

# I'm Saved by Faith in Christ

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How can I be sure my sins are forgiven? Maybe that is a strange question for a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to ask. At this stage of the game in preparing for the ministry, however, that question deserves a thorough answer. How can I be sure? Right now the answer is essential for my own spiritual health. In the near future the answer will be essential for the spiritual health of everyone who comes to me with the same question.

My Lutheran upbringing has stressed to me again and again that people can be sure of their forgiveness *by faith*. We are not saved because of what we do. We are saved *by faith*. What does that really mean? What kind of a faith makes me sure I am forgiven? Is faith simply believing in God? Is it believing that God is so nice that he ignores what I have done wrong? What does it mean that I can be sure of forgiveness *by faith*?

By faith, I can be sure of my forgiveness right now. I can be as sure today as when I first started learning that truth in the days when I was a rug rat. I am saved by faith. Scripture tells me so.

"For by grace you are saved *dia; pistew*." That prepositional phrase, italicized here in Ephesians 2:8, is Scripture's most straightforward way of describing what faith has to do with forgiveness and salvation. The preposition *dia* plus the genitive case indicates agency or means. It is translated "through."

It helps to look at a couple other examples of *dia* plus the genitive case. The apostle John wrote *dia* papyrus and black ink for the time being until he could see his fellow Christians in person and speak with his mouth (2 John 12). Papyrus and black ink were the tools his hand used to transmit his inspired thoughts to his readers. The apostle Peter mentions that gold is put to the test *dia* fire (1 Peter 1:7). Fire was what a goldsmith used to refine his precious metal.

It is important to see that John and Peter did not use *dia* plus the accusative case in those two examples. *Dia* plus the accusative case indicates cause. Papyrus and black ink were not the cause of John's letter. Fire was not the cause of a refining process. Papyrus, black ink and fire were agents, means, tools. That is what faith is. It is not a cause of my forgiveness. It is the agent, the means or the tool *through* which I have forgiveness and salvation. None of the apostles ever write that people are saved *dia; pistin*, "because of faith, because they believe." They always write that people are saved *dia; pistew*. Siegbert Becker wrote, "There is no statement in Scripture which says that God forgives us *because* of faith" (422).

Many passages use *dia* plus the genitive *pistew* to describe faith as a means of forgiveness. Galatians 2:16 is an especially important one to keep in mind for two reasons. First, in Galatians 2:16 *dia; pistew* is opposed to *ek e'rgwn nomou*, "by works of law, by doing law." Trying to do what God says in the Ten Commandments is not the way to be declared innocent by God. Faith is. Secondly, Galatians 2:16 is so important to a discussion about faith because it makes a lector read *dia; pistew* and another construction, *ek pistew*, in the same breath. The two prepositional phrases are parallel in this verse.

The preposition *ek/ek* has a lot of talent. In different contexts it can indicate separation, direction out of somewhere, source, cause, or means. So what does it mean when it is used with *pistew*? Many passages use that construction (e.g., Romans 1:17, 4:16 and 5:1). In Galatians 2:16 Paul wanted to make it unmistakably clear that *ek pistew* and *dia; pistew* mean the

same thing. Whenever the apostles say we are saved, forgiven or declared innocent  $\epsilon\kappa\ \pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\omega$ ", they are expressing the truth that faith is not a cause of forgiveness. Again, it is the means.

Scripture also uses participles to tell me I am saved by faith. Two outstanding passages stun the reader by stating just how important faith is. According to Mark 16:16 only the one who believes,  $\omicron\pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\alpha$ ", will be saved. The person who does not believe,  $\omicron\lambda\iota\pi\iota\sigma\tau\eta\sigma\alpha$ ", will be thoroughly condemned. Faith does save. John 3:18 says the same thing. The one who believes,  $\omicron\pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\omega\upsilon\upsilon\eta$ , is not condemned. The one who does not believe has been condemned already. Faith saves.

