

LAI D HOLD OF *BY* CHRIST JESUS

Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was **laid hold of by Christ Jesus**. (Philippians 3.12 NASB)

When he met the risen and glorified Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul was blinded by His glory. He fell to the ground and had to be led by the hand for three days. When Paul got up from the ground, he stood on his feet as a changed man, never the same as he was before he met Jesus. He had been laid hold of by Christ Jesus!

One moment he was seeking to destroy the Way that held Jesus as Lord and in the next moment he too was calling Jesus, Lord. He had no choice in the matter in that moment in which Jesus appeared to him and broke into his life. It was God's timing and His doing. By God's own doing, Paul was placed *in* Christ, and he started to run the race of the faith with a passion for the One who had appeared to Him and had laid hold of him. From that day on, Paul sought to lay hold of the One who had laid hold of him.

Is it any wonder that Paul sought so intensely to apprehend Christ? After all, he had persecuted the ecclesia of God, resulting in the death of some of his brethren. Paul knew that he did not deserve to meet Jesus on the road to Damascus, let alone be called by Jesus and given revelation of secrets that had been revealed in part to the Hebrew prophets. Because of his egregious acts against the ecclesia, Paul was determined to give his life to the cause of Christ, even to the point of death as a martyr, if required. The fact of the matter is that he worked harder than all the other apostles because he was not fit to be an apostle.

Thereupon He was seen by James, thereafter by all the apostles. Yet, last of all, even as if a premature birth, He was seen by me also. For **I am the least of the apostles, who am not competent to be called an apostle, because I persecute the ecclesia of God**. Yet, in the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace, which is in me, did not come to be for naught, but more exceedingly than all of them toil I—**yet not I, but the grace of God which is with me**. (1 Corinthians 15.7-10 cv)

Paul's service was a testimony to the grace of God. The one who was not competent to be called an apostle was called into service in spite of the things that he had done. Grace did not take into account Paul's merits or demerits. It was an act of God that, we could say, God did because he chose it that way in accord with His own purpose. This is the beauty of the grace of God. Who the person is or what the person has done or not done does not enter into grace. What matters is God's purpose, for He alone is the Supreme of His creation, and He dispenses His grace in accord with His purpose and will.

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As Paul beheld Christ and wrote his epistles, it seems as if he was continually searching for words to describe the One who appeared to Him on the road to Damascus and continued to reveal Himself to Paul. Paul was laid hold of *by* Christ (Philippians 3.12) in such a profound way that he desired to know no one *but* Christ and to count all as loss for the *sake of* Christ (Philippians 3.7-8).

What drove Paul with such passion? Perhaps Paul was astonished that Jesus would appear to him and put him into service in spite of all that he had done to try to destroy the ecclesia of God. It must have stunned him every time he considered the grace of God that chose him in spite of who he was and what he had done. Grace and love became foremost to Paul and drove him to willingly die daily for the cause of Christ. In fact, he wrote to Timothy that the grace of the Lord overwhelmed him, with faith and love in Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 1.14 cv).

We need to take special note that Paul was apprehended *by* Christ. Paul never sought for Christ. The fact of the matter is that Paul did everything to oppose Christ. Yet, in the midst of this opposition, Jesus revealed Himself to Paul and commissioned him for service. This was in accord with the purpose of God and nothing could stop the Lord Jesus from taking action when the time was right.

Paul did not pray a sinner's prayer. He did not walk the aisle in answer to the preacher's invitation. He did not open the door of his heart. He did not ask Jesus into his heart. He did not confess with his mouth that Jesus is Lord. Jesus had to tell him who He is. It was Jesus alone who moved upon Paul's heart and removed the scales that were blinding him. Do you get it? Paul had nothing whatsoever to do with his conversion. It was all God's doing. Paul never forgot that he had absolutely nothing to do with receiving spiritual sight. He knew it was all by the grace of God. If Jesus had not blinded him that day, he knew that he would have continued with his persecution and killing of his Jewish brethren in the ecclesia of God. Paul made no claim that he had a say in the matter. Simply, it was not according to his so-called free will. God's will overcame Paul's will or, we could say, trumped Paul's will. We see this thought woven into Paul's evangel.

But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "**LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.**" (1 Corinthians 1.30-31 NASB)

By God's doing you are in Christ! What part have any of us played in coming into Christ? The answer is that we had no part in it at all. It was all by God's marvelous grace.

