

“Faith + Nothing = Salvation” is Bad Math

Faith + Nothing = Salvation. Well, there’s some bad math for you. It doesn’t add up. Let’s fix it: Faith + Nothing = Faith. Or here’s another way to say it: Faith + Nothing = Nothing but Faith.

By the way, we are not saved by faith. We’re saved by grace. We are saved by grace *through* faith:

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

Not of works, lest any man should boast.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:8–10)

From that passage it is easy to assume we receive grace if we simply have faith. And it’s easy to conclude that our “works” — of any sort — have nothing to do with the receipt of saving grace.

On the other hand, the apostle James cited Abraham’s example, writing “Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.” (James 2:24). At first glance it seems like Paul and James disagree, but they don’t: “works” means different things in different contexts.

Abraham’s “works” was his obedience: he obeyed, and headed to the promised land:

“By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.” (Hebrews 11:8)

Later, Abraham obeyed by offering Isaac. Abraham’s works of obedience should not be confused with the “good works” or good deeds done for others that Paul mentioned back in Ephesians. Those good works are done as a result of being Jesus’ workmanship:

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:10)

Nor should Abraham’s works be confused with the “works of the law” Paul wrote about in some of his letters. Neither “the works of the law” nor good works done for others can ever earn saving grace. If they could, there would have been no need for Jesus to die for us.

For his works — his obedience through faith — Abraham was deemed to be a believer. He acted on his faith and obeyed. James wrote:

“But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?
Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?
Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?”

And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.” (James 2:20–24)

Faith and believing are not the same: faith is trust that something is true; believing is acting on that faith, even though it may be uncomfortable to do so. Abraham chose to obey through faith. For that he was deemed to be a believer and was justified to God.

It’s the same for us today: we must act on our faith and obey. Jesus is “. . . the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him” (Hebrews 5:9).

We are saved by grace *through* faith, not just because we *have* faith. *Through* faith we can choose to obey and “come to God” on His terms. It is that choice that matters. Faith is necessary, but it’s the choice — to obey — that matters. Without faith, we would not see that we have a choice to make:

“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6)

It is entirely possible to have faith, yet not choose to “come to God,” preferring to remain in the comfort zones of our old life. Even with faith Abraham could have chosen to remain in the comforts of home, and not leave for the promised land. That would have been dead faith: faith without works.

“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.” (James 2:26)

So, what does God tell us to do today? How do we obey? Well, this should come as no surprise: We are all sinners. Our sins have separated us from God (Isaiah 59:1,2) and have earned the “wages” of sin: perishing in death (Romans 6:23). We need God’s mercy. And there is good news: God promises His mercy. Here’s how we can receive His promise:

“He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.” (Proverbs 28:13)

That’s repentance, changing our mind about continuing in sin. Turning from a life lived apart from God. God “now commands all men every where to repent”:

“And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent” (Paul, in Acts 17:30)

If we’ll obey and come to God on His terms, we’ll have our past sins blotted out:

“Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19, NKJV).

Please realize this: our sins were not blotted out or paid for on the cross, as many today will try to tell you. Our sins remain until we come to repentance. In fact, we’ll pay for our own sins unless we come to repentance.

But if we'll come to repentance, our past sins will be erased and we'll have redemption, by grace, from the death penalty already earned for past sins. With His life, His blood, Jesus made a ransom available: He made His death available to cover our death penalty. With past sins erased, and no longer under condemnation, we are no longer separated from God. We are justified or reconciled to God. Now we can begin a new life — a “time of refreshing,” “in the presence of the Lord.”

So, how are we “in the presence of the Lord”? Through the gift of the holy spirit, given — by grace — to those who obey and repent:

“And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.” (Acts 5:32)

“Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” (Acts 2:38)

Through the holy spirit Jesus leads us in ongoing sanctification, making us ready to receive yet another grace: the gift of eternal life, our salvation. But sanctification can only proceed while we remain in repentance, abiding in Him. Jesus' work is not finished. He is at work right now through the holy spirit:

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.” (Jesus, in Revelation 3:19)

Jesus says:

“If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.” (John 15:6)

In this mortal life we who are in justification have “the hope of salvation” and are “appointed . . . to obtain salvation” and “shall be” saved — in the future, according to Paul and Peter:

“But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ” (Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 5:8,9).

“But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.” (Acts 15: 11)

That was Peter, speaking to apostles and elders about future salvation for both themselves and Gentiles. Peter did not tell them they were already saved.

Justification and salvation are different things, at different times:

“Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him.” (Paul, in Romans 5:9)

In this mortal life we may be in justification, but we are not saved from ever perishing in death until we receive the gift of eternal life at Jesus' return.

We have free will and we can choose to turn from repentance, and no longer be justified to God. We have many warnings about this in the letters from the apostles. We are warned not to “fall away” (Hebrews 6:6) and not to “fail of the grace of God” (Hebrews 12:15). We are urged to “give diligence to make our calling and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10):

“Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall:
For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:10,11)

It is clear from Hebrews 6:4–6 and 2 Peter 2:20–22 that even after receiving the holy spirit, and knowing Jesus, we can then “fall away,” no longer in repentance, rejecting the lead we receive from Jesus through the holy spirit.

The apostle Paul clearly understood that he could revert to a life of sin, no longer in justification, and end up as a “castaway”:

“But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.” (1 Corinthians 9:27)

Here is Jesus’ warning about returning to sin:

“But and if that servant say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to beat the menservants and maidens, and to eat and drink, and to be drunken;

The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers.” (Luke 12:45,46)

“Once saved, always saved”? Apparently not. That servant was going to pay for his own sin.

“Can a Christian lose their salvation?” That’s a trick question. You cannot lose what you do not yet have. But you *can* fall away, no longer justified to God, no longer on the “narrow way” that leads to salvation.

“Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.” (Hebrews 4:1)

Outside of repentance, we receive no mercy and have no redemption from the death penalty already earned for sin. We will surely, hopelessly perish in death, paying our own death penalty. That’s why Jesus warned, “except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (Luke 13:5).

“Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.” (Luke 13:4,5)

Faith + nothing = salvation just doesn't work. Any formula for salvation must include repentance, because without repentance we will surely perish!

The apostle Peter made it very clear: we either come to repentance, or else we perish. It's our choice:

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)

Jesus did not tell His disciples to preach “faith alone” or “faith + nothing = salvation.” Not even close. He told them to preach “repentance and remission of sins”:

“Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures,

And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day:

And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:45–47)