

**Ephesians 2:8-9**  
**Is Saving Faith a Gift from God?**

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God not as a result of works, that no one should boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

These two verses are among the most beloved in the Bible. They express with beauty and clarity marvelous truths of the gospel and soundly contradict the man-made doctrine that eternal life is a reward for good works and merits. Little wonder that so many Christians have committed them to memory, often from their youth.

“For by grace you have been saved” reminds us that delivery from sin and its punishment has been accomplished through exercise of God’s undeserved favor. He has done this for the benefit of those who have sinned against Him, the very ones who deserved His wrath (Romans 5:1-11). For these He gave His only-begotten Son (John 3:16). To these He freely offers eternal salvation (Romans 6:23), adoption as sons (2 Corinthians 6:18), and “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 1:3). So great is God’s grace toward those who believe that it will take the ages to come for Him to “show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7).

Ephesians 2:8 also reminds us that God’s great salvation is received “through faith.” When a sinner hears the gospel and trusts in Jesus, God saves him. More precisely, God justifies the sinner, declaring him righteous in His sight. This is an act of imputation in which God credits the sinner’s account with His own righteousness, “even the righteousness of God through faith for all those who believe” (Romans 3:22). The verse continues, “. . . and

that not of yourselves.” Here we encounter a controversy. It centers on the question: To what does “that” refer?

### **Does “that” refer to faith?**

Some Calvinists say that “that” refers to faith in Ephesians 2:8. They understand the verse to read, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that faith is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” The *Westminster Confession* of 1646, a document which many consider to be the most authoritative summary of Reformed doctrine, interprets the verse this way.<sup>1</sup> Reformed theologian Loraine Boettner explains the theology behind this belief, writing, “Faith is not something man contributes to salvation but is itself a part of God’s gift of salvation—it is God’s gift to the sinner, not the sinner’s gift to God.”<sup>2</sup> This belief is closely linked to the Reformed doctrine of unconditional election. Boettner explains:

God’s choice of certain individuals unto salvation before the foundation of the world rested solely in His own sovereign will. His choice of particular sinners was not based on any foreseen response of obedience on their part, such as faith, repentance, etc. On the contrary, God gives faith and repentance to each individual whom He selected. These acts are the result, not the cause of God’s choice. Election therefore was not determined by or conditioned upon any virtuous quality or act foreseen in man. Those whom God sovereignly elected He brings through the power of the Spirit to a willing acceptance of Christ. Thus God’s choice of the sinner, not the sinner’s choice of Christ, is the ultimate cause of salvation.<sup>3</sup>

### **Chosen “in Christ”**

I disagree. In my book *John Calvin Goes to Berkeley*, I put forth the view that divine election refers to the Father taking those “in Christ” for Himself. As Elliot Hall points out in Chapter Thirty-three, Ephesians 1:4 tells us more about election than any other verse in the Bible. Speaking of Christ, it states that God the Father “chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (Ephesians 1:4). The verb

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<sup>1</sup> *Westminster Confession*, chapter 11.

<sup>2</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Faith* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

“chose” is in the middle voice. This communicates that the Father chose us *for himself*. His act of choosing is qualified by the phrase ‘in him,’ referring to Jesus. This means that the Father chose us with our close connection to Christ in view. Such an election is conditional.

Ephesians 1:4 continues, telling us that the Father chose “us” for a purpose: “that we should be holy and blameless in his sight” (Ephesians 1:4) This is only possible within the context of being ‘in Christ.’ A holy God cannot treat guilty sinners as holy and blameless in His sight simply by decree. There must be a just basis for such a judgment. That basis is Christ. He’s the mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). Sinners come to Christ through personal repentance and faith. God helps them to do it, but He doesn’t repent for them and He doesn’t believe for them.

The Calvinist cannot accept man having any real voice in God’s decision as to whom He will save or whom He will not. God is sovereign, the Calvinist tells us. The choice must be all of God and none of ourselves or He is not truly sovereign.

But cannot God remain sovereign while granting men and women the freedom to choose whether or not they will submit to His rule, accept His gracious offer of salvation, believe in His Son, or love Him? Is God’s sovereignty so fragile that human choice can disrupt or negate it?

