

# The Wages of Sin and the Free Gift of God

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

It is a text of dual emphases. The one is darkly foreboding, the other magnificently exhilarating. Paul wrote:

For the wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:23).

## The Roman Letter

It cannot be determined exactly when the church in Rome was established. Perhaps those Jews and proselytes who were present in Jerusalem on Pentecost (Acts 2:10) migrated back to the Imperial City and planted the cause of Jesus. By the time Paul penned the epistle to the Romans (perhaps a quarter of a century later), the glowing reputation of this church was known throughout the empire (Romans 1:8).

The letter is doctrinal (chapters 1-11), practical (chapters 12-15) and personal (chapter 16).

Preliminary to a consideration of the text soliciting our special focus, we should reflect upon the material that prepares the way for its presentation. Consider the gist of the first six chapters of this inspired document:

- **Chapter 1:** An indictment of the obtuse and wicked Gentile world is issued.
- **Chapter 2:** A complaint is made against the inconsistent Jews.
- **Chapter 3:** All are victims of sin, but there is a plan for salvation through Christ.
- **Chapter 4:** Salvation is not achieved through a graceless system of law.
- **Chapter 5:** The universal consequence of sin is death.
- **Chapter 6:** God's saving plan is accessed by means of obedient faith.

A survey of these chapters will lay the foundation for understanding 6:23.

## Sin Defined

There are three significant terms in the initial phrase of the text that must be explored. These are: "sin," "wages," and "death."

### Missing the Mark is Sin.

Sin is represented by various biblical expressions in both Testaments of the Bible. The word itself derives from original terms (Hebrew, *hata'* ; Greek, *hamartano* ), that portray the image of missing a mark or target (cf. Judg. 20:16; Rom. 3:23).

These words imply several things. There is a target or **standard** of spiritual and moral excellence at which one must aim. As fallible human beings, we frequently **miss the standard**, either purposely or through ignorance (cf. Heb. 9:7, ASVfn). In either case, we sin, and sin **condemns** even if it is **only one sin** (Jas. 1:15; note the definite article [ASV]).

### Rebellion is Sin.

A rebellious temperament is the root of many a sin. The prophet Samuel declared, "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as idolatry and teraphim" (1 Sam. 15:23).

Jeremiah once described the disposition of wayward Israel as follows: "They are turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who **refused to hear** my words" (Jer. 11:10).

One cannot but be reminded of the hardened Jews whom Stephen encountered, and who, rather than reverently consider his teaching, “stopped their ears,” then murdered God’s messenger (Acts 7:57-59).

### Neglect is Sin.

Sin is more than simply doing wrong. It also embraces the idea of **purposefully neglecting** one’s duty to the Creator. James expressed it in this fashion: “He who knows to do good, and does not do it, to him it is sin” (Jas. 4:17).

One scholar has observed that those here in view “cannot take refuge in the plea that they have done nothing positively wrong; as Scripture makes abundantly clear, sins of **omission** are as real and serious as sins of **commission**” (Moo 1985, 158).

So many are known to whine, “I know I should, but I’m just weak.” The rationalization of weakness will not produce forgiveness. There must be an appropriate seeking of pardon and a serious attempt to change one’s conduct.

### Presumption is Sin.

David once petitioned the Lord: “Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be upright, and I shall be clear from great transgression” (Psa. 19:13). Several things may be said regarding this sobering text.

First, the presumptuous sin appears to be in contrast to the hidden faults mentioned just previously. The former are sins committed in ignorance. Who could possibly keep up with the slips he makes unawares? These are sins nonetheless and require forgiveness.

Second, presumptuous sins are of a different sort. The original Hebrew term is undergirded by such ideas as the haughty attitude of one who is insolent and who scorns the sovereignty and authority of God (cf. Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1981, 267).

A New Testament word that illustrates this arrogant disposition is **ethelothreskeia**, a compound term from **ethelo** (“will”) and **threskeia** (“worship”), hence is rendered “will-worship” (Col. 2:23). It is a **self-initiated** action reflected in a mode of worship that either is “forbidden or unbidden” (Vine 1991, 881).

J. H. Thayer depicted it as “worship which one devises and prescribes for himself, contrary to the nature of the faith which ought to be directed by Christ” (1958, 168).

