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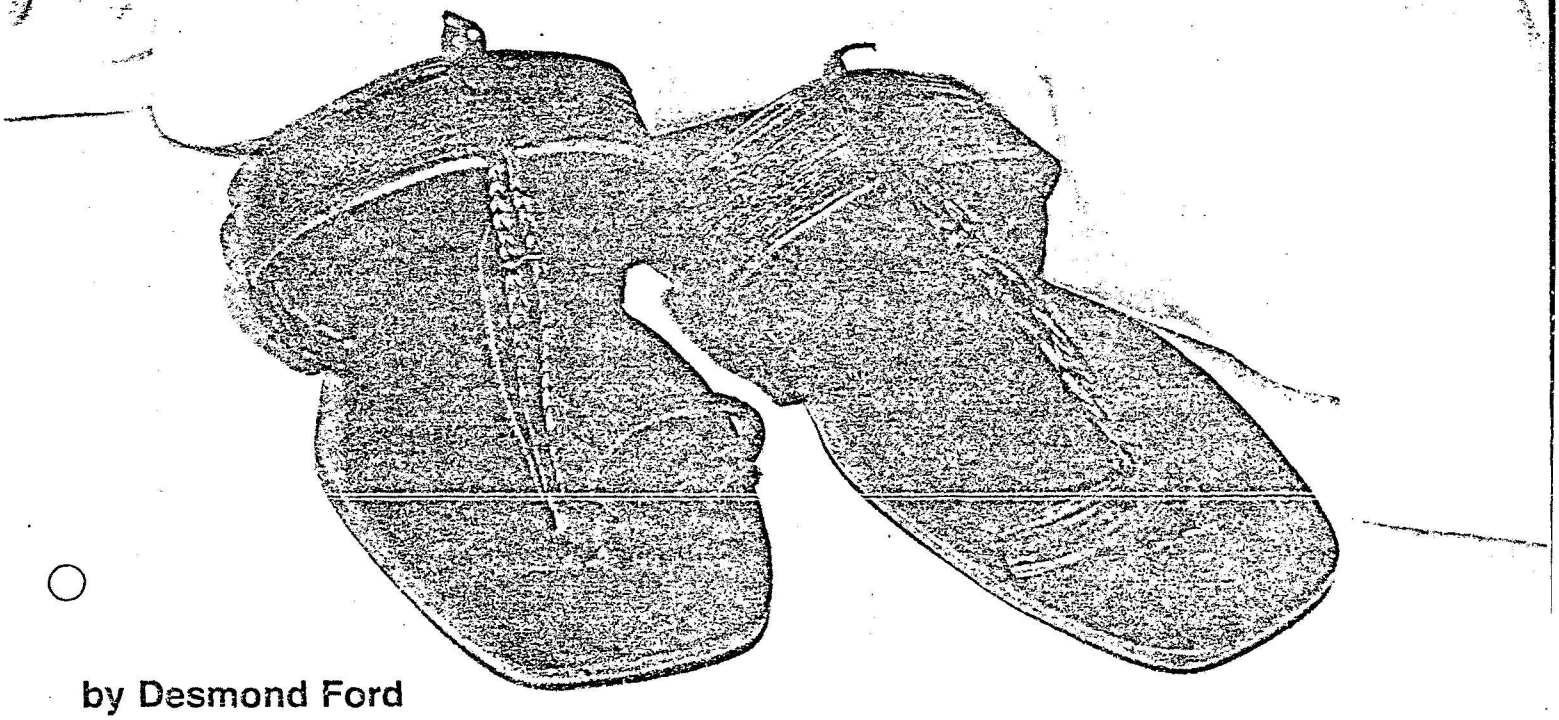
# I believe—
# in the righteousness of Christ

A special pullout section



**by Desmond Ford**

*Just how important is the pure robe of Christ's righteousness to one's salvation? Can my activities for the Lord in any way add to what Christ has already done for me through His perfect life and His death on the cross?*

IT HAS become an old joke to refer to the statement that years ago people who missed a stagecoach were prepared to relax and wait a week for the next one, whereas today some of us almost have a nervous breakdown if we miss a section in a revolving door.

Take the country from which I write—Australia. One would think that this land is sufficiently removed from Western culture to represent a more relaxed way of life. But not so. A well-known anecdote here concerns one who came from the outback to the city of Sydney, and whose first words were, "What is everyone running for?"

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Yet it is not really a twentieth-century disease to which we refer. An ancient Chinese parable tells of one who promised a flock of wild geese, "If you will *all* be quiet, I'll tell you something which will turn you into human beings." Thereafter one was quiet and then another, but never all at once. The sage is said to have waited and waited till he grew gray and old with the passage of the days and years. Eventually all the geese were caught and eaten.

