

The Christian Fight (Part Five)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Forerunner, "Personal," September-October 2007

In the previous article, we examined Enoch's walk with God. As we began, we pondered why God initiates and carries on His creative work in us through grace. There are two major reasons:

The first is because the wages of sin is death. Once he has sinned, no one can ever live and work purely enough to erase that charge against him. Thus, through grace and its package of gifts, God levels the playing field so that each of the called has the possibility of continuing life through the grave. God allows the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to apply to a repentant, called-out individual, accounting the righteousness of Christ as a credit to him. This permits him to enter into God's presence, beginning a relationship with Him. Thus, a person's journey to God's Kingdom is jump-started.

The second reason is that, since God's spiritual creation is by grace, the called-out one becomes completely indebted to God. This fact is very humbling to proud man, whose carnality is so strong that it believes it can accomplish salvation by itself. However, Romans 8:7 affirms that our carnality is hostile to God's laws and will not be subject to them. Without the humility of a changed attitude toward God, a person will not submit to God. This is why people of serious theological intellect can grasp biblical truths yet refuse to keep them.

For example, many grasp that the Sabbath should be kept, yet their carnality will devise a justification for not keeping it. They will choose not to humble themselves to observe it. The carnal mind fears, hates, and detests having to submit, and its major defense is self-justification. The justifier blames God, the church, the ministry, the brethren, parents, the boss, the company, genetics, circumstances—whatever is convenient—to deflect blame for doing or feeling as he does. However, humility is a choice a godly person will exercise because he sees God fully in the picture.

Walking With God in Real Time

As we left off in Hebrews 11:6, we were examining why and how one walks with God in real time. The author writes, "But without faith it is impossible to please Him." Despite this plain statement, many through the ages have attempted to do so through mere religiosity. Cain is the Bible's first example of this. Nothing in Scripture indicates that he was not religious. Genesis 4:3 shows that he and Abel met with God at a set time, giving the sense of an occasion previously appointed and agreed upon. Cain is a type of the typical worldly religious person. He has God somewhat in mind, but he does not believe God really means all that He says. He chooses what he will believe, revealing the major, unbridgeable gaps in his faith.

Below are fourteen biblical statements on faith's importance. All of them apply during the sanctification period of a Christian's life:

- » Romans 5:1-2 says that faith gains a person acceptance before God.
- » Romans 4:20 declares that faith glorifies God.

- » Hebrews 11:6 reveals that faith pleases God, and He will reward it.
- » Isaiah 38:3 states that faith is expressed in humble and loyal sincerity.
- » Ephesians 2:8 announces that by grace through faith a convicted and repentant sinner is saved.
- » Ephesians 3:17 affirms that Christ dwells in our hearts by faith.
- » Galatians 2:20 proclaims that we live by faith.
- » Romans 11:20 asserts that we stand before God by faith.
- » II Corinthians 5:7 confirms that we walk by faith.
- » I Peter 5:8-9 shows that we can successfully resist Satan by faith.
- » Acts 26:18 establishes that we are experientially sanctified by faith.
- » Ephesians 3:11-12 insists that by faith we have boldness to access God.
- » I Timothy 6:12 explains that faith sustains us to fight the good fight.
- » I John 5:4 demonstrates that we can overcome the world by faith.

The overall lesson of Enoch's life is that, as important as it is, justification is merely a beginning—it is another thing altogether to continue living by faith. The sanctification period and the costs of being a living sacrifice to God drive human nature to devise theological lies like the "Eternal Security" doctrine, also known as "once saved, always saved."

Enoch literally lived a life in which the central issue, its driving force, was his faith in God. Looking at this entirely spiritually, a truth that is important to humility emerges. Just as Enoch's physical translation from one geographical area to another was supernatural, so was his spiritual translation from a carnal, earthy, self-centered person to a God/Christ/Kingdom of God-centered person.

The Bible shows that the heart is the source of our motivations (Matthew 15:17-20). For our hearts to function by faith, we need what God makes possible *only* through His calling: our hearts must change. The Bible refers to this as "circumcision made without hands." Living by faith is what pleases God. However, we can have that faith only when God supernaturally translates us into the beginning stages of His realm of living, called in the Bible "eternal life."