For in grace, through **faith**, are you saved, and **this is not out of you**; it is God's approach present, not of works, lest anyone should be boasting. (Ephesians 2.8-9 cv)

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Even the faith is not our faith. What faith did Paul have as he was traveling down that road to persecute the ecclesia? The only faith that he had was in himself and his righteousness that he sought for in the law. He had no faith in Jesus and His finished work of the cross. To Paul, the cross was foolishness before he met the risen Lord. He had to be given the faith to accept the fact that Jesus was the one speaking to him. This is why Paul proclaimed that our boast is in the Lord. We have no boast in ourselves. None! We have no boast that we made a free-will choice for Jesus. Free will did not enter into the picture for Paul, and it does not enter into the picture for anyone saved in our day. Why? Paul gave us the answer in his Ephesians epistle.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who blesses us with every spiritual blessing among the celestials, in Christ, **according as He chooses us in Him before the disruption of the world**, we to be holy and flawless in His sight.... (Ephesians 1.3-4 cv)

The key words are *according as He chooses us in Him before the disruption of the world*. Some translations use the word *foundation* in place of *disruption*. Regardless of which word is used, the point is that before Adam was formed from the soil of the earth, God chose those who would be born during our present eon to receive every spiritual blessing among the celestials *in* Christ. In other words, God has chosen those to believe on His Son. If you believe, it is because it is a sovereign act of grace on the part of God. It is His will, not your will. Even before this world was regenerated and mankind brought forth, God chose who would be *in* Christ and who would be seated *with* Him among the celestials.

Why should this seem strange to us? Did God not start with Abraham and create a special race of people called the Hebrews to be a kingdom of priests and to be the nation through which He would rule the other nations of the world? Did any of them have a choice in the matter?

I know that some reading this will immediately recoil at the thought that our will never entered into the picture the day we were saved. Over the centuries, the debate has raged and continues to rage over whether there is free will or no free will in the matter of salvation. But answer this question: Did Paul have any choice in the matter? Some might argue that Paul did make a choice and that he could have rejected Jesus on the spot. Where is the proof of that? There is no indication that Paul had any say in the matter or that he felt he had a choice in the matter. He was blind. How was his sight to be restored? The Savior had to remove the scales. Paul was totally dependent on the risen Christ. The verses just cited clearly indicate that Paul saw that the faith to be saved is *not out of you*; it is purely by grace. If our will makes the choice for Jesus, is this not our own doing? Is this not something for us to boast about? Do you think for moment that the God of the universe cannot and will not trump the will of the vilest sinner? He did it for Paul, and, by the way, He did it for you and me as well. Let us not forget that Jesus only did the will of the Father. *Not My will, but Thy will be done!*

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Jesus broke into my life.

Perhaps I find Paul's words so comforting and convincing regarding this whole matter of will because, in some very small way, I relate to Paul and his experience on the road to Damascus. My testimony is that the Lord Jesus broke into my life. In my youth, I feared God and had a sense of sin in my life. I even recall crying out to God for mercy. However, in those days, I personally did not know Jesus or have a desire to serve Him. The denominational "church" that I attended as I was growing up had a picture that supposedly was of Jesus hanging on the wall behind the pulpit. At a certain point in the worship service, the minister would turn around and face this picture and utter some words along with the whole congregation. This amounted to idolatry, but this is all I knew of Jesus in those days. Later, when I was about twenty years old, I recall attending a Christian function of some sort and mocking the Christians, who immediately told me I was "going to hell." I just laughed.

It was not until I was thirty years old that Jesus appeared to me, not in the visible sense, but through His faith which overwhelmed my unbelief. I was all alone; there was no preacher, no altar call, no asking Jesus into my heart, no confession of faith. I was lying on my bed reading a book (not the Bible) that had an interesting title. I had no motive in reading it other than I had a fascination with things that seemed different from the norm. One moment I was in the world seeking for the things of the world and in the next moment the eyes of my heart were opened to see the King of the universe who, one day, will return to this earth as the Conqueror. I had no faith of my own to believe in Jesus nor did I have any desire for Him, but by His grace He gave me His faith to believe in Him and my eyes were opened in an instant. By God's own doing, I was placed *in* Christ, and my life has not been the same since that glorious day. Praise God! As Paul did, I now press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Along this path of faith, the Lord has impressed on my heart that there would be suffering. I can testify that He has been true to His word.

As I look back on all the years leading up to the day Jesus revealed Himself to me, I see that the hand of God was on me right from the start of my life. I know without any doubt that I was set apart for God before the disruption of the world. It was only a matter of God's timing as to when Jesus was to reveal Himself to me. Why thirty years old and not four years old? I do not know; it is God's doing. He alone is sovereign and I must leave the question until I meet the Lord Jesus face to face. I am sure that all our life experiences are part of our training in accord with the purpose of the eons and our specific place in the coming eons. Nothing is lost by our Lord, for all is worked according to His purpose.

This is not bragging on myself, as if I have done anything to deserve it. My life has been filled with sin. As I see it, I lost thirty years of personally knowing Jesus. I have nothing in me or that has come from me to commend to God. It is all by the grace of God. My boast is in the Lord!

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Secure in Christ.

