

SIXTY MINUTES TO RAISE THE DEAD!

EXPLORING FAITH, GRACE, WORKS & SALVATION IN EPHESIANS 2

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1. <http://www.Lockman.org>

Table of Contents

PREFACE	1
1. INTRODUCTION.....	3
2. WHAT IS SALVATION?	10
3. WHAT IS GRACE?	17
4. WHAT IS FAITH?.....	25
5. HOW CAN SALVATION BE A GIFT?.....	32
6. CAN YOU REALLY BE SURE OF YOUR SALVATION?.....	37
7. WHAT IS MEANT BY WORKS?.....	43
8. WHICH BOAST IS EXCLUDED?	50

PREFACE

Recently, I heard a description of an evangelical sermon as ‘thirty minutes to raise the dead.’ This, of course, refers to the Bible’s description of non-Christians as being ‘dead in their sins’ (Ephesians 6:1) - in other words, as spiritually dead as a result of having no relationship with God, the giver of all life – and the desire of the preacher for the hearer to find new life in, and through, Jesus Christ.

This book, *Sixty Minutes to Raise the Dead* began life as 6 talks, each of 10 minutes duration, and broadcast as part of a Search For Truth podcast series (www.searchfortruth.podbean.com) of the same name. Across the total of 60 minutes, the series explained in turn each of the five major words in a Bible text (Ephesians 2:8-9) that sums up most clearly how it is that a (‘dead’) person finds new life in Jesus Christ, God’s son and our saviour. And hence the title!

In the course of the later compilation of this book, two additional chapters, chapters 5 and 6, have been added with Bible answers to two very important questions that these verses might raise in readers’ minds; but please don’t feel you have to speed-read in order to consume all eight chapters in sixty minutes!

It is our prayer that God may be pleased to use this little book to bring to life, in this way, many who read its pages. If you would like to receive help on what you read in this book, please contact us at sft@churchesofgod.info.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, we posted an online invitation to a talk about Christianity in our local church. We boosted the Facebook post so as to reach a wider than usual audience. One person responded, evidently unimpressed, simply and scornfully saying: “People! It’s the 21st century!”

I wonder what made him think the Christian worldview was inconsistent with modern living? After all, Christianity has persisted throughout twenty centuries and across very diverse cultures. Its historical basis has often been challenged, but time and time again careful research vindicates the case made for it. Its core message claims to solve the basic need of our human nature. Millions from every kind of economic and psychological background testify to the credibility of its claims, academics and royalty as well as commoners.

But how do we defend Christianity against these modern critics? To use the Bible is seen as special pleading. Thankfully, there’s evidence all around us for which the best explanation is the message of the Bible, once its claim to be authentic is acknowledged as being without equal in all of ancient literature. Nobel prize-winners in science are among those who find no conflict between the Bible and science. The media portray it as otherwise, but this is to confuse where the conflict really exists – in the clash between two irreconcilable worldviews: those of theism and naturalism.

The Apostle Paul faced a not dissimilar challenge in the first century. He once addressed a sceptical audience at Athens, one with no knowledge of Christianity and no sympathy for the Bible. He began by referencing the world around him, saying:

"The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:24-25).

The God whom Paul preached is a necessary being. I should try to explain what I mean by that. Clearly, it's not necessary for us to believe in his existence. I can even deny or at least feign ignorance of the law of gravity and still manage to fall out of bed in the morning. However, irrespective of our belief, the reality is without God's existence we simply would not be. And that's what Paul pointed out at Athens (as stated in these verses). How can we verify that? Well, the only other option that tries to explain our existence is the one that says 'first there was nothing, then it exploded.' The idea of a nothing that exploded into something is nonsense, whichever way you look at it. And here's why. If ever there was truly nothing, there would still be nothing now! You can't get something out of nothing, either spontaneously or over billions of years. And since that's the case, God as creator is a necessary being.

Scientists recently discovered something further about our universe which had already been predicted (in this case it was what they described as 'gravity waves'). The fact we can predict

what the universe is like shows us that it's not random, but obeys Laws - made by an intelligence far greater than our own. One famous scientist, reluctant to believe in the existence of God, said that it looked as if some super-intelligence had monkeyed with the laws of physics. But let's allow Paul to get to his second point. He continues in Acts 17:26:

“and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth.”

We've now discovered that there's a particular part of our genetic inheritance which we get from our mother (Mitochondrial DNA). This indicates that all have descended from a single woman, the so-called 'mitochondrial Eve'. The idea that all modern humans can be traced back to one woman supports biblical history (as in this verse) – and what's more, when checked out against the real world, first results indicated that the rate of change in this DNA is awkward for those who advocate the evolutionary long-age claim. If correct, it means that mitochondrial Eve, the mother of all living, takes us back to the time of the biblical Adam, created before sin and disease and pain existed. Next Paul hints at the purpose for which we were created when he says:

“having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children'” (Acts17:26-27).

To have no desire for anything is symptomatic of dis-ease. Experts mark the absence of desire as a sign of *dis-ease*. When you no longer enjoy what you once did enjoy it's one of the symptoms of depression. Arguments from desire are often invoked as evidence for the existence of God. And that's for this reason: that within humans exists a desire which nothing in time, nothing on earth, and no creature, can satisfy. This suggests that something exists that is more than time, earth, and creatures in order to satisfy this desire. Augustine put it like this: "... our heart is restless until it repose in Thee." Paul said God made us with the inbuilt drive to search for and find him.

You already have a sense of God - whom do you turn to in difficulties? Whom do you blame when things go wrong? When you watch the news on TV what kind of thing gets reported? Almost always it's bad stuff. Good stuff isn't news. We expect good things to happen like mothers to love their children. This is because God is good and the source of all good. Actually, to all practical purposes, we worship whatever we fill our life with; whatever we're always thinking about; whatever we're always wanting to spend our time doing (pleasure-seeking). It's here Paul tells us why it never satisfies because we were made to find that elusive satisfaction in God.

"Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man" (Acts 17:29).

A lady in church the other day was troubled. Her son had asked her “Who made God?” She’d felt unsatisfied by her answer. I asked her “How long is a piece of string?” Once again, she struggled to say anything, only smile, wondering where the conversation was headed. I explained that also was an unanswerable question. However, that doesn't mean any particular string has no length, far less does it mean that no such stuff as string exists. It's unanswerable because we've not defined the terms: which string are we talking about? Now when someone asks “Who made God?” which God are they talking about?

Not the God of the Bible because, as we've seen, he's the only being who simply cannot not be – because we're here and without God's existence we simply would not be - that's who the biblical creator God is. The idea of cause and effect has been powerful in science, but what right have we to expect it to apply to the Creator himself? Now, Paul turns to the so what:

“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent” (Acts 17:30).

In case we've forgotten what repent means, this is to change our thinking and attitude about something as in young Hemingway junior who came to hate the gun that killed his father. His father was the acclaimed author, but also someone prone to depression. He had a gun of which his son was very proud. Young Hemingway took pleasure in seeing it. But after that fateful day when his father used it to blow his brains out, his attitude towards the gun turned to hatred. On his mother's instruction,

he tossed it in the lake. When we repent, our attitudes similarly go through such a 180-degree turnabout. The pleasure of sin, as we once viewed it, we now hold in contempt, understanding our sins occasioned the death of our saviour and Lord. And we all need to undergo this change ...

