

Is faith the gift of God?
A Series on What does Faith Mean: Part 7

Among the many controversies in Christian theology is the question of whether the sinful nature of man renders a human being unable to freely exercise a saving belief in Jesus Christ. One verse that is used to support this perspective is Ephesians 2:8:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, **it** is the gift of God;” (NASB)

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, **it** is the gift of God -” (NIV)

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; **it** is the gift of God,” (NKJV)

What is the pronoun “it” (Greek term “touto”) in Ephesians 2:8 really referring to? According to Greek grammarians, there are five possibilities.

1) “Faith” as the antecedent. In this interpretation, the verse would read: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, **faith** is the gift of God.”

2) “Grace” as the antecedent. In this interpretation, the verse would read: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, **grace** is the gift of God.”

As a general rule in grammar, the pronouns and nouns always agree in gender and number, and neuter pronouns are not used with male or female nouns. The demonstrative pronoun “touto” is in the neuter gender and grace (Greek: “charis”) and faith (Greek: “pistis”) are in the feminine gender. This means that the pronoun “touto” is not referring to either “grace” or “faith”; thus, option 1 and 2 are not likely.

Some have argued that there have been exceptions to this general rule in which a neuter demonstrative pronoun refers to an antecedent noun of a different gender. However this argument is weakened by the fact that those examples do not follow the sentence construction of Ephesians 2:8.

3) The Greek terms “kai touto” serves as an adverbial force to add an emphasis to the preceding antecedent “faith”. For example: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, **it is especially** the gift of God.”

In the twenty two instances where the formula “kai touto” is found (excluding Ephesians 2:8), there are no clear examples where the neuter pronoun “touto” is associated with different genders. So it is unlikely that this option can be considered seriously.

The fourth and fifth possible interpretations consider the demonstrative pronoun “touto” as referring to the antecedent phrase or clause regardless of any gender. In the twenty two instances where the formula “kai touto” is found (excluding Ephesians 2:8), fourteen or fifteen instances are referring to a previous concept (i.e. Luke 3:20; 5:6; John 11:28; 18:38; 20:20; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 7:37; Phil. 1:9, 28; Heb. 6:3).

4) “For by grace you have been saved through faith” is the antecedent phrase / concept. For example: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, **grace by faith salvation** is the gift of God.” This view interprets “grace” and “saving faith” as a gift of God. Advocates of this view argue that if the whole of salvation is the gift, then its component parts, “grace” and “faith”, are part of that gift “not as a result of works, so that no one may boast”.

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5) The concept of “salvation” of Ephesians 2:5 is the antecedent (“even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)”). For example: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, **salvation** is the gift of God.” This view interprets “salvation by Christ’s atonement” as the gift of God, and His “grace” as the basis of the gift; “saving faith” is not a part of the gift of salvation and therefore is not a gift of God.

It should be noted that the Greek word for “salvation” is in the feminine gender.

There are several approaches in attempting to understand what the apostle Paul meant in Ephesians 2:8. The following is a sampling of how one could understand this controversial passage.

1. Observe the immediate and overall context of Ephesians 2:8.

Both the immediate and overall context of the first two chapters of Ephesians is regarding *man’s salvation found in Jesus Christ*.

Immediate context: While there is controversy whether saving faith is included in the gift of salvation, there is no question that:

Salvation is by grace and is the gift of God.

Salvation is through faith.

Salvation is not of works or of ourselves.

Overall context: In the first two chapters of Ephesians, Paul speaks of the provision and basis of spiritual blessings, God’s redemption through Jesus Christ:

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace (Eph 1:7).

In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation – having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise (Eph 1:13).

even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), (Eph 2:5)

For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity (Eph 2:14-16).

The context surrounding Ephesians 2:8 is all about salvation; absent is any explicit mention of saving faith as part of God’s gift nor whether faith is the response to salvation. If faith was a divine gift, it would have a seeming contradiction to Paul’s earlier statements such as, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31) or “So faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

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2. Conduct a word study on the Greek word for “gift”.

In Ephesians 2:8, the Greek word for “gift” is “dōron”. This is the only instance in which “dōron” is used to refer to a “divine gift”. Other Greek terms such as “dōrea” and “charisma” are often used when in reference to divine gifts such as “salvation”, the “Holy Spirit” and “spiritual gifts” (i.e. gifts of the Holy Spirit).

The most common meaning of the Greek noun “dōron” is “the offering” (Matt 5:23; Mark 7:11; Luke 21:1-4; Heb 5:1, etc.), because it describes the gift of a human being to God.

Occasionally “dōron” is used in combination with the Greek verb “prosperō” which means “to offer”. In this sense, “dōron” is similar to the Greek nouns “thysia” (offering for sacrifice) and “prospora” (offering). This combination of “dōron” and “prosperō” is not found in Ephesians 2:8, as this verse is about a gift **from** God. However the idea that God’s gift is an offering and sacrifice is certainly there.

The writer of Hebrews makes an interesting contrast between the Old Testament system of repetitive sacrificial offerings (“dōron” and “thysia”) and the final, once and for all, offering of Jesus Christ (“prospora” and “thysia”).

Hebrews 5:1

1) For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts (**dōron**) and sacrifices (**thysia**) for sins;

Hebrews 7:26-28

26) For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; 27) who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up (root word: **prospora**) sacrifices (**thysia**), first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. 28) For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever.

In regards to a divine gift to the unsaved, the Bible speaks of salvation or atonement but does not include saving faith:

There are statements that effectively say that God gave His Son: John 3:16; John 4:10.

There are statements of Jesus Christ giving Himself for our sins: Galatians 1:4; 1 Timothy 2:6.

There are statements that refer specifically to Jesus’ death on the cross: Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; Luke 22:19.

3. Conduct a study into the meaning of “faith” (such as this series of articles on faith).

Aside from the interpretive possibility of Ephesians 2:8, there seems scant biblical evidence that “faith” is a gift from God. When Paul holds up Abraham as an example of faith, he esteems Abraham’s personal and self generated faith. In another example where Jesus is conversing with Martha (John 11:25-27), Martha demonstrates a self generated belief of something that was true (Jesus as the Messiah).

The Bible clearly exhorts human beings to believe with the imperative “believe in”: Mark 1:15; John 1:12; 3:18; 10:38; 12:36; 20:31; Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9; Galatians 2:16; 1 Thessalonians 4:14; etc.

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The Bible appears to indicate that faith is the responsibility of the hearer: John 5:46; Luke 24:25; Acts 26:27; etc.

So if saving faith was the gift of God, a contradiction exists. Wouldn't the divine gift of faith absolve anyone of responsibility for it?

The Bible makes a distinction between faith and works; faith (the act of believing something is factually true with trust) is not considered work.

Works cannot result in saving faith: Acts 13:38-39; Romans 3:21-22, 28; Galatians 2:15-16; 3:1-9.

Genuine faith results in works: James 2:14-26.

The biblical evidence explicitly indicates that faith precedes salvation (John 5:24; Rom 3:21-26; Gal 3:1-5) and is not simultaneous nor a response to it. Works is implied in the phrase "and not of yourselves" (Eph 2:8); however, it is not likely that faith is included with human efforts of good deeds or compliance to Mosaic legislation.

The interpretive controversy of Ephesians 2:8 reflects the tension between God's sovereignty / omniscience and human will / responsibility. God's own Son, Jesus Christ, was the divine gift that was provided for the sin offering to pay the judicial price of mankind's past, present and future sin. The fact that faith is a personal response on the part of people must be balanced with the fact that God is sovereign. The Bible clearly teaches that God convicts men of their need for salvation:

Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

References:

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