

Salvation: Free Gift or Earned Right?

Let me begin this article by asking you three related questions:

1. Can a Christian earn salvation?
2. Or is salvation a free gift – from God?
3. If it is a free gift from God, does this mean that we do not have to do anything?

These are three big questions, and ones that I answered in my response to some comments I received recently in an e-mail from a man by the name of Peter. Here are Peter's comments:

I refer to your article “Faith without Works” in the February 2002 issue of your Forerunner magazine. In the article, the author writes,

“The Church of God has always agreed 100% with those who say that salvation is a gift and that a Christian cannot earn salvation by charitable wks or by obedience to God's law. However, obedience is a condition we must meet before God will give us His free gift of salvation.”

Pardon me, but this is really playing with words and is silly. There is no need to go into theology or philosophy. This is just plain English. If there is a condition to be met, of course it needs to be earned. Even if I were to play with words, and not use the word ‘earn,’ which you deliberately avoid, it is still illogical. I would simply say that the gift is not free; there is a condition to be met. How can something be free if there is a condition to be met??!! This train of thought is completely unsustainable.

Imagine you go to a store, and an ad says “Free hairdryer”... the only condition is that you have to obey whatever the store tells you... and the store tells you a whole lot of things you need to do... e.g. shop there for a month. No money is exchanged... but which rational person would agree that the store is indeed giving away a free hairdryer??!! As with advertising gimmicks, we must reject the idea that the gift is free.... terms and conditions apply. Now that is not free, unless you're the most naive consumer out there.

Physical Free Gifts

Peter's questions are not bad ones. So what about it? Is he right? Does he have a point? What does God's holy Word say on the subject?

I thanked Peter for his comments and told him that, as it was me who wrote the 2002 article his letter referred to (see <http://www.tcog.ca/faithwks.htm>), I was sorry that he found "my" words to be illogical and silly. However, "my" words in this particular case – the words he read in my "Faith without Works" article were not really mine. I plagiarized them from the written word of God.

First, let us look at this on a logical, grammatical plane. Just because something is a free gift does *not* mean that certain conditions do not apply.

For example, my wife Tricia and I collect Air Miles which ultimately entitle us to "free" flights. In order to receive these Air Miles, we must buy so many goods from certain merchants. Now, we *could* buy these same goods for the same price from other merchants who do not participate in the Air Miles program. If we did so, we would not receive any Air Miles or the resultant free flights.

Are these flights really free? Or am I earning them? They are free. All I have to do is make my purchases at certain merchants. (Of course, the associated taxes must be paid whether I use money or Air Miles to purchase the flights themselves).

Likewise with Peter's free hair-dryer. If two stores sell the same products – products that I need – at the same prices; but one store is giving away a hair-dryer if I buy from them then, yes, that hair-dryer is a free gift!

Spiritual Free Gifts

Likewise on the spiritual plane, can a Christian earn his own salvation? Or is it a gift? Let God answer through His apostle, Paul:

For *the grace of God that brings salvation* has appeared to all men. (Titus 2:11)

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

So what is God telling us here? He is telling us that His grace brings salvation; that we are saved by grace; and all thee – salvation, faith and grace – are gifts from Him!

But just what is this thing called “grace”? Here are the definitions from two religiously unbiased dictionaries. The first one tells us that grace is: “free and undeserved favour from God.” The second tells us that grace is “unmerited divine assistance given to humans for their regeneration or sanctification.”

This being said – that salvation is a free gift – is there nothing at all that a Christian is required to do in order to receive this wonderful free gift of salvation? Or can he go and do just as he pleases? Once again, let God’s Word give us the answer:

Wherefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.* (Philippians 2:12)

This verse clearly tells us that Christians are required to work out their own salvation; also that obedience is required of them. Obedience and repentance are also mentioned elsewhere as conditions required for salvation:

And being made perfect, He *{Jesus}* became the author of eternal salvation...

Who to? To anyone who says they believe in Jesus?... No!...

... unto all them that obey Him. (Hebrews 5:9)

**For Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation.
(II Corinthians 7:10)**

So, if a Christian does these things very well, does he then deserve the gift of salvation? Does God then owe it to him? No! God is never beholden to any human being – in anything!

We very imperfect human parents love our children. We love to give them gifts – gifts which might include inheritances. Salvation is an inheritance given by God the Father to His beloved children:

Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation? (Hebrews 1:14)

Are our physical gifts and inheritances freely given? Yes. Do our children earn them? No. Not in most normal cases, anyway.

But could we rightly withhold them – for example, in a case where we knew that one of our children would spend the proceeds of the inheritance on a profligate lifestyle which might include illicit drugs and immorality? Yes, of course we could withhold them in such cases.

The New Covenant is Two-sided

The New Testament Christian's relationship with God is a covenant. The Holy Bible calls it the "New Covenant" (See Jeremiah 31:31 and Hebrews 8:6-13). A covenant is a legal agreement.

In a Christian's covenant with God, God agrees – no, guarantees – to do His part and the Christian agrees to do best to fulfil his part (with the aid and indwelling of God's Spirit).

God's covenants – both Old and New are inextricably linked to salvation:

Although my house is not so with God, yet He has made with me *an everlasting covenant*, ordered in all things and secure. For *this is all my salvation* and all my desire; will He not make it increase? (II Samuel 23:5)

Thus says the LORD: "In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of *salvation* I have helped you; I will preserve you and give you as a *covenant* to the people, to restore the earth, to cause them to inherit the desolate heritages. (Isaiah 49:8)

The bottom-line question is this: Are righteous works and obedience to God's laws requirements in His New Covenant? And the bottom-line answer is "absolutely YES!":

"For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days"... {i.e. in the World Tomorrow, after Christ's return to earth.}... says the Lord: "I will put my laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Hebrews 8:10)

Salvation is free gift from God. We cannot earn salvation by works or by law-keeping. But to keep our side of God's New Covenant agreement, we must do righteous works and we must obey God's eternal, holy law!

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