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**Are God’s New Testament Promises  
Assuring Final Redemption Ultimately  
Contingent upon Human Obedience**

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**Introduction**

The creation narratives in Genesis (1-3) strongly suggest that a dominant purpose for God’s creation of man and woman “in our image” (Gen.1:26-28) was to have a permanent fellowship with humanity (Gen. 3:8-11). Man was given two important gifts and responsibilities: namely, fruitfulness and dominion over creation. Implicit in human responsibility therefore is accountability. This

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explains the reason God drove man out of the Garden of Eden. The Bible discloses that the first Adam failed because of sin or disobedience. That generation ended with the great flood that saw Noah as the survivor (Gen. 6-9).

#### **A. Global Redemptive Purpose**

In Genesis 12:1-3 by divine initiative God revealed his global redemptive purpose for humanity when he called Abraham. The call of Abraham contained three-fold promises that Abraham would (i) possess the land (ii) become a great nation and (iii) be a blessing to the nations. This divine promise and plan was reaffirmed to Isaac (Gen. 26:4) and to Jacob (Gen. 28:14). Scholars believe that Genesis 3:5 anticipated the ministry of Jesus in his conquest over Satan. However, the best Christophany in Genesis is Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son (Gen. 22) which bears startling semblance to God's sacrifice of his only son Jesus Christ for the sins of the whole world (John 3:16) and therefore restores fellowship between him and humanity.

Thus, the Christian Kerygma is the proclamation of the cross-resurrection event as the foundation of human salvation. Thus the doctrine of atonement is basically the basis for man's salvation – the means that God provided which would make forgiveness of sin and salvation available to humankind. In Acts 16:31, Paul gave an answer to man's response to this God's initiative – "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved". Because of this verse and others like it most scholars have come to believe that the only condition for salvation is faith. This new status of man the Bible refers to as "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17).

According to John the Baptist, Jesus Christ came into the world as the true light to those who believe (John 1:9). By implication the Bible indicates that we are all creatures of God but not children of God. We qualify for "sonship" or are made "heirs" of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26-29; 4:4-7) Lord. It was Apostle John who argued that all who received Jesus and believed in his name, He gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12). There are other important things that believers receive in this new life in Christ. They include among others forgiveness (Eph. 1-7), reconciliation (Col.1:21-22; Rom.5:10), regeneration (Titus 3:5; Eph. 2:1, 5-6), and justification.

## **B. Restoration to God**

Without going into the details of these words, what is important is that all taken together are relationship terms intended for harmonious restoration of relationship between God and man and between man and fellow man. In the New Testament the greatest gift and promise of God is the gift of eternal life (zoen aionion) (John 3:16; 6:68; 20:31). Admittedly, aionios zoe is the climax of what constitutes in the broad sense the biblical understanding of the concept of Salvation. According to the Genesis story of the Jahwist School, God created man for eternal life, that is eternal fellowship with Him. Death was deliberately missing in the dictionary of the divine economy of creation. Death came upon human beings as a consequence of sin. Eternal life was the portion of human beings because in the Garden of Eden Adam and his wife ate freely from the tree of life in order to live forever (Gen.3:21-24).

## **C. Justification**

There is a biblical emphasis on justification as the basis for man to possess eternal life or to go to heaven. The New Testament presents five foundational bases for man's justification. First, it is divine initiative because it God who justifies us (Rom. 8:33), man cannot justify himself before God. Second, justification is by grace (unmerited favour) (Rom. 3:24). Third, we are justified by the blood of Jesus (Rom. 5:9). The shedding of blood is the clearest expression of the death of Jesus. Therefore his death is the means whereby man can be saved. Fourth, justification is by faith (Gen. 4:3; Rom. 4:13). Fifth, man is justified by the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 4:25). The New Testament strongly suggests that man is justified by faith in the finished atonement of Jesus Christ and that the consequences of this justification is peace with God and eternal life which is eternal fellowship with Jesus Christ in heaven. Therefore in the New Testament the cross-resurrection event expresses both God's love for the world, God's judgment over human sin and affirmation of God's sovereignty and supremacy over creation.

However, what has remained a perennial theological problem is whether God's promise of salvation in the New Testament is ultimately contingent upon human obedience. In other words, what is the relationship between faith and work in the economy of God's salvation for humankind? This is the primary focus of this paper.

#### **D. Faith Versus Work**

Quite often scholars have identified Paul and James as representative of two divergent views of the faith-work debates. Paul in Romans 3:28 says, “For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law”. In Galatians 2:16, he also states, “A man is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Christ Jesus”. Again in Ephesians 2: 8-9, Paul declares “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves—it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” Most scholars perceive these texts as Pauline emphasis on justification by faith alone. On the other hand, Apostle James in James 2:14 asked, “What good is it my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deed? Can his faith save him?”

As a matter of fact, there is no New Testament evidence that both contradicted themselves or that Paul’s emphasis is on faith and James emphasis is on work. It has been argued that the difference between Paul and James is a difference of starting point. Paul is said to have started with the basic fact of the forgiveness of God which no person can earn or deserve. James is believed to have started with the professing Christian and argued that a person must prove his Christian faith by his deeds. The use of the theory of “starting point” to suggest the difference in their theological positions is also unconvincing and probably misleading.