The right relationship between work and rest is a fundamental problem. Our proverbs on the matter contradict each other:

- Labor conquers all things.
- He who hesitates is lost.
- Look before you leap.
- Rest awhile that you may finish the sooner.
- Beware of activity without achievement.

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• Step back in order to jump farther.

Physically speaking, life consists of a rhythm of work and rest on a daily and weekly scale. Even our yearly holidays are a concession to this fact. What about spiritually? Does the same principle apply? As regards our eternal salvation, do works, or the rest in faith, count the most? What is the relationship between God's part and ours in genuine Christian life?

**Scripture gives us many illustrations** of the issues involved. There is Martha, cumbered with much serving, and Mary, sitting in calm adoration. There is Ahimaaz, who ran without a message, and the Thessalonians, who had a message, but who stopped running (2 Thessalonians 3:11).

One Old Testament parable tells of a man who was so "busy here and there" that he lost what had been entrusted to him (1 Kings 20:40), and consequently lost his life as well. Another passage also from the Old Testament condemns those who in complete relaxation are "settled on their lees" (Jeremiah 48:11). We read of some (the Galatians) who insisted that salvation had to be earned and of others (the Corinthians) who said that mere faith was enough and that behavior did not matter.

Yes, at first sight even the Bible is confusing on this issue. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." "Strive to enter in." "Fight the good fight." "By works a man is justified." And on the other hand: "A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law." "Come unto me . . . and I will give you rest." "We which have believed do enter into rest." "In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength." "Wait on the Lord."

Church history tells a similar story. There have been the Calvinists and the Arminians, the quietists and the Pietists—those who believed God did it all, and those who seemed to believe that man did it all. Theologians discuss the same issue as they talk of faith and works, justification and sanctification, prevenient grace and the labor of love.

**How to harmonize faith and works.** Can the truth be said simply? Can it be easily grasped? Let us try. To many observers the Jewish race has seemed the most energetic in the world. They have ever been great workers. On one occasion they asked Christ, "What shall we *do*, that we might *work* the works of God?" (John 6:28). Years later the Gentiles also voiced the same query, for in the following book we find a European jailer exclaiming, "What must I *do* to be saved?" (Acts 16:30).

**A changed and purified heart demands also a changed and purified life. One cannot take place without the other.**

Both inquiries received a similar reply. Jesus told them, "This is the work of God, that ye *believe* on him that he hath sent" (John 6:29). Paul said, "*Believe* . . . and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31).

But it isn't always that way. While the woman at Samaria was told to ask for the gift of salvation, which was already available, Nicodemus was informed that he needed to be born again. While Zacchaeus was told that salvation had come unbidden to his house, the rich young ruler was admonished to sell all that he had and give to the poor before he followed Jesus. Many despairing invalids were graciously informed that their sins were forgiven and that they might rise up and walk, whereas a certain lawyer was ordered to keep the commandments and live. We are still mixed up.

The key lies at the door, as is usually the case in the Scriptures. In the beginning God gave man everything; nothing was earned. All was the result of divine love and grace. Man rested before he worked, according to the Creation record. But after the Fall, we find man feverishly working to remedy his nakedness, till God came and told him to halt his activity while a lamb was slain and its skin was made into the gift of a new wardrobe (Genesis 3:7, 21). Later, however, Cain reverts to his parents' activism and offers God his own sacrifice of fruit—he feels no need of a blood sacrifice—and his offering is rejected. *Apparently no sacrifice of our own to God is acceptable until we have accepted His sacrifice.*

**The belief that accepting Christ releases men from keeping the law of God is a dangerous and unbiblical teaching.**

The Scriptural truth can be summarized as follows: *Effort is essential, but it is of value only if it springs from faith's adoration of Christ and His cross.* Consider, for example, the wonderful story of the Good Samaritan in its context. The parable is wedged between two other stories. The first of these concerns the lawyer who asked, "What shall I *do* to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25). He was told, "This do [keep the commandments], and thou shalt live" (verse 28). The second story, on the other side of the parable, tells of the rest of Jesus in the home of Mary and Martha. Mary also rested. Sitting at His feet, she listened adoringly, while Martha, busy in the kitchen, became furious at being left alone to prepare lunch. Her anger boiled over as she urged the Lord to rebuke her sister. "But the Lord answered her, 'Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her' " (Luke 10:41, RSV).

Now we can understand our Lord's words, not only to Martha but also to the lawyer. Love's activity can spring only from love's contemplation. Our very first duty is adoration. By beholding we become changed. Only he who has meditated upon Christ hanging on the cross as the gospel incarnate is able to truly love his neighbor and keep God's commandments.

Martin Luther in 1520, at the dawning of the Reformation, wrote, "A good or a bad house does not make a good or a bad builder; but a good or a bad builder makes a good or a bad house. And in general, the work never makes the workman like itself, but the workman makes the work like himself. So it is with the works of man. As the man is, whether believer or unbeliever, so also is his work—good if it was done in faith, wicked if it was done in unbelief."