“... because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

From that event in history we know that God has visited this planet. Jesus Christ, God’s son, entered humanity and died so that he could be our saviour, but was raised to be our judge if we don’t receive him in faith as the only one who can provide us with forgiveness.

Thomas Arnold, formerly Professor of History at Rugby and Oxford, one of the world’s great historians, could say: “I know of no one fact in the history of mankind which is proved by better, fuller evidence of every sort, to the understanding of a fair inquirer, than the great sign which God hath given us that Christ died, and rose again from the dead.” I leave you with this thought: Jesus’ once-sceptical disciples were convinced and maintained their belief in the resurrected Christ for 40 years or more. Suppose it had been a hoax, then these untrained men must be credited with a miraculous feat. Compare what happened at the US political scandal of ‘Watergate’ in the President Nixon era. In the latter case, 12 of the most powerful men on earth couldn’t maintain a lie for above 3 weeks. Yet, we are asked to somehow believe that the 12 disciples succeeded

where they failed – and for 40 years. David Hume, the Scottish sceptical thinker, proposed we could believe in a miracle if the alternative was less probable. This is evidence that demands a verdict.

2. WHAT IS SALVATION?

The story has gone viral on the internet about a man who for many years in his retirement used to stand on a street in the city of Sydney, Australia, and hand out religious pamphlets.

They were evangelical leaflets presenting the Christian message that our only personal hope is to be found in Jesus Christ. His experience was that nearly everyone was apathetic, almost totally indifferent. As a result he developed a very direct approach. He would stand forward and respectfully challenge by-passers by enquiring if they were saved, and if they died that night would they be sure of going to heaven? We might wonder what the modern shopper or commuter might understand by the word 'saved', but the anecdotal evidence at least points to the extraordinary effectiveness of the direct approach used by this white-haired elderly gent.

But I want to check if we know exactly what he meant when he used the word 'saved' in that way. There's a Bible verse that uses the word just as he meant it. In fact, I'll read two verses, if I may. They're found in the Apostle Paul's Bible letter written to believers at Ephesus in the first century:

“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, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

In fact, in each chapter in this little book, I'd like to take up one of the five key words from those two verses we've just read. In this first study, we'll be looking at the word 'saved' as the Bible has it here. The Bible itself uses this word in different ways which the context makes clear. That's no different from us, of course. Depending on context, we might talk about being saved from drowning or being saved from bankruptcy or simply saving ourselves from making a bad mistake.

In this Bible verse we've read, which said "by grace you have been saved," the sense is that of the ultimate salvation – a salvation which is from God's eternal wrath and judgement in the lake of fire when this life is over.

On the 20th of August in 1993, I remember sitting in a hospital waiting room. I can no longer recall the circumstances, but what I can tell you is this: there was a coffee table with reading material, and on it was a tabloid newspaper. Its headline seemed to scream out at me. It proclaimed: 'Out of hell.' It was reporting on a coal mining disaster and the rescue of some miners from an underground inferno. It gripped me for two reasons: my father had worked underground in the mining industry and once I'd written a school essay about just such a horror as this. As a result, my heart went out to the families involved, but as a student of the Bible in no way do I believe their ordeal can be compared with the unending horror of 'hell' - as the final judgement of the lake of fire is normally referred to.

Jesus Christ did graphically compare the fire of God's judgement with the city of Jerusalem's smouldering municipal rubbish dump in his day, so I'd better clarify what I mean. It was the

tabloid headline I was thinking of when I spoke of a false comparison. You see, there are no Exit signs in the Lake of Fire. No-one escapes. It's a final destination, an ultimate destiny that awaits some of us. No-one will come out of hell.

To counter civil unrest, a British politician, John Patten, once suggested that preachers should do more 'hell-fire' preaching. But the problem is that the western world, and even its religious spokespersons, have lost that vision. According to LifeWay Research's survey¹ on theology, the concept of eternal judgement proves to be especially unpopular. Only 4 in 10 Americans believe Hell is where God sends all people who don't accept Christ as their saviour. But 60 percent of Americans believe all people are reunited with loved ones in Heaven. Especially surprising was the fact that those with evangelical beliefs (64%) were most likely to agree all people go to Heaven when they die. That was back in September 2016.

It's no different in the United Kingdom. The biggest religion in Scotland remains Christianity, with 37 percent identifying as such. Researchers also questioned people about their detailed religious beliefs. In all cases, the majority of those questioned said they didn't believe in concepts such as heaven, hell or a day of judgement. More than two thirds (68 percent) didn't believe in hell. This was reported in the Scotsman newspaper in August of 2018.

1. <http://lifewayresearch.com/2016/09/27/>

americans-love-god-and-the-bible-are-fuzzy-on-the-details/

Let's ask if this could potentially be a contentious biblical interpretation. The prophet Isaiah in chapter 66:16 sets the tone: "The LORD will execute judgement by fire." And Jesus, the kindest and truest of men, had more to say on the subject of hell than he ever said about heaven. There are 12 recorded occurrences in the New Testament, 6 of them from the lips of the Lord, and on more than 4 separate occasions. Let's just quote one of them verbatim: Jesus said: "Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels." And yes, at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 20:14, we read that "death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire." Those words don't allow for multiple interpretations. Eternal or everlasting punishment, described in terms of a fiery torment, is the plain reading of these texts. The Bible warns repeatedly that this fate is **factual**; it is **fearful**; it is **fair**; and it is **final** – and that latter point was the one we were stressing by way of criticising the tabloid's theology.

Unfortunately, even religious institutions that support an orthodox biblical understanding of eternal fiery judgement, at the same time advocate a non-biblical and unorthodox message of how to be saved from it. And, once again, surveys of popular opinion show that their message – and not the Bible's message – is tragically the one that is being believed, with more than 50% of people polled typically thinking that their own works can rescue them from this judgement by fire. That's got to be the biggest lie in the world – both in terms of the number of people involved in it, and in terms of how high the stakes are. There truly can be no bigger lie than this: that you can get yourself 'out of hell.'

In the middle of 2017, the United Kingdom saw a tragic example of what happens when people are fatally misled into doing what others – even others in authority - are telling them. The Grenfell Tower fire occurred on 14 June 2017 at the 24-storey block of public housing flats in West London. It caused more than 80 deaths. Public anger was fuelled by alleged failings surrounding the safety of the building, including allegations that fire doors hadn't been fitted. Separate sources told newspapers that not all the front doors in the tower block were fire-proofed. This is hugely significant because official fire department advice was for people to stay in their rooms in the event of a fire – and that thinking is critically dependent on there being fire doors offering protection to residents who are told not to leave the building. Sidani Atmani said his neighbour on the 15th floor, a man he knew as Stephen, died because he had followed the fire department's instructions to stay in his flat. "A lot of people died because of what they were told to do," he said. "It was horrible."