Noah's Use of Faith

Hebrews 11:6 is a scriptural bridge that applies directly to both Enoch and Noah. Noah's example of his use of faith seems insignificant because it is contained within only one verse, but it is significant by illustrating the practical, daily use of faith throughout life.

Ezekiel 14:13-14 includes Noah in an exclusive list:

"Son of man, when a land sins against Me by persistent unfaithfulness, I will stretch out My hand against it; I will cut off its supply of bread, send famine on it, and cut off man and beast from it. Even if these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they would deliver only themselves by their righteousness," says the Lord God.

God is setting the examples and reputations of these three men as standards of faithful, righteous behavior under stressful circumstances for us to follow and strive to reproduce. Even the order is interesting. Obviously, Noah was the first chronologically, but Job lived long before Daniel—perhaps even a thousand years before him—yet Daniel precedes Job on the list. Was one more righteous, more respected than the other? Perhaps. Are they listed in the order of the severity of what they endured, their righteousness being equally worthy? Maybe. However, God usually lists things in the order He wants them considered, and Noah is listed first.

Whatever God's reason, Noah accomplished a significant witness, persevering for a very long time under horrific conditions. His witness was of sterling quality and worthy of emulation. Hebrews 11:6-7 recounts his faithful life:

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

These two verses appear quite innocuous. We read them and consider their teaching a matter of course regarding Christian life and salvation. However, for this world's Christianity, they pose a dilemma for those more deeply aware of the intricacies of Christian responsibility.

Calvinist theologian Arthur Pink (1886-1952) says in his exposition of this passage, "The verses which are now to engage our attention are by no means free of difficulty, especially unto those who have sat under a ministry which has failed to preserve the balance between Divine grace and Divine righteousness." Why would he say this? These two verses, almost single-handedly, nearly destroy one of the most treasured teachings of this world's Christianity—the Doctrine of Eternal Security, the "once saved, always saved" or "no works required" doctrine.

Note the end of the quotation: Some ministries have "failed to preserve the balance between Divine grace and Divine righteousness." Preachers who fail to maintain this balance strongly emphasize God's favor while neglecting or ignoring His claims on our lives—our duties and responsibilities to Him—because He owns us! We are His slaves!

To any thinking person, these verses severely undercut those preachers' claims that appear to guarantee grace, that is, to assure salvation. How? Verse 6 clearly states that God rewards those who live by faith, and verse 7 illustrates that, in Noah's case, the reward was that Noah and his house were saved because of what they *did*.

What did Noah do that was so important to his and his family's salvation? His works produced the ark, the means of escaping death from the Flood. Noah's works were rewarded. Where, then, is grace?

Note that I wrote that these verses "almost destroy" this concept, not "totally destroy." They do not contain the entire story, but they are very troublesome, to say the least, to those of the no-works

stripe. If they do not bother a nominal Christian, he is clearly ignoring what the verses really say, that a person's works play a large part in his salvation. What would have happened to Noah and his family had they convinced themselves that, since God had given Noah grace, no ark needed to be built because God would save them anyway?

Coming to God

Notice that Hebrews 11:6 reads, "he who comes to God," and I Peter 2:3-4 uses a similar phrase. "Coming to God" means that one approaches nearer to God, seeks Him, or he walks with Him. It signifies fellowship with Him.

The Bible shows three stages of coming to God. The first is at God's calling when one begins to draw near. It results in justification and the imputing of Christ's righteousness. The second is more continuous, occurring during sanctification, as a person seeks to be like God, conform to His image, and have His laws written, engraved, into his character. The third stage occurs at the resurrection when the individual is glorified.

John 6:44 clarifies our first coming to God: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day." Nobody comes to God, no one seeks the God of the Bible, until he becomes aware of his need of Him. Nobody comes to God until he realizes he is far from Him and out of His favor—in fact, he is under God's condemnation and separated from the quality of life called in the Bible "eternal life." God reveals a measure of these things through His calling.

