FREE GRACE THEOLOGY AND THE GOSPEL

What Must Be Believed

John 20:31 – *but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.*

WHERE WE ARE

We have examined three systems that place something besides believing in Jeus Christ for salvation. Lordship Salvation makes surrender part of believing. Reformed Theology makes a persevering life the necessary evidence of faith. Arminian Theology makes continuing in faith and obedience the condition of keeping eternal life. The last lesson set out what Scripture teaches in place of all three: eternal life is a gift, possessed now, kept by God, and the believer's assurance rests on His promise.

Free Grace Theology stands nearest to what we have taught. Every Free Grace camp holds that eternal life is received by faith alone, apart from works before or after, and that the one who has it cannot lose it. Those who hold Free Grace Theology also disagree with one another, and the disagreement is not at the edges. It is over the gospel itself: what a person must believe, and what believing is.

This lesson sets out what Scripture states on both questions and then measures the Free Grace camps against it.

I. WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS MUST BE BELIEVED

Eternal life is received by believing in Jesus Christ. "He who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). To believe in Jesus is to believe the message about Him, and Scripture states that message in three parts: who He is, what He did, and what He promised. No single verse lists all three, but the Gospel of John in total brings the details together. Also, Scripture together states each of them plainly, and the texts written to bring a person to faith hold them together.

Who He is. John states its own purpose: "these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (20:31). In John, "Son of God" is a claim to deity, and the hearers understood it that way. "For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God" (5:18). Jesus ties belief in His identity to death in sin: "for unless you believe that I Am [He], you will die in your sins" (8:24). The words "I am" are ἐγώ εἰμι *egō eimi*, and the NASB supplies "He." The same words close the argument with the Jews: "before Abraham was born, I Am" (8:58). The confession that ends the Gospel names Him in full: "My Lord and my God!" (20:28). John begins his testimony with a declaration that the Word is (ἐγώ εἰμι in the imperfect) God and that the Word became flesh. To believe in Jesus is to believe Him to be who He said He is.

What He did. 1 Corinthians sets down the gospel as it was delivered to the church: "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). The death was "for our sins," and the Scriptures that 1 Corinthians points to state what that means: "He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5); "the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (53:6). He died in the place of sinners: "Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). Romans states that God Himself set that death forth as the payment for sin: "being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith" (3:24–25). The payment was not made for believers only: "He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

What He did is finished. On the cross Jesus said, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). The verb is τελέω teleō in the perfect passive indicative: the work was completed and stands completed. Hebrews states the result: “He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God” (10:12). Nothing remains for the sinner to pay. Romans joins the resurrection to the death: “He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification” (4:25). In John, Jesus ties eternal life to the cross before the cross takes place: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life” (3:14–15).

What He promised. The message is not only facts about Jesus. It is an offer from Him. “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). At the tomb of Lazarus, the promise and the person are held together:

> *Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?” She said to Him, “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world.” (John 11:25–27)*

Romans states what kind of promise it is. Of Abraham it says, “with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform” (4:20–21). The promise is a gift, and a gift is not a wage: “Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness” (4:4–5). Ephesians says the same: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (2:8–9).

The third part is the one most easily not included. A person can believe that Jesus is God, that He died for sins, and that He rose again, and still believe that he must earn heaven. Roman Catholic teaching affirms all three facts and denies that eternal life is received by faith alone. Such a person has believed facts about Jesus without believing Him for what He offers. “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace” (Romans 11:6).

The scope of the three. The disciples “believed in Him” early in His ministry (John 2:11), and yet “as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead” (20:9). Before the cross, the death and resurrection had not yet happened and had not yet been understood. What God required to be believed grew as He revealed more. John was written after the resurrection, to readers who knew the cross, and it was written so that they would believe. The entire book of John presents all these details and the whole is the message. The message that is presented is the Gospel of Your Salvation. This Gospel is clarified in the Epistles.

The verdict belongs to the message, not to the hearer. A presentation that leaves out any of the three is incomplete, and it leaves the hearer without something Scripture gives him to believe. Whether a particular person believed is not ours to rule on. We proclaim all three, every time.