So important is faith when it comes to salvation that Scripture will not even squirm away from using an imperative. The jailer at Philippi asked what he had to do to be saved. Paul answered with an imperative,  $\pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\omicron\upsilon$ . "Believe." It is obvious that Paul is not telling the humbled jailer that faith is the one work he needs to do that will cause him to be saved. Other passages discussed earlier in this paper throw that idea in the garbage where it belongs. This imperative is an invitation. "Here, eat an M&M." If I said this to a friend, I am probably not planning on shoving that piece of candy down his throat. I am offering it to him. In the same way, Paul was inviting the man to believe. Faith was the only way, the only *means*, through which he would be saved.

In addition to prepositions, participles and imperatives, the dative case tells me I am saved by faith. Romans 3:28 is the outstanding passage. A person is acquitted  $\pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\iota\ \kappa\omega\upsilon\iota$ "  $\epsilon\gamma\gamma\omega\upsilon\eta\ \nu\omicron\mu\omicron\upsilon$ , "by faith—and doing law is completely excluded." The dative must be a dative of means or instrument. It is the same thing as  $\epsilon\kappa\ \pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\omega$ " and  $\delta\iota\alpha\ \pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\omega$ ". I am saved by faith. My attempts to be good will never help me. The infused grace of Rome will never help me. A reliance on a decision for Christ I could supposedly conjure up in myself will never help me. When it comes to my forgiveness and my salvation, it is by faith. "Neither contrition nor love or any other virtue, but faith alone is the sole means and instrument...through which we can receive and accept...the forgiveness of sins" (Formula of Concord, Concordia Triglotta 925).

Paul calls salvation by faith a gift God gives. It is  $\tau\epsilon\omicron\upsilon\ \tau\omicron\ \delta\omega\upsilon\omicron\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$  in Ephesians 2:8. If I want to be sure I am forgiven and saved, I dare not look to some faith I dreamed up in myself. Faith comes from God. Scripture tells me it comes from my baptism and God's Word.

Mark 16:16 plainly says, "The one who believes and is baptized will be saved." When this passage comes up in a discussion, a popular remark seems to be that it is not the lack of baptism that condemns. Unbelief is what condemns. That is true. The second half of the verse states, "The one who does not believe will be condemned." On the other hand, if a person uses that popular remark to downplay the importance of baptism, it is time to take a better look at the grammar of Mark 16:16. Who will be saved?  $\omicron\pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\sigma\alpha$ "  $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \beta\alpha\pi\tau\iota\sigma\mu\omicron\upsilon$ ". One definite article covers both participles. Believing and being baptized are a unit thought. Mark 16:16 is not attempting to dismiss baptism's importance. It is showing that there is an intimate connection between baptism and faith.

Scripture gets even more pointed when it says that God saved us through washing,  $\delta\iota\alpha\ \lambda\omicron\upsilon\tau\omicron\upsilon$  (Titus 3:5). After Paul tells me in Galatians 3:26 that I am a son of God through the faith, he tells me how this can be in verse 27. "As many of you as were baptized...have put on Christ." Baptism connects me with Christ. It saves me. It is God's power to create and maintain my faith.

Faith comes from God's Word. There was a reason why John wrote a Gospel that especially emphasized what Jesus said during his life and after his resurrection. He wrote the

book *ihā pisteushte*, "in order that you may believe" (20:31). John took it for granted that the Scripture written by him had the power to create and maintain faith.

Faith comes from God's Word. Paul reminded Timothy that the holy Scriptures had the power to make him wise for salvation *diā pistew*". Scripture aims at making someone wise in a definite direction. It aims at saving. That saving happens through faith. In another passage Paul could not speak any more clearly. "The faith is from hearing, and the hearing is through Christ's word" (Romans 10:17). Faith has a source. It comes *ex akoh*", "from hearing." That hearing does not take place in thin air, in dreams, or in the best Shakespeare. The word of Christ is how we hear what God has to say. It is the means God uses to speak to us (*diā rhmato*"). I am saved by a faith that comes to me through my baptism and God's Word.

I am saved not by what I do but by a faith that comes through the means of grace. The most important part of this paper, however, still needs to be presented. Faith is not a stab in the dark that somehow there is a God out there who is going to make everything turn out okay for me. Faith has a specific content. It has a very definite object.

