

What is the Gift Mentioned in Ephesians 2:8-9? *Why the Discussion Needs to Shift Away from Faith as a Gift*

J. Paul Tanner

Aug 24, 2020

INTRODUCTION

Several times over the past year, I've heard friends comment about faith being a gift. I would like to humbly suggest that this assertion is misguided. If you do a computer search to see where the words "faith" and "gift" are used in the same context, you will find that the Scriptures don't express faith as being a gift. The only verse that comes even close is Eph 2:8-9, but I hope to show that even this passage is not affirming that *faith is a gift*.

Here is the verse from the NASB:

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹ not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Although the words "faith" and "gift" do appear in the same verse, a careful study is needed to understand the Apostle Paul's point.

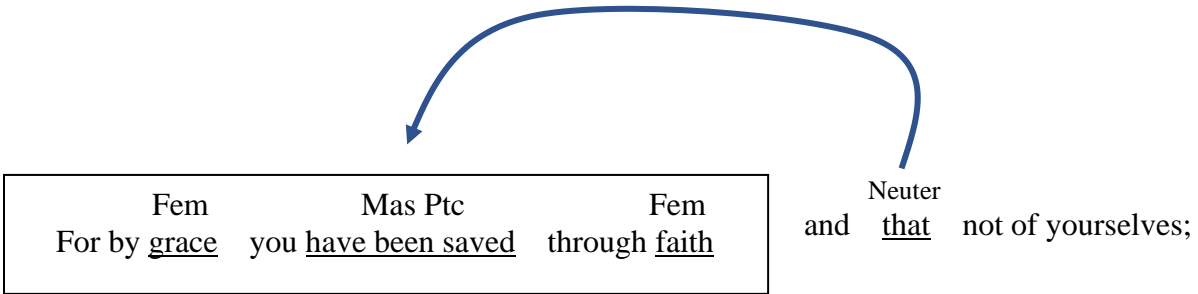
Insights from the Greek Text

In the verse above, we see the demonstrative pronoun "that," as in "that not of yourselves." So, we must ask ourselves what the proper antecedent of this is. In the Greek language, nouns, pronouns and participles will be one of three *genders* (not to be confused with sexual genders). Such words, then, will either be masculine, feminine, or neuter. The pronoun "that" in Eph 2:8 must agree with its antecedent in gender. In this case, the pronoun "that" is in the neuter gender. However, the preceding words are not. Let me diagram this for you.

		Mas				
	Fem		Participle		Fem	Neuter
For by <u>grace</u>		you <u>have been saved</u>		through <u>faith</u> ;	and	<u>that</u> not of yourselves;

By the way, the word "gift" is neuter, and obviously the words "that" and "gift" refer to the same thing. But what, then, does "that" (the gift) refer to? It cannot be grace; it cannot be the participle "saved"; and it cannot be "faith." None of these words are in the neuter gender. Yet, in the Greek language, a neuter pronoun can sometimes be used to refer back to a composite thought. For example, we have a neuter pronoun heading up Ephesians 1:15 and translated "For this (reason)" (lit., *on account of this*). Yet it refers back, not merely to the preceding sentence, but to all of Eph 1:3-14. A similar situation is present in Eph 2:8.

In Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul first depicted our state prior to knowing Christ: we were dead in our trespasses and sins and under the wrath of God (2:1-3). Beginning in Eph 2:4, he shifted to tell us what the grace of God has done for us. The word "that" in Eph 2:8 can refer back to all that he spoke about in Eph 2:4-8a, or it can refer back simply to Eph 2:8a. There is really no effective difference, but I prefer the latter. A modified diagram will clarify what I mean (see next page):



The point is that the word “that” (the *gift*) is **the whole concept** expressed in the box. In other words, the gift is not merely faith. Rather, it is the whole concept of *being saved by grace through faith*. You can’t make it refer to only one of the parts.

Harold W. Hoehner, previously head of the New Testament department at Dallas Seminary, has written a major commentary on the Book of Ephesians, and came essentially to the same conclusion. [The Greek word for “that” is τοῦτο]. He writes,

Rather than any particular word it is best to conclude that τοῦτο refers back to the preceding section. This is common and there are numerous illustrations of such in Ephesians. For example, in 1:15 τοῦτο refers back to the contents of 1:3-14, in 3:1 it refers back to 2:11-22, and in 3:14 it refers back to 3:1-13. Therefore, in the present context, τοῦτο refers back to 2:4-8a and more specifically 2:8a, the concept of salvation by grace through faith.¹

One other insight is that the verb is what we call a *periphrastic participle*. It combines the “to be” verb with a participle. In this case, the participle is in the *perfect passive* tense. The *passive* indicates that one does not save himself; it is something done to him. The perfect tense is not a simple past event. Rather, it indicates something that took place in the past, but which has continuing results right up until the point of speaking/writing. The idea is that at a point in the past, an individual entered into a state of salvation and has continued to be in that state of salvation. For this reason, some translations prefer to render this, “you are saved.”

Conclusions

There is a gift that God has given us as Christians. It is a gift of bringing us into a state of being saved on the basis of grace and by the means of faith. Therefore, if we wish to use biblical terminology, we should not speak of faith being a gift. The Bible doesn’t present it in that way. Rather, faith is our response to what God has revealed. The discussion needs to shift, then, from speaking about whether faith is a gift to what it means for God to elect (choose) and predestine people. For that, however, we need to go primarily to Ephesians 1 and Romans 8 and a few other pertinent verses (e.g., Jn 6:44; Acts 13:48). For this, I would refer you to my previous paper “Preliminary Reflections on Election and Predestination in Ephesians 1:4-5 (Apr 23, 2019).

¹ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 343. While a student at DTS, I was privileged to have Dr. Hoehner for two Greek courses, one on Galatians and another on Romans.