### Violating the Conscience is Sin

Paul admonishes that when a Christian engages a certain action, he must “be fully assured in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5) that what he is doing does not violate his own conscience.

The conscience is a sensitive instrument and is a person’s most valuable endowment in nudging him in the proper direction as he grows in knowledge. The conscience is not the final arbiter of right and wrong (Prov. 14:12). It must be educated. Yet, in its proper place, it is a prized gift from God, and the Christian must guard against it becoming hardened (cf. Eph. 4:19; 1 Tim. 4:2).

This is why, at the conclusion of the chapter, Paul cautions that any practice that violates of one’s conscience is sin, even in religiously or ethically neutral matters. One must be able (in the case of eating meat) to eat or drink “of faith,” i.e., with a clear conscience (Rom. 14:23).

Here is an important point. A clear conscience does not make a wrong act right, but a violated conscience can make a right act (in its basic nature) **wrong** for that individual.

### The Wages of Sin

The Greek term **opsonion** is found only four times in the New Testament. Twice it is employed of a soldier’s pay (Lk. 3:14; 1 Cor. 9:7), once of the support Paul received from certain churches—a support that should have come from Corinth, but didn’t (2 Cor. 11:8)—and, finally, in a figurative sense for the **consequence** of sin (Rom. 6:23).

The word suggests the idea of that which one has **earned**. Thus, morally it **must be paid** if justice is to prevail. It hints that there is a very high price tag attached to sin.

The text under consideration has a narrow focus, namely the “wages” of sin earned by the human family as the result of sin’s introduction into earth’s environment by our original parents.

Before we concentrate on that, however, it is worth mentioning that the cost of rebellion against God has had even a broader range of consequence.

- Angels that rebelled against their Creator paid a horrible price (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6; Heb. 2:16).
- The “whole creation” labors under the degenerative process that leads to death (Rom. 8:20-22; Heb. 1:10-12).
- The earth itself especially bears the scars of sin’s ravaging blows—in the curse of Eden and the aftermath of the global deluge of Noah’s day (Gen. 3:17-19; 6-9; 2 Pet. 3:5-6).

Our point of emphasis, however, is primarily upon the effect of sin on those creatures who were made in Jehovah’s spiritual image (Gen. 1:26-27). Our text in Romans employs a solitary term—“death.” **Death!**

## Death: The Grim Reaper

In biblical parlance, “death” always conveys some absolutely inflexible truths:

- Death is never associated with the concept of **non-existence**.
- Death is never viewed as a strictly **natural** biological process. It is portrayed as the **penalty** for sin.
- Death always carries the idea of a **separation**—whether in a physical sense or a spiritual sense.

### Physical Death

Normal physical death may be described in two ways.

First, it is the cessation of the body’s biological processes as a result of progressive degeneration (Jn. 11:14, 39; Acts 2:27; 2 Cor. 4:16; 5:1).

Second, death signals that the spirit, or soul, has left the human body. The body apart from the spirit is dead (Jas. 2:26; cf. Acts 9:39; 2 Pet. 1:14).

Physical death is the consequence of humanity’s reckless venture into sin. All have sinned (Rom. 3:23), either in fact or in prospect (children will sin as they mature). Hence, all will experience death (Rom. 5:12) with the exception of those who are alive at the time of Christ’s return (1 Cor. 15:51; 1 Thess. 4:15). (See [The Divine View of Death](#).)

### Spiritual Death

Spiritual death is the state of being separated from fellowship with God by virtue of a life of sin. All accountable people who have not been reconciled to their Creator by means of Christ’s redemptive plan, are dead spiritually (Isa. 59:1-2; Eph. 2:1; 1 Tim. 5:6; Rev. 3:1).

Only by the process of the **new birth** can one be made alive again in the **spiritual** sense (Jn. 3:3-5; Rom. 6:4, 11, 13; Eph. 2:4; cf. 5:26).

### The Second Death

The second death is an **eternal separation** from God in that horrible abode known as hell. In referring to the judgment of the ungodly, Jesus depicted it in this fashion: “Depart from me” (Mt. 7:23; 25:41; Lk. 13:27).

