

Question #2: Soteriology in Ephesians

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The way that the book of Ephesians presents the matter salvation is in some ways unique among Pauline literature. It does not contain material that is contradictory to his other writings, but it emphasizes certain features that are more subtle elsewhere. Furthermore, there are aspects of salvation expounded upon and stressed in other writings which are either minimized or not mentioned in Ephesians. This could be due to the fact that Ephesians was written late in Paul's life to a different audience than that of some of his earlier letters.

Salvation as a Completed State

The soteriological view presented in the book of Ephesians is that the Christian is already living in the completed state of salvation. This perspective overrides all other aspects of salvation mentioned in the letter. Ephesians 2:5 and 8 both make the statement that "by grace you have been saved". In these instances, the verb σωζω ('saved') is in the perfect tense, indicating a completed action with ongoing results. This is further emphasized by the fact that verses 5 and 6 state that God "made us alive together with Christ", "raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places". The tense of these three verbs that talk about our union with Christ are all in the aorist tense, again indicating an action that has already taken place.

This completed viewpoint of salvation is somewhat unique among Paul's writings. In other places the stress is often on the future aspects of salvation. Verses such as Romans 5:9, 1 Thessalonians 5:9, and 2 Timothy 2:10 are more representative of general Pauline soteriology. They indicate that presently we as Christians have been justified, but in the future we will be saved from God's coming wrath, and will obtain eternal salvation at that approaching time.

However, the book of Ephesians does hint at this future aspect of salvation when it mentions that when we heard and believed the gospel of salvation we were "sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance" (Eph 1:13b-14a).

Ephesians 2:7 also points to this future aspect of salvation when it mentions God's kindness to us

“in the ages to come”. Furthermore, it is not altogether uncommon for other Pauline writings to contain a present aspect to salvation, or at least minimize the future aspects. For instance, Romans 11:11 states that salvation has come to the Gentiles and 1 Corinthians 1:18 says that we are presently being saved. Second Corinthians 6:2 boldly states that “now is the day of salvation”. So, although Ephesians may present a different emphasis from many other Pauline writings, it is not inconsistent with the gospel that he preached.

Union with Christ – Sharing In Christ’s Death and Resurrection

Another aspect of salvation common throughout Pauline soteriological literature is the matter of the believers’ union with Christ. Ephesians 2 mentions that the believers’ were made alive with Christ, raised up with him, and seated with him in the heavenly places. Romans 6:4-5 also talks about the believer being united with Christ in his resurrection. However, the Romans passage also emphasizes other aspects of the believers’ union with Christ, such as being crucified and buried with Christ (Rom 6:3-4). This aspect of the believers’ union with Christ is missing from the book of Ephesians.

Salvation Not According to Works

In all the Pauline literature that we have regarding soteriology, both faith and grace are shown to play a central role. For instance, Romans 3:22-24 clearly states that we are justified by God’s grace, appropriated through faith. Ephesians 2:8 matches this closely by stating that by grace we have been saved through faith. (Cf. also Rom 4:16; Gal 2:20-21.)

Something else common to Paul’s doctrine of salvation throughout his writings is the fact that salvation is not according to works. However, many of his writings outside the book of Ephesians make it clear that salvation by God’s grace through faith is in contrast to the works of the Old Covenant Law. This is most evident in the books of Romans and Galatians, where Paul clearly says that a person is “justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law” (Rom 3:28) and

that a person “is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal 2:16).

Some scholars have contrasted this to what is presented in Ephesians, by stating that Ephesians widens the term “works” to encompass all human effort, whereas other books only contrast the “works of the Law” with faith and grace. Indeed Ephesians does refer to works in a more general sense, not indicating the works of the Law. (Cf. Eph 2:8-9). This may be due to the fact that the churches in both Rome and Galatia were dealing with issues introduced by Jews or Jewish constituents of the Christian faith. It does not appear that Ephesus had that element to deal with. Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, was applying the gospel message to a wider audience, one not struggling with the “works of the Law”. He could do so since a person cannot be justified by either the works of the Law nor by any kind of human effort. However, even Romans 4:1-6 seems to be dealing in some degree with the more general category of human efforts, not exclusively the works of the Law. Paul argues (Rom 4:2) that Abraham was not able to boast in his works, much in the same way as Ephesians 2:9 argues that no one can boast in works.

Summary and Conclusion

By looking at Pauline literature without the book of Ephesians, one might summarize Paul’s view of salvation by using Romans 5:8-9 which states, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.” But when the book of Ephesians comes into play, one could just as easily use Ephesians 2:8 as the culminating summary; “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” These verses are not contradictory, but whereas the Roman’s

passage lays stress on the future aspect of salvation, Ephesians emphasizes the fact that we are already living in the good of that salvation.

There does appear to be some differences between the soteriology in the book of Ephesians and the rest of the Pauline literature. This could be due in part to the fact that the believers in Ephesus were a Gentile audience with different needs than many of the other recipients of Paul's letters, who were influenced by and struggling with a Jewish background. The differences are mainly due to variations in emphasis rather than any contradiction in doctrine or teaching.