II. THE CAMPS ON WHAT MUST BE BELIEVED

The universalist edge

A small number who began with Free Grace convictions have moved to universalism, the teaching that every person will finally have eternal life. The reasoning runs this way. Christ died for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). If every sin has been paid for, no sin remains to condemn anyone. Grace is unconditional, and so no condition can stand between a person and eternal life. Belief becomes the discovery of what is already true of everyone, not the means of receiving it.

The first premise is true. Christ did die for the whole world. The conclusion is an inference, and Scripture states the opposite. “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (John 3:18). Before faith, believers were “by nature children of wrath, even as the rest” (Ephesians 2:3). 2 Peter describes false teachers who were bought and still perish: “even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves” (2:1). The payment is sufficient for all, and it is received by faith. Universalism has no promise to believe, because it has nothing to offer that the hearer does not already have.

The promise alone

The Grace Evangelical Society (GES), following Zane Hodges, holds that the one thing a person must believe is the promise. Bob Wilkin states it in one sentence: “Jesus guarantees everlasting life to all who simply believe in Him.” Hodges put it more sharply: “People are not saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross; they are saved by believing in Jesus for eternal life.”

Their case is built from John, as the one book written to bring people to believe in Him, and from the believers in John’s narrative who believed before they knew of the cross: the Samaritans, Martha, and the disciples. We agree that promise is essential. The GES position is right that a presentation without the promise is not the gospel.

The error is in the method, their hermeneutics. The believers in John’s narrative lived before the cross, and their understanding belongs to that time, as John 20:9 says. The position also reads the observations about those who believed during Jesus’ ministry apart from the rest of the New Testament. To hold it, GES must set 1 Corinthians 15 aside, and it does. GES teaches that 1 Corinthians 15:1–11 is not an evangelistic text and that the salvation of 15:2 is a present, ongoing salvation that depends on holding fast. The chapter answers that reading itself.

> *Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:1–2)*

The verbs look back to the beginning. “Which also you received” and “you believed” are both aorist. πιστεύω *pisteuō* appears again in 15:11 in the aorist: “so we preach and so you believed.” The chapter is recalling the gospel the Corinthians first believed. “You are saved” is σῴζω *sōzō* in the present indicative, and it states how a person is saved, through this gospel. Nothing in the verse describes a growth process.

The chapter also defines “believed in vain.” The Corinthians were not in danger of failing to hold on. Some among them were saying “that there is no resurrection of the dead” (15:12), and 1 Corinthians states the consequence: “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain” (15:14); “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (15:17). Their faith would be empty if the resurrection were false. The condition concerns the truth of the message, not the endurance of the believer. 1 Corinthians 15 recalls the gospel in order to defend the resurrection as essential to it. To call it a “sanctification text,” a reader has to bring that category to the chapter. The chapter does not supply it.

The death and resurrection alone

Many Free Grace presentations take 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 as the whole message: believe that Christ died for your sins and rose again, and you have eternal life. The death and resurrection are the gospel’s center, and the chapter states them “as of first importance” (15:3).

The weakness is what is left out. 1 Corinthians 15 was written to people who had already believed, and it recalls what they heard in order to argue the resurrection. It is not a complete presentation to an unbeliever, and it does not state the promise. A presentation built from it alone can leave out the free gift. The person who believes the facts and still believes he must earn eternal life has not believed the message Scripture gives him to believe.

The list that grows

The teachers associated with Duluth hold that a person must believe in Christ's person and work, and they have written at length against the promise-only position. Tom Stegall's thesis is that a person must believe in "the Lord's deity, humanity, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection, i.e., [in] His person, work, and provision" (*The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 19).

We agree the person and the work as essential; Scripture states both. The difficulty is that the list grows. Sinlessness was added in the course of the book (p. 545), and the book concedes that "God in His infinite wisdom and sovereignty has chosen, for reasons undisclosed to us," not to give a list (p. 282). Once a list is built by deduction, each new doctrine about Christ becomes a candidate for it. Scripture's answer is not a longer list. It is the message stated in the texts written to bring a person to faith: who Jesus is, what He did, and what He promised.