Paul described the destiny of the wicked as the “eternal destruction **from the face of the Lord** and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess. 1:9). The same state is called a death (Rom. 1:32), which was not merely capital punishment, as evidenced by the fact that not all the sins catalogued in the previous context warranted the death sentence (see Cottrell 1996, 1.166-167).

James spoke of the condemned soul who is rescued from death (Jas. 5:20), which, of course, cannot refer to physical death. The book of Revelation uses the expression “second death” several times (Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8), which is the obvious equivalent of the “lake of fire” (Rev. 20:10).

Thayer defined this sense of “death” as “the miserable state of the wicked dead in hell” (283). R. A. Torrey once described the second death as “not mere non-existence, but wrong, wretched, debased, devilish existence” (1933, 306).

## The Free Gift of God

The first clause of Romans 6:23 is separated from the second clause by the adversative particle *de*, rendered “but.” The apostle will now show the other side of the redemptive coin.

There are five different words in the Greek Testament that reflect varying shades of meaning with respect to a gift. The word here used is *charisma* (found seventeen times in the New Testament), the verbal form of which is *charizomai* (found twenty-three times). It is a lovely word signifying “that which is freely and graciously given” (Danker and Bauer 2000, 1081).

It is, however, a mistake of unfathomable magnitude that so many have adopted the view that this gift does not require a **willing recipient** who happily acknowledges that the gift may be undergirded by conditions.

Let us illustrate this principle with examples from the Bible itself.

First, Christ himself was a gift from God to humanity: “For God so loved the world that he gave *didomi* his only Son” (Jn. 3:16). But that gift was not unconditional, for the apostle continues, “that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have life everlasting.”

In the larger context of John’s gospel, belief and obedience are synonyms (cf. Jn. 3:36, ASV, ESV). Furthermore, elsewhere John makes it clear that Christ “came unto his own, and they that were his own **received him not**. But as many as **received** him, to them he **gave** the right to become children of God” (Jn. 1:11-12). A gift does not exclude possible conditions.

Second, since there are valuable lessons to be learned from Old Testament precedents (Rom. 15:4), let us give consideration to the conquest of ancient Jericho:

Jehovah informed Joshua, “I have **given** into your hand Jericho and the king thereof” (Josh. 6:2; cf. v. 16). Yet specific instructions were provided as to how the Israelites were to take the city (Jn. 6:3ff).

The writer of Hebrews declared that the city was not taken until after the divine instructions were obeyed (Heb. 11:30). In that connection, Rahab was spared because she was **obedient**, in contrast to the citizens of Jericho who were disobedient (Heb. 11:31; cf. Jas. 2:25).

Anyone with a modest level of reasoning ability can deduce that a gratuitous gift and the obedient **reception** of the gift does not imply a contradiction.

An incident in the ministry of Paul illustrates the same principle. On that long and harrowing voyage to Rome (Acts 27:1ff), the apostle had been informed by an angel that God had “granted” (*charizomai*) to him the lives of his sailing mates.

Subsequently, however, when the inmates of the damaged vessel began abandoning ship, Paul warned that there was a condition to the preservation of their lives: “**Except** these **remain** in the ship, **you cannot be saved**” (Acts. 27:31).

## A gift can be conditional!

Third, Christ emphasized that though eternal life is God's gift there is human initiative to be exercised in obtaining such (i.e., obedience is required): "**Work** not for the food which perishes, but [work] **for** the food which abides unto **eternal life**, which the Son of man **shall give** unto you" (Jn. 6:27).

Finally, it should be observed that those enamored with the Augustine-Calvin theory of the perseverance of the saints—namely, that a child of God can never forfeit his salvation—contend that whenever God provides a gift, such is **irrevocable**. Mounce attempts to apply Romans 11:29 to the matter of salvation (2006, 284), but there are enormous problems with that view.

First, as seen in the shipwreck illustration above, God threatened to withdraw the gift of sailor safety if the inmates of the vessel did not conform to his condition.

Second, the context of Romans 11:29 does not deal with the matter of salvation. Rather, it refers to God's use of the nation of Israel as the conduit through whom his Son would come (cf. Cottrell, 2.291-292; Cranfield 1990, 581).

Third, the office of an apostle was a gift of God (Eph. 4:8, 11), yet Judas forfeited his apostolic office and was lost (Acts 1:20b, 25).