Professor J.C. Beker, my teacher at Princeton thirty-three years ago, in his book *Paul the Apostle* (1980) speaks about the “indicative” of the Christ-event and the ethical imperative of that event. He rightly argues that the contextual situation evokes the particular emphasis. When Paul debates the nature of righteousness and faith with Jewish Christians or Judaizers he emphasizes primarily “the indicative” of the gospel (Rom. 1-5; Gal. 1-4). In that context “the imperative” is more presupposed than explicitly argued. It usually follows the indicative of faith-righteousness in a subsequent stage of the argument and then in relation to the Lordship of Christ, our participation in him and the gift of the Spirit (Gal. 5:1-25; Rom. 6:8-39). However, in a Hellenistic context, Paul emphasizes much more the “imperative” and the responsibility of life “in the body” (1 Cor. 1-15; 2 Cor. 1-7). It is noted that in Paul’s thought these emphases which the contextual situation evokes does not affect Paul’s basic conviction about the

integral connection between the indicative and the imperative (Gal. 5:1; Rom. 6:12 cf. also Rom. 8:12; 12:1; 13:12). In other words, the “indicative” of God’s redemptive act in Christ is insolubly linked to the “therefore” of the ethical “imperative”.

On the basis of the above, James is not suggesting that we are justified by faith and work. Instead, he is simply saying that we are justified by faith that works. According to James, those who claim to have faith but no works have a useless, demonic, and dead faith (James 2:16-20). James is contemptuous of a mere intellectual acceptance of certain truths without trust in Christ as Saviour. James is concerned that only genuine faith will produce good deeds but only faith in Christ Jesus saves. By citing Abraham as an example of faith in his willingness to sacrifice his son, James shows he was in agreement with Paul’s position (James 2:12-24). This is what in the New Testament is understood and spoken of as “believing faith”, a living faith or a dynamic faith. The faith that Abraham demonstrated and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Abraham’s obedience as a demonstration of love for God, provoked God to swear to bless him (Gen. 22:15-16).

### **E. Christianity Ethically Demonstrated**

The idea that Christianity must be ethically demonstrated is an integral and essential part of the Christian faith throughout the New Testament. Paul repeatedly makes clear the significance of Christian deed as part of Christian life. In Romans 2:6 he spoke of God who would render to everyone according to his works. In Romans 13:12, he urged Christians to behave decently in line with Christian values. In Romans 14:12, he insisted that everyone shall give account of himself before God and to receive his own reward (Col. 3:8; 2 Corinth. 5:10) Christian perception of living faith goes with exemplary life, that is good character or godly conduct and not by ‘words’ only that are spoken without concrete demonstration. This is important because as Paul would indicate their labour in the Lord will not be in vain (1 Corinth. 15:58). Labour involves action not just folding ones hands and doing nothing. Paul himself in his life demonstrated that kind of Christian faith In 2 Timothy 4:6-8, Paul in a self-confident faith declared his preparedness to depart from this earth having fought a good fight, having finished the race and having kept

the faith. Consequently, both James and Paul agree that people have been saved by grace through faith to do good works.

Peter in his Book to the Christians (2 Peter 1:3-8) showed his deep understanding of a dynamic faith. He was convinced that our faith or knowledge of Christ Jesus should make us effective and productive. Christian life is a productive life. In Matthew 25:35-40, the last judgment is based on moral character expressed through charitable deeds. Good works do not produce good character but good character produces good works. As Jesus in Matthew puts it “by their fruit you will know them”, (Matthew 7:20). Matthew in his gospel is aware that ‘faith’ and ‘grace’ are important but he speaks of *dikaïosunē* as the primary condition of entry into the *basileia* by the believers. For him, there is no room for only a calling upon God without doing his will (Matt. 7:21). He understands the concept of righteousness in practical concrete terms as taught by Jesus Christ as the Will of God, and it is among the “everything which I commanded you” which Jesus expects his disciples to live out in Matthew 28:18-20. Luke similarly agrees that Christian life requires living it out as Jesus in gospel of Luke put it- “those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28). Similarly Peter (Acts 2:38; 3:19), John (1:12) and Paul (Acts 20:21) show that repentance toward God and faith in Christ are the necessary conditions for salvation. Admittedly, God is more interested in our faithfulness or obedience than in our position.

### **Conclusion**

On the basis of the above discussion can we rightly argue that salvation is conditional? Put in another way are God’s promises in the New Testament contingent upon human obedience? As clearly shown in the Scriptures, God is faithful (1 Corth.1:9; 10: 13; 1 Thess.5:24; Heb.10:23) and all His promises are always “Yes” in Jesus Christ (2 Corith.1:20). The New Testament authors are unanimous about the integral connection between the “indicative” of God’s redemptive act in Christ Jesus and the ethical imperative of that Christ event. Christian faith is a believing, living faith as personal response to what God has done for humanity in Jesus Christ (the indicative) that guarantees salvation perceived in the New Testament as a finished work (John 19:30; Rom. 5:8). It is purely the prerogative of God. As a gift from God, we are motivated to do good works (Eph. 2:8-9). The New Testament is unanimous that salvation can be received through

repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour (Acts 17:30; Eph. 1:13-14; Eph. 2:10). In other words, God's New Testament promises assuring final redemption ultimately are dependent upon human obedience. In the biblical context, Christian obedience in humility is our necessary response to the God who loves us and it gives the believers access to a full appropriation of the promises of God in their lives, even unto the end of time. As Jesus in Matthew 7:21 will insist that "not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven". Christian faith is a devotion, a commitment that is verifiable.



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