




# Faith as divine gift or human response? A study of Eph 2:8–9, Phil 1:29, and *Soera Ni'amoni'ö*

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This study examines the exegetical debate concerning the antecedent pronoun 'τοῦτο' in Ephesians 2:8–9 and the phrase 'ἐχαρίσθη ... πιστεῦειν' in Philippians 1:29, with the primary objective of determining whether faith is a divine gift or a human response in the process of salvation. Employing a grammatical–historical exegetical approach, this study concludes that faith is best understood as a human response to divine grace rather than a direct gift from God. This conclusion is further supported by an analysis of various biblical texts that consistently indicate that while God provides every individual with the opportunity to believe in Christ, the act of faith itself remains within the domain of human responsibility. Additionally, this study highlights the translation of *Soera Ni'amoni'ö* concerning these texts, which aligns with its findings. Consequently, the results of this study have significant theological implications for the Nias Christian community, including Catholics, in understanding the role of faith in salvation as a human response originating from individual volition rather than as a directly bestowed gift from God.

**Contribution:** This study contributes to soteriological scholarship by affirming, through a grammatical–historical exegetical analysis, that faith is a human response rather than a direct gift from God. Its findings enrich academic debates on the relationship between grace and faith while providing a contextual perspective through an analysis of the *Soera Ni'amoni'ö* translation, which aligns with this conclusion.

**Keywords:** faith; salvation; response; gift; *Soera Ni'amoni'ö*.

## Introduction

Faith is one of the most significant and challenging concepts in the Bible, particularly concerning its relationship with the doctrine of salvation. Without faith, one will perish, whereas with faith, one will be saved. One of the silences of the Bible pertains to its source. There are two views in Christianity on this matter. The first view firmly states that faith solely originates from God. It is a gift from God (Barrett 2013; Hodge 1994; Southard 2016; Schreiner 2015). This view is typically held by Calvinist theologians. Conversely, the second view regards faith as originating from humans. It is humanity's response to God (Forlines 2011; López 2007; Sapaugh 1994). This view is taught by Arminian theologians.

Two passages in the Bible often debated on this issue are Ephesians 2:8–9 and Philippians 1:29. The focus of the debate in Ephesians 2:8–9 concerns the neutral demonstrative pronoun τοῦτο (this). Some views on the antecedent of this pronoun are as follows: (1) 'faith' as its antecedent; (2) 'the concept of salvation by grace through faith' as its antecedent; (3) 'grace' as its antecedent; and (4) καὶ τοῦτο [and this] having an adverbial force without an antecedent (rendered as 'and especially') (Nichols 2004; Wallace 1996). The first and second views understand 'faith' as a gift from God but not the third and last views. Meanwhile, the issue in the text Philippians 1:29 relates to the phrase 'granted to you ... to believe (have faith) in Christ'. Does this phrase mean that faith (belief) is a direct gift (grace) from God to someone (Hansen 2009), or does it mean 'God provides an opportunity for someone to believe (have faith)?' (Gundry 2011). The first meaning asserts that faith is a gift from God but not the second.

In short, the issue of the two aforementioned texts regarding the source of 'faith' has been interpreted in two ways, namely: (1) faith is understood as a gift from God; and conversely, (2) faith is not a gift (originating from) from God. Therefore, this study aims to prove from where the source of faith is according to both texts accompanied by biblical evidence from other texts.

Furthermore, this study will analyse how these two texts have been translated into the Nias-language Bible, known as *Soera Ni'amoni'ö*. By examining *Soera Ni'amoni'ö*, this research aims to

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explore how the translators understood and interpreted the pronoun τοῦτο (Eph 2:8–9) and the phrase ἐχαρίσθη ... πιστεύειν (Phlp 1:29), which have been the subject of theological debate. The analysis of *Soera Ni'amoni'*ö is expected to provide additional insights into how the Nias Christian community has understood and interpreted these texts over time. Thus, this study is not only focused on reconstructing the original meaning of the texts in Greek but also on examining how the concept of faith is transmitted and comprehended within the linguistic and cultural context of the Nias community.

## Research methodology

This study employs a grammatical–historical exegetical approach to uncover the original meaning of the text as intended by the author for its first recipients (Porter & Clarke 2002). The analysis examines the grammatical, syntactical, historical, lexical and theological dimensions of the pronoun τοῦτο in Ephesians 2:8–9 and the phrase ἐχαρίσθη ... τὸ εἰς αὐτὸν πιστεύειν in Philippians 1:29. By doing so, this study aims to determine whether these texts support the notion that faith is a direct gift from God or if they indicate that faith is a human response.

Moreover, this research extends beyond textual analysis by methodologically applying the exegetical findings to contemporary theological discourse and modern Christian understanding (Blomberg 2012; Kaiser & Silva 2007). To reinforce the conclusions derived from exegesis, this study integrates biblical hermeneutics by engaging with supporting arguments from other passages of Scripture. Additionally, an evaluation of the *Soera Ni'amoni'*ö translation provides further insights into how these biblical concepts have been understood within the Nias Christian community. Thus, this study not only contributes to scholarly discussions on biblical theology and translation accuracy but also underscores the broader theological significance of the interpretation of these passages.