## Eternal Life

The "free gift" of this remarkable text is that of eternal life. But what is eternal life? It is the opposite of the second death (see above). It is an eternal relationship with God, overflowing with a depository of blessings beyond the scope of present full representation or appreciation.

It is not merely everlasting existence (though that is involved). Instead, it is a **quality** of living that can only be defined in terms of its relationship with the Godhead. Again, as Torrey observed: "Life is defined in the Bible not merely as **existence**, but as **right existence**—knowing the true God and the life manifested in Christ" (306; emphasis added).

Two important things must be emphasized at this point.

- Eternal life or "eternal salvation" is conditioned upon one's obedience to the Lord (Jn. 3:36, ASV, ESV; Heb. 5:8-9).
- Fidelity must be maintained if one ultimately is to enter heaven (Heb. 3:12-19; 6:4-8; 10:26-31).

## In Christ Jesus our Lord

It is particularly important to notice the prepositional phrase that sets forth the sphere in which eternal life is found. It is "in Christ," an expression found eighty-nine times in the New Testament (fifteen times in Romans).

The phrase signifies "ingrafted as it were in Christ, in fellowship and union with Christ, with the Lord" (Thayer 211). In God's great plan of human redemption, there is no salvation apart from the atoning work of Christ, and no personal accessing of forgiveness apart from obedience to the Savior (Acts 4:12; Heb. 5:9; cf. 2 Tim. 2:10).

In this very chapter, entrance into that redemptive relationship is explicitly detailed:

Or are you ignorant that all we who were **immersed into Christ** Jesus were **immersed into his death**? We were buried therefore with him through immersion **into death** [i.e., the benefits of his death]: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3-4).

In another text, the apostle states the same general truth in slightly different language:

For you are all sons of God, through **the** faith [article in Greek text; objective faith, i.e., the gospel system], in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were **immersed into Christ** did put on Christ (Gal. 3:27).











The sphere of salvation is the in-Christ relationship. The mode of entrance is the culminating act of immersion in water (cf. Acts 2:38; 22:16).

The terms “Christ,” “Jesus,” and “Lord” emphasize Jesus’ role as the promised Old Testament “Messiah” (Anointed One), the Lord’s function as Savior (Mt. 1:21), and his lordship (i.e., authority [Mt. 28:18, ASV]) over all (Jn. 17:2).

## Conclusion

Romans 6:23 is a gold mine of information. It instructs, warns, and promises. Study this text carefully. Passively yield to it. Teach it vigorously.

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Romans 6:23; Acts 2:10; Romans 1:8; Judges 20:16; Romans 3:23; Hebrews 9:7; James 1:15; 1 Samuel 15:23; Jeremiah 11:10; Acts 7:57-59; James 4:17; Psalm 19:13; Colossians 2:23; Romans 14:5; Proverbs 14:12; Ephesians 4:19; 1 Timothy 4:2; Romans 14:23; Luke 3:14; 1 Corinthians 9:7; 2 Corinthians 11:8; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6; Hebrews 2:16; Romans 8:20-22; Hebrews 1:10-12; Genesis 3:17-19, 6-9; 2 Peter 3:5-6; Genesis 1:26-27; John 11:14, 39; Acts 2:27; 2 Corinthians 4:16, 5:1; James 2:26; Acts 9:39; 2 Peter 1:14; Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:51; 1 Thessalonians 4:15; Isaiah 59:1-2; Ephesians 2:1; 1 Timothy 5:6; Revelation 3:1; John 3:3-5; Romans 6:4, 11, 13; Ephesians 2:4; Matthew 7:23, 25:41; Luke 13:27; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Romans 1:32; James 5:20; Revelation 2:11, 20:6, 14, 21:8; Revelation 20:10; John 3:16; John 3:36; John 1:11-12; Romans 15:4; Joshua 6:2; John 6:3; Hebrews 11:30; Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25; Acts 27:1; Acts 27:31; John 6:27; Romans 11:29; Ephesians 4:8, 11; Acts 1:20, 25; Hebrews 5:8-9; Hebrews 3:12-19, 6:4-8, 10:26-31; Acts 4:12; Hebrews 5:9; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27; Acts 2:38, 22:16; Matthew 1:21; Matthew 28:18; John 17:2

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