

You Can Believe the Promises of God and Still Be Eternally Lost

It is possible to believe the promises of God, and have the assurance of salvation, and yet be lost forever.

Professing Christians With False Assurance

This possibility is implied in Matthew 7:22, “Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonderful works in Your name?’” These folks believed that they were secure in relation to Christ. They called him “Lord,” and they tapped into supernatural power in His name.

Perhaps they had even more “assurance of salvation” than many strugglers today (who are genuinely saved) because supernatural power was flowing through their hands. So when they read the promise “I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you” (Josh. 1:5), they believed it was true of them. But it wasn’t.

That is why they will be shocked when Jesus says to them, “I never knew you. Depart from Me, you who practice evil” (Matt. 7:23). They are lost. But they thought they were saved.

Now Jesus’ point is that their lives of sin already testified to their lostness. But I am drawing out another point beneath their sinful deeds. I want to know what their false assurance tells us about how to truly believe a promise of God.

We believe the Bible teaches that we are “justified by faith without the works of the law” (Rom. 3:28). So when Jesus rejects them because they are “workers of lawlessness,” we know that the deeper problem is a defective faith. If we are

condemned for our sinful works at the last judgment, it will be because they are the evidence of unreal faith.

Saving Faith and Dying Faith

So my question is this: If we can believe at least some of the promises of God, as these folks did, and still be lost, what makes the believing of promises a truly saving belief?

Charles Hodge gives us a clue. In 1841, Hodge wrote a short, popular book on the Christian life called *The Way of Life*. In Hodge's chapter on "Faith" he shows that the Bible uses the word faith for all sorts of different states of mind including deadness. "As the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

Now, what makes the difference between dead faith and saving faith? I'm not asking how these two faiths prove themselves to be different. That's James' point (and Jesus' point in Matthew 7). They prove themselves to be different by their fruit. I'm asking something else: How are they different in their essence? What is the true experience of faith and what is the false experience of faith?

Here's what Hodge says: "We may believe on the testimony of those in whose veracity and judgment we confide, that a man of whom we know nothing has great moral excellence. But if we see for ourselves the exhibition of his excellence, we believe for other reasons, and in a different way" (154).

This "different way" is what makes believing true, saving believing. There is nothing wrong with believing Christ or believing His promises on the testimony of others. In fact, that is how all of us came to faith. We relied on the testimony of the apostles and prophets. But being persuaded that the goodness and trustworthiness and beauty of Christ and His promises are factual is not saving faith.

That is why professing Christians will be shocked at the last

day, when they hear Jesus say, "I never knew you." They will protest, "Lord, Lord." To be sure, believing that Christ and His promises are true, based on a testimony, is a necessary part of faith. But it is not the saving essence of faith.

The Spiritual Apprehension of Truth

What makes faith saving faith is this "different way" of believing that comes from a different (not alternative, or contradictory) way of apprehending the reality believed. This different way is what Hodge calls a "spiritual apprehension of the truth." He says, "It is a faith which rests upon the manifestation by the Holy Spirit, of the excellence, beauty, and suitableness of the truth. ... It arises from a spiritual apprehension of the truth, or from the testimony of the Spirit with and by the truth in our hearts" (156).

To illustrate this kind of spiritual apprehension that constitutes an essential part of saving faith, Hodge cites three texts:

- Luke 10:21. God has "hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children." Both the wise and the children are hearing the same advocates, and looking at the same evidences. But there is a difference. Jesus says the difference is something God "revealed." In other words, it goes beyond what we see with physical eyes and hear with physical ears and infer with natural reason.
- Matthew 16:17. "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Many were seeing what Simon Peter saw, but were not seeing "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). This sight is something different.
- 2 Corinthians 4:6. "God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." There is a knowledge of the glory

of God in the gospel which is different from believing the facts, or even believing that the facts will save us. There is what Paul describes in verse 4: "seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ." That is not a physical light. It is a beauty perceived by the eyes of the heart (Eph. 1:18).

In other words, even though it is essential to use the mind and the senses to hear and see and construe the incarnate, inspired, human testimony to the truth, nevertheless, being persuaded with the mind that something is true is not the same as apprehending the beauty and worth of the truth. And without that, our conviction may be no more than the devil's useless assurance that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Even he "believes" that. But he does not see it as beautiful and precious and wonderfully suited to accomplish good and holy purposes.

What Does It Mean to Believe a Promise?

What then does this reality mean for our conviction that believing the promises of God is the essential thing in saving, sanctifying faith? Here was my argument in *Future Grace*: Saving faith—which also sanctifies—is not only a backward glance to the foundations of faith in the work of Jesus. Saving faith is also the forward glance in the confidence that the future grace, which Christ purchased, will in fact come true—for the world, and for me.

But now we see that more needs to be said about this future-oriented faith. Now we see that it must include a spiritual perception of the beauty of God and his plan in making these promises—a beauty that we will enjoy to the full as the promises come true.

In other words, saving faith in the promises of God includes spiritual enjoyment of the God of the promises. I don't want to overstate it. I only say that saving faith

must include this enjoyment. Enjoyment of the glory of God is not the whole of what faith is. But without it, faith is dead.

Defining Faith as Resting Is Not Enough

It is not enough even to say that believing the promises of God is a resting in God and his help. We must clarify the spiritual nature of this resting, in order to distinguish it from the deluded “resting” of Matthew 7:22. Those professing Christians have a kind of “resting” in God’s security. What we must say about resting is that to be a saving resting it must be a sense of safety from hell, but also a sense of satisfaction in the beauties of God (Ps. 16:11). We rest in security, and we rest in sweetness.

This satisfaction is missing from the hearts of the professing Christians of Matthew 7:22. If the enjoyment of God himself were there, they would have delighted on earth in the very divine excellencies that such enjoyment anticipates. But instead they were “workers of lawlessness.”

Implications for How Sin Is Overcome

This reality has a huge implication. It means that it is not just the security of the promises that frees us from motives to sin; it is also the heart’s enjoyment of the sweetness of God in the promises. When we perceive and enjoy the spiritual beauty of what is promised, not only are we freed from the insecurity of greed and fear that motivate so much sin, but we are also shaped in our values by what we cherish in the promise (1 John 3:3).

This influence is what the professing Christians of Matthew 7:22 did not have and why their behavior was so out of sync with God. They loved power, and they loved it that God gave them power. But they did not love God.

Another way to say it would be that in all the acts of saving faith the Holy Spirit enables us not only to perceive and

affirm factual truth, but also to apprehend and embrace spiritual beauty. It is the “embracing of spiritual beauty” that is the essential core of saving faith. And this embrace is what will shape our lives most deeply and receive the “well done” at the Last Day.

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