Part A – Salvation, Part B – Judgment, Part C – The Ages to Come

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A-7: Salvation by Works? (Part 2)

> **The message of the kingdom is grace. There is nothing anyone can do to merit the invitation to the banquet. We are simply invited, and must only accept. It is through grace that we are saved. But each one must make the decision [our "work"] of whether to receive grace ; of whether they will come to the party or not. [From "The Great Banquet," *Stories that Jesus Told*, 19 December 2017]**

We have to be willing to receive the gift, accept the invitation, make the effort to "come to the party". That takes some humility, as it does to receive any gift. (Haven't we all met someone who, because of pride, refuses to receive a gift or kind gesture?) And for the gift of Salvation, that humility includes recognition that you've been wrong about a few things; or at least you know you just haven't got it in yourself. And thus it is that many a person has stopped short of entering the Kingdom, simply because of pride. Or as the Parable of the Great Banquet illustrates, self-absorption and pre-occupation with the affairs of this life cause many to turn away from the invitation. (Matthew 22:1-10, Luke 14:12-23)

"Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience."* (Hebrews 4:11, ESV) That state of *"rest"* is God's domain of grace – that state of deep assurance of being one with God, under His wings of protection and blessing. No more "work" to be done; it is now all God's doing – His "work" (grace). But it is preceded by the *"let us therefore strive"* stage, which corresponds to the "faith" side of the salvation equation. *"By grace are you saved through faith."

(Ephesians 2:8)

And if one must *"strive to enter that rest"*, then there must be an element of "works"; otherwise, it would be *"disobedience"*. We have to resist the tendency to rely on ourselves instead of Him and put in the effort to choose what is best and enter into His rest. What James said about faith being completed by works is nothing else but our response to what God's grace or favor has already made available; He is just waiting for us to "go for it".

Our Salvation has already been accomplished – the work of God's grace; we need only to exercise our faith to make it reality. And as far as personal salvation is concerned, to exercise our faith requires some kind of "work" of confession, submission, or going in the right direction. This kind of "work" – "carried out in God" and "not your own doing" (according to John 3:21 and Ephesisans 2:8)- is simply the result of our trust (or faith) in Him, which is love really – *"faith working through love."* (Galatians 5:6, ESV)

Whereas the other kind of works (*"your own doing"*) is based on a lack of trust – a pretended faith and even a selfish desire to use God, to appease Him by performing certain rituals. Such lack of trustfulness won't guarantee entrance into the Kingdom. *"For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn't receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it."* (Luke 18:16-17, NLT)

What often happens: we fear having to trust God and fall into His arms, we want to hold onto ourselves instead of letting go. Perhaps we try to maneuver our way into God's favor by a display of works of our own choosing – an act of self-deception which enables us to hold onto our pride and comfort zone of habitual thought and action.

Paul, writing about his Jewish brethren, expressed it well: *"For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God."* (Romans 10:3) Such works are carried out with the wrong motive – mostly for show, whether it be the works of the Law, religious observances, or even moral conduct. And that kind of do-it-yourselfism has caused huge problems

throughout Church history.

> **The most raging religious controversy the world has ever known has been between the do-it-yourself religions and the God-alone-can-save-you kind. Man has always been trying to save himself, to work his way to Heaven, with just a little help from God thrown in. That way he can give himself most of the credit and go his own way.**
>
> **The first murder was committed by a religionist of the do-it-yourself kind, Cain (the oldest son of the first couple, Adam and Eve). Cain killed his brother Abel, a man who was trusting God (Genesis chapter 4). This was the beginning of the persecution of the true church by the false church. Cain was religious, very religious. He was trying very hard to save himself in his own way, even sacrificing to God and claiming to worship God. He was doing his best to ask God to help him earn his own salvation–but his best wasn't good enough!…**
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> **On the other hand, Abel just did what God told him to do–and he "offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain" (Hebrews 11:4): the sacrifice of pure faith in what God told him to do. By sacrificing a lamb, which was a foreshadowing of Jesus dying on the cross for the sins of the world (John 1:29), Abel showed that he was trusting God alone to save him. He knew he had only God's righteousness, and none of his own, and that salvation was purely a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8-9).**
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> **Abel's humble sacrifice made such a fool out of the hardworking Cain, the self-made man and devout religionist, devoted to his own form of worship, and it so totally exposed the futility and hypocrisy of Cain's hard work, that Cain was furious. After all his labors of the flesh, his legalistic reasoning, and his demands for salvation in return for all he was doing, Cain was so humiliated that he tried to wipe out the awful truth that his religion had failed to save him–and he did so by killing the man whose simple faith in God's grace had exposed him.**
>
> **Thus began the battle royal between pride and humility… the perpetual warfare that has been waged ever since between the false church and the true church…**
>
> **This conflict has resulted in some of the greatest**