It's also relevant to point out that if there was a lack of fire doors it might also help to explain why the fire spread so rapidly through the building rather than being contained in one place. In the end, the result was that people perished in the flames because they did what the authorities told them. It was a horrific case of obediently doing what the authorities you believed in were telling you, only to discover that it was in actual fact the wrong thing to do. Now compare doing what your religious institution tells you – and all the while thinking it will save you from the Lake of Fire – then one day discovering too late that it's been totally the wrong advice. By then it'll be too late. For, as we

said, there's no exit from the Lake of Fire. That much should be clear enough even from the Lord's description of an eternal fire and eternal punishment.

Once there, it's too late. There's no going back. It's eternal. Now, remember our two Bible verses? "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, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

On that basis alone, the idea that we save ourselves from future judgement by the good we try to do now is clearly shown to be false and wrong. We need to go with what the Bible says and not with what anyone else or any institutional religion says. If they say anything different to these verses which are our text for this series of studies, then the result will be even more serious than for those poor people who followed the fire department's instructions at Grenfell.

I now hope that the Bible meaning of 'salvation' at this point is now clear. It's being saved, literally, from a fate worse than death. Jesus once said: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell" (Luke 12:4,5).

We've been given fair warning that: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in

unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18). And, the Bible adds, there’s not a single one of us exempt from wrong-doing in God’s view of things (Romans 3:12).

Then the Bible gives us what has most appropriately been described in the word ‘Gospel’ as ‘good news.’ It says: “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). God’s Son is Jesus Christ, declared to be so by his rising from the dead – and the only way to be saved, even if we were to die today, is: “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36).

3. WHAT IS GRACE?

To be constantly protesting that something isn't fair is a mark of immaturity. After all, it doesn't take much experience of life to come to the conclusion that life isn't fair – at least, not as we view it.

I vividly recall the true story of a teacher and his class as it concerned the marking of end-of-term assignments. To start with, before the first assignment took place, the teacher said - and said repeatedly to make sure everyone got the message - that all assignments had to be ready for collection by him on the day he'd set for them, or else they'd be marked as a 'fail'. "Is that clear?" he asked. They all replied that it was perfectly clear.

So far, so good. Then came the assignment at the end of the first term. Some students were late: their assignments had not been completed by the appointed time. The teacher reminded them of what had been agreed. "But sir!" they cried, "please give us a couple more days to finish it." Very graciously, the teacher said he'd allow that this once, stressing this was not something to be repeated.

At the end of the second term, the same thing happened. There were a few, once again, who appealed for a little more time, as they'd been unable to complete their assignment by the due date. The teacher reminded them of what he'd previously said. "Please sir, please sir!" they begged, just once more. "Do you not

remember that last time I said it would be the last time that I'd allow an extension?" "Yes sir, we know sir, but please, please ..." Once more, the teacher allowed the late entries.

It was now the end of the third term. There could be no excuse for not knowing the system. But once again, some students weren't ready with their assignments. They'd presumed once again on the teacher being gracious. They'd possibly come to expect this. However, to their dismay, the teacher announced that this time those students whose assignments were not ready in time would be marked with a 'fail' for that third and final term. "What!" the students cried. "Please sir, that's not fair!" No sooner had they uttered those words: "That's not fair!" than the teacher said very firmly to the class. "Fair? Did I hear you say 'fair'? Ok, you want fair? Listen up, I'll tell you exactly what's fair. I've been gracious these past two times, but you've now requested fairness, so I'm going to give you what's fair. I'm going to give you what you've asked for. Those students whose assignments are not ready will be marked with a 'fail' for this term. But, I'm also going to look over their previous marks and those previous late passes will also be changed to a 'fail!'"

The students were stunned, but they certainly learned the difference that day between grace and what's fair. And that helps us in defining what grace is. Grace is simply what's not fair. God's grace is his undeserved favour towards us. If fairness is about getting what we deserve, then grace is about what's not fair. Whatever we receive by grace is opposed to, or in contrast with, whatever we merit fairly by our own deserving works. At this point, let's revisit our text for this series of studies, the one that comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 8

& 9: “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, so that no one may boast.”

In our last study, we defined the salvation here as being salvation from God’s final judgement, that is the punishment our sins deserve. Now we’re checking out the way salvation is made available to us - and that is by God’s grace, being his favour towards us, something which we haven’t merited. Jesus loved to tell stories that shocked people when clarifying the meaning of grace. In Matthew 20:1-11, it’s recorded he told them this story:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. When he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the market place; and to those he said, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.’ And so they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did the same thing.

And about the eleventh *hour* he went out, and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why have you been standing here idle all day long?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You go into the vineyard too.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the laborers, and pay them their wages, beginning with the last group to the first.’ When those

hired about the eleventh hour came, each one received a denarius. When those hired first came, they thought that they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius.

When they received it, they grumbled at the landowner, saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the scorching heat of the day. But he answered and said to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong: did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own? Or is your eye envious because I am generous?' 'So the last shall be first, and the first last'" (Matthew 20:1-16).

Now, if we're honest, many of us would have to say that our initial reaction – if not one we were prepared to defend – would be pretty much the same as the reaction of the objectors in that story. In modern societies dominated by workers' rights, what's proposed there would be seen as outrageous. But at bottom, that sense of outrage stems from our sense of what's fair. The point Jesus was making was this: that God's dealings with us are not on the basis of what's fair, and certainly not on the basis of what we think of as fair. If God paid us what we'd earned – or what we actually deserved - no human would be saved or rescued from the judgement to come.

Next, we have another of Jesus' stories:

“Two men went up into the temple to pray; one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner! ‘I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other: for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled; but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:10-14).

It might appeal to our sense of fairness that a good-living person would get more from God than someone who was susceptible to corruption. Again, Jesus’ words shock us. They should shock us into the realization that we ALL deserve the Lake of Fire. Perhaps you think of yourself as a good-living person, someone who behaves better than the average person. You may indeed be more respectable than others, but it remains true that for you to be saved, it can still only be by God showing his undeserved favour towards you. The Bible verse in Romans 6:23 makes this very clear, telling us “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Wages are what we earn. We get paid what we’re worth. But, in God’s estimation, we’re all sinners, every last one of us. And our well-deserved earnings is death, that is the second death which is to be forever separated from God's presence, and so from all happiness and from every sense of well-being.

But the good news of the Bible is about what God did for us in history. He sent his one and only son, Jesus. And Jesus was willing to take our place and to experience being separated from God, when dying on the cross to pay the price for the sin of our human rebellion against God. According to the Bible, this is what happened on the day Jesus died, the just and innocent dying in place of the unjust and guilty:

“Two others also, who were criminals, were being led away to be put to death with Him. When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminal, one on the right and the other on the left. But Jesus was saying, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots, dividing up his garments among themselves. And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, ‘He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.’

The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, and saying, ‘If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself.’ Now there was also an inscription above Him, ‘THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.’ One of the criminals who were hanged there was hurling abuse at Him, saying, ‘Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us! But the other answered, and rebuking him said, ‘Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed are suffering justly;

for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds: but this man has done nothing wrong.' And he was saying, 'Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom.' And he said to Him, 'Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise'" (Luke 23:32-43).

One of those two criminals executed next to Jesus came to recognize he was getting what he deserved; and that Jesus most certainly wasn't.

