often in the Scriptures than salvation.

But one of the great discussions through the ages has been "How are you saved?" Are you saved by grace? Are you saved by faith? Are you saved by works? Unfortunately, the answer is often given in extremes. To admit one is to exclude the others. The problem is when you insert the word "alone" after any of these.

The Bible nowhere teaches that you are saved by grace alone. Or by faith alone. Or by works alone. In fact, there are dire consequences in taking any of those positions.

If you are saved by grace alone, then faith is unnecessary. Salvation is indeed "the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). No one deserves it. No one can earn it. It comes from God's love for man and for His desire that all "be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). Paul describes Him as being "rich in mercy" and motivated "by the great love with which He loved us" (Eph. 2:4).

But are we saved by grace alone? Does God's desire for all men to be saved mean that all will? If so, why do we need the Bible? If so, why even go through the horror of the crucifixion? "A gift requires a giver and a willing receiver" (Colly Caldwell). The same Bible that tells about the God of grace informs us about receiving this grace. The apostles went about preaching so that people could be informed about grace (Acts 20:24, 32). Apollos "helped greatly those who had believed through grace" (18:27). Grace is indeed available to all. But not all are willing to receive this gift.

If you are saved by faith alone, then works are unnecessary. We are saved "by grace through faith" (Eph. 2:8). Faith comes by hearing the word of God. We are presented with the facts of the gospel of grace. When we read the testimony of the witnesses of these facts, we respond by believing what we have heard. Without faith, it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6).

But are we saved by faith alone? "You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone" (Jam. 2:24). This faith without works is further described in this chapter as dead (2:17), useless (2:20) and imperfect (2:22). Just saying "I believe" or "accepting Christ as your personal Savior" is not supported in Scripture. In fact, we find just the opposite. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). Faith is

linked with repentance (Acts 20:21), confession (Rom. 10:10), and baptism (Mark 16:16) as God's conditions for salvation. "Faith only" may be a "wholesome doctrine and very full of comfort" (Methodist Discipline). But it is not full of Scripture.

If you are saved by works alone, then grace is unnecessary. We are "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10). The Bible speaks of different kinds of works: works of the devil (John 8:41), works of darkness (Rom. 13:12), and works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-20). But the works we are created to do are the works of God. It is the conduct He expects from those who have been conformed to the image of His Son. The gospel of grace instructs us to "deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age" (Titus 2:11-12).

But are we saved by works alone? When Paul wrote that salvation is "not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Eph. 2:9), that is just another way of saying what he said in the verse before: it is "not of yourselves" (Eph. 2:8). Consider our condition when God saved us. We were "dead in your trespasses and sins," "indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind," and "by nature children of wrath" (Eph. 2:1,3). Could you have done anything about your condition on your own? Could you have worked enough good deeds to offset the bad or decided on your own wisdom what would bring you to life? Without His grace, we are without hope.

Instead of trying to play grace against works or works against faith, let each play its part in God's plan of salvation. In so doing, we will be saved His way, the only way.