

THE FAVORITE TEXT OF FAMOUS PEOPLE - Jerome Hines

“By Grace . . . Through Faith . . . Plus Nothing”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Eph. 2:8-9

Daniel Boone, the famed frontiersman, was asked one time if he had ever been lost in the woods. He answered, “I never got lost, but I was bewildered once for three days.”

His reply strikes us as an apt description of the problem perplexing many people today. They never completely lose their way, but they are certainly bewildered by life and their living of it. They grope through a maze of conflicting alternatives and desires searching for some way out, hoping, but only half-believing, they will find one.

Prior to 1953 Jerome Hines was a such a person. For thirty years he had wandered about with what he calls,

“An inner fire burning in my soul, an inner fire that relentlessly drove me here and drove me there. What was this fire? Some men call it ambition. In some, it is a sense of unfulfilled destiny. Other men can find no name for it. But something was missing in my life. What was it? Where was it?

“First I sought the answer in science. I spent six years getting degrees in chemistry and mathematics. I studied psychology, psychiatry, philosophy, and many other subjects. None of them gave the answer, or satisfied that inner fire. I became a successful opera singer, joined the Metropolitan Opera Company, and sang in concerts and on T.V. Still, no satisfaction, to a relentless soul.”

And then, one day while writing the religious opera, “I Am The Way,” Jerome Hines became a changed man, what he calls a “born-again Christian.” The September 28, 1959, issue of Newsweek Magazine reports how it occurred. Mr.. Hines had observed that no one had ever

done a passion play in operatic form and decided to give it a try. For three years he studied the scriptures, especially the gospel narratives. As he did so, he became more and more aware of his own personal need of salvation and surrender to Christ.

The crucial moment came one night in 1953. He had been struggling with the theme of the Holy Spirit, “the music which was to go under the spoken words of the Sermon on the Mount.” He was having great difficulty with it. In fact, he felt as if he had run into a blank wall and would have to give up the project. But let him tell about it in his own words.

“I didn’t believe in a personal God at that time. Yet, I found myself asking God to help me. And that evening for the first time I literally received the Holy Spirit. It came through the music.”

Because I had admired Jerome Hines both as a musician and as an ambassador of Jesus Christ, I wrote to him asking for a comment on his favorite text. This was his reply.

“Dear Dr. Lavender,

Thank you so much for your letter of December 7. I am most happy to comply with your request for a particular verse or passage which has been most helpful to me.

My text is Ephesians 2:8 and 9 --

‘For by grace ye are saved through faith; and that not of yourself; it is the gift of God, not of works lest any man should boast.’

It is the clearest exposition I have found to date of our true position as Christians.

God used it directly on me in my early experience. May I take this opportunity to extend all my best wishes to you for a blessed New Year.

Sincerely, In His Name,

Jerome Hines.”

“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.”

These are several words of enormous weight in this text which the famed opera star has selected as his favorite. Among them are: Grace. Saved. Faith. Gift. God. Man. But the focal word is *Saved*.

In fact, if you carefully turn through the pages of the New Testament, you will discover man’s salvation from sin is the focal concern of the entire Book. It is the main theme of the Gospel. It is that around which everything else centers, and to which everything else is subordinate. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus all took place that,

“Whosoever believeth in him should not perish.”

Every act of God in history has been aimed at saving man from the certain doom which awaits him if he persists in following his rebellious path. From the very first moment when it was whispered along the streets of gold in heaven that man had sinned and forsaken his creator, the seeking God has sought to restore the father-child relationship sin had sundered.

“But what is sin?” you ask. Basically, it is man’s stubborn insistence upon having his own way. His seemingly inescapable tendency toward self-centeredness. His revolt against the rulership of the Lord God Omnipotent.

Contrary to popular opinion, sin is not just doing certain things we ought not to do. It is not a series of moral failures. Those are merely symptoms of sin. Fundamentally, sin is claiming to believe in God while living as if he did not exist.

It is an unwillingness to play a supporting role in life. It is a determination to have the lead. To

be the star. Even though it means denying God the right to *be* God. Sin is loving darkness rather than light, and expressing that misguided love in faulty lives, lives which fall far short of the life and example of the Lord Jesus. Because this ego-centric bent is the universal malady of man, the Bible says quite unequivocally,

“All have sinned..” “There is none that doeth good and sinneth not.”