## Results and discussion

### Exegesis of Ephesians 2:8–9

The debate centres on determining the antecedent of the neuter-nominative demonstrative pronoun τοῦτο. This word is a proximal demonstrative pronoun, generally translated as 'this' rather than 'that' [ἐκεῖνος] (Wallace 1996). Verses 8 and 9 (BGT) can be divided into two parts:

Verse 8a

ἐστε σεσωσμένοι : God's action (GA)

Τῇ χάριτι : Basis of God's action (BGA)

διὰ πίστεως : Means of receiving God's action (MRGA)

The conjunction γὰρ at the beginning of verse 8a indicates that this sentence functions as an explanation of Paul's statement that God saves His people to demonstrate His grace (Arnold 2010). The term Τῇ χάριτι [grace] functions as

the BGA, namely σεσωσμένοι [saved], as indicated by the use of the dative case, which in this context conveys the meaning of 'because of'. Therefore, χάριτι is best translated as 'by grace' or 'on the basis of grace' (Wallace 1996). Meanwhile, the prepositional phrase διὰ πίστεως [through faith] serves as the instrument for receiving the action σεσωσμένοι, which in this context is referred to as the MRGA (Joersz 2013; Lincoln 1990).

Verses 8b–9

καὶ

τοῦτο : GA, BGA, MRGA?

οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν : Negative source (NS<sup>1</sup>)

θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον : Positive source

οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων : Negative source (NS<sup>2</sup>)

ἵνα μὴ τις καυχῆσται : Purpose of verse 8b

The conjunction καὶ at the beginning of verse 8b serves as an exegetical marker, which can be translated as 'that is', but the most accurate translation is 'and' (Hoehner 2002). Therefore, this conjunction indicates that verses 8b–9 function as a further explanation of 'something' mentioned in verse 8a (Danker 2021; Lincoln 1990). That 'something' is referred to by Paul as τοῦτο. Verse 8a contains three elements: (1) ἐστε σεσωσμένοι (God's action, GA); (2) Τῇ χάριτι (basis of God's action, BGA); and (3) διὰ πίστεως (means of receiving God's action, MRGA) (Cheung 2014; Jamieson 2014). The syntactical question then arises: does 'something' [τοῦτο] refer to GA, BGA, MRGA or the entire clause of verse 8a, as suggested by the majority of scholars (Arnold 2010; Joersz 2013; Lincoln 1990; Wallace 1996)?

Before answering this question, it is necessary to first explain that verses 8b–9 serve as additional clarification regarding the source, origin or cause of τοῦτο. This is emphasised by the meaning of the preposition ἐξ ('οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν [NS<sup>1</sup>], οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων [NS<sup>2</sup>]) in verse 8b–9 (Hoehner 2002), which describes the negative source of τοῦτο. Furthermore, the genitive case in δῶρον also reinforces this idea, as the genitive case of this word functions as a genitive of source parallel to the preposition ἐξ (Baugh 2015), affirming that τοῦτο is a gift [δῶρον] from God (Hoehner 2002). Thus, the term δῶρον serves as the positive source (PS) of τοῦτο. Paul then notes the purpose of why τοῦτο does not originate from the Ephesian believers themselves or from their works but is a gift from God – so that they may not boast [ἵνα μὴ τις καυχῆσται].

### First view: Referring to the entire clause of verse 8a

The majority of scholars adhere to this view (Arnold 2010; Fowl 2012; Joersz 2013; Lincoln 1990; O'Brien 1999; Wallace 1996). For instance, Lincoln (1990) and Arnold (2010) state that the pronoun τοῦτο is best understood as referring to the preceding clause (v. 8a) in its entirety, encompassing the entire process of salvation described in the verse. Consequently, the act of salvation (GA), the basis of salvation (BGA) and the means of salvation (MRGA) are all considered gifts from God.

As previously explained, the phrases οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν, θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον and οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων serve as clarifications of the source, cause or origin of τοῦτο. Here, Paul seeks to elucidate τοῦτο to ensure his readers do not misunderstand it. He asserts that τοῦτο is something that does not originate from themselves or their works but is rather a gift from God. Therefore, the interpretation of τοῦτο must not be detached from Paul's description, as demonstrated by Thielman (2010). He notes:

The first statement (verse 8b) affirms that 'this' (τοῦτο) – that is, the salvation Paul has just discussed – does not originate from Paul's readers themselves (ἐξ ὑμῶν). Therefore, their salvation must come as a δῶρον from God ... The second statement (verse 9) emphasises that salvation does not come 'from' any works they might perform (ἐξ ἔργων). (p. 143)

Even Lincoln himself acknowledges that the phrases 'οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν, θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον and οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων' refer to salvation:

Therefore, οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν asserts that salvation does not originate from the readers, neither as its cause nor its creator.... If translated literally, the second part of verse 8b reads, 'the gift is from God'. The word θεοῦ is placed at the beginning as a stark contrast to ὑμῶν (from yourselves). This underscores that salvation does not come from humanity but from God as His gift. (pp. 111–112)

Similarly, Arnold affirms this view, stating:

Salvation is entirely a 'gift' (τὸ δῶρον), with God explicitly identified as the genitive of origin ('from God'). In a characteristically rhetorical manner, Paul continues to emphasise that salvation does not depend on human effort but is entirely derived from God's grace. (pp. 150–151)