There's a story told about America's Korean war. It concerns the battle for Triangle Hill. At one point, American forces had been driven back from this strategic piece of high ground. The order was given from high command that it was to be regained at any cost. There was a call for volunteers from among special forces. Well, the effort paid off, in the sense that the hill known as Triangle Hill was re-taken. After the event, a group of US Marines stood talking together. They noticed one of their number, standing a little way off, and he had tears coursing down his cheeks. Sometimes, even the toughest of men cry.

Slowly, they edged over to him and asked the reason. In reply, he simply motioned to the corpse of a US Army Major, lying at his feet. The officer had been a volunteer, leaving the safety of the officers' quarters to fight alongside the marines in the effort to retake the hill. 'He didn't belong on this hill,' the marine said. And neither did Jesus belong on Skull Hill. He left the safety of heaven to volunteer to take our blame before a holy God when dying our death on that cross.

Have you thanked him from the bottom of your heart? He didn't deserve to die for our sins, and we certainly don't deserve the forgiveness God offers to us through him. But that's God's grace for you. And it's only through God's grace that we can be saved from the eternal punishment that our sins truly do deserve before a holy God who knows our every nasty and unkind and unworthy thought.

4. WHAT IS FAITH?

In our studies of the key words in our selected text, Ephesians chapter 2 verses 8 & 9, we come to the indispensable word 'faith.' The reason I describe it in that way comes from a verse in the Bible book of Hebrews: "Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6). This raises the basic issue of what faith is.

I suggest that before we deal with its occurrence in our text, we need to tackle what for some is the generally troublesome matter of faith. We live in a cynical world and at a sceptical time, where people are very likely to ask: "What can you believe any more?" Others are envious of the faith of Christian believers; still others say such gullibility is not for them. Remember one response I recently got when pointing to Christian themes was: 'People! It's the 21st century!'

Why do some believe in God but others find it impossible? Atheists, of course, profess to not believing in God. Some would go so far as to rubbish the whole idea of faith, perhaps adding that not only is this the 21st century but it's a proper scientific age in which we've come of age and no longer need medieval superstitions. Little do they know of the workings of modern science. Scientists are working on building a so-called 'theory of everything.' To achieve such a breath-taking end, brilliant scientists are willing to suspend judgement and *believe*

seemingly 'impossible' things – such as unimaginably tiny strings vibrating in the crumpled folds of unimaginably tiny dimensions which by virtue of vibrating in different ways produce the different forms of fundamental particles that go to make up energy, force-fields, atoms - and us.

This is the seemingly incredible (potential) theory of everything from subatomic particles to immense galaxies (not to mention totally hypothetical multiple parallel universes) – a theory that aspires to incorporate all the forces of nature. At this point in time, it all rests on faith and things unseen.

Some other atheists, more modestly, say they simply acknowledge one less God than theists. If believers understood why they reject Zeus, the argument goes, they would understand why atheists reject their God too. Sounds reasonable at first perhaps, but little do they know that whereas Zeus and his associates held sway at the popular level, Aristotle defended a God who was unchanging, immaterial, all-powerful, omniscient and indivisible; a God who possessed “perfect goodness and necessary existence.” It remains the case that adherents of many, if not most, religions acknowledge a being who is the ground of all being. The Bible effectively defines God as the great Someone who “calls into being that which does not exist” (Romans 4:17).

Every other entity finds the reason for its existence in God. Derisory talk of spaghetti monsters and teapots in orbit are not in the same league at all, as such material objects would stand in need of explanation, even if they really did exist, since they do not exist necessarily. But God is necessary, otherwise, if there was once nothing, there would still be nothing now. Something

that doesn't exist cannot create itself – that defies the so-called philosophical law of non-contradiction (something can't both exist to do the creating and also not exist so as to become created at the same time).

When Mark Twain wrote about faith, I believe he said something along the lines of it being believing in something 'that ain't so', that is, believing in something that's not true. That's not at all what the Bible means by faith. That's a wrong ('straw man') idea that's been made popular by those who are passionate about sharing their atheism with us. Faith isn't a denial of fact, nor is it opposed to reason. It's entirely compatible with it. That's true of faith in ultimate things as well as the kind of faith we all routinely place in mundane things. I recall a debate with an atheist who refused to acknowledge faith as a daily reality. He was asked: 'Do you trust your wife?' He said he did. Well, surely he did because there was evidence to support that.

But not only is God the ground of Being and the reason why everything else exists, the Bible tells us that, ultimately, reality is personal. But, the Bible is disregarded by many. On what grounds, we ask? Typically, ill-researched grounds or even uninformed prejudice. I'll leave you to discover for yourself that the Bible is the most credibly authentic example of all ancient literature, bar none. But feel free to make contact for help on that point.

I hope we have shared enough to show that belief in the existence of a creator God who has communicated with us in human language is something that stands up to reasonable investigation. It's not a pure flight of fancy, far less a deliberate decision to

affirm something false. No-one should be advocating doing that – about anything. Now, one of the primary teachings of the creator’s communication in the Bible is something we can find plenty of hard, empirical evidence for. And that’s the fact that we’re no longer as we once were, but we’ve fallen from our original God-given human dignity. And that brings us right back on track regarding the faith that saves us in the text we’re studying.

Allow me to remind you again of our text for this series of studies, the one that comes from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 8 & 9: “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, so that no one may boast.”

In our past studies, we’ve already defined the salvation here as being salvation from God’s final judgement, that is, the punishment our sins deserve. We’ve also checked out the way God’s salvation is made available to us - and that’s by God’s grace, being his favour towards us – in other words, something we haven’t merited. Now, we come to this third key word of ‘faith.’

One Bible writer, James, dismisses so-called faith that, in reality, is just all talk and no action. Faith, in order for it to be saving faith, has to be real, he says – it must be genuine and not only a professed faith. In that latter category, might be someone who, when asked, lists their religious affiliation but then adds that they never take any notice of it. The Apostle James was agreeing, of course, with what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians believers. We can easily combine their teachings in a totally consistent way. In summary, we’re saved by faith alone, but the

faith that saves us is not alone – it's not alone in the sense that it'll be accompanied by actions that are faith-based. Works are the evidence of faith, but it's not the evidence that saves us, only the faith itself. That (comparison of the words of James and Paul), by the way, is an example of how the lazy allegation that the Bible is full of contradictions can usually be easily answered. It's normally just a smokescreen people try to hide behind.

But the point is well made that the Christian hope of forgiveness isn't secured by being able to recite facts or simply by being in possession of factual information about the Jesus of history who's the founder of Christianity. (And, yes, corroborating factual information is available from at least five sources outside of the Bible – so that our faith is firmly rooted in fact). To be told something and to possess that knowledge is not enough. Even when we assent to it, fully agreeing that it's correct information, we're not going far enough. These are necessary steps, for sure, but there's got to be personal commitment – of the kind that makes us act on the knowledge we've given our intellectual agreement to.

