

**“Through Faith” | Ephesians 2:8-9**  
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**(Discussion questions on page 7)**

“I can do it myself. I can do it myself,” said the little girl, attempting to pour the milk for her cereal—gallon-jug shaking in her hands—by herself. “I can do it myself. I can do it myself,” said the little boy, on tiptoe, reaching, his tiny finger extended, for the glass on the shelf. “I can do it myself. I can do it myself,” mumbled the man, as his wife asked if he needed help with directions.

We human beings don’t much enjoy admitting we need help. We don’t design our resumes around examples of our inabilities and limitations, highlighting our dependence on others.

On the one hand, our desire to be capable people is part of how God designed us. We are not dead logs; we are living and moving creatures, made to fill the earth and subdue it.

But, on the other hand, there is something a little deeper—more dangerous, even darker—about our appetite for self-sufficiency and independence.

“I can do it myself. I can do it myself,” says modern man when considering how to put the world, or himself, to rights. “I can do it myself. I can do it myself,” said Israel to the Lord, when it asked for a human king and rejected God as King. “I can do it myself. I can do it myself,” said Adam and Eve, as they turned their backs on God, determined to live in His world on their terms.

There is something in our nature that recoils from the fact of our dependence on God. It feels threatening, makes us vulnerable, forces us to admit our weakness. This may be why one of the most reoccurring words in the Bible—appearing far more than “love,” or “mercy,” or “grace”—is the word, **“faith.”** Again and again, the Bible tells us we must live by faith:

“The righteous live by faith” (Hab. 2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38); Christians “walk in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham” (Rom 4:12); “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb 11:6).

And Paul will add, in our passage today from Ephesians 2:8-9, that we are “saved through faith”:

For by grace you have been saved through **faith**. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God (Eph 2:8).

If pride says, “I can do it myself.” Faith says the opposite. Faith is the human creature, humbled by limitations and sins, frustrated by a lack of self-mastery, finally crying out to his Maker, “I cannot do it by myself. I need help.” Faith is our assent to a truth outside ourselves, and a lifestyle of dependence on a strength other than ourselves.

Here Ephesians, Paul invites us to see the role faith plays when God's saving grace becomes personal and effective in our lives. I want to take some time this morning to consider this faith: *What is it faith in? How do we exercise it? What does it feel like to experience it?* To do so, we'll make three observations about this faith that says—when it comes to salvation and doing life—“I cannot do it by myself.”

### **I. Though Faith cannot see everything, it does hear and understand something.**

The idea of faith is popular today. You hear athletes or leaders, when they think of challenges before them, speak of the need for faith. To encourage each other, friends say, “You just gotta believe.” But it's hard to say what this faith is in. It's more of a vague sense of optimism about the future, of a vague notion of confidence in oneself.

But biblical faith has a clear content to it. And while it is true that faith, by nature, involves trusting in something you cannot see. It is not the case that faith is not utterly blind. Biblically, faith is in something we must clearly understand. What is this something? Paul tells us back in Ephesians 1:13, where he writes

In him [Christ] you also, when you **heard the word of truth, the gospel** of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13).

The Ephesians “believed in Christ” only after they “heard the word of truth, the gospel.” Faith, as Paul says elsewhere, “comes by hearing, and hearing the Word about Christ” (Rom 10:17). What is this word, this Gospel, that faith hears and understands?

I recently heard a story of one of the first staff workers for Campus Crusade. She had grown up in Los Angeles in the 40s and 50s, and recounts a time when she was seeking to know what the Gospel message was, and how someone became right with God. She visited church after church, hoping the minister would explain the Gospel. But in church after church, she just heard sermons about morality, about being good people—but not about getting saved. Though she knew she needed faith, she needed to know what this faith was in.

If that's you this morning, here is a quick summary of the content of the Gospel Christians put faith in.

**1. Event:** First, the Gospel is an event that happened in history. That event is Christ's death and resurrection: In Paul's first letter, 1 Thessalonians, he writes, “... we believe that Jesus died and rose again” (1 Thess. 4:14). In 1 Corinthians he writes similarly:

I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (1 Cor 15:3-5).

There is no Gospel without this real, concrete, event in history of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We know about it not only because of its ongoing impact through His followers, but because of the hundreds of eyewitness accounts during that time, and the careful taking down of these events in the Four Gospels and Paul's letters. We trust in the credibility of this "news story," even though we were not there ourselves.

