

“Gift & Responsibility”

*Exodus 14:19–31; Joshua 24:14–15;
Philippians 2:12–13*

***Salvation is both God’s gift and a
task that is our responsibility***

When it comes to understanding the Bible, paying attention to the order of events is often key. For example, was work given to the humans before or after they ate the forbidden fruit? The answer is “before,” which is important and surprising. Were the Israelites saved from

slavery before or after they were given God’s Law? Before. Hence, they can’t have been saved from bondage because they had been an obedient people, living according to God’s teachings. They hadn’t yet been given the teachings. Instead, God simply saved them in an act of undiminished grace. Then, afterwards, God gave them the Law, the teachings on how they were to live with God and one another. Grace, then Law. Salvation, then obedience. The order matters. With that in mind, let’s take a closer look at the story of the Exodus.

The story

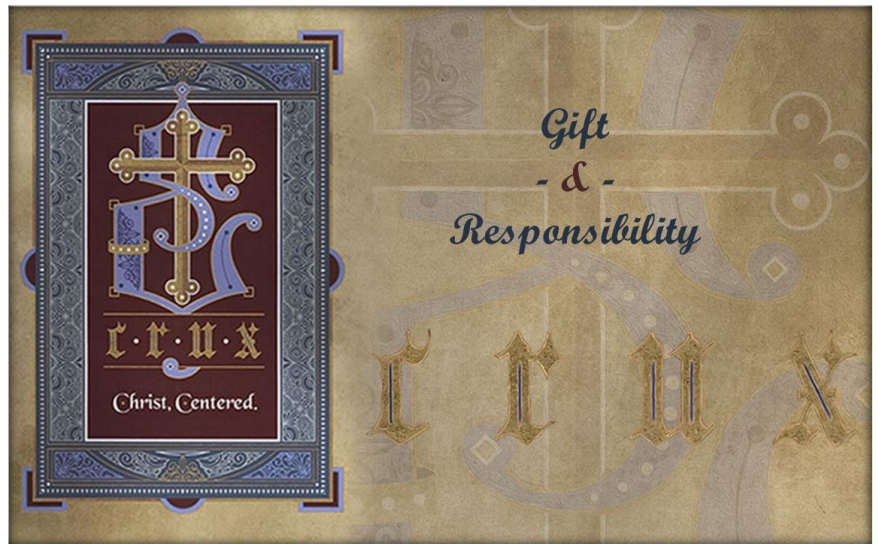
When the book of Exodus opens, Abraham’s descendants (through Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s twelve sons) have been enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years. Sometime around 1500–1300 BC, Moses is born and then raised in the Pharaoh’s house, despite being a Hebrew. As a grown man, he murders an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew, and disappears into the desert. There, he marries and tends to his flocks.

One day, he sees a bush that is burning but is not consumed by the fire. When he investigates, Moses is confronted by God, who tells Moses that God is going to save the Hebrews. It is in this meeting that God reveals his name to Moses, YHWH, which means “I am” or “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:1-6).

Moses resists and offers up some reasons why he isn’t the right guy, but God persists. Eventually, Moses, with the help of his brother, returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrews. As you’d expect, the Pharaoh resists, so God sends plague after plague upon Egypt. In the end, Pharaoh relents only when God sends death to strike all the first-born of Egypt. However, the death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb.¹

After this final plague, Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or “sea of reeds”) to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the parted waters.

Once across the sea and in the Sinai wilderness, the Israelites follow God to his mountain in the Sinai wilderness. There, God gives them his Law, enabling God to dwell with them and lead them to Canaan, the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. After setting out, the tribes make a beeline for Canaan. When they arrive, they send in some spies, who come back and report on the terrors that await them if they attempt to conquer the Canaanites. All the spies, except for Joshua and Caleb, urged them to turn back. God had promised them the land, but rather than trusting God, the people listen to their own fears and turn away (Numbers 14), at which point God tells them that they will wander in the wilderness until that faithless generation passes away. The next generation will be the ones who would enter and conquer Canaan.



¹ Jews commemorate this “passing over” every spring. In the last week before his crucifixion, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. The last supper of Jesus and his disciples was a Passover dinner; Jesus is the Passover lamb, essentially inaugurating a new Exodus. Jesus is the one whose sacrificial death makes our own salvation possible.

Later, Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who urged the Israelites to trust God forty years before, are allowed to enter Canaan. God chooses Joshua as his representative and senior commander on the ground. God also instructs Joshua that the Israelite males are all to be circumcised before they undertake the conquest of Canaan, for the practice had been abandoned in the wilderness, driving home the people's distance from God during their wandering. When all is ready and the people have committed themselves anew, God dries up the Jordan River, reminiscent of the Exodus, and the people cross over to begin their war of conquest.