> **misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the Scriptures that have ever existed…**
>
> **[from "Flesh or Spirit" lecture delivered during the *Jesus Revolution* era, 1971]**

A vivid picture there of the right and wrong kinds of works: Abel "who was trusting God" with his "simple faith in God's grace"; and Cain who wanted to do things his own way. As explained there, the gift of Salvation requires "faith" – without any "do-it-yourself" works. Of course, Abel still had to do his part of preparing a lamb sacrifice. This was the action of his faith. "Abel just did what God told him to do."

So far, we have considered the concepts of faith and works, but not much about "grace", the crucial factor in the journey to salvation. So then what about "grace"? What is it? To put it simply, when God lavishes His love upon us, especially when He does what is impossible for us to do or be deserving of, that is *"grace"*. The word *"grace"* comes from the Greek *charis*:

> **The N. T. writers use [*charis*] pre-eminently of that kindness by which God bestows favors even upon the ill-deserving, and grants to sinners the pardon of their offences, and bids them accept of eternal salvation through Christ… Eph. 2:5,7,8. (*Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, pg. 666)**

We may not "deserve" it, but if a person, via his conscience, has been doing what is right in God's eyes (even if it's nothing more than a positive and humble reaction when confronted with God's Truth), then he puts himself in the position of being able/worthy to come to the Light. He will respond meaningfully and positively to God's grace, and thereby be received into the Kingdom.

"Doing what is right in God's eyes" means engaging "spiritual discipline":

> **Learning about and applying the Spiritual Disciplines can help you deepen your love for the Lord and your connection with Him in significant ways. They can help you align your life with God's will and put you in a position to receive God's blessings. Practicing the**

> **Spiritual Disciplines is similar to becoming proficient in any field; it entails making decisions which require self-discipline. It isn't easy, but it is rewarding. [from "The Spiritual Disciplines, Introduction", 15 January 2014. This is a helpful series of articles, applying, not only to salvation, but to many areas of one's spiritual life.]**

God's love for us inspires within us the desire to do what is right; or if nothing else, like the thief on the cross, to incline our hearts to love and trust in God rather than reject Him. And He in turn, moved by our love, pours out on us His divine favor (grace).

The path to salvation will always lead to the name (or power) of Christ (according to John 14:6, Acts 4:12). But, to review what was discussed in the previous post, that path may be viewed through two different lenses.

On the one hand, through the lens of faith. As Ephesians 2:8-9 explains, *"by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God". "Grace"* is what God does. *"Faith"* is what we do. And faith is not only a matter of believing, but also accepting (unlike the demons who only "believe"). And if one "accepts", this is the crucial step of faith, the built-in "work" aspect that completes the initial "faith". And this effort of faith, this "work" of faith, brings access into God's grace.

On the other hand, we can look at salvation through the lens of works. And here we may consider what the Gospel of John says about the path to salvation: *"whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God*." (3:21, ESV) The *"works"* themselves do not perform the miracle of salvation; that's God's job (*"grace"*).

But "grace" doesn't kick in until a person *"comes to the light". "The one who comes to Me I will in no wise cast out."* (John 3:21, 6:37) To come to the Lord, that in itself is a "work". It is the action of a person's faith in whatever Light he or she was given, which will result in the right kind of works, done in love and humility. They may not have understood it as God's Light working on their conscience. But their works are the evidence that that was what took place.