**2. Accomplishment:** Second, the Gospel states that Jesus' death accomplished things. It paid our debt which we incurred due to our sin. Paul explains in Colossians that God made us alive together with Christ,

.... by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross (Col 2:14).

On the Cross, Jesus also delivered us from spiritual bondage to dark forces:

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them (Col 2:15).

Imagine you have been delinquent on several rent payments in your apartment. On the one hand, you have a legal problem with the courts; they can justly declare that you are in the wrong. On the other hand, you happen to have a cruel and sinister land lord who holds this debt over your head, making you feel pathetic because of your failings, using your guilt to accuse and manipulate you.

This is our plight as sinners: we have a debt in God's cosmic courts of justice; but we also have an accuser, Satan, prowling around, spiritually manipulating us because of our failings. But on the Cross, Jesus deals with both problems: he pays our debt, satisfying the Good Judge; and he simultaneously removes all leverage that Satan, the accuser, has over us.

On the cross Jesus accomplishes the possibility for our forgiveness and deliverance.

**3. Gift:** Third, the Gospel is something announced and held out to you as a free gift: This is the language Paul uses in our passage:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the **gift of God**, not a result of works... (Eph 2:8-9).

In the Gospel, God holds out to us Jesus Christ and all his benefits as a free gift: The benefits of forgiveness, reconciliation with our Maker, the Holy Spirit, membership in God's Church, and new and everlasting life. This gift of the Gospel is never something we earn; it is offered to us as a free gift; what the Bible calls grace.

Here, then, is the beginning of faith: even before faith puts trust, it must understand. It hears this message, the Gospel, and understands it. It hears the God is holding out this gift.

And this brings us to our second observation, which has to do with how we receive the gift.

## II. Though Faith does not earn God's blessing, it knows how to receive it.

For the gift of salvation to become effective in my life, the decisive action I take is faith. It is worth reflecting on why this is the case.

The Bible does not say we are saved by our love, but by our faith. If we were writing these verses today, we might change Paul's words to say, "For by grace you are saved through your **love**." But Paul says, we are saved "through our **faith**." We might imagine Jesus saying, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever **loves** him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). But he said, "whoever **believes** in him." Why faith and belief, and not love or obedience?

This is because faith is unique in being an act of *receiving*, not *doing*. While love is a fruit of faith, part of sustaining faith, love suggests a sense of doing which faith does not.

Imagine a young child is worried about many things. He cries to his parents that he is worried they won't have food to eat, or a house to live in, or protection from bad guys. His parents do not respond by saying, "Honey, don't be afraid, love us." Rather, they say, "Honey, don't be afraid, *trust* us—trust that we will provide for you and protect you." They tell the child to *trust* in their love for him.

This is why faith is the crucial first movement in receiving God's grace: faith is not our ability to rightly love God (although faith produces love): faith is an empty hand, an empty stomach, a frightened face, that receives the grace of God. Thomas Goodwin, the seventeenth century pastor, wrote of this truth: "The hands of all other graces are working hands, but the hands of faith are merely receiving hands."

Hence, Paul goes on to emphasize, that "this [this salvation] "this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph 2:8-9).

What, exactly, does this movement of receiving look like. Let me suggest three specific features of how faith receives: (1) surrender, (2) welcome and (3) cleaving.

**Surrender:** Jesus often fronts the call for faith, or belief, with the call for "repentance": "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). Repentance requires submitting to God's Word about our sinfulness, and turning away from it.

Today, this requires surrendering to our own self-understanding. For modern people, faith often breaks down because we want God on our terms—especially our terms of self-understanding. We simply don't except God's declaration about how sinful we are. But this would be like sitting in the doctor's office, rejecting the doctor's words and saying, "when it comes to diagnosing my

problems, I can do it myself.” Faith requires surrender to God, even at the level of our self-understanding.

**Welcome:** Faith also involves more than receiving the benefits of Christ’s work—it involves receiving Christ himself as our friend and Lord. Later in chapter 3, using this same phrase “through faith,” Paul prays, “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph 3:17). The point of our salvation is not forgiveness; it is reconciliation with God. Jesus wants to come and make his home in us. We must welcome the person of Christ, not just the benefits of the work of Christ.