Thus, it can be understood that Lincoln, Arnold and others interpret the pronoun τοῦτο independently of its clause, relying on examples of the pronoun's usage elsewhere, where it consistently refers to the entirety of the preceding concept or statement. However, they do not provide a syntactical, contextual or theological basis for their view. For instance, if Lincoln and Arnold did not interpret the pronoun τοῦτο independently, they would merely affirm that the phrase 'That (τοῦτο) is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God' refers to salvation, rather than the entirety of the preceding concept. As Perkins (1997) asserts, verse 8b underlines the fact that salvation is entirely a gift from God and not a human achievement, while verse 9 reinforces this by explicitly rejecting human works. Williamson (2009) summarises this as follows:

The structure of verses 8–9 leaves no room for misunderstanding. Paul begins with the statement that by grace you have been saved. He then affirms that this is not from ourselves: 'and this is not from you'. He then reiterates the point – our salvation is a gift from God – and once again rejects the idea that salvation is based on human effort: 'it is not from works'. Finally, he states the reason for this fact: 'so that no one may boast'. (p. 63)

O'Brien (1999) similarly asserts:

To emphasise that salvation is solely by God's grace and through faith, Paul adds two negative affirmations: first, 'and this is not from yourselves, but it is the gift of God' (Eph. 2:8b), and second, 'not from works, so that no one may boast' (Eph. 2:9). (p. 175)

Here, proponents of this view overlook the syntactical relationship between the pronoun and the phrases 'οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν, θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον and οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων'. Moreover, MacArthur (1986) underscores that if the pronoun τοῦτο refers to the entire statement 'by grace you have been saved through faith', then the additional phrase 'and this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God' becomes redundant, as grace itself is already defined as an act of God not obtained by human effort. Cheung (2014) also highlights this issue:

Since 'grace' in salvation is, by definition, something given and accomplished by God, and not something generated or performed by humans, the statement that 'this grace is not from yourselves' would appear redundant and unnecessary. (p. 63)

## Second view: Referring to faith or grace

This view is typically held by Reformed scholars. For instance, Jamieson (2014) states that the pronoun τοῦτο refers to 'the act of believing' or 'faith', indicating that faith does not originate from oneself but is a gift from God. MacArthur (1986) prefers to interpret the pronoun as referring to 'the act of believing' rather than 'faith'. Cheung (2014) asserts that the pronoun refers to faith in verse 8a, arguing:

Since faith is something that occurs in our minds and not in God's mind, some mistakenly assume that faith is the result of our own will and strength, thinking that we believe because we choose to do so with our "free will." Because sinful humans prefer to think that faith is a product of their own volition, but since faith is actually a gift from God, it makes sense for Paul to clarify this matter so that we do not conclude that grace comes from God while faith originates from ourselves. (p. 64)

This view has been rejected by modern scholars on the grounds that both 'grace' and 'faith' have different grammatical genders (i.e., feminine) compared to the pronoun τοῦτο [neuter]. As Gundry (2010) notes:

However, this is not the case, because in Paul's Greek grammar, pronouns such as 'this' must match their antecedents in gender and number. But in Greek, the word for 'faith' (and also 'grace', incidentally) is feminine, whereas the Greek word for 'this' is neuter. This mismatch eliminates the possibility that 'this' refers to 'faith'. (n.p.)

Furthermore, the arguments applied to the first view can also be applied to this second view. The pronoun τοῦτο should not be interpreted separately from its complete clause because the clause itself provides a description of the pronoun. Therefore, what τοῦτο refers to – something that is '[not] from yourselves' but is 'the gift of God' and 'not from works' – cannot reasonably refer to 'faith' or 'grace' but rather to salvation or the act of being saved. As Gundry (2010) asserts, the pronoun grammatically and naturally refers to the action expressed by the verb σεσωσμένοι [having been saved]. Bock (2019) further emphasises that it is logically more coherent to state that salvation does not come from works than to claim that faith does not come from works, as the latter statement would be tautological.

### The third view: Referring to the act of salvation or salvation itself

According to this view, the pronoun *τοῦτο* refers to the act of salvation or salvation itself in Ephesians 2:8a (Gundry 2010; Thielman 2010). This is the position adopted in this study. The syntactic, contextual and exegetical arguments supporting this view are as follows:

Firstly, Paul describes the pronoun *τοῦτο* as ‘something’ that does not originate from the Ephesians themselves or their works but is rather a gift [*δῶρον*] from God (Gundry 2010; Thielman 2010). This description serves as the primary indicator for interpreting the pronoun. This description forms a chiasmic construction: (A) οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν; (B) θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον and (A’) οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων (Larkin 2009). The next question is: what is this ‘something’ [*τοῦτο*] that is neither οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν nor οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων but rather θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον? In his other epistles, Paul explicitly states that what is not based on human works is salvation: τοῦ σώσαντος ἡμᾶς ... οὐ κατὰ τὰ ἔργα ἡμῶν (Tm 2 1:9) and οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων ... ἔσωσεν ἡμᾶς (Tt 3:5). Notably, Paul uses the same prepositional phrase οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων in Titus as in Ephesians 2:8.