I have shared a little of my personal testimony not only to make the point of our salvation being God's will and not our will, but also to stress the absolute security of our place *in* Christ once our eyes are opened to Jesus.

Periodically, we hear of believers who, for whatever reason, begin to doubt if they are truly saved. They do not seem to have the assurance in their heart. Why is this? Undoubtedly, there are several ways to answer this question, but there is one answer that seems to trump all the others.

Assuming the person is truly saved, the reason the believer begins to doubt his (or her) salvation is because he was convinced from the beginning that it was his own faith that saved him and not the faith of the Son of God. In other words, he had some part in "accepting" Jesus. The problem comes when the person's faith begins to falter for whatever reason. Perhaps the trials of life become too great, or temptation and specific sins have taken hold, or weariness has set in, or life has not turned out as planned, or countless other issues of life in these bodies of death arise. With these trials and tribulations, doubts begin to enter the person's mind. He reasons that he has done something to deserve these things, which leads him down the slippery slope of unbelief. He further reasons that all that is happening is because he does not have enough faith. Like Job's friends, brethren might tell him that the problem is that he needs more faith. No; the problem is that he needs to see that he was not saved because he had any faith of his own; it was the faith of the Son of God. He had no part in choosing to believe on Jesus. It was all by grace through faith, and that not even of himself.

You see, this takes all the pressure off of us to be saved and to remain saved. Let us be clear that this in no way means that our life is to be lived any way we desire after we are saved. Once we are *in* Christ, there is a new life in us, and this life must be lived out from us.

Once we see this truth and it takes hold in our heart, we will never doubt our salvation. Why? Because we will always know that the very same faith of the Son that saved us will also keep us. Our being saved always was and always is in the loving care of the Savior. We are saved, are being saved and will be saved, all by the grace of God. *I will never leave you nor forsake you!*

However, there are some other reasons for doubt that go along with this matter of faith.

First, doubt comes in when believers fail to see that they are *in* Christ. We need to see that when we are saved, we are *in* Christ. As stressed previously, *in* Christ is the most secure place in the entire universe. This is an objective and absolute truth that is not dependent on anything we do, our emotional state, or the trials of our life. It is God's own doing, and we need to rest in this fact by faith.

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Second, doubt comes in when believers fail to see that they are not only *in* Christ, but they are sealed *in* Christ with the Holy Spirit. According to Paul, when we first believe, we are sealed in Christ with the Holy Spirit of promise (Ephesians 1.13); that is, we receive an earnest of the spirit as a foretaste of what is to come. There is no mention in Scripture that once this seal is applied it will ever be broken and the earnest of the spirit released. The spirit of God is given to us when we believe as an assurance that we have a future allotment in the kingdom of God.

Third, doubt comes in when believers base their salvation on emotions and feelings. Salvation is not based on feelings, which one day can be as high as a kite and the next day as low as a slug. We are saved by faith. Feelings are especially dangerous for those who experience an emotional high when they first believe. Over time, these feelings wane and when the trials of life come along, the believer might be tempted to think that something is wrong and begin to question even his salvation. Feelings are no judge of whether we are or are not saved. Faith is not moved by feelings or, for that matter, by anything else.

Fourth, doubt comes in when believers experience sufferings and trials. We are destined to suffer in this life if we are going to reign during the eons of the eons (Romans 8.17; 2 Thessalonians 1.5; 2 Timothy 2.12). Suffering is not a sign that we have failed but proof that we are the Lord's. Suffering may also come in the form of discipline at the hand of God. If we are not disciplined, then we are not being trained to be a son of God (Hebrews 12.5-11).

Fifth, doubt comes in when believers keep looking inward and focusing on self and their own weaknesses and failures. We need to get our eyes off ourselves and onto Jesus and above where He is seated and from whence He is coming for us to take us to meet Him (Philippians 3.20-21; Colossians 3.1-2), **fixing our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of faith** (Hebrews 12.2).

Sixth, doubt comes in when believers remain as immature babes in Christ. We need to mature *in* Christ; that is, we need to grow up to be sons and this requires that we take in the meat of the word of God (1 Corinthians 3.2). We cannot live on a diet that is fed to a baby. Spiritually speaking, baby food is that which pertains to initial salvation. It is good to be thankful for our salvation, but we must move beyond this to grasp the complete word of God. We must press on toward maturity (Colossians 1.28).

Seventh, doubt comes in when believers lack heavenly vision. We need vision, vision of Christ and the destiny that we have *in* Him. We need to see Christ and the purpose of the eons.

If you have been saved by grace through faith, rest in faith that you have been laid hold of by Christ Jesus because you have been chosen *in* Christ before the disruption of the world. This is in accord with the purpose of the eons, and it is the path to conquering through the life of Christ.

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Scripture Abbreviations:

CV	Concordant Version (Literal New Testament)
NASB	New American Standard Bible

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Article #3

November, 2007