**The danger of dead words.** Luther's statement, of course, was but a commentary on Romans 14:23: "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." If we are not "in Christ," all our *good* deeds, as well as our *bad* deeds, are an abomination to God. All such "righteousnesses are as filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). They are "dead works" (Hebrews 6:1).

The gospel is Good News, not good advice. It tells us that Christ has already redeemed the whole world and borne the brunt of all our sins—past, present, and future. God is reconciled to us and invites, "Be *ye* reconciled" inasmuch as, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21, RSV).

All who believe the Good News are "accepted in the beloved." They are "complete in him." Christ is made unto them "righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption."

The Scriptures declare, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1, RSV). We are not under the law as a means of salvation, and the knowledge of such marvelous grace delivers us from the dominion of sin (Romans 3:20; 6:14).

The *fruit* of our new relationship with God must ever be distinguished from its *root*. We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone. We are not saved by a mixture of faith and works but by that true faith which inevitably works. God justifies no man whom He does not hope eventually to sanctify.

"I would not work my soul to save,
For that the Lord hath done.
But I would work like any slave
For love of God's dear Son."

The believer works from the cross, not to it. True Christianity has ever taught that union with God by faith brings holiness, but heresy affirms that a self-achieved holiness can result in union with God. One writer has summed up the balance of truth as follows:

"There are two errors against which the children of God—particularly those who have just come to trust in His grace—especially need to guard. The first . . . is that of looking to their own works, trusting to anything they can do, to bring themselves into harmony with God. He who is trying to become holy by his own works in keeping the law, is attempting an impossibility. All that man can do without Christ is polluted with selfishness and sin. It is the grace of Christ alone, through faith, that can make us holy.

"The opposite and no less dangerous error is, that belief in Christ releases men from keeping the law of God" (E. G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 59, 60).

Man's part in salvation is comparatively minute but nevertheless indispensable. While objectively, Christ is all, subjectively, faith is all, and it is a faith which ever yields holy fruit. We are to prove we live by our actions. Our words, ways, and tempers should tell the same story. We should not live the torpid life of a tortoise or sloth but the energetic, vibrant life of a deer. Christians are not meant to be like insects which grow to a certain point of development and then stop. Rather, we should be like trees which ever increase in strength and influence.

**God's work within.** Now we can reconcile the apparently contradictory scriptures mentioned earlier. Yes, we must work out our own salvation, but the rest of the text says, "For it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). We can work *out* only what we permit God to work *in* as we look to the crucified and risen Christ.

Whatever contribution men make to their own salvation is made by the grace of God. If there is in our celestial robe of righteousness but one stitch of our own making, we will be lost. If there is but one link of salvation's chain of ten thousand links that is of our own devising, we are hopelessly lost. God is both the Author and the Finisher of our salvation as we look to Him in adoring faith.

It is our part to cultivate faith by study, meditation, prayer, and obedience, remembering that while it is the *look* which justifies, it is the *gaze* which sanctifies. To believe is to receive. As we trust, the Holy Spirit fills; if we cease to trust, He ceases to fill, and His presence is ever evidenced by the abounding works of love.

The learned Bishop J. C. Ryle puts the whole thing in a nutshell as follows:

"The plain truth is that men will persist in confounding things that differ—that is, justification and sanctification. In justification the word to be addressed to man is believe—only believe; in sanctification the word must be 'watch, pray, and fight.' What God has divided let us not mingle and confuse.

"According to the degree of his faith the Christian fights well or ill, wins victories or suffers occasional repulses, comes off triumphant or loses a battle. He that has most faith will always be the happiest and most comfortable soldier. Nothing makes the anxieties of warfare sit so lightly on a man as the assurance of Christ's love and continual protection. Nothing enables him to bear the fatigue of watching, struggling, and wrestling against sin like the indwelling confidence that Christ is on his side and success is sure. It is the 'shield of faith' which quenches all the fiery darts of the wicked one" (*Holiness*, pp. ix, 37).

To the fray! D-day is past. V-day is sure!

## For further thought

**1.** Just how important is the righteousness of Christ to one's salvation? Can any works of ours add to what Christ has already done—through His perfect life and sacrificial death—in regard to our redemption and salvation?

**2.** Discuss the implications of the author's statement: "Apparently no sacrifice of our own to God is acceptable until we have accepted His sacrifice." How does this apply to man's activities for God?

**3.** What part, if any, do a person's works and deeds play in the salvation process? Are we saved by faith alone or by faith plus something we do?

**4.** What does it mean to "work from the cross, not to it"?

**5.** Just how important is the righteousness of Christ? Can anyone be saved without it? Were the people in the Old Testament redeemed by virtue of the animal blood shed through the sacrificial system?