Secondly, the phrase οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων [‘not from works’] in Ephesians 2:9 does not specifically refer to works of the Law [*ἐξ ἔργων νόμου*] as in Galatians 2:16 or Romans 3:20, 24, 28; 4:2, 6; 9:11. Contextually, this phrase refers to human efforts and actions to gain God’s favour (Fowl 2012), including works of the Law. Barton et al. (1996) affirm that Paul uses this phrase to counter false teachers who claimed that Christians must adhere to all Jewish laws to be saved. Thus, works of the Law are included in Paul’s broader reference to works [*ἔργων*] in Ephesians 2:9 (Bock 2019). Furthermore, Paul elsewhere states that what is οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων or ἐξ ἔργων νόμου pertains to justification (Rom. 3:20, 24, 27, 28; 4:2, 6; 9:11; Gal. 2:16). The term ‘justification’ in these texts is synonymous with ‘salvation’ in Ephesians (Bruce 1984). Consequently, the phrase ἐξ ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαιωθήσεται in these other texts parallels ἐστε σεσωσμένοι ... οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν ... οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων in Ephesians 2:8–9, reinforcing that what Paul refers to as not from human works or works of the Law in this context is justification or salvation.

Moreover, Paul frequently contrasts ‘faith’ with ‘works of the Law’ in the context of obtaining justification, as seen in Romans 3:28, *πίστει δικαιωθῆναι ἄνθρωπον, χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου*, and Galatians 2:16, *δικαιωθῆμεν ἐκ πίστεως χριστοῦ, καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου*. These phrases parallel Ephesians 2:8–9, *ἐστε σεσωσμένοι διὰ πίστεως, καὶ τοῦτο οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν ... οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων*. The parallelism and contrast between ‘faith’ and ‘works [of the Law]’ in Paul’s argument for justification or salvation confirm that human works, including works of the Law, cannot be the negative source of ‘faith’ or ‘grace’. Therefore, the clause *τοῦτο οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν ... οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων* in Ephesians 2:8b–9 cannot refer to ‘faith’, ‘grace’ or the entire concept of verse 8a.

If this contrast is logically structured, where ‘faith’ is the positive means and ‘works [of the Law]’ is the negative means of obtaining justification or salvation, it can be illustrated as follows:

Means 1 (Positive)	: You have been saved or justified through faith.
Means 2 (Negative)	: You have been saved or justified not through deeds.
Conclusion	: You have been saved or justified through faith not through deeds.
Basis 1 (Positive)	: You have been saved or justified by grace.
Basis 2 (Negative)	: You have been saved or justified not by works.
Conclusion	: You have been saved or justified by grace not by works.

Thus, in logical syllogism, ‘Means 2’ (‘not through deeds’) cannot be the source of ‘Means 1’ (‘through faith’). Likewise, ‘Basis 2’ (‘not by works’) cannot be the source of ‘Basis 1’ (‘by grace’). Way 1, Way 2, Basis 1 and Basis 2 explain the means (instrumentality) in both a positive and negative sense regarding how one is ‘saved or justified’. Consequently, the phrase *διὰ πίστεως, καὶ τοῦτο οὐκ ἐξ ὑμῶν ... οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων* in Ephesians 2:8–9 explains the positive means and the negative source of the action *ἐστε σεσωσμένοι*. Knight (2005) affirms this:

This passage conveys its message through a negative and positive approach. On the negative side, the apostle Paul makes two statements: salvation is not the result of your efforts and salvation is ‘not by works, so that no one can boast’. (p. 208)

Thirdly, in its context, verses 8 and 9 serve as a reiteration, expansion and elaboration of the parenthetical statement in verse 5 (‘for by grace you have been saved’) to further emphasise the nature of salvation as grace (Anders 1999). Thus, the entirety of verses 8 and 9 is not intended to emphasise the nature of ‘faith’ or ‘grace’ itself, nor the entirety of the clause in verse 8a but rather a reaffirmation that salvation is by grace, excluding human efforts or works from its equation.

Fourthly, the term ‘gift’ [*δῶρον*] is used only here in Paul’s letters and stands out in the language of ancient philanthropy. This term is virtually synonymous with ‘grace’ [*χάρτι*] (Talbert 2007). The vocabulary used by Paul in verses 8 and 9, such as ‘grace’, ‘through faith’ and ‘the gift of God’, strongly emphasises that salvation is an act of grace or a gift from God. Syntactically, if the phrase *τοῦτο ... θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον* [‘this ... the gift of God’] is transformed into an active sentence, it would take the form: ‘God gives this (*τοῦτο*)’. In this sentence, *τοῦτο* functions as the object, referring to ‘something’ given by God to the Ephesians. Consequently, the use of *δῶρον*



further underscores that τοῦτο refers to 'something' as a divine gift received by the Ephesian congregation. The syntactical question then arises: What is the gift of God [θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον]? Paul himself explains in Romans 5:17 that it is justification, which is synonymous with 'salvation' in Ephesians. Furthermore, in this text, justification is not only described as δωρεά [feminine] but also as χάρις [grace] from God. This closely parallels Ephesians 2:8: 'Τῇ χάριτι ἐστε σεσωσμένοι ... καὶ τοῦτο ... θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον'. Thus, the phrase τοῦτο ... θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον refers to salvation, as affirmed by Lincoln (1990):

