

A Glimpse of Life in the Kingdom

Part 3: A Work of Faith

Dr. Richard J. “Dick” Hill

We are not saved by our works plus the work of Christ (Ephesians 2:8–9; Titus 3:5; Romans 4:4–5). Works plus faith in Christ nullifies the faith (Romans 11:6). Water baptism plus faith in Christ, joining a local church plus faith in Christ, or stopping bad habits plus faith in Christ does not save. We are saved by faith in Christ alone. Two immediate reasons should come to mind. First of all, a spiritually dead person has no spiritual life. Dead people cannot turn from their sins (or do anything else). The dead must be made alive, and only God can give life (Deuteronomy 32:39).

Second, anything added to the all-sufficient work of Christ on the cross diminishes the immense value of that work (Hebrews 10:10–14). Because of our Lord's true identity as the God-man, His death on the cross satisfied God the Father forever as payment for sin. It should be obvious that Jesus Christ died once for all sin.

This raises a question: is personal faith in Christ considered a work? We are told to believe in Christ. Believing is a choice that we make. Is that human choice a work? Paul's very familiar words come to mind:

For by grace are you saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God not of works lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8–9)

At issue is what is the gift of God? Is it grace, or is it faith? The closest antecedent to “it” is the word “faith.” According to the grammar of the passage, both faith and grace may be considered gifts of God. God gives to His elect both the grace and the faith necessary to be in Christ for life. It is God who makes both happen. Saving faith is not our work.

What about repentance? Is it a work? There is no question that God asks the sinner to repent and believe in Christ. Paul's words from the Areopagus in Athens, Greece, come to mind: “These times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30; see Acts 20:21). Repentance, like faith, is a gift of God.

If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God? When they heard these things, they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.” (Acts 11:17–18)

And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth. (2 Timothy 2:24–25)

Repentance and faith are often thought of as two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other. You cannot believe in Christ without repenting, and you cannot repent without believing.

Repentance for salvation means to have a change of mind. This mind change may involve grief or sorrow over the sin that separated someone from God for so long. It may result in a desire to turn away from that sin. It may bring tears of grief and joy. There are also those who repent in a very quiet way. Small children who hear the gospel and simply believe in Christ are a case in point. God brings repentance to them in a gentle way. When God brings the truth of the gospel into the fallen minds of sinners, He produces the conviction of sin necessary and the need for a Savior. God changes their minds and gives them faith to believe in Christ, and the result is a new creation.

God gives us the responsibility to believe in Jesus Christ in order to be saved. This is the will of God. Jesus said, “You are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life” (John 5:40). He also said, “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18, see also 3:36).

However, we are not saved by faith that is alone. The faith that saves us will become productive. It will produce fruit (or a work) in the life of those who believe. James said that faith that is not accompanied by works is not a saving faith. He called it a “dead faith” (James 2:17–20). He gave two irrefutable illustrations: Abraham’s offering Isaac and Rahab’s hiding the spies. Abraham offered Isaac on the altar, totally trusting in God. That amazing offering became his work of faith. Rahab’s hiding the spies became her work of faith (James 2:14–26). The game breaker that overwhelmingly confirms this truth is Hebrews chapter 11, often called the roll call of the faithful. Having one’s name listed in this roll is very commendable. Those who made the list were those who demonstrated that they had exercised saving faith by the work that their faith produced.

The writer said that faith is “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” By faith, the elders obtained a good testimony. We believe by faith that the world was created by the Word of God and not from some tangible substance (Hebrews 11:1). The chapter goes on to name some of the faithful saints from the Old Testament:

By faith, Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain.

By faith, Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death.

By faith, Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear and prepared an ark for the saving of his household.

By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance.

By faith, Sarah received strength to conceive, and she bore a child.

By faith, Abraham offered up Isaac.

By faith, Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.

By faith, Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.

By faith, Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel and gave instructions concerning his bones.

By faith, Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw that he was a beautiful child, and they were not afraid of the king's command.

By faith, Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin.

By faith, the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days.