To take a practical example, let me relate it to something I've lately been doing rather a lot of – flying. As a young boy I became aware of the existence of aeroplanes, although for a time I was much more interested in cars and trains in the way most children are – boys at any rate. Then at senior or high school, I was taught the principle (due to Bernoulli) behind the shaping of the aircraft wings that enables these enormously heavy aircraft to maintain lift and so to stay up in the sky. Demonstrations using models convinced me to accept that it works. But it's another thing to step onboard, isn't it? Some people just have a fear of

flying. Safety records of past flights, and scientific explanations of how it's possible, are simply not enough. More is needed: and that's a step of faith – to entrust yourself to all the engineering know-how and to the skill of the crew, and then to finally step on board.

Faith without faith-based actions is a dead, useless thing that can't save us in the ultimate sense. Now, some folks worry because their faith is weak or small, even if it's genuine. Let me reassure you that it's what you put your faith in that counts. Some friends of mine have done parachute jumps for charity. To jump out of an aircraft takes more faith than to step onboard in the first place, wouldn't you agree? Let's just use our imagination for a second. Say, you were invited to do one of those charity jumps, and you got to choose your own parachute. There were three to choose from. To the first, a label was attached that said: 'prepared by volunteers from a local school.' The second parachute also came with a notice that read: 'this parachute didn't work properly last time, but we think it should be better next time.' The third declared: 'New parachute, packed by experts, and quality controlled.'

Which would you entrust your life to? It's a no-brainer, I'd suggest! The point is, of course, that it's what we place our faith in that makes the vital difference. Finally, to our text once more: "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, so that no one may boast."

It's faith, on our part, that secures our God-given salvation. John Paton was a missionary to the New Hebrides and one of his first tasks was to provide a translation of the Bible into the language of the people he was working among. The equivalent word for 'faith' in their language eluded him for a while. There didn't seem to be a single word that fitted the meaning exactly. He leaned back in his chair and at one point with his feet lifted off the ground - when one of his local helpers suddenly said 'That's it!' That pictures what we understand by 'faith' - it means 'to lean your whole weight on something' (and obviously to be confident of avoiding a collapse).

I want to sign off from this study, shared with you, by gently challenging you, if I may, if you've put your full weight of confidence in God's son, Jesus Christ, trusting in him, and in him alone, for your eternal salvation, even the forgiveness of your sins before a holy God? Jesus left heaven, and came among us, and gave himself to die on the cross to fulfil God's plan to make salvation available to us free of cost. Will you believe and receive Christ and enter into a relationship with God the creator (John 1:12)?]

5. HOW CAN SALVATION BE A GIFT?

To help answer this important question, I want to share with you the true story of a pearl fisher. By the time this story takes place, he's quite an old man. His name was Rambhau and he earned his living on the shore of the Indian Ocean by diving into the water and hopefully returning to the surface with an oyster between his teeth. When opened, the beautiful, shining pearl from inside would bring him some money to live on when sold at the local market.

It was to this same shoreline that a missionary by the name of David Morse came. He spoke earnestly to Rambhau and the other fishermen about the Christian message of forgiveness. He told them how the Bible says everyone who comes to God in repentance, and then receives his son, Jesus Christ, as their own personal saviour by faith, is promised forgiveness.

Rambhau, however, was not persuaded by the Christian message. He clung to his own religious ideas. In fact, he told the missionary that the Christian message seemed too simple a recipe for forgiveness. "Perhaps I am too proud," he said, "but I want to do something to get a place in heaven. I intend to go on a pilgrimage to Delhi for my sins and by doing that I hope to earn God's mercy."

No matter how often David Morse talked to him, the old diver simply couldn't understand the miracle of God's grace. David Morse tried time and time again to explain to the pearl diver that we can't in any way earn or merit God's grace towards us as sinners - but that we can only accept it as his gift. Although Rambhau was unpersuaded, the two of them – the missionary and the old pearl diver - became good friends.

Then one day, Rambhau came to see the missionary. He'd come to tell him he was finally leaving to go on his pilgrimage to Delhi. He was being realistic when he told the missionary that he might never return. He was visiting him in order to hand over a little box. "You're my best friend," he said, "and I want you to have this." The missionary opened the box to see a very large pearl.

"I've kept this pearl for years," the diver explained, "and now that I'm leaving for Delhi, perhaps never to return, I want to give it to my best friend, to you. Here you are. That pearl, Sahib (teacher), is perfect," Rambhau explained. The missionary was touched by his kindness, but politely declined. It was much too generous a gesture for the poor old man to make. The pearl diver looked hurt. The missionary tried a compromise. Looking up, he said, "Well, Rambhau, let me buy this wonderful pearl; I'll give you \$1,000 for it."

The pearl diver shook his head. "It's not for sale, it's for you, my friend."

"No, Rambhau," said David Morse, "as much as I want the pearl, I cannot accept it. Maybe I'm too proud, but to accept it just like that seems too easy to me. I want to pay or work for it."

“Sahib,” replied Rambhau in a severe tone while straightening up, “this pearl is invaluable ... it’s priceless. Nobody in this world can pay what this pearl is worth to me.” He then began to explain. “I had a son,” he said, “who was also a diver.” He was the best pearl diver along the Indian coast. He had the keenest eye, the longest breath. He could dive down to 30 metres. He was the delight of my heart. He always dreamt of finding a pearl better than any that had ever been found. One day he thought he’d found it. But the oyster was nearly inaccessible, deep down and well secured in a rocky crevice. Finally, he succeeded in getting it out and up to the surface. But he’d stayed under the water for too long. He’d strained his heart. Soon afterwards, sadly, he died.”

The old man bowed his head, and for a moment his whole body shook, but he made no sound. “Now you see, Sahib, why this pearl is invaluable, it’s priceless. Nobody in this world can pay what this pearl is worth to me. You do understand, don’t you? My only son gave his life to get this pearl. I cannot sell it. I can only give it as a present. Just accept it as a proof of our friendship.”

Holding back tears, David Morse, the missionary, replied, “Rambhau, don’t you see? That is exactly like what I’ve been telling you about God’s gift of salvation.”

The diver gave the missionary a long, searching look as he ever so slowly began to understand.

The missionary continued: “God is offering you salvation as a free gift, at no charge. It is so great and costly that no man would be able to pay for it. It cost God the life of his only Son to open

the door to heaven. Even by pilgrimages of thousands of miles you could never earn God's grace. God's love and deliverance of sinners like you and me can only be accepted as a gift in faith and thankfulness. He deliberately gave up his only Son to the terrible death of the cross."

God's light entered the old pearl diver's heart. "Now I understand," he said, then he turned round and went away, deep in thought. An hour later he came back and said: "I don't want to wait any longer, I want to come to God right now, just as I am. I cannot earn God's mercy, the price is simply too great. As a lost person I want to accept this love of God. Though it is beyond my understanding, I want to thank him and his Son Jesus Christ for it."

I've used this story in simple fishing communities around the Pacific Ocean coast to illustrate what we find so clearly presented in God's Word, the Bible, in Ephesians 2:8,9: "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, so that no one may boast." Many learn about salvation by God's grace through faith from these verses – which emphasize the point that God's salvation – the forgiveness of our sins – is not the result of our own good works. Often, they're helped by Rambhau's story when I use it as an illustration of this great Bible truth.