If translated literally, the second part of verse 8b reads, 'the gift comes from God'. The word θεοῦ is placed at the beginning in sharp contrast to ὑμῶν ('from yourselves'). This affirms that salvation does not originate from humans but from God as His gift. (p. 112)

Additionally, the question 'What is the gift of God?' is equivalent to asking, 'What has God done for the Ephesian congregation?' This inquiry pertains to GA towards the Ephesians, which is ἐστε σεσωσμένοι ['you have been saved']. Therefore, when the phrase τοῦτο ... θεοῦ τὸ δῶρον is transformed into an active sentence, it clearly indicates that the phrase refers to the act of salvation or salvation itself, rather than 'faith' or 'grace'. As Arnold (2010) asserts, 'Salvation is entirely a "gift" [τὸ δῶρον], with God being expressed as the genitive of source ("from God")'.

Fifthly, Paul's emphasis that τοῦτο is not from themselves or their works but is the gift of God aims to prevent the Ephesians from boasting (v. 9, 'ἵνα μὴ τις καυχῆσθαι'). The syntactical question then arises: In what aspect [τοῦτο] are the Ephesians not to boast? Is it in 'grace', 'faith' or 'salvation'? A similar admonition appears in Romans 3:20, where the prohibition against boasting is linked to the act of justification received by the Romans, which is equivalent to the act of 'salvation' in Ephesians 2:8. Paul states that they may boast, but only in faith, not in works. Thus, this parallelism affirms that Paul forbids the Ephesians from boasting [μὴ τις καυχῆσθαι] about the salvation they have received, as its source is neither themselves nor their works but rather the gift of God (Abbott 2014). Hohner (2002) further reinforces this by stating that all forms of boasting must be eliminated concerning received salvation, as salvation is not obtained through good works but through faith.

The grammatical, syntactical, contextual and exegetical analysis conducted confirms that there is no basis for interpreting the pronoun τοῦτο as referring to 'faith', 'grace' or 'the entire clause or concept in verse 8a'. The analysis demonstrates that the pronoun is most appropriately understood as referring to the act of salvation or salvation itself.

## Exegesis of Philippians 1:29

As previously noted, the issue in this text revolves around whether the phrase ὑμῖν ἐχαρίσθη ... τὸ εἰς αὐτὸν πιστεῦν ['it has been granted to you ... to believe in Christ'] should be understood as faith being directly given as a gift by God to an

individual (Hawthorne 2004). This would mean that God directly bestows faith upon a person, similar to someone directly giving money to another person, who then immediately receives it. Alternatively, it could mean that God grants someone the opportunity to believe (to have faith) (Brown 2022; Bruce 2011).

## The meaning of ἐχαρίσθη [granted]

The verbs πιστεῦν [to believe] and πάσχειν [to suffer] in this verse are present infinitives, while the main verb is the indicative verb ἐχαρίσθη [granted]. O'Brien (1991) notes that these two present infinitives indicate a continuous relationship between 'believing' in Christ and 'continually suffering' for His name. Furthermore, the two following articles τὸ (τὸ πιστεῦν καὶ τὸ πάσχειν) clarify the first article τὸ (τὸ ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ) (Hellerman 2015). Therefore, τὸ πιστεῦν (faith or belief) and τὸ πάσχειν [suffering] provide additional information about what has been granted [ἐχαρίσθη] to the Philippian congregation (Hansen 2009). This aligns with the function of both verbs as appositional infinitives. An appositional infinitive refers to a specific example included within a broader category mentioned by the main noun and serves to define the main verb (Wallace 1996). Mounce (2019) refers to this as a 'complementary infinitive', which is used to provide additional information to complete the meaning of the main verb, often translated with 'to' or 'namely' followed by a verb. Consequently, the action of ἐχαρίσθη [granted] applies to both πιστεῦν [faith] and πάσχειν [suffering].

Thus, the question arises: should ἐχαρίσθη [granted] be understood as God directly bestowing πιστεῦν [faith] upon the Philippian believers, akin to someone directly giving something to another person? If understood in this way, then πάσχειν [suffering] must also be strictly interpreted as a direct gift from God to them, because the verb ἐχαρίσθη governs both infinitives.

Suffering [πάσχειν] in this context refers to persecution in the form of ostracism, slander, discrimination, false accusations, heresies, opposition to the glory of the Roman state and its gods, confiscation of property, verbal and physical abuse and imprisonment (Bird & Gupta 2020; Joersz 2013; Thompson & Longenecker 2016). Scripture explicitly rejects the notion that such suffering originates from God or is directly given by Him as an irrevocable gift [χάρις or χάρισμα] (Olson 2002). The same type of suffering was experienced by the readers of the Epistle of James, yet James explicitly describes such suffering as not originating from God or being directly given by Him (Ja 1:13). Therefore, ἐχαρίσθη in Philippians 1:29 cannot be strictly interpreted as 'God directly bestowing' suffering upon the Philippians. Rather, it should be understood more loosely as meaning that 'God allows or grants the opportunity' for the Philippians to suffer for Christ (Brown 2022; Bruce 2011). This opportunity is regarded as a privilege (Merida & Chan 2016). Consequently, the phrase ὑμῖν ἐχαρίσθη ... τὸ εἰς αὐτὸν πιστεῦν ['it has been granted to you to believe in Him'] must also be understood in the same way: that 'God allows or grants the opportunity' for the Philippians to believe in

Christ, because both πιστεύειν and πάσχειν are infinitive objects of the verb ἐχαρίσθη.

