

The Gift Of Salvation In Ephesians 2:8

In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul wrote: “For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast.” (HCSB). The exegetical issue that is debated is to what the pronoun “this” in verse 8 refers. Does it refer to the grace, the action of being saved, the faith, or some or all of the three? I will show below that the syntax excludes the possibility that “this” refers only to the noun “faith,” but syntactically it could refer to more than one of the three. Ultimately, on contextual grounds and consistent with other Pauline statements about faith and works, we must understand Paul to be using the pronoun “this” to refer to the gift of salvation and not to faith.

The difficulty with understanding the pronoun “this” to refer only to faith is, in the first place, a syntactical one. Harold Hoehner recognized this problem in his commentary on Ephesians: “A serious objection to this is that the feminine noun does not match the neuter gender of the pronoun.”¹ Likewise, commentator Justin Smith wrote: “The Greek word for ‘that’ is neuter, so that the reference cannot be to ‘faith,’ since in that case it would be feminine.”² Whereas Smith concludes that the pronoun refers to the phrase “for by grace you are saved,”³ Hoehner concludes that “[r]ather than any

¹ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians, An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2002), 342.

² Justin A. Smith, “Commentary On The Epistle To The Ephesians,” in *An American Commentary On The New Testament*, edited by Alvah Hovey, 38. Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

particular word it is best to conclude that [the pronoun] refers back to the preceding section... the concept of salvation by grace through faith.”⁴ In contrast to these commentators, Peter O’Brien asserts that the pronoun could refer to faith but contextually should be “understood of salvation as a whole, including faith (or faithfulness) through which it is received.”⁵

What the syntactical analysis tells us is that the pronoun could refer to faith, grace, and salvation, or a combination, but probably not just to faith. Peter O’Brien is right to look to the context to drive the answer, but I think his, and Hoehner’s, conclusion that the pronoun encompasses all three is wrong because it is not what the context demands. Ephesians 2:9 is most helpful here: “it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast.” Paul showed a concern about his audience boasting. The question is whether Paul was really concerned that one of the Ephesians would boast because of his faith, or was concerned that one of them would boast that he received the grace or favor of God, namely salvation? Was Paul emphasizing that their very faith was a gift so that they would not boast that they believed the gospel when it was preached to them?

To boast is to speak with pride. I would submit that a plain sense reading of the passage, in its context, requires that we understand the pronoun “this” to refer to “by grace you are saved” and not the faith. People typically boast about their accomplishments or their stuff, and the act of believing or trusting is neither. Moreover, as we have already seen, this view is grammatically acceptable.

⁴ Hoehner, *Ephesians, An Exegetical Commentary*, 342-43.

⁵ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary, The Letter To The Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1999), 175.

Suppose, however, that Paul did intend to teach that faith is itself a gift. First, I would point out that this is not explicitly taught anywhere else in the Bible, even in the various other places where Paul teaches that salvation is by grace apart from works (see, e.g., Romans 3:24). More troubling, however, is that this would contradict other clear Pauline passages. If the pronoun refers to the faith, or even the faith, grace, and salvation together, then Paul's statement in Ephesians 2:9 would mean that Paul considered faith a work that should not be a ground for boasting because, in this case, it was given by God and not sourced in the person. Paul teaches elsewhere that faith is not a work. One of the fundamental hermeneutical principles, grounded in the inerrancy of the Bible, is that a debatable verse cannot be interpreted in such a way that it is contradicted by a clear teaching elsewhere. As Roy Zuck wrote in his hermeneutics text, "An obscure or ambiguous text should never be interpreted in such a way as to make it contradict a plain one."⁶

Paul wrote in his epistle to the Romans that faith is not a work: "He presented Him to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be righteous and declare righteous the one who has faith in Jesus. Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By one of works? No, on the contrary, by a law of faith. For we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law." (Romans 3:26-28, HCSB). Paul not only contrasts faith with works, but counters the possibility of boasting with the truth that salvation comes through faith. Paul here assumed that people might boast of works, but would have no ground for boasting of faith. Likewise, in

⁶ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation, A Practical Guide To Discovering Biblical Truth*, Victor (Colorado Springs: Victor 1991), 111.

Romans 4:4-5, Paul covered this ground again: “Now to the one who works, pay is not considered as a gift, but as something owed. But to the one who does not work, but believes on Him who declares righteous the ungodly, his faith is credited for righteousness.” (HCSB). Once again, Paul contrasted believing with working. In Paul’s mind, faith was not a work and therefore not a ground for boasting. In addition, we elsewhere see Paul elaborate on his concept of the gift of God (see, e.g., Romans 5:15-18, 6:23), and the gift is the provision of salvation in Jesus or eternal life, but never faith.

The position that the pronoun “this” in Ephesians 2:8 refers to the faith alone is grammatically unlikely. The view that it refers to the grace, salvation, and faith is grammatically possible, but not demanded and not supported by the context, especially Paul’s statement in Ephesians 2:9. Moreover, it is contrary to Paul’s other writings, especially in Romans. Therefore, the interpretation that satisfies the grammar, context, and the greater context of Paul’s other writings, is that the pronoun “this” refers to the salvation by grace and does not include reference to faith.