**Cleave:** Faith then involves cleaving to Christ. Like a barnacle on a rock, we depend upon Christ, lean upon Christ.

This is what it means, at the level of our heart and soul, to say that faith *receives* the grace of God: we receive by humble surrender to Christ, open welcome to Christ, and desperate cleaving to Christ.

Next week we will consider the fruits of faith, by considering the end of verse 9, where Paul says that we are saved through faith “*so that no one may boast*” (2:9) and verse 10, where Paul says that this new life of faith involves “**good works** which God prepared beforehand for us to walk in” (Eph 2:10). So we will notice that faith produces both inward fruit, humility (no boasting) and outer fruit (good works).

But I want to conclude today by considering the experience of saving and abiding faith. And this brings us to our third and final observation.

### **III. Faith Is More Than a Feeling, but Has a Feel to It.**

Faith, in as much as it produces love for God, will involve treasuring Christ. But faith should not be mistaken for only an emotion. For there are many times when we must trust in God despite our feelings.

But what I want to suggest as we close, is that having and living by saving faith does bring a certain “feel” to one’s life. I want to consider this to help us better grasp what it might be like to be saved by faith and live by faith. I’ll do so with three brief images.

1. **Someone Awake:** Jesus uses the image of “new birth” to describe what happens when we first have faith in the Gospel—grace enters, the Spirit comes, and we are a new creation. This has several effects on us. But I want to suggest that one “feel” that it takes is that of being “awake” to the things of God rather than “asleep.” There are many instances in Scripture where the life of faith is likened to being and keeping “awake” (1 Thess 5:6; 5:10; Rev 16:15). But one way you will experience faith that can at first seem subtle, is simply that you find yourself increasingly aware of sin, more bothered by sin, thinking about God, wondering about the things of God. Even if these experiences wax and wane, you are “awake” to the reality of God and Jesus Christ and sin and salvation in a way you simply were not before.

2. The weaned child with its mother: Second, is the image of a weaned child with its mother, and comes from Psalm 131. David writes,

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. <sup>2</sup> But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. <sup>3</sup> O Israel, hope in the LORD (Ps 131:1-3).

This is the image of a *resting trust* that has first worked through uncertainty and fear. David is not unclear about who God is; David is describing situations where he is unclear about what God is allowing to happen. But his heart comes to a place of no longer needing to have faith in God-plus-favorable-circumstances, but faith in God alone. George MacDonald writes,

That man is perfect in faith who can come to God in the utter dearth of his feelings and desires, without a glow or an aspiration, with the weight of low thoughts, failures, neglects, and wandering forgetfulness, and say to Him, "Thou art my refuge."  
-George MacDonald

3. The Loyal Soldier: The third is a soldier who gives himself entirely to the purposes, rules, and culture of an army, thus surrendering his own life. And in doing so, also finds himself surrounded by the army of soldiers, who inspire. This soldier surrenders his will to a greater will, and says he is here to serve. In a sense, the soldier feels that in losing himself in this self-sacrifice, he will find a truer and more satisfying version of himself. But he must do this in *faith*—putting total trust and offering total loyalty to another. I have this sense in mind when I hear Paul's words in Galatians 2:20,

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20).

Paul does in fact refer to an ongoing faith in Christ with this language when he says to Timothy, "Share in suffering as a good **soldier** of Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 2:3). The soldier does not say, "I can do it myself." The soldier looks instead to the directives of those above him, and relies daily on the comrades beside him.

Close: "For by grace you have been saved through **faith**. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works....(Eph 2:8-9), Paul says. Therefore, at the center of the Christian life is not the voice of pride that says, "I can do it myself." But the voice of faith that says, "I cannot do it myself; but God has, and will continue, to do it for me and through me."

Let's Pray.

## Small Group and Family Devotional Discussion Questions

1. Read Ephesians 2:8-9. What is faith as Paul uses it here in verse 8? How would you define faith?
2. Who is a hero of faith in the Bible you admire? How about in your family-line or friend group?
3. For Paul, faith is not a vague sense of confidence, but an abiding trust in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ—the Gospel—and what He promises to continue to do for us. How would you explain the Gospel message to someone who wanted to have faith in it? What are some of the promises of God that you have faith in?
4. What are some challenges today that work against our faith? What are challenges that you experience in having faith? How might Christians encourage faith in one another?