I don’t think so. Whether individuals freely choose to accept God’s love and enjoy heaven or to spurn Him and suffer the just penalty of their sins in hell, God shall reign over all. “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, /And every tongue shall give praise to God” (Romans 14:11). He shall have His way.

### **Irresistible Grace**

That’s not the way it works, the Calvinist tells us. God has already chosen who will believe and who will not. When He calls a sinner, the sinner will come and be saved. God’s will cannot be thwarted. This brings us to the doctrine of irresistible grace, the “I” in Calvin’s TULIP. Once again, Loraine Boettner explains:

In addition to the outward general call to salvation which is made to everyone who hears the Gospel, the Holy Spirit extends to the elect a special inward call that inevitably brings them to salvation. The external call (which

is made to all without distinction) can be, and often is, rejected, whereas the internal call (which is made only to the elect) cannot be rejected; it always results in conversion. By means of this special call the Spirit irresistibly draws sinners to Christ. He is not limited in His work of applying salvation by man's will, nor is He dependent upon man's cooperation for success. The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ. God's grace, therefore, is invincible; it never fails to result in the salvation of those to whom it is extended.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Father Draws the Repentant**

I agree in part. As I explain in *John Calvin Goes to Berkeley*, I believe that God gives those who repent the light to believe and draws them to His Son. Those whom He draws will come. The Lord taught, "All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37). The same truth is found a few verses later in John's Gospel. Jesus said, "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me" (John 6:45).

Why wouldn't they come? Why wouldn't repentant sinners who have received special light from the Father believe in the Lord Jesus and be saved? Or, to look at it from the other direction: What keeps people from accepting God's offer of salvation in the first place? Is it not sin? Jesus said, "And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). That's why so many people will face the wrath of God in the final judgment. They refused to turn from their sins. They loved their sin above all else.

This cannot be said of the person who has truly repented. Such a person has seen for himself his worthlessness and shame. He has taken sides against himself, proclaiming himself guilty as charged. This is the person who, when, by God's grace, he hears the gospel, knows that Jesus is his Savior, the one who died for him. Calling out to Him, he is saved.

### **Lydia of Acts 16:13-15**

Consider Lydia. Luke tells her story in Acts 16:13-15. When Paul first met her, she was with other women in a place of prayer. She was "a worshiper of God" (Acts 16:14), a

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<sup>4</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Faith* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1983).

phrase that indicates that she was a Gentile convert to the Jewish faith and a God-fearing woman. As she listened to Paul explain the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ, “the Lord opened her heart to respond” (Acts 16:14). In the New Testament, the heart refers to the inner person, the seat of mental, moral, and spiritual life. In Lydia’s case, God opened her heart to be attentive to Paul’s message. She responded in faith, trusting the Savior as her own. Why? Because she was a God-fearing woman, who was looking for the coming Messiah. When she heard the gospel, God opened her heart to respond positively. She trusted Christ and was born again.

Why Lydia and not some others? The Calvinist would say because God elected her. He chose her before the foundation of the world and then irresistibly called her.

I say God opened her heart to respond to the gospel because she had responded to a previous work of God, namely, His call to repentance. This Gentile woman had already turned from darkness to light, from idols to the living God. He in response looked down upon her from heaven and took note. He graciously sent the apostle Paul to tell her the good news of salvation. God touched her heart, and she believed and was saved.

We see in Lydia’s life the biblical order of salvation: first repentance, then faith, new life, and finally good works as she opened up her home to Paul and his companions (Acts 16:15). This is almost the opposite order of what we find in Calvinism. Note the order in Boettner’s statement above: “The Spirit graciously causes the elect sinner to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ.” The Calvinists says that the sinner can’t respond until he is born again, so before anything else can happen, God must quicken or regenerate the dead sinner. Once the person has been born again, then he can believe; after that he can repent. They have it all backward.

### **God Responds to Repentant Sinners**

I can hear the objections: God doesn’t respond to anyone. We respond to Him. He’s sovereign over all, free in all His choices—*sovereign-choice*, they call it (a term not found in the Bible).

What God are they talking about? *God doesn’t respond to man?* That’s not the God of the Bible. Scripture says, “For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His” (2 Chronicles 16:9). The Lord says through Isaiah, “But to this one I will look, / To him who is humble and contrite

of spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isaiah 66:2). Such a person was Lydia. She repented. God sent her a great evangelist. He opened her heart to respond. She believed. God forgave her. He gave her new life.