When some folks hear, or read, about sin and sinners, they immediately engage in a bit of mental gymnastics in an endeavor to disassociate themselves from what is being said. They conjure up images of the most wicked people they can imagine. The miserable mendicant on skid row trying to run away from life through the neck of a bottle. The heathen in dark and distant jungle lands across the seas who still practices witchcraft. The teenager who has become addicted to narcotics and must sell her body in an effort to pay for her habit.

“These are sinners,” they say. “Surely we’re not as bad as they. We live clean, moral, upright lives. The gospel of salvation for sinners may apply to *them*, but surely not to us.”

They forget the real measure of their need is not how they compare with others, but how they compare with Jesus Christ.

Let me show you what I mean. Several years ago, I was preaching in Topeka, Kansas. While there, I purchased a new blue suit. It was a fine suit and I was quite proud of it. In fact, to really set it off, I purchased a new tie and pair of shoes. I was quite anxious to wear the suit for the services of our closing weekend of our Topeka Crusade, and the tailor agreed to make every effort to have it ready.

I went back at 5:30 Friday evening, and the suit was ready. I put it on, paid the man and walked out of the store. I stood on the sidewalk for a moment, allowing the passers-by to soak up the glory of this bit of sartorial splendor! The church where I was preaching was just around the corner. To get there I had to walk by Pellitiers, a large department store. A curved mirror had been placed in the back of one of their display windows, and I paused to examine myself in it.

Almost magnetically I was drawn toward it until my nose was pressing against the window pane.

Suddenly, I noticed a smudge on my left shoulder. Apparently, I had rubbed against the plaster wall of the tiny dressing room. I started to brush the smudge away when I noticed several loose threads on my lapel. With mounting irritation I picked them off and threw them to the ground.

As I looked down I noticed that, in some way, I had scuffed the toe of on my brand new shoes. I began to give it a “scotch shoeshine,” rubbing it on the back of my trouser leg, when I observed that in his haste to get my new suit ready on time the tailor had put a double crease in my right pant leg! Crestfallen, I came to realize that what, when seen from a distance, had seemed to be a beautiful bit of attire, when examined up close, had many flaws.

You get the point. When we compare ourselves to other people, the alcoholic, the heathen, the dope addict, we don’t seem so bad. Our sin does not seem so sinful. But when we get up close to Jesus Christ, when we examine ourselves in this mirror of God, our iniquities are clearly seen, and we discover what the scripture means when it says our righteousness is as filthy rags in the sight of God.

So serious is this bondage to sin there is absolutely nothing we can do by ourselves to bring about release. That’s the reason our text exposes the futility of “works” as a means of salvation. The more we know about the true nature of God’s glory, the more hopeless becomes our lot. As the chasm between us yawns wide and clear, we become conscious of our need of a Savior, someone who can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

To assume that, by our own efforts, we can achieve a passing grade in God’s classroom is to reveal that we have never met the God of the Bible. Anyone who has caught a vision of the Lord, “High and lifted up,” cannot help crying, “Woe is me! I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips.” The closer we get to God -- the more Christ-like our lives become -- the more aware we are of his great glory, and the sheer impossibility of our doing anything in, and of, or by ourselves, to merit

his consideration.

Thus Leslie Newbigin writes,

“The Christian is one who has forever given up the hope of being able to think of himself as a good man. He is forever a sinner for whom the Son of God had to die, because by no other means could he be forgiven. In a sense we can say that he has given up the effort to be good. That is no longer his aim. He is seeking to do one thing, and one thing only, to pay back something of the unpayable debt of gratitude to Christ who loved him as a Savior and gave himself for him. In this new and self-forgetting quest he finds that which, when he sought it directly, was forever bound to elude him -- *the good life.*”

This act of grace on God’s part is the inevitable expression of his father nature. Any father who cares deeply about his children, as God cares about us, does not want to be estranged from them.

Whenever one of my children deliberately disobeys me, and thereby destroys the fellowship between us, I am deeply grieved.

Even though I know this estrangement is temporary, it produces great pain in me. Because I want to be in fellowship with my children, I do everything possible, short of minimizing their guilt, to ease their pathway back into harmony with me. I do not set up insurmountable barriers. Instead, I do everything I can to take the barriers down.