Notice how the Parable of the Prodigal Son illustrates this:

But when he had spent all [of his inheritance], there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'" (Luke 15:14-19)

The son did not return or draw near to his father until he was aware of his need. This sense of need motivates us to seek God and draw near to Him. This sense of need is a gift of God's grace working on a person's mind and is initially given when God summons the individual to approach Him.

Ephesians 4:17-24 covers the second "coming to God":

This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness on their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ. If indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you

put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Verse 30 adds an instructive, albeit sobering, thought: "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." The Holy Spirit mentioned here is God Himself, who is hurt, sorrowed, by our sinful neglect of His gift. Once He bestows this sense of need, it is a continuous impulse unless we stifle it by neglecting to follow through, as those in the book of Hebrews were doing.

We are responsible for maintaining our fellowship with Him by doing the works that He has appointed for us to do. For instance, there must be continuous exercise of prayer, study into His Word, and seeking to be like Him. We seek Him because we grow to admire—indeed respect—His love and character, appreciate the purpose He has brought into our lives, desire His merciful forgiveness, and realize He is our Benefactor in every aspect of life. However, we must do all of these things in faith.

Notice Paul's counsel in II Corinthians 5:7: "For we walk by faith, not by sight." Like life, walking is a continuous process. Thus, when Hebrews 11:6 says, "He who comes to Him must believe that He is," it means far more than just assenting to a vague idea of a "First Cause." Under the New Covenant, we are dealing with a living Personality working within His creation.

To walk by faith is a practical responsibility. It results from believing in His character and His works as revealed in His Word to the extent that we trust Him and submit to His commands in every area of life. His character is a major reason why we must continue to seek Him: so that our knowledge of Him is continually sharpened and refined to inform our imitation of Him in our lives. Otherwise, we will be pursuing a phantom designed by our own imaginations. We need to grasp as much of His transcendent holiness, supreme sovereignty, almighty power, and perfect justice, as well as His abundant mercy and wonderful grace.

Hebrews 11:6 emphasizes that He is a Rewarder, a Benefactor to those who come to Him and consistently walk with Him by faith. He rewards those who, as a way of life, seek Him in anticipation of His treating them with patient, respectful kindness, even abundance, as He works to create us in the image of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 11:5-7 balances reward with duty. Together, these verses show that, to be rewarded, we must walk with Him and seek Him. Walking and seeking are where "works" come into play, troubling those who believe in the incomplete Eternal Security doctrine.

In summary, walking with God and seeking Him by faith require keeping God in mind combined with making the efforts of obedience and any sacrifices of time, energy, and rejection by worldly family, friends, and business associates. Nevertheless, these result in being rewarded by God.

Forgetfulness, Passivity, and Neglect

God commands in Psalm 50:5, 22, "Gather My saints together to Me, those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice. . . . Now consider this, you who forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver." Especially interesting is that Psalm 50 is directly addressed to those who have made a covenant with God, yet some, perhaps many, suffer from forgetfulness regarding His importance to their well-being.

Could *we* be guilty of such a thing?

Psalm 78:39-42 reveals ancient Israel's forgetfulness:

For He remembered that they were but flesh, a breath that passes away and does not come again. How often they provoked Him in the wilderness, and grieved Him in the desert! Yes, again and again they tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember His power; the day when He redeemed them from the enemy.

This serves as a warning. Notice the contrast between God, who remembers and keeps His part of the covenant, and men, who so easily forget Him. Our forgetting triggers neglect of the responsibilities that we acquired in making the New Covenant, as Hebrews shows. The next step in the decline of responsibility is to forsake all accountability. However, to seek God diligently by faith is the opposite of Israel's destructive process. When we come to God, the process of forsaking the world begins. Forgetting God ultimately draws us right back into what we originally came out of!