In this connection we might consider the case of those who were not

thinking much about God but were working with a view to benefiting their fellow man – with a pure heart out of concern for others – not trying to prove their own righteousness. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, it was not at all important that the Samaritan belonged to the wrong religion. All that mattered was that *"he had compassion"* for someone in need. (Luke 10:29-37) And in the Lord's eyes this placed him far above those (the priest and the Levite) who had the right religion (*"salvation is of the Jews"* – John 4:22) but could not show compassion when it was needed. Similar thoughts are expressed in the Parable of the Sbeep and Goats in Matthew 25:31-46.

Jesus once said to someone (another Samaritan, the woman at the well) whose religious beliefs were a bit mixed up, *"Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews."* But for Him this wasn't the main issue, for Jesus went on to say, *"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him."* (John 4:22-23, KJV) Evidently, the Lord was not much concerned with the Samaritans' lack of doctrinal correctness; He much preferred to see their faith and love for God.

For so many people in this world, their faith in the Christian God has been weakened or made non-existent because of their cultural background and training, or because of a poor example seen in those who were supposed to be Christ's representatives. For all we know, as far as God is concerned, the works of these people could be counted as *"works… carried out in God".* If they have the right kind of works, and if faith and works operate together as the Book of James teaches, then these people must have some kind of faith (even if it might seem lacking from a believer's point of view). But as far as God is concerned, if their *"works have been carried out in God,"* then *"a person is justified by works and not by faith alone."* (John 3:21, James 2:24 – ESV)

Of course, in the end their salvation is still a matter of faith – *"by grace through faith"*; to overcome their ignorance and unbelief (the faith side of the equation), Christ would have to show His divine favor (His grace) by manifesting Himself at some point, in the Afterlife, to those who might not otherwise have the "faith" to accept the truth and be given the opportunity to enter the Kingdom during their earthly lives. Normally, we

think of faith as being *"completed by works".* (James 2:22, ESV) But, since faith and works are inseparable, who is to say that the converse cannot also be true? Works can be "completed by faith".

We might recall the example of Cornelius, the Roman centurion, who lacked knowledge of the Christian faith. The angel told him, *"Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God."* (Acts 10:4) Because of his good works, he was deemed worthy to receive enlightenment from the apostle Peter and be the first Gentile to receive the Holy Spirit… much to the surprise of Peter and those who accompanied him.

The thing to remember then is that a person's "works", if done with a good conscience, will engage the grace and mercy of Christ, even to those who were unbelievers during their lifetime. Although it is much better for a person to know Christ during his or her lifetime, that does not have to limit Christ's outpouring of "grace", both in the present and in the Afterlife.

Regarding the people of God in the very End Time, the *Revelation Book* makes this interesting statement: *"And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ."* (12:17) The forces of Darkness shall be warring against certain people (*"the woman"*, later referred to as *"His wife"* in 19:7) The *"woman"* symbolizes the people who are obeying God, standing up for truth and righteousness during those dark days at the End of our present Age; they are those who pose a threat to the Dragon and his new world order headed by the Antichrist and False Prophet.

Are all these people Christians? Probably most of them will be. But it should not surprise us to see many in those days who, because of their culture or upbringing, cannot see their way to making bold declarations of faith in Christ. Yet they will courageously confront the evils of the new world order of the Antichrist and False Prophet. Even without a proper understanding of who Christ really is, nevertheless, they will have been guided by that *"true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world."* (John 1:9)

Certain Scriptures foresee that *"the man of sin… son of perdition… opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped."* (2Thessalonians 2:3-4) All those who believe in and submit to the Higher Power, the Almighty, refusing to worship the world's Antichrist ruler, they are the ones who will be obeying God, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Would not God overlook their lack of knowledge and consider them His people, as those *"who keep the commandments of God"?* On the other side of the coin, there may be many in those days who call themselves Christians (*"have the testimony of Jesus Christ*") yet may fail to *"keep the commandments of God"* and will shy away from making the difficult choice to stand forth boldly in the cause of righteousness. Having the right belief system – *"the testimony of Jesus Christ"* – is important, but it is not the entire picture.