Scripture presents this truth by using prepositions. In 2 Timothy 3:15 Paul uses an adjectival prepositional phrase to describe faith. Faith that saves is *th" ejn Cristw/ jhsou*, "the [faith] in Christ Jesus." If one thinks of the words "Christ Jesus" as a three dimensional sphere, faith that saves is always in that sphere. It can never be outside of it. Faith is embedded in Christ Jesus.

A second preposition often used is *eij*". John 3:18 serves as an example. The one who believes *eij" aujton* is not condemned. The *aujton* in context is the Son of God. The preposition *eij*" indicates direction. Faith looks toward someone. It looks toward the Son of God, Jesus Christ. "Saving faith deals only with the Christ *outside* us, or the Christ *for* us. The object of saving faith lies outside man, and to reach it, the believer must certainly look beyond himself" (Pieper 436).

A third preposition is *epi*. In Acts 16:31 the inviting imperative is followed by *epi; ton kurion jhsoun*, "Believe on the Lord Jesus." The basic meaning of *epi* is "upon." The point is that faith has a sure foundation. It has a base on which it rests. "I know my faith is founded on Jesus Christ, my God and Lord" (Christian Worship 403).

The Holy Spirit also used the genitive case to express the fact that faith has an object toward which it looks. In Galatians 2:16 Paul used the genitive *Cristou* after the noun *pistew*" to express what the object of faith is. *Cristou* is an objective genitive. It is interesting that this passage used *eij" Criston jhsoun* with the verb *episteusamen* to express the same truth. Faith does not look at itself. It looks at its object. It looks at Christ.

The apostle John used a *ofti* clause to tell what the content of faith is. Faith is believing that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). Faith looks at the man Jesus, whose name means "Savior," and sees him for who he is. He is God's Anointed, *oCristo*", the one whom God sent on a special mission. This man Jesus is God; he is God's own Son.

Romans 3:25 graphically illustrates just what it means to look to Christ for forgiveness and salvation. Christ came on a mission. He came to make a full payment for sin by dying on the cross. According to Romans 3:25 God set Christ Jesus forth as a full payment *diā »th"¼ pistew*" *ej tw/aujtu aiḡmati*, "through faith in his blood." Having faith in Jesus means being immersed in his blood. It looks to his blood and what his blood accomplished. Through his blood we have the forgiveness of our sins (Ephesians 1:7). Believing in Jesus does not mean merely acknowledging that he existed on earth. Believing in Jesus means trusting that the God-Man's blood paid for my sin. I know he paid for my sin because he paid for the sins of

every sinner of all time. He is the full payment "for all the world" (1 John 2:2). Faith keeps its attention on Christ's death.

It also stares at his resurrection. Paul used an objective genitive in Colossians 2:12 to make a connection between faith and Christ's resurrection. Faith that raises a person from spiritual death to spiritual life is a faith "in the energy of the God who raised Christ from the dead." In the passage the objective genitive is the "ἐνεργεῖα". The genitive τῷ θεῷ is subjective. God displayed energy and power when he raised his Son from death. Faith stares at God's energy and power, especially the energy and power he used to raise Christ. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul told him, "Keep on remembering Jesus Christ, raised from the dead" (2:8). Jesus was raised because we had already been declared innocent and forgiven by God (Romans 4:25). The resurrection was God's proof to us that our sins were completely taken away from us by Christ's work on the cross. No wonder faith refuses to take its eyes off Jesus' death and his resurrection.

I have no reason to doubt that I am saved. I am saved through faith, not by my feeble attempts to be good. I am saved through a faith God gave me, a faith created and maintained by the means of grace. I am saved through a faith that keeps all its focus on Christ, on his death and resurrection for all people. Faith in Christ makes me bold enough to say that I don't even care whether or not I will believe when I die. I only care about whether Christ died and rose again. He did. That means I am forgiven. That means I am saved. My Lutheran upbringing and my Lutheran education have driven me back to the Scripture again and again and again. How can I be sure I am forgiven? How can I be sure I am going to heaven? Twenty-five years into my life I am giving the same answer I did as a young boy: "Jesus loves me. Jesus died for me. The Bible tells me so."

That is the center of my life. That will be the center of my Gospel ministry.

All glory be to Christ.

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