Moreover, the term ἐχαρίσθη is derived from χαρίζομαι, which conveys the sense of goodwill or mercy freely given, undeserved and generously bestowed as a privilege. Therefore, this word is translated as 'to bestow grace or mercy' (O'Brien 1991; Vine 1981). As such, it signifies privilege (Hamm 2013; Hawthorne 2004), a concept made explicit in many translations: 'you have [*graciously*] been granted the privilege of suffering for Christ'.<sup>1</sup> Semantically, the term ἐχαρίσθη emphasises the nature of πιστεύειν and πάσχειν as privileges granted by God to the Philippians. This means that when the Philippians were given the opportunity (allowed) to believe and suffer for Christ, it was considered a privilege for them. Therefore, the semantic meaning of ἐχαρίσθη itself should not be understood as 'God directly bestowing' faith and suffering upon them.

### Comparison with Acts 11:18

The proper way to understand the phrase ἐχαρίσθη ... πιστεύειν ... καὶ πάσχειν ['granted to believe and to suffer'] in this text is by comparing it with the expression μετάνοιαν ἔδωκεν ['granted repentance'] in Acts 11:18. The phrase μετάνοιαν ἔδωκεν in this passage is an idiom (Keener 2020) and should not be interpreted literally. This expression appears only in Wisdom of Solomon 12:10, which states ἐδίδους τόπον μετανοίας, meaning 'granted a place for repentance' ('gavest them place of repentance' [KJV]; 'gave them an opportunity to repent' [NRSVUE]). The phrase also appears in 12:19 as διδοῖς ... μετάνοιαν ['granted repentance']. Keener (2013) asserts that this expression signifies that God generously provided Israel with the opportunity to repent and also allowed the Canaanites to do so although they never took advantage of this opportunity. Thus, the phrase μετάνοιαν ἔδωκεν in Acts 11:18 should be understood in this sense: 'God granted the opportunity for repentance' not only to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. Consequently, this phrase should not be interpreted as 'God directly granted repentance to the Jews and Gentiles', in the sense that God was the direct giver of that repentance itself. This interpretation is supported by the observable reality that many Jews and Gentiles still had not repented (Olson 2002).

Applying this understanding, the same interpretive approach should be used for ἐχαρίσθη ... πιστεύειν ... καὶ πάσχειν in Philippians 1:29. This phrase should be understood as indicating that God provides the opportunity or means for individuals to believe and to suffer for their faith. This implies that the gift of faith and suffering is not something directly given by God but rather an opportunity available to those who respond to the divine calling. This interpretation aligns with the broader theological principle in the New Testament that human faith involves personal responsibility. For instance, in Romans 10:17, Paul states that 'faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ'.

<sup>1</sup>See the bible dictionary of Ancient Greek (BDAG) and the bible versions PHILLIPS, NEB, GNB, JB, NLT, Amplified Bible, GWT, GNT, ISV, and NRSV.

If faith were entirely given directly without human involvement, then the responsibility to hear and respond to the word would become less significant. Thus, the phrase ἐχαρίσθη ... πιστεύειν is best understood as God providing individuals with the opportunity to believe rather than as a direct gift from God. This interpretation of Philippians 1:29 respects the principle of human freedom in responding to the divine call while also affirming God's initiative and grace in salvation.

### Theological argument

The various theological foundations for asserting that faith is not a direct gift from God but rather a human response are as follows: Firstly, numerous testimonies in the New Testament affirm that what is granted as a gift from God to believers is salvation or eternal life, as seen in passages such as John 10:28; 17:2; 1 John 5:11 and Romans 5:15, 16; 6:23. Nowhere else in the New Testament is faith explicitly stated as a divine gift, apart from Ephesians 2:8–9 and Philippians 1:29, both of which remain subjects of exegetical debate.

Secondly, numerous biblical narratives and texts depict instances where individuals who have not yet believed are commanded (or called) to believe in or trust in Christ. Moreover, faith is consistently presented as a requirement (when used as a verb) and as a means (when used as a noun) for obtaining salvation (Ladd 1993). When someone is commanded to perform an action, it indicates that the action originates from that person themselves. Similarly, when the Bible commands individuals to believe in Christ, it underscores that the action originates from the one being commanded, rather than from an external source. Furthermore, when a requirement must be met or a means must be utilised to attain something, it suggests that the requirement or means is inherently possessed by the individual. This principle applies to faith, which is both a prerequisite and an essential means that every person must fulfil and possess to receive salvation—it originates from within the individual, not from an external source.