The war stories in the book of Joshua fall very hard on the ears of Christians, for we wonder where we see Jesus in any of it. But, I suppose, the book of Joshua reflects the realities of a hard and sinful world. If the people of God are to have a home, the land will have to be taken from someone – and it is.

When the necessary cities have been conquered and their kings defeated, the land is allocated to the various twelve tribes. But before the people head to their new homes, Joshua reminds them who they are and of all that God has done for them. They must make a choice now: Will they really choose God? Will they obey God and serve him? The time has come to stop flirting with other gods. It is time to choose.

But haven't they already chosen, we might ask? Yes, they have. But they must choose today, tomorrow, and the next day. This business of choosing to trust God, to obey him, and to serve him is never done. As Paul puts it, we must continue to work out our salvation (Philippians 2:12). Like the Israelites, we *have* been saved and *we are being* saved.

Gift and responsibility

What does this long story teach us? That God's gift precedes the responsibility of the humans to be obedient. It is much like baptism and confirmation as we practice it in The United Methodist church. We baptize infants, emphasizing that the grace poured out is on God's initiative; none of us could think that the baby is participating in any meaningful sense. It is pure gift. Further, it would be like the Israelite infants carried in their mothers' arms as they ran across the dry bed of the Red Sea. The children exercised no choice; they played no role.

But when our youth are confirmed in the faith, they are making a very real choice to be obedient. They are accepting the responsibility to be Christians on purpose, not just because their parents had taken them to church. Again, hearkening back to the Exodus, when those Israelite babies grew up, they too had to make a decision. Would they remain among God's people, living as God taught them or would they leave, striking out on their own path? That is the question posed by Joshua and every generation since.

We see this in the brief passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians (2:12-13). Prevenient grace and sanctifying grace are the names we give to the grace of God who is at work in us, enabling us to "want and to actually live out his good purposes" (from the Common English Bible). Those two verses lay out both gift and responsibility (gift and task, as it is usually put). Roger Olsen elaborates on this:

The Bible does urge people to do something for their salvation. In the famous "paradox of grace" passage of Philippians 2:12 – 13 Paul says "work out your salvation with fear and trembling." Clearly God expects us to do a task to have and keep our salvation.

The problem is that many people ignore the next part of the "paradox of grace" passage. Paul immediately follows "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" with "for God is at work in you to will and to act to fulfill his good purpose." Both sides of the paradox must be emphasized equally. Swiss Christian theologian Emil Brunner has said that salvation is both "gift" and "task." In German this is a play on words: Gabe (gift) and Aufgabe (task). Salvation is both Gabe and Aufgabe. How can it be both? And doesn't it mean that we have to do our work first and then God does his work in response to ours? That's the impression many people get from popular preaching and especially from revivalism. There's the call to response — repent and trust in Christ and you will be saved! It leaves the impression that God's work is after ours. That implies that our task is autonomous, that it is totally our own to do without any help from God. Many people take this misinterpretation into their

Christian lives and live as if whatever help they get from God to live a holy life or a life of discipleship comes in measure to their own hard work. It's our American rugged individualism with its emphasis on self-reliance and revivalist preaching that makes us think the "task" side of salvation and being a Christian comes first and is independent of the "gift" side.

But the Swiss theologian who emphasized salvation as both *Gabe* and *Aufgabe* was not prioritizing them the way most folk Christians do. It's our American rugged individualism with its emphasis on self-reliance and revivalist preaching that makes us think the "task" side of salvation and being a Christian comes first and is independent of the "gift" side. According to classical Christian teaching, however, that's putting the cart before the horse. When Paul told the Philippian Christians to work out their own salvation, he meant do it because God is at work in you, not because God will do his work if you do yours first.²

And so, we gratefully embrace the gift of salvation that God has given us, even as we then embrace the task of living in such a way that others see Christ in us, that we grow in love and holiness throughout all our days.

Daily Bible Readings *More on gift and responsibility*

| | | |
|------------------|----------------------------|---|
| Monday | Exodus 11:1-12:42 | The story of the final plague and the escape from Egypt |
| Tuesday | Exodus 12:43 -13:16 | The instructions for the Passover feast |
| Wednesday | Ezekiel 36:22-37:14 | God promises to restore his people, putting his Spirit in them and giving them new hearts |
| Thursday | Job 2:1-10 | Job chooses to keep his trust in God. |
| Friday | Luke 19:1-10 | A rich tax-collector, Zacchaeus, chooses to make a complete commitment to Jesus |
| Saturday | Acts 5:27-42 | Peter and the Apostles choose to defy the Jewish leadership a second time |

² Olson, Roger E. *Questions to All Your Answers: The Journey from Folk Religion to Examined Faith* (pp. 110-111). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.