

Revelation 22.12-14, 16, 17, 20, 21 — Faith or works?

The short passage from Revelation includes the final words of the Bible, the last words of this mighty epic narrative, written by multiple authors over centuries: The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.

The lectionary edits this passage slightly for the sake of clarifying some bits. It skirts over a verse about the evil that has been excluded from the city, and also the warnings about adding to, or subtracting from the words of this book. There is beautiful reassurance here: Jesus is the first and the last and the always. Everything is finished. The Spirit and the bride say 'come!' We are invited again to the free gift of the water of life. And the final reassurance of all: Jesus is coming soon. It is wonderfully up-lifting. The point of the book of Revelation, which I must keep emphasising, is that God wins, and we, who are on his side, share in his victory, and will know absolute peace and joy in his kingdom.

Having said all that, I want to focus on verse 12, in which Jesus says, 'behold I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done.' That line, 'according to what they have done,' caused my little Protestant ears to twitch. Is this salvation by works then? I thought my reward was based on Christ, not on my own deeds? Does that mean that my reward will be much less? What if I don't make the cut? — because I am capable of all sorts of ridiculous paranoia before I remember that we are talking about Jesus here, and Jesus is just and good. So, let's look again at the case for 'salvation by works' and for salvation by faith, and see where we end up.

There are various places in the New Testament that strongly imply salvation by works. This line certainly suggests it. John 5:28-29 suggests it too, as do passages in the letters of John, and much of the letter of James. James 2 is particularly strident: 'What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?' and moments later: 'You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.' James argues that faith is not faith without doing something about it. If you claim faith and you are not transformed, and your actions with it, your faith was a lie. Good works will reap a reward, evil deeds will lead to exclusion from God's kingdom. James leaves no room for complacency.

Martin Luther was not particularly keen on the book of James. It was Luther who 'rediscovered' the doctrine of salvation only by God's grace, and he did much to push Paul's letter to the Romans forward as the preeminent book of the New Testament for shaping our doctrine. Some of us may have come across what is called the 'Romans road' — a way of using selections of verses from the book of Romans to talk through personal salvation. And the emphasis here is that our salvation is only by God's grace through Jesus, and only by our faith in him. So Romans reminds us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; that the wages of sin is death; that while we were still sinners Christ died for us; that the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord; and that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

It is clear that our salvation is by God's gift and not by our deserving it. None of us makes the grade. Luther must be right. The epistle of James, and various writings of John must be wrong!

But wait — both sides are right. 'Believe in' can sound like a very weak phrase, and that can lead to our seeing faith in a weak way. One of my kids believes in the Loch Ness monster and the Yeti, but it doesn't change who he is or how he lives his life. John and James believe in the transformative nature of faith. Instead of the phrase 'believe in', we should instead be saying and thinking 'trust, honour and commit myself to obeying'. More of a mouthful, but also much more true to the sort of change they are talking about. I liken this to a train moving onto a turntable, being turned around, and put onto a new track. Christian faith takes a real decision and is hard to turn back on. And in that turning, while it is certainly true that we can fall into error in the weakness of our human nature, the Holy Spirit inside us should be transforming us. We don't, having chosen to follow Christ, then plan crime. We are basically oriented to good, even if we fail frequently. Our nature has changed.

Some parts of the church are very literal in believing that no one can enjoy the afterlife unless they specifically declare their faith in Jesus Christ. This gives them a real drive to evangelise the world. I don't see it that way: I trust that in Jesus's loving fairness to those who heard and believed, and to those who did not hear it in a way that made sense to them.

We live in a very capitalist world, and we can be closely attuned to pay and reward. If you remember the parable of the workers in the vineyard, various hired helpers work different durations during the day, but receive the same pay in the end. Those who have worked all day complain that the wages are equal. Many of us are sympathetic with this perspective. But these workers did gain something that the later hired hands did not — the sense of achievement of having done more. The ability to say 'I did that'. The work is, in itself, rewarding. Those who have served longer and more fully will know this.

So salvation *is* by faith, and we will receive the reward for our works. There is less controversy than we might think. And as I said at the beginning, God wins, and there will be peace and goodness.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.