Thirdly, a theological paradox arises if the faith that is commanded and required from individuals does not originate from themselves. This theological irony would be particularly problematic if Jesus, during His earthly ministry, commanded people to believe in Him, while faith itself did not originate from them but was instead a divine gift. It would be unjust for individuals to be condemned for not believing in Christ if faith were not granted to them by God. In such a scenario, could unbelievers be held accountable for their lack of faith? If faith were a divine gift, Jesus would not have posed the rhetorical question, 'When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?' (Lk 18:8), because faith would necessarily exist wherever God had bestowed it. Instead, this question reinforces the notion that faith originates from human beings, whom Christ expects to possess faith upon His return.

Fourthly, the verb 'believe' (or 'faith') in the Bible is synonymous with 'receive' in the context of receiving Christ (Jn 1:11–12) and is antonymous to 'reject' or 'disbelieve' (Mt 13:37; Gal 2:21). These synonyms and antonyms clarify that the acts of receiving and rejecting Christ are personal responses. A further theological paradox arises if faith as a divine gift does not originate from humans: why is the rejection of Christ understood as a human act, while the acceptance (believing) in Him is regarded as a divine gift? Why should the source of these opposing actions – rejecting and accepting Christ – be understood differently? Such an inconsistency raises questions about the coherence of biblical interpretation.

Fifthly, Paul observes that within the Ephesian church, there were individuals whose faith failed under testing, proving to be inadequate, worthless or disgraceful – translated from the Greek term ἀδόκιμοι (*adokimoi*) (Tm 2 3:8) (Danker 2021). If faith were a divine gift, could it then become worthless or disgraceful? Can a gift or work of God be subject to failure? If faith were divinely bestowed, could those who had received faith – such as some members of the Ephesian church – ultimately destroy their own faith?

Another theological argument against faith being a divine gift is the claim that if faith originates from human beings, it would be considered a meritorious act or work that earns salvation. However, biblical logic asserts that even if faith comes from humans, it is not a meritorious act but rather a means by which salvation is received. The noun 'faith' functions as a means to obtain salvation, while its verb form serves as a condition for salvation. This concept can be illustrated as follows: Suppose Person A purchases a new car, paying for it in full with his own money. He then offers the car as a free gift to Person B, who does not have to pay anything or provide any service in return. Person B has two possible responses to this gift: either to reject or to accept it. If he accepts the car, it becomes his at no cost. His action of accepting the car is not a meritorious act or work.

Similarly, salvation – represented by the car in the illustration – is the result of Christ's work on the cross. Christ offers salvation to everyone freely, without requiring payment or merit. People can respond to this offer in two ways: by rejecting or accepting it. Accepting salvation is synonymous with believing in Christ. When someone accepts salvation, it is evident that this acceptance is not a meritorious act but merely a response to the offer (Little 2003).

In conclusion, the biblical evidence and theological reasoning presented above support the view that faith is not a gift from God but rather a personal response required from each individual. Faith is commanded, expected and necessary for salvation, and its very nature implies that it originates within the individual rather than being divinely imparted.

## The translation perspective of the Soera Ni'amoni'ö Bible

The *Soera Ni'amoni'ö* Bible is a translation of the Bible into the Nias language, spoken in North Sumatra, Indonesia. It was first published in its entirety in 1911. A distinguishing feature of this first edition was the use of the Van Ophuijsen spelling system, which employed the vowel 'oe', pronounced as 'u'. This version was later updated using the Soewandi spelling system and the Enhanced Spelling System, replacing 'oe' with 'u'. In 2006, the *Soera Ni'amoni'ö* Bible underwent a revision. The texts of Ephesians 2:8–9 and Philippians 1:29 in the *Soera Ni'amoni'ö* bible translation (1911) are presented in Table 1.

The pronoun τούτο in Ephesians 2:8–9 is translated as *da'ö* ([that] – τούτο) as a distal demonstrative pronoun, whereas it should have been translated as *da'a* ([this] – τούτο) as a proximal demonstrative, in accordance with the function of the original text. Furthermore, the pronoun *da'ö* (τούτο) can be understood as the object of the phrase *ba tenga moroi chōmi* ['and not from yourselves'] because it is placed at the end of the phrase. However, this pronoun may also function as the subject of that phrase, because the Nias language has a syntactical structure where the subject is often positioned at the end of a sentence. Therefore, its use here is more accurately interpreted as a subject.

Its placement at the end of the phrase rather than after the conjunction *ba* ['and'] (which would result in '*ba dao tenga moroi chōmi*') serves several purposes: Firstly, to avoid ambiguity in the phrase *ba dao*, which could be interpreted as 'there' or 'and that'. Secondly, to emphasise that the pronoun is closely tied to the phrase *tenga moroi chōmi*, which functions as a descriptor of the negative source of the pronoun *da'ö* (τούτο). Thirdly, more significantly, to link and align verses 8b–9 with the phrase *moroi ba wamati* ('from faith' – διὰ πίστεως, v. 8a). The phrase *moroi ba wamati* describes the source of *no aeri ami* ('you have been [in a state of] saved' – ἐστε σεσωσμένοι). The parallelism between *moroi ba wamati* and verses 8b–9 is further reinforced by the repeated use of the word *moroi* ['from'], which appears three times in verses 8–9, structuring the passage as follows:

<i>A moroi ba wamati,</i>	: from faith
<i>B ba tenga moroi chōmi da'ö,</i>	: not from yourselves, that