In a similar, but much more significant and satisfying way, without making light of our sin, God acts to make repentance possible. He bends over backward, if we may apply that figure to him, to see that salvation from sin is made simple for us.

He is always the aggressor, taking the initiative, seeking, searching, cajoling, pursuing, calling,

loving, looking for, and encouraging any evidence of desire on our part to be done with sin, and at one with him.

As the familiar parable reports, it is the father who, seeing the prodigal approach, runs, falls on his neck and kisses him. To be sure, the prodigal must first come to himself. God has given us the right to choose our destiny, and he respects that right.

“In many ways he will be good and kind,

But God will not force the human mind.”

The first step must be ours. When we take it, when we make an about-face and start back, God hastens to meet us, places loving arms about us, and tenderly supports us on the long way home.

As A.W. Tozer declares,

“Whenever we lift our longing eyes toward God, we are sure to meet friendly eyes gazing back at us.”

Or as the Bible says,

“God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

This is what our text means when it says, “For by grace are ye saved . . .” The forgiveness God offers is a totally unearned gift. It is something extended to us inspite of the fact we do not deserve it.

What blessed good news this is to the individual who has struggled to pacify his conscience and purify his soul, only to be met with repeated failures. But, by the grace of God, that which he could not do by *himself*, is done for him. He is redeemed! Not by his own works of righteousness, but by the righteousness of Jesus. He is saved because he is found by the Savior, the One who does for him what he cannot do for himself.

It was Mark Twain who said,

“Everybody talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it.”

I suppose we might say that everybody talks about grace, but nobody really understands it. Oh, theologians can define it. Preachers can describe it. Believers can receive it. Lost sinners can enjoy it. But who can understand it?

Who can understand how God could so love this wicked, wayward world he would give heaven's best to redeem man's worst! And yet, that is the story of his grace. Little wonder we are compelled to sing,

“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found.
Was blind, but now I see.

‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fear relieved:
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!”

Which leads our thoughts to these other words in Jerome Hine's favorite text,

“For by grace are ye saved through faith . . .”

If grace is the Good News of God, then faith is the thin wire over which man receives it. It is the key which unlocks the treasure house. The aqueduct through which the refreshing water flows. The trembling hand which receives the golden gift. The telescope which unveils the unseen object's splendor. It is that which gives us eyes to see, and ears to hear.

Faith is not shutting your eyes. Faith does not see less; it see more. Faith is opening your eyes to see what was not apparent at first glance. It is what Dr. Tozer calls,

“The gaze of a soul on a saving God.”

What Georgia Harkness terms,

“Positive trust in somebody or something.”

What Paul defines as,

“The assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

And it is by grace . . . through faith . . . that we are saved.

What does it mean to have faith? Well, in relation to a bank, it means you are willing to put your money in it. In relation to a political candidate, it means you are willing to give him your vote. In relation to a doctor, it means you are willing to entrust your life to his care. And, in relation to Jesus Christ, it means you believe what he said about himself. It means you have “positive trust” in his capacity to redeem. It means you are willing to gamble your soul’s eternal destiny on his claim, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No man cometh unto the father but by me.”

To have saving faith in Jesus Christ is to follow Phillip Brooks’ definition letter by letter.

F -- forsaking

A -- all

I -- I

T -- trust

H -- him

Forsaking all, I trust him.

When you have *that* kind of faith, you cease to be a creature of time, and become a citizen of eternity.

Many years ago Houdini, the famous magician and escape artist, was challenged to open what was reported to be a burglar-proof safe. He agreed to the test. After being in the room alone with the safe for a few seconds, he called for his challengers to come and see that the door of the safe was open. When asked later how he did it. Houdini explained he had simply tried the door and discovered it was unlocked!

What a parable of the situation confronting many moderns. They look upon the gates of heaven as if they were so securely shut only some titanic force, or great cleverness, could budge it. Actually, the gates of heaven are unlocked! And they swing open when even the slightest soul leans the weight of his faith in Christ upon them.

“For by grace are ye saved through faith;
And that not of yourselves:
It is the gift of God;
Not of works, lest any man should boast.”