So again the question: Salvation, does it come by works or by faith? Neither really. Salvation is a gift of God's grace or favor. It is our faith, however, that leads us towards God's salvation, bestowed freely on those who are ready for it. Faith is a powerful force. It transforms *"things hoped for"* and *"things not seen"* into reality. (Hebrews 11:1)

Faith provides us with the trust we need to launch out, take on new challenges, and be willing to explore new possibilities and avenues for success. If we put aside our lamp of faith, or don't maintain its brightness through replenishing it with the oil of the Word, then we're going to find it much harder to venture into the future with confidence. We'll stumble more easily, not seeing clearly what obstacles block our path. We'll lack the resolve to remain triumphant when hardship comes our way. Faith is the quiet assurance that, beyond what we know and can do, there are still factors that ultimately remain in God's control.

But there is no such thing as faith that is not accompanied by some kind of work or action. In the "faith" chapter of Hebrews 11, the heroes of faith have listed, along with their name, the action they took that showed or completed their "faith" in what God wanted them to do. Their works were the right kind of works (since they were what God wanted them to do). And as they did their works, God poured out His grace and did the miracles for them that were needed.

And likewise, the miracle of Salvation requires faith, which is always accompanied by a "work" of some kind: an enquiring mind, a seeking heart, a contrite and humble spirit, acts of kindness, a confession of faith, whatever it might be.

As mentioned earlier, the Lord has made it very simple *"Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life… The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out… Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved."* (John 3:16, 6:37, Romans 10:13) The Salvation process is simple, and yet there is no standard procedure; there is endless variety because the journey to Salvation is different for each individual… because the sort of "work" that proves their "faith" is unique to each individual.

For example, compare what Zacchaeus and the thief on the cross did that brought them to the Light. For the former, it was his declaration to restore the money he had stolen; for the latter, it was a humble and desperate plea for rescue.

We normally think of faith as the starting point and works as the completion point. For a person's *"works"* cannot of themselves bring salvation. *"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit."* (Titus 3:5)

Nevertheless, it should be conceded that a person's *"works of righteousness"* can touch the heart of God. And His grace then kicks in on behalf of those individuals who are coming *"to the light".* We might recall the example of Zacchaeus, whose declaration to help the poor and those he had cheated, stirred Jesus to declare, *"Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham."* (Luke 19:9)

So, for many that starting point of faith is rather vague and may best be understood as *"their conscience bearing witness"* to the *"true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world."* (Romans 2:15, John 1:9) For those who have no knowledge of Christ, the words of John 3:20-21 are appropriate. If a person *"does truth"* and his *"deeds have been done in God"*, he will *"come to the Light"*.

So from this we could say that a person's works are the starting point, which ends up in faith as the completion point. That's how it may look, but in reality, as James wrote about Abraham, *"faith was working together with his works."* (2:22)

And if he *"hates the Light"* because he is *"practicing evil"*, he won't *"come to the Light"* at all. Or at the very best, it will be a painful process to have the "faith" to receive the gift of salvation because it means his *"deeds"* will have to be *"exposed"* and renounced. (John 3:20-21) Obedience (or works) engenders faith just as faith engenders obedience.

Well, we may speculate forever about who gets into the Kingdom and who doesn't, or what their place in the Kingdom will be. The important thing to remember is that *"the Lord knows those who are His."* This statement is followed by the qualifier, *"And let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity."* (2 Timothy 2:19)

Christ cannot bestow salvation on someone who refuses to *"depart from iniquity"* (which renders them unable, or unwilling, to *"come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed"*), nor is He going to be happy with the works of those who, having come to Him, turn their backs on Him in disobedience and unrighteousness.

The thing to keep in mind about all of this is that "faith" doesn't act by itself; there is always an element of "works". And in many cases, those "works" happen over the course of a whole lifetime before an obvious "faith" (in Christ) comes into being.

As far as salvation itself is concerned, those "works" may be of an internal sort, an act of personal will – whether it be confession, a move towards repentance, a calling out *"on the name of the Lord"*, or whatever it might be – what Jesus called *"the work of God"*. (Romans 10:13; John 6:29) And after that it is pure grace; Christ opens the gates to welcome the new believer into the Kingdom.

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Continue to B-1: Resurrection and Rapture