

IS FAITH THE GIFT OF GOD?

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". . . Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, **Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved . . .**" (Acts 16:31)

When the Philippian jailor asked Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved, they replied that the sole requirement was to "**believe** on the Lord Jesus Christ". The Greek word translated "believe" is **πίστευσον**, the second person, singular, aorist active imperative form of the verb **πιστεύω**.

A normal reading of this text gives the clear impression that Paul believed this man was capable of believing. Strict Calvinists, however, because of their understanding of Total Depravity (the first of their 5 so-called Points) as meaning *utter inability*, insist that Paul was commanding the Philippian jailor to do something he had no power to do. They assert that in order for a person to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ", God must first sovereignly bestow the **gift** of faith¹. Calvinists use a variety of Biblical texts to support their assertion that faith is a gift (e.g., John 6:28-29; 44-45; Romans 12:3; Acts 3:16; Philippians 1:29; 2 Peter 1:1), but they usually derive their major support from Ephesians 2:8.

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." (Ephesians 2:8)

In Ephesians 2:8, the demonstrative pronoun "that" is identified as "the gift of God". At issue is, what is the antecedent of the pronoun "that"? In the English text, the noun immediately preceding "that" is "faith", which would normally be the best candidate as the pronoun's antecedent. However, the situation is very different in the Greek² text of this verse. The Greek word translated "that" is **τούτο**, the neuter form of the near-demonstrative pronoun. In Greek, all nouns and pronouns have gender, and Greek grammar demands that a pronoun and its antecedent agree in gender. In Ephesians 2:8, "faith" (**πίστεως**, the genitive case of **πίστις**) is feminine in gender and cannot be the antecedent of the pronoun "that"; if the Holy Spirit had intended to assert in this verse that "faith" is "the gift of God", He could have made that clear by using **αὐτή**, the feminine form of the demonstrative pronoun. The Greek noun for "grace" is also feminine, so it cannot be the simple antecedent of "that".

So what is "the gift of God", the antecedent of the pronoun "that"? It is most natural to understand "the gift of God" as the concept of a *by-grace-through-faith-salvation*, which is the grand subject of Ephesians 2:1-10. This also makes sense of the Greek grammar, since neuter forms of the near-demonstrative pronoun (**ούτος**) virtually always have conceptual antecedents³ (i.e., concepts that require multiple words to describe). That salvation is a gift of God (i.e., by grace) is clear; this is the simple assertion of Ephesians 2:5, with Ephesians 2:8 merely adding that the instrument by which it is received is personal "faith".

The Calvinistic dogma that saving faith is a gift that must be sovereignly bestowed by God before the unregenerate man can believe has its basis in logical deduction from their understanding of Total Depravity as *utter inability*. In actuality, it has no support in Scripture.

¹ In Greek, the noun "faith" (**πίστις**) comes from the same root as the verb "believe" (**πιστεύω**).

² "The Greek New Testament is the New Testament. All else is translation." (A.T. Robertson)

³ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (1996) pp. 334-335.