So many have been brought up in the religious belief that we must work to earn our salvation, to make ourselves acceptable to God. Perhaps you have too? But salvation cannot be paid for as a result of any religious good works we do. The only work that can bring salvation is the one finished good work of God's

Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross. When he died, after suffering the judgment due to our sins, he cried out “It is finished” (John 19:30). Salvation cost the life of God’s Son. It’s too precious for us to be able to pay for – God can only give it to us as a gift when we turn to him and humble ourselves, and thank him for it. The Bible confirms in Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

If you find Rambhau’s story a striking illustration of God’s offer of love, won’t you come to him, too? And remember, you must come to God as Rambhau did when he said: ‘I come, just as I am.’ Which reminds me of the story of the artist who saw a beggar lying at the side of the road in a terrible mess. That would make a great painting, he thought, I’d call it ‘man at his end.’ He commissioned the beggar and paid him half of his fee in advance. At the appointed date and time, there was a knock on the artist’s studio door. “Can I help you?” the artist enquired of the stranger. “It’s me,” was the reply, “you asked me to come today.” “But you’ve shaved, and cleaned yourself up and got new clothes! I wanted you to come just as you were!”

God doesn’t ask us to try to make ourselves acceptable to him – that’s impossible. Instead, he wants us to come just as we are, willing for him to change us, and make us a brand-new person in Christ.

6. CAN YOU REALLY BE SURE OF YOUR SALVATION?

A lady once heard a preacher say that salvation is by God's grace and not by our own works – he was presumably preaching on Ephesians 2:8,9 - but she struggled to accept it. She wrestled in prayer with the idea until she fell asleep. As she slept, she had a dream. She dreamt she was falling over a cliff, and grabbed the branch of a tree to arrest her fall. As she dangled over the edge, she was holding on for dear life, but she heard a voice saying 'let go.' She didn't. How could she? She'd fall and be lost! Again the voice said, 'let go.' Again, she easily resisted that unnatural advice that seemed to defy all reason to her. Letting go made no sense. Then the voice said, 'if you won't let go, I can't save you.'

She awoke at that point in her dream, and was at once convinced that salvation was by God's grace alone, and not by her own efforts.

To put it on the sure foundation of the Word of God, let's now quote ... "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, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

This assurance of salvation that we **have been** saved is supported in the Apostle John's first letter. There was a time when I used to find that letter more than a little confusing. Then I realized by the Lord's help that its central theme was not about how we

receive salvation; but about how we can be sure about the reality of the salvation we've already received. That was a 'light-bulb' moment for me and perhaps it can be for you, too.

The Apostle John repeats three things over and over in his first Bible letter. Those three things are our need to: maintain our beliefs, do what's right, and love others. You may at first think, that John is saying that, taken together, these define the way of salvation. But you'd be wrong. That would be making salvation the result of our own works. This would hopelessly contradict the teaching found elsewhere in the New Testament. Many clear and major lines of Bible teaching converge to show emphatically that our salvation is not by our works, but as Ephesians 2:8-9 says, it's by God's grace which we must simply receive through faith alone on our part. So, let me restate my discovery of some time ago now.

John's not telling us how to obtain salvation or the forgiveness of our sins, but he's telling us how we can be sure we already have that salvation or forgiveness. If we maintain our beliefs, if we do what's right, and if we love others, then we'll live in real assurance of salvation. Failure to do these things, however, will result in our claim of salvation becoming very hollow-sounding – above all to ourselves. We need to live the life to assure ourselves that we have it.

The most impressive statement of assurance comes in the fifth chapter of the Apostle John's first letter, reading on from verse 10:

“The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:10-13).

That last verse is so emphatic, isn't it? ‘That you may know you have eternal life’. Yes, we can be sure. And, without a doubt, God wants us to be sure! He caused his apostle to write these lines just so that we may really know this. It sure is good to know we're no longer guilty before a holy God - to know beyond any doubt whatsoever that we're right with God through personal faith in Christ alone.

That's where verse 12 comes in. It's so clear and definite. Our faith lays hold on this word from God. If we've received God's Son, Jesus Christ, into our hearts by faith then we have eternal life. If we've never repented to God of our sinfulness and turned to him through believing in his Son, then we don't have this free gift of God which is everlasting life. It's a simple and clear-cut as that.

The story is told of a rich man who had died and his household goods were now being auctioned. By the way, according to my research, the version of this story which I'm about to share is the

original version, which was first printed in 1954. In this version, the rich man died and his household goods – all his possessions – were being auctioned off because it appeared that he'd left no will – none that anyone could find, at any rate. Among his possessions was a framed photograph of his son, and at the auction, the only person to bid on it was an elderly woman dressed in shabby clothes. She was later revealed to have been the dead child's nurse. Her charge, we're told, died at an early age, but she'd loved him dearly and now wanted his photograph as a keepsake – now that it could be obtained quite cheaply at auction. In fact, there was little other interest in it, apparently. So, the old nurse successfully bid for it, and later took the treasured photograph home.

When examining it in her house, she noticed a bulge in the heavy paper backing of the frame. Intrigued, she made a cut in the backing paper, and from inside it she pulled out an envelope. The envelope was found to contain a copy of the rich man's missing will! But that wasn't all! The will made it clear that the rich man's entire estate was to go to whoever had purchased this photograph of his son – that is, the entire fortune was to go to the person who cherished the memory of the dead man's son. The one person who cherished the son – as opposed to all the others who were simply attempting to plunder the rich man's wealth – this was the one who was intended to benefit. (Original printed version dating to 1954, according to Snopes.com).

And so it is in relation to every good thing we could ever wish for. Searching for these things in our own way, we fail to get them. But to receive Jesus Christ as Saviour, we have everything that's worth having included in him.

In John 5:24, Jesus says: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.” Receiving Christ brings us eternal life, and freedom from guilt and condemnation, and immunity from sin’s wages, namely death.

As we now draw our response to a conclusion, I want to leave you with the pure and emphatic language of the Bible. Listen carefully to our readings if it’s assurance of your salvation which you’re looking for. These quotes that follow leave no room at all for uncertainty. We begin in Acts 10:43: “Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.” Then in Acts 16:30-31: “...and after he brought them out, he said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

The Apostle Paul also says in Ephesians 1:13-14: “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, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory.”

And finally back to John 1:12-13, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” I did say finally, but I think I want to I leave you with the words of the Lord in John 17:3 “This is eternal life, that they may know You,

the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” There again is that ring of certain knowledge, so clear in John’s writings. Praise God!

7. WHAT IS MEANT BY WORKS?

While preparing these studies in which we're exploring together five key words found in the text of Ephesians chapter 2, verses 8 & 9, I find myself in a country that's been dominated for some four centuries by one particular religious outlook, one that was imported to these islands by Spanish explorers.

In the national daily newspapers, there are regular reports on press releases from Vatican city in Rome. From a source such as these, I was most interested to read a transcript of a Vatican Radio message saying that Pope Francis had visited the crypt beneath St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican one evening. The report went on to say that he'd gone there "for a time of private prayer for the repose of the souls of his predecessors in the office of bishop of Rome, who have departed this life".

Let me come back to that in a moment, but first let me tell you that during days in the country where I am as I write this, I often visit the simple homes of anyone willing to talk about ultimate issues. Many of them are interested in such topics, it turns out. I listen as my local colleague engages them in their dialect, and I follow carefully their discussion as he gently leads up to asking if they're sure all their sins are forgiven and, as a result, they're confident they've a place reserved for them in heaven.