III. THE CAMPS ON WHAT BELIEVING IS

Believe or trust

Some Free Grace evangelists hold that believing is not enough and that a person must also trust Christ. Larry Moyer defines "saving faith" in terms of believe and appropriation.

> The second element of saving faith is appropriation. Passages such as the ones studied earlier show that personal response is demanded. That response in essence is, "Believing that You have the gift of eternal life and You alone are able to give it, I willingly take what You have to offer." To convey this idea in introducing others to Christ, many use the word "trust." Not only is this consistent with what is meant by the Greek word translated "believe," it also readily identifies in a lost person's mind what God is asking him to do."

The word "trust" is used two ways, and they need to be separated.

In the first use, trust is an act distinct from believing. A common illustration shows two men on a burning building. A voice from below tells them to jump. One jumps with full confidence in the net below. The other jumps screaming, unsure, expecting to die, and is caught all the same. Both are saved because both jumped. The illustration makes the act the condition, and it shows the problem with the word in English: a person can trust, in the sense of acting, without believing. Scripture does not add a second step. "He who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

In the second use, trust means relying on Christ alone for eternal life and not on oneself. That is not a second step. It is what believing the promise is. The question it puts to the hearer is a fair one: whether he is relying on himself or on Jesus Christ alone.

A person receives the grace of God when he is persuaded that the message of salvation is true. Ephesians states the order: "after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, having also believed, you were sealed" (1:13). The evangelist's work is to tell the truth and answer the hearer's questions while he is considering the message. It is not to push the hearer to appropriate the gift.

Assurance at the moment of faith

GES holds that assurance is of the essence of saving faith: a person who believes the promise of eternal life knows he has it, and a person who is unsure has not yet believed the promise. Others in the Free Grace camps answer that a person can believe and still lack assurance. Each side argues from what it infers believing must involve.

The question has a logic to it. If the promise is eternal life, and a person does not know whether he has eternal life, it is fair to ask whether he understood the promise. But Scripture never states that a person without assurance at the moment of faith did not believe. Nor does Scripture state the reverse. When an inference is taught as doctrine,

the argument moves from the text to the inference, and the two sides end up contending over what neither text says.

The practical course stays with the text. Preach the promise as Scripture states it: eternal life, possessed now, that will never be lost (John 5:24, 10:28). When a person says he believes and then says he is not sure he will be in heaven, the conversation is not finished. Go back to what Jesus promised and whether he believes it. 1 John was written for that very purpose: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13).

IV. WHY THE CAMPS DIVIDE

Every camp examined here holds that eternal life is free. They divide over the content of the gospel and the nature of believing, and in each case the division comes from the way the text is read.

Inference taught as doctrine. Universalism infers from the scope of the cross that no one is condemned. The assurance debate infers from the nature of the promise who has believed it. Each inference is then defended as though Scripture had stated it.

One book read alone. The promise-only position builds the content of faith from John's narrative, before the cross, and sets aside the whole of the Gospel as it was progressively given and the content that was presented clearly in the rest of Scripture.

A category brought to the text. To keep its conclusion, GES reads 1 Corinthians 15 as sanctification, a category the chapter never names. The death-and-resurrection position treats a chapter written to believers as a complete presentation to unbelievers. The growing list deduces requirements Scripture does not state.

Free Grace Theology has the gospel right in its center and has no settled way of reading the texts that state it. Its camps share a conclusion about grace, and each has fitted the texts to that conclusion in a different way. The remedy is not a better system. It is to read each text for what it states, to whom, and for what purpose, and to believe and proclaim the message as Scripture gives it.

V. THE GOSPEL IN SCRIPTURE

Scripture states the message to be believed in its own words.

Who He is: "these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). What He did: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). What He promised: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). How it is received: "to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:5).

Ephesians gathers it into one phrase:

> *In Him, you also, after listening to the **message of truth, the gospel of your salvation**, having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13–14)*

Heard, believed, sealed. The message is heard, the message is believed, and God seals the one who believes it.