**TABLE 1:** Text of Ephesians 2:8-9 and Philippians 1:29 in the *Soera Ni'amoni'ö* bible and its literal translation.

Verse	Nias language	Literal translation to English
<b>Ephesians 2:8-9</b>	<i>Fa'ahachō dōdō sa, wa no aeri ami, moroi ba wamati, ba tenga moroi chōmi da'ö, no boeala Lowalangi. tenga moroi ba mboeaboea, fa bōi isoen ia niha.</i>	By grace, that you have [been] alive, originating from faith, and not from yourselves – it is a gift of God.  not from works, so that no one may boast.
<b>Philippians 1:29</b>	<i>29 Noa sa tetehe chōmi – fa'ebōea dōdō – mitaha wamakao bōrō Keriso, tenga ha famati chōnia</i>	It has been granted to you – the greatness of heart – to endure suffering for Christ, not only to believe in Him.



*A' no boeala Lowalang* : but a gift of God

*B' tenga moroi ba mboeaboea* : not from works

In the above structure, B–A'–B' also describes the source of the pronoun *da'ō* [τοῦτο], meaning it does not originate from the Ephesian congregation or their works but rather as a gift from God. Thus, because B–A'–B' describes both the pronoun *da'ō* [τοῦτο] and *no aeri ami*, it confirms that they are identical. This means that the pronoun *da'ō* [τοῦτο] can be interpreted as (or referring to) *no aeri ami*. Consequently, *da'ō* [τοῦτο] cannot refer to *wamati* ['faith'] in A, because A and B–A'–B' both describe the source of *no aeri ami*.

Furthermore, the pronoun *da'ō* [τοῦτο] cannot refer to *fa'ahachō dōdō* ['grace'] either, because in the Nias language, this phrase does not denote 'something' that can be given or received but rather an emotion of compassion (Laiya et al. 1985). As such, it functions as the basis for *wa no aeri ami*. Because the pronoun *da'ō* [τοῦτο] is described as *boeala* [gift], it emphasises that the pronoun refers to 'something that can be received as a gift by the Ephesian congregation'.

Additionally, the expression ὑμῖν ἐχαρίσθη ... πιστεῦειν ... καὶ πάσχειν in Philippians 1:29 in the *Soera Ni'amoni'ō* translation conveys that God has permitted suffering and faith for the Philippian congregation, and that this permission is an act of His grace ('*fa'eboea dōdō*' [translated as 'greatness of heart'] is an idiomatic expression in the Nias language for 'grace'). This can be seen in the use of the word *tetehe* ('*noa sa tetehe chōmi – fa'eboea dōdō*', translated as 'it has been permitted to you – greatness of heart'), which means 'permitted'. Therefore, the expression *noa sa tetehe chōmi – fa'eboea dōdō* asserts that suffering and faith occur because they are 'permitted', not directly bestowed by God.

Thus, because the pronoun *da'ō* [τοῦτο] (Eph 2:8–9) is understood as referring to 'the act of salvation' ['*no aeri ami*' – ἐστε σεσωσμένοι] and the expression ὑμῖν ἐχαρίσθη ... πιστεῦειν is understood as 'God permitting faith for the Philippian congregation' in the *Soera Ni'amoni'ō* Bible, it can be concluded that this is how the translators of this Bible understood these two theological issues in both texts. This understanding has consequently been followed by all Nias Christians as its readers because the *Soera Ni'amoni'ō* Bible is the only Bible available in the Nias language.

## Conclusion

Based on a thorough exegetical analysis, this study concludes that the pronoun τοῦτο in Ephesians 2:8–9 does not refer to 'faith', 'grace' or 'the entire clause in verse 8a' but rather to the act of salvation itself [ἐστε σεσωσμένοι]. Meanwhile, the phrase ἐχαρίσθη ... πιστεῦειν in Philippians 1:29 is idiomatic, meaning that God granted (permitted) the Philippian believers the opportunity to believe. Linguistically and contextually, this phrase does not imply that God directly imparted faith to them. Therefore, these two texts do not

support the claim that faith is a direct gift from God. Instead, various other biblical texts indicate that faith is a human response originating from within the individual, though it is not a meritorious work. In this regard, what is given by God is salvation itself.

Furthermore, the findings of this study have significant implications for biblical translation. An analysis of the *Soera Ni'amoni'ō* translation of Ephesians 2:8–9 and Philippians 1:29 reveals that the translators of this version have accurately reflected an understanding consistent with the conclusions of this research. Thus, this study not only contributes to exegetical discussions in biblical theology but also affirms the accuracy of the *Soera Ni'amoni'ō* translation and reinforces the theological understanding of the Nias Christian community, including the Catholic faithful in the region.

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### Authors' contributions

J.J. contributed to conceptualisation, writing the original draft and resources. S.B. contributed to conceptualisation, writing the original draft and resources. H.Z.L. contributed to conceptualisation, writing the original draft, methodology, formal analysis and writing – review and editing.

### Ethical considerations

This research has been approved and examined by Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Injili Indonesia Surabaya (Evangelical Theological Seminary of Indonesia Surabaya) on 2 February 2025 and did not involve direct contact with humans. The ethical clearance number is No. 00367/KEP-STTI Sby/EC/II/2025.

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### Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article.

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