It's always good to plan for the future, isn't it? And before I travel to each new area, I would always make a reservation in some kind of lodge or inn or basic hotel there. It's reassuring to know where you're going, even if much else about the journey may be unfamiliar. The Apostle Peter encourages us to think that way, too, about the ultimate journey we each have to make when this life is over for us. He talks about the Christian hope of obtaining "an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for [those who are true Christian believers]" (1 Peter 1:4).

In this country, we find many who are ready to express the understanding that Jesus Christ, God's son, died on the cross to pay for the sins of humanity. They state this very readily, but their confidence quickly fades to hesitation when asked if they're certain of a personal reservation in heaven. "Not sure," they say, thinking that it'll depend in some way on their own performance.

That it should be like this is not surprising, as they have a generational respect for the Pope. And, returning to what we mentioned earlier, here it gets reported on Vatican radio that Pope Francis had been visiting the Vatican crypt in order to pray for the safe repose of the departed souls of previous Popes. This hardly inspires confidence among the general population. If a pope can't be sure of making it, then they might well ask, who can? If they're going to be more sure than the Pope himself, then they're going to have to think of themselves as outperforming the Pope – something they'd definitely shy away from thinking.

I contrast these doubtful locals with others I recall encountering on a never-to-be-forgotten afternoon in the forested, mountainous interior. Some of my other friends and co-workers had been sharing God's Word, based around the text we're exploring in this series. I probably don't need to remind you again that it comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 8 & 9: "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**, so that no one may boast." And we've already defined the salvation here as being salvation from God's final judgement; with the means being by God's grace, that is his unmerited favour towards us; and accessed by genuine action-based faith on our part.

When I visited this remote village among the rubber trees that gave the villagers their cash crop, I must confess I was a little unprepared for their enthusiasm which contrasted vividly with the hesitation I'd encountered in the city suburbs. A dozen of them that afternoon either stabbed their finger at the text or else recited it with an excitement that was contagious. They positively beamed when they announced to me: "The priests never told us this!" They'd freshly discovered, from their new Bibles, that God is good, he's gracious, and they could be – and so evidently had been – saved from future condemnation "by faith through the grace of God!"

They were so insistent, and the refrain was so often repeated that afternoon, that I could hardly refrain from sharing it in their language just now, quoting them as they testified to me that their new-found salvation was, word for word translated into English, "through faith by the grace of God." I remember sheltering in a

thatched hut from the tropical sun and thinking to myself that they'd made Martin Luther's historic discovery some 500 years after him.

If I ever needed proof positive that the Bible is God's living and active Word, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of any human heart (Hebrews 4:12), I certainly received it that day. Here were radiant faces, and transformed lives! What overflowing joy later to climb aboard an overcrowded pickup truck with them and head to the nearest mountain river where they publicly witnessed - through believers' baptism by full immersion in water - to their readiness to follow Christ as Lord. They understood, and readily affirmed, this act was only the public sign of what had already transpired in their hearts.

The mention of a river reminds me of a story, or at very least an illustration, I once heard of a man who got into difficulty in some water. Thankfully none of our friends did while we were baptizing them! But this other incident might well have been tragic. Apparently, the river currents involved were treacherous. Onlookers on the riverbank watched the efforts of the drowning man - his own desperate efforts to save himself - they watched them become fainter and more feeble. Among the onlookers that day was a highly experienced lifeguard. His eyes were fixed on the swimmer who was clearly in great danger of drowning. He was tiring, and slowly settling lower in the water. 'Help him! What are you waiting for?' the crowd urged the lifeguard.

But still he remained motionless, but never even for one moment taking his gaze off the drowning man. The crowd were in shock, in disbelief. The man had now almost sunk out of sight, he was

no longer making any movement at all. At that precise moment, the lifeguard dived into the treacherous current. With his strength and skill, he soon had the helpless man on the riverbank where he made a full recovery.

The relieved crowd berated the lifeguard: “You almost left that too late, what on earth were you thinking?” The lifeguard then explained that for as long as the drowning man was trying so desperately to save himself, any intervention on his part would surely have endangered both of them. Two drownings would have been the probable result in such turbulent water.

What a lesson that brings us! And on the very topic we’re considering. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 5:6 – “While we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” Christ’s rescue work on our behalf becomes effective in saving us when we recognize we’re unable to help ourselves.

In this matter of our eternal salvation from guilt and condemnation before a holy God, the saying you sometimes hear: “God helps those who help themselves” is absolutely and totally false. It’s a lie, but there’s an even bigger lie going around all over the world. You’ve heard it, nearly everyone has. It’s a religious lie. It comes in many different forms, but basically this is what it says. The world’s biggest lie says: “Live the best life you can. And when you come to stand before God, he’ll weigh up all the good things you’ve done and all then all the bad things you’ve done, and if the good outweighs the bad, he’ll let you into heaven.” That is the most sinister fake news there’s ever been. Let’s refresh ourselves with the liberating truth of God’s Good News for sinners, as we all are (Romans 3:23): “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, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

There’s another verse, one Paul wrote to Christian believers in Galatia, in which he says that “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Galatians 2:16). We do well to stress what that verse is saying. It’s saying that in all of history there’s never been anyone born of a human father who’s ever succeeded in making himself or herself acceptable to God by his or her own efforts or own religious observance – of any sort. Not one.

Anyone misguided enough to think they might be the one to do it, should consider the force of Paul’s words later in that same Bible chapter, this time found in verse 21. There he says that those who attempt to work for their salvation, who try to pay for forgiveness by self-help, deceived by the promise of any kind of religious observance ... Paul says they’re truly guilty of “nullifying the grace of God,” and in effect are saying that “Christ died needlessly.”

In this Bible letter we’ve just been referring to, Paul seems to consistently contrast “the works of the Law” with “the faith of Christ” (see Galatians 2:16,20 and Galatians 3:23; also Romans 3:22,26). The Good News is we don’t have to do the former; but need to truly believe the latter. In this regard, Christ is frequently mentioned alongside Abraham, who was notable for his faith in leaving his own country, becoming a wanderer in a foreign land, and not withholding anything from God. But these remarkable demonstrations of Abraham’s faith are eclipsed totally by the faith of Christ! He left heaven, was homeless on this earth, and

gave his all at the cross. His faith saves, frees and justifies us – when we endorse it with ours. In this way, ‘the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith’ (Romans 1:17).

8. WHICH BOAST IS EXCLUDED?

The atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell was once asked what he would say if he found himself standing before God on judgement day and was asked, "Why didn't you believe in Me?" Russell replied, "I would say, 'Not enough evidence, God! Not enough evidence!'"

If you dare to write a blog or post to Facebook on issues of Christian faith, you should be prepared for the same refrain: "There's not enough evidence." But, we must ask, not enough for what? Do you mean that there's not enough evidence to compel someone to become a Christian?