By faith, the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe when she had received the spies with peace.

By faith, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens, and received their dead raised to life again.

By faith, others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection.

By faith, still others were mocked, scourged, chained, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, tempted, or slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented; the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.

Then the writer said something incredible. He said that God provided something better for us. This list has not yet been completed. We in the age of the church are completing the list. We are by faith being productive for God's glory.

We are now involved in fulfilling our work of faith that puts the exclamation mark on our salvation. It is an interesting point that with few exceptions, the saving faith of all those listed above is never mentioned in scripture. We know that they had it, however, because we read of the work that their faith produced.

Did James's statement that faith without works is dead contradict Paul's teaching that we are saved by faith apart from human works? Not at all. As Dr. Charles Ryrie often said, salvation is the root that produces the fruit. A living faith will produce fruit. Paul wrote that we are Christ's workmanship, created in Him for good works; God foreordained that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10). We are not saved by works, but the faith that saves us will work. Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruit" (Matthew 7:16–20). If the tree is dead, there will be no fruit.

No productivity points to a dead faith. Paul referred to a dead faith as “believing in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:2). All true children of God will produce some work of faith in their lifetimes. We may never know what that work may be. We may never understand that special work in our own lives, much less the lives of others, but the fact of the matter is that a living faith will be a productive faith.

Run to Win

Therefore, we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1–2).

The roll call of the faithful becomes a cloud of witnesses motivating us to finish a race with endurance. These witnesses teach us that we are to run the race to win. Dr. Howard Hendricks, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, often said, “We are not to build a skyscraper on a foundation designed for a chicken coop.” The writer of Hebrews challenged believers to run the race of the Christian life with endurance and to help build a foundation fit for a King.

Paul’s message to the Corinthian church was similar. He said clearly that we are to run to win (1 Corinthians 9:24–27). Believers are in a race, a race that we entered when we came to faith in Jesus Christ. We are in this race to win and should desire to hear these words from our Lord: “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord” (Matthew 25:21–23).

Each believer is given the opportunity to receive the prize, but only those who win will receive it. How can we win? Paul said that we must be temperate in all things. Like any athlete, we must discipline our lives to be able to finish the race well. We do this to win crowns. Four possible crowns are mentioned in scripture as rewards for faithful service: a crown of joy for those who encourage others in their faith (1 Thessalonians 2:19), a crown of righteousness for those who eagerly long for the coming of the King (2 Timothy 4:7–8), the crown of life for those who endure the extreme pressure of trials (James 1:12), and the crown of glory given to those who faithfully feed and take care of God’s sheep (1 Peter 5:4).

Paul worked hard to so discipline his body that he might not become disqualified from the race.

Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. (1 Corinthians 10:1–5)

The Jews wandering in the wilderness for forty years were disqualified. They were taken out of the race. We can also be removed from the race. John spoke somberly of sin that leads to death. It may be the case that we so frustrate the grace of God that He determines it is far better for us to be

with Him than to be here in this life. He removes us from the race (1 John 5:16–17). Those Jews who died in the wilderness were to be an example to us.

Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.” Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (1 Corinthians 10:6–11)

These are not words written to unbelievers. These words are written to wayward sheep. We are to take heed lest we fall. God is faithful and will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to bear, but He will provide a way of escape for every trial (1 Corinthians 9:24–10:13).

We only have one life to spend on this earth, and how we spend it will determine our position in the coming earthly kingdom of Jesus Christ. We are destined to reign with Christ if we know Him, but the extent of this reign is being determined by the use of our giftedness in this life. We must be faithful to discover and use these gifts in the body of Christ. Our position in the kingdom depends upon it. Our reward at the judgment seat of Christ depends upon it. The crowns that we win also depend on it.

As servant kings, we are all going to serve our King in His coming kingdom, but the extent of that service is being determined now.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

May we be faithful to do business until He comes.

This is part three of a three-part series, and is taken from Dr. Hill's book, A Glimpse of the Coming King. Dr. Hill is president of Glimpses of Grace.