### **“That” is Neuter**

Wrong, the Calvinist says. Faith is a gift from God in the strictest sense. He gives it to the elect and only the elect. “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Is that what these two verses teach—that faith is a gift from God? I don’t think so, and for a good reason: the antecedent of “that” is *not* faith.

Some review of grammar may be in order before going further. In Ephesians 2:8, “that” is a pronoun, a word that stands in for another noun or noun phrase called its antecedent. For example, in John 3:16, “For God so love the world, that He gave His only begotten Son . . . ,” the word “He” is a pronoun. “God” is its antecedent, the word for which “He” is standing in and to which it refers back. Since a pronoun represents its antecedent, a pronoun agrees with its antecedent in gender (masculine, feminine, neuter) and number (singular, plural). That is why in John 3:16 the pronoun for “God,” which is masculine and singular, is “He,” which is also masculine and singular.

In Ephesians 2:8, the word “that” is the translation of a Greek demonstrative pronoun (*touto*). Its gender is neuter. This means that when looking for its antecedent (the word to which it refers), the Greek reader would have looked for a neuter noun or noun phrase. Since “faith” is a feminine noun, the reader would not have readily linked “that” (neuter) with “faith” (feminine). He would have looked elsewhere for something that is neuter to serve as the antecedent.<sup>5</sup>

### **An Exception to the Rule**

There is more to this. As proponents of using Ephesians 2:8 to prove that faith is a gift from God are happy to point out, there are exceptions to the rule of

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the pronoun that follows—“it” in the clause “it is the gift of God”—does not provide any help, for it is not actually in the Greek text, but has been added by the translators to complete the meaning. For that reason, the words “it is” are in italics in many translations. A word-for-word translation of the two clauses would be: “and this not of you, of God the gift.”

pronoun/antecedent gender agreement. Sometimes in the New Testament, not very often, a pronoun and its antecedent have different genders. On this point, proponents quote A. T. Robertson, one of the most respected authorities on Greek grammar in modern times. In his authoritative work titled *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*,<sup>6</sup> Robertson states that a demonstrative pronoun “agrees with its substantive in gender and number.”<sup>7</sup> He then qualifies this rule, stating, “Sometimes the construction according to sense prevails.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, there are exceptions to the general rule. In a small number of cases, the pronoun does not agree with its antecedent in gender but for some other reason—a more natural reading, for example—takes another gender. Robertson lists as an example Romans 2:14: “For when Gentiles [neuter] who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these [masculine], not having the Law, are a law to themselves.” Here Paul uses the masculine gender for “these” since he is referring in context to *these men*. Others cite Acts 8:10, Acts 9:15, 1 Corinthians 6:11, Philippians 3:7, 1 Peter 2:19, and Jude 1:12 as examples of verses in which a pronoun does not agree with its antecedent in gender.

But hold on. Continue down the page where Robertson explains that exceptions sometimes occur, he explains why he does not list Ephesians 2:8 among them. Robertson says that the pronoun “that” refers “to the idea of salvation in the clause before.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, as Robertson sees it, Paul is saying, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and *that salvation* is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” Some might point out that “salvation” is also a feminine noun. As such, it has the same problem as “faith.” Robertson, however, is not saying that the antecedent of “that” is the Greek word “salvation” (which is not found in Ephesians 2), but that the antecedent of “that” is “the idea” contained in the clause. “You have been saved” is the antecedent of “that.” That is why the gender of “that” is neuter according to Robertson, and if anyone has the authority to speak on such matters, it is A. T. Robertson.

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<sup>6</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1923).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 704.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Conclusion**

Whether or not the Bible teaches that saving faith is a gift from God is an important topic and worthy of serious study. This much, however, I think is clear: One should not use Ephesians 2:8 to argue in favor of it, for in doing so one must also assert that an exception to the well-established rule of gender agreement between pronoun and antecedent be enforced. Such an argument is an example of a spurious form of reasoning called *special pleading*. This is when a person says, “I know this normally wouldn’t make sense, but if you will allow me an exception to a general rule, you will see that I am right.” Such an argument is exceptionally weak and really no argument at all.