Most people are spiritually apathetic, too busy or unconcerned to be bothered about spiritual things. They just can't be bothered to look into the evidence for Christianity. Most people aren't even acquainted in the least with the evidence for Christianity. This remains true for academics, and high-profile atheists, who at times display glaring ignorance of the evidence that any open-minded, careful research finds. They boast in their own intellect, but are shockingly ignorant about the reality of what they either affirm or deny. Such boasting is not good. They would do well to consider the counsel of the Bible prophet Jeremiah:

“Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,' declares the LORD” (Jeremiah 9:23,24).

History affords an example of someone who boasted in his accomplishments, in his credentials so to speak, and who for a while thought to do everything in his power to oppose Christianity (although he was a fervent believer in the existence of God). He may have had the intellectual horse-power to mix it with the best of them, but his thinking was dramatically turned around – to the extent that he could then say:

“May it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14).

And so, Saul of Tarsus became the Apostle Paul, the distinguished early Christian apologist.

But there's another kind of boasting that's perhaps equally effective in denying the Christian message. I think it was Michael Green who may have illustrated it in this way. A man was appearing in court, charged with the offence of stealing his neighbour's motor-cycle. The evidence against him was compelling, yet he said he was there to demand justice for himself. The judge addressed the defendant, and asked 'What

do you mean that you are here to demand justice? The object in question was found in your possession, and you admitted that you didn't have permission to take it. How on earth do you think it's in your interest to demand justice?'

The defendant did not hesitate before responding: "Your honour, I fully agree that on the day in question I stole my neighbour's motor-cycle ..." "Well then," interrupted the judge, "You stand self-condemned!" "No, your honour, if I may ... I repeat my demand for justice. They are prejudicing my case by selecting that day in question, for I maintain there have been a great many other days when I did not steal his motor-bike. I wish these also to be taken into account."

Have you ever heard a defence on those grounds? I think it's safe to say our defendant would be laughed out of court. But I asked a moment ago if you'd ever heard a defence based on such grounds. Could it be that it's vaguely familiar? What defence are you preparing against the time when you'll stand before God? Yes, there's credible evidence to take this idea very seriously indeed, even if Bertrand Russell thought to the contrary. If you've been thinking that your defence before God will be along the lines of "Sure, I've done some bad things, but I've done many good things," then isn't that the same type of defence that you smiled at a few moments ago?

I fear a lot of people are in this situation. Perhaps, you are. Its naivety has never struck you before. Everyone who plans to boast in their own good performance, in the main, is in this predicament. Might we just also observe that whatever we regard as good in ourselves, is not viewed in that same way by God.

In fact, God is on record, in the Bible book of Romans 3:12, stating that in his estimation there's not one of us who, in our own strength, does anything he regards as good. So, all boasting on our part is futile.

I probably don't need to remind you again of the Bible text at the centre of our study. It comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 8 & 9: "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, **so that no one may boast.**"

By this late stage in our exploration, we've already defined the salvation here as being salvation from God's final judgement; with its means being by God's grace, that is his unmerited favour towards us – which is accessed by genuine action-based faith on our part. Our previous study drew attention to the emphasis here being against this salvation being of our own working. In fact, these two verses go to quite unusual lengths in disabusing us of any lingering idea that we can get to heaven on our own merits. We might ask: "Could it be any plainer?" Positively, faith is identified as the means; but then negatively, our works are singled out as not being the means of our salvation. Of course, God knew how pervasive and attractive to us would be the boastful thought of us thinking we could possibly somehow be there based on merit.

To completely put an end to any suggestion that the Bible's message could at any point be mistaken on this most important issue, we're not only told that our works don't count, but additionally, we're told that no-one in heaven will ever be able to boast in their own right to be there. That is altogether here

so comprehensively and emphatically ruled out in unmistakably plain language. But let's take our cue from the way this text handles the matter, and spell it out:

If you could make a personal contribution to your salvation; if you even slightly deserved it more than others; if even your faith was truly yours ...; if grace was not entirely sufficient ...; then you would be able to boast. However, we're told that's ruled out, as simply not being possible!

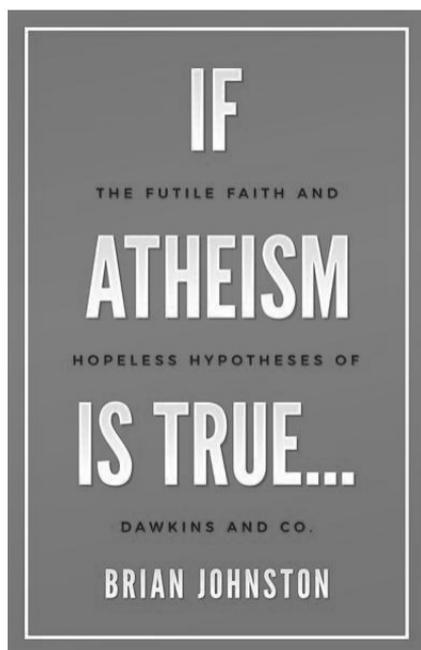
In making that point, I'm suddenly reminded of an incident in the life of Jesus on earth, as recorded by Matthew in the Gospel bearing his name (Matthew 19:16,26). Someone once asked Jesus this question: 'What good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?' The Lord dealt with the question in such a way as to show that none of us by ourselves can even begin to plumb the depths of what it would require us to do. Jesus' own close followers were stunned by their Lord's answer. "Then who can be saved?" they asked somewhat incredulously. They said this because they understood Jesus to have ruled that our own works cannot possibly save us.

Jesus replied: "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." And the good news is that God did the impossible at the cross. It was there, outside Jerusalem, about 2,000 years ago, that the previously immortal died, God's son having become also human for the express purpose of dying. And it was there that the holy one was charged as guilty.

Our guilt was transferred to Jesus who was totally and completely without any sin of his own. It was there, when Jesus died in our place, that God recognized Christ's death as the Christian believer's own death, that being the wages of sin (Romans 6:23). It was there that death itself was defeated. Through Jesus' resurrection, we may have new life in him (1 Peter 1:3), and so become – in the only way possible - hell-deserving sinners who are amazingly accepted by God for a reserved place in heaven (1 Peter 1:3,4).

Well, we've now reached the end of our studies based on these two marvellous Bible verses - verses which have made the Good News of God so powerfully clear and effective to so many, many people. I do hope and pray our shared thoughts may be helpful for you too. Perhaps it's now time to revisit our opening question in a different guise. I have a friend who likes to provoke thought by gently challenging: if you were standing now at heaven's door and were asked why you should be admitted, what would you say? Well, what would you say ...?

Did you love *60 Minutes to Raise the Dead*? Then you should read *If Atheism Is True...* by Brian Johnston!



Written by a nuclear scientist turned missionary, this book draws together some of Brian's previously published writings on apologetics to produce a concerted offensive against what the apostle Paul would surely describe as the 'indefensible' arguments of the so-called 'New Atheists'.

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About the Author

Born and educated in Scotland, Brian worked as a government scientist until God called him into full-time Christian ministry on behalf of the Churches of God (www.churchesofgod.info). His voice has been heard on Search For Truth radio broadcasts for over 30 years (visit www.searchfortruth.podbean.com) during which time he has been an itinerant Bible teacher throughout the UK and Canada. His evangelical and missionary work outside the UK is primarily in Belgium and The Philippines. He is married to Rosemary, with a son and daughter.



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