In what way must we come to God? In Proverbs 8:17, personified wisdom reminds us, "I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently will find me." The Hebrew word translated as *diligently* means "busily; with persistent, persevering effort; industriously." In Psalm 119:10, the psalmist declares, "With my whole heart I have sought You; oh, let me not wander from Your commandments!" He pursued God wholeheartedly and steadfastly. In Psalm 27:4, David adds that he did this "all the days of my life."

Jesus provides needed instruction in Luke 11:8-13:

I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!

Jeremiah 29:12-13 encourages us to seek God with all our hearts: "Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart." In order to do these things, the faith that God gives is required, but we must still use it. Enoch and Noah did this, and God rewarded them.

How does He reward those who seek Him by faith in this manner? The principle of "ask, seek, knock" (also found in Matthew 7:7-8) helps us to understand this. God allows Himself and all that He is to be found by those who seek Him in the manner He prescribes. He bestows His favor on them as did the Prodigal Son's father. He forgives their sins and writes His laws on their hearts as He teaches them His ways. He strengthens them to forsake their idols. He assures them that they are "accepted in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:6). He provides for them physically and heals them psychologically. He gives them understanding and wisdom, as well as a foretaste of the rest and peace to come. Eventually, He ushers them completely and totally into His Kingdom.

II Timothy 1:6-7 reminds us of a responsibility: "I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." All of what God provides to those who seek Him with all their hearts deals with having a sound mind. Does what we see and hear in today's news give any indication that people are sound-minded?

Would we call sound-minded what Paul describes in II Timothy 3:2-5—the "perilous" attitudes of people in the end time? People are this way because they have neither contact with God nor acceptance before Him. It is helpful to remember that Noah lived in the same kind of world that we do (Matthew 24:37). His world was equally crazy and violent, yet he came out of his long experience high on God's list of the most righteousness men in history. If God did this for Noah, why would He not do it for us?

Some Interesting Pairings

The objection people have regarding Hebrews 11:5-7 is that the mention of works and reward in the same breath suggests legalism and working for salvation. Is that so, or is it a misconception on their part? The latter. They misunderstand the salvation process because they do not allow the Bible to interpret itself.

God says in Genesis 15:1, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." His encouragement applies to us as well as to him. God Himself is the reward of those who seek Him. "Those who seek Him" is limited to those God invites to approach Him and who believe enough to take advantage of the opportunity and thus stir themselves up to draw near. The invitation itself is an aspect of God's grace.

Romans 4:4 makes it clear that earning access to God is impossible because it would put God in man's debt. No, access to Him is the result of freely given grace. The pairing of grace and reward is no more inconsistent than God's almighty sovereignty and man's responsibility being linked, or Jesus being both our Lord and our Servant. There would be no reward if God did not first give grace.

Another pairing we need to consider is found in Colossians 3:23-24: "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ." Is not salvation a free gift? Yes, but as servants of Christ, we work, and our reward is eternal entrance into God's Kingdom. Add to this the idea found in Isaiah 55:1, that we are to "buy . . . without money." Salvation, then, is both a gift and a reward.

It should be clear that, in terms of salvation, gifts and works are nothing more than opposite sides of the same coin. Both are involved in the same process—salvation—but they are seen from different perspectives.

One thing is certain: There will be no lazy, neglectful people in the Kingdom of God (Matthew 25:26-30). Why? Because God is preparing us for living with Him eternally, so we must be created in the character image of Him and His Son, or we absolutely will not fit in. We would live in absolute, eternal misery. Jesus stresses that diligent work is part of His character when He says in John 5:17, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." Creators work!

Luke 13:24 adds strength to this point: "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able." The Greek word translated "strive" is actually the source

of the English word "agonize." In addition, Jesus urges us in John 6:27 to labor "for the food which endures to everlasting life." God chooses to reward such strenuous efforts, not because they earn us a place in His presence, but because He deems it fitting to recognize and bless them. The Bible shows salvation as a reward, not because people earn it, but because God wants to emphasize the character of those who will be in His Kingdom and encourage others to be like them. The citizens of that Kingdom are workers like the Father and Son.

A second reason why reward and salvation are linked is because salvation, like payment for a person's labor, comes after the job is finished. Among the apostles, nobody worked harder for God than Paul did. At the end of his life, he writes:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. (II Timothy 4:7-8)

Just as wages for work performed are paid after a job is done, God's major blessings are not given completely until our course is finished.

Perfectly Compatible

God's Word shows another reason why grace, works, and reward are perfectly compatible with each other. Titus 2:11-14 provides background for understanding:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.

Remember that Paul uses "grace" as a collective term to encompass many aspects of God's freely given kindnesses. To the astute, grace is a gift that teaches its recipients. These verses show what it teaches:

1. It teaches how and in what attitude we must conduct our lives—that is, righteously and godly.
2. It teaches us to live in anticipation of Christ's return.
3. It teaches us about iniquity and redemption.
4. It teaches that we must zealously do good works.

Ephesians 2:8-10 states that salvation is by grace through faith, and that these two lead to good works. Grace and faith are the very foundations of salvation, and with the privilege of having access to God, we also have a responsibility: to perform the good works God ordained beforehand for us to do. Can we honestly avoid the fact that God requires works?

Hebrews 11:5-8 clearly teaches that God chooses to bless with rewards those who by faith choose to cooperate with Him in His spiritual creation. Abel, Enoch, and Noah are proofs of this fact. Thus, three major factors are linked in the spiritual creation process leading to salvation: grace, works, and rewards.

We can watch this unfold in Noah's experience with God. This is of particular importance to us living in the end time because both Jesus and Peter state that the end time would bear a similarity to Noah's day. Peter specifically shows in II Peter 2:5-6 that the Flood is a strong witness against the doctrine of uniformitarianism, the idea that earth's history has passed without variation through the ages:

. . . and [God] did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly. . . .

If God is the Savior and Rewarder of those who obey Him, then the opposite must be true: that He is the Punisher of those who despise Him. The Flood and Sodom are witnesses of this truth. Not all things have continued as they always have. The godly lived; the ungodly died. Despite what men say and think, God moved to punish mankind's sins in the days of Noah. That punishment came in the form of the Flood, which wiped out all land-based mammal and bird life except for Noah, his family, and the animals in the ark.

Genesis 6:8 reveals the beginning of Noah's salvation. It began in God's mind. It was absolutely unearned, being an act of God's kindness. This is step one.

Hebrews 11:7 says that Noah believed God's warning. This, combined with God's grace, becomes the foundation for Noah's reaction. Noah's belief is step two.

Next comes the effect of this combination: Internally, Noah "moved with fear." He was motivated—he felt an urge—due to his deep respect for God. The external effect was that he built the ark. This is step three.

The consequences of his foundation of grace and faith plus the impulse to move with fear comprise step four. He and his house were saved from the Flood, the world was condemned by his witness, and he became an heir of the righteousness that is by faith.

Did Noah's works save him? The answer is both yes and no. Consider: If Noah, not believing, had failed to prepare the ark, would he not have perished in the Flood along with everyone else? Certainly. Did his own efforts in building the ark, then, save him from the Deluge? No, they did not, because we have not yet considered all the parts God played in this scenario. He did far more than just warn Noah to build an ark.

Philippians 4:19 promises, "God will supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." This does not at all mean that we can do anything we want to, and that God will take up the slack. It means that God will supply all our needs within the project He has us working on.

Genesis 6:13-16; 7:14-16; and 8:1 and others show God's oversight, guidance, and providence. Genesis 8:1 is especially important: "Then God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the

animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters subsided."

"Remembered" indicates His special attention during the entire project, but it especially focuses on the time following the shutting of the door when those in the ark were helpless before the overwhelming onslaught of water. Huge torrents of water gushed from the earth, as well as fell from the heavens. This must have created huge waves. There is no indication that the ark had mast, sail, rudder, or wheel for navigation. Nevertheless, God was with them from beginning to end, giving them His special attention to preserve them and see His purpose accomplished.

This illustrates God working in them both to will and to do as they cooperated in their human, weak ways. This combination of God's grace and human cooperation produced their salvation.