Justification by Faith

Alone

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20, ESV).

The Cross is the only bridge to freedom.
In our study this week, we may struggle to know exactly what Paul meant by the doctrine of justification by faith. But some of our best-known hymns tell us exactly how it feels. “Amazing Grace” was written by John Newton in 1772. Newton had good reason to consider himself a “wretch.” Abandoning the religion of his youth, he became a rebellious young man who was notorious for his wild ways. While onboard the ship Greyhound, Newton was called by the captain one of the most profane men he had ever met. Later in his career, he worked on slave ships as part of that terrible traffic in human beings.

**But finding his faith means that everything has changed.**

But a terrifying storm at sea, which Newton only survived by tying himself to the ship’s pump, began his conversion. When he left the sea for good, he became a priest and wrote many hymns, of which “Amazing Grace” is the most popular.

In this hymn, Newton admits that his life has not been perfect. He has felt “lost” and “blind.” But finding his faith means that everything has changed. The feeling of wonder and joy in this hymn makes it a universal favorite.

“And Can It Be?” was written by Charles Wesley in 1738. Wesley’s story was very different from John Newton’s. He was an exemplary child who grew up to be a clergyman. While at Oxford, he and his brother John led a prayer group known for the piety of its members. The name “Methodist,” used to describe members of the group, came from their reputation for methodical Bible study and a disciplined lifestyle. Yet in spite of all Charles’s good works, he felt worthless in God’s eyes.

All this changed when he had a conversion experience and began his mission to ordinary people, traveling the country and preaching in fields so that everyone could experience God’s love.

In this hymn, Wesley admits that he can’t understand why Jesus should take responsibility for his sins. It doesn’t make sense. But his expression of how wonderful it feels makes this one of his best-known and best-loved hymns.

**REACT**

1. Look up the rest of the words of these hymns. Which do you prefer, and why?
2. Do we have to be able to explain something before we can experience it?

Jenny Waller, Somerset, England
Outsiders and Insiders

Paul seems to have been proud of his Roman citizenship and boyhood in the rich Cilician trading city of Tarsus, where Greco-Roman culture provided wide-ranging educational opportunities and where he learned to speak and write Hellenistic Greek.

As a Jew, Paul later also received a Hebrew education in Jerusalem. But coming from abroad, he may have felt like an outsider. Maybe his dress or accent attracted mockery? Perhaps it was to compensate for these differences or for physical infirmities that he became a Pharisee, fanatical in his opposition to the teachings—and followers—of a Messiah who seemed little more than a weakling. To Paul, God's chosen people could be saved from destruction only by faithful attention to every detail of the law of Moses. They needed to be insiders.

Christ's new covenant allows room for cultural diversity and for a community spirit that extends across boundaries of race and culture, resulting in equality of faith, not exclusivism.

New Faith, New Outreach

However, the Paul writing to the Galatians was a new man. He had come in from the cold of legalism to the warmth of redemptive grace. Now he had a new commission—sharing the gospel. But he was still an outsider, not easy for Jewish followers of Christ to trust. It's clear that God chose Paul because of his earlier fanatical commitment to tradition. This meant he understood the need to go beyond the status quo to share Christ with outsiders like the Galatians without requiring them to take on Jewish identity. Christ's new covenant allows room for cultural diversity and for a community spirit that extends across boundaries of race and culture, resulting in equality of faith, not exclusivism.

REACT

1. Read Romans 2:12–15 and consider what the following phrases/words mean: “conscience” (verse 15, NIV), “do by nature things required by the law” (verse 14, NIV), and “a law for themselves” (verse 14, NIV).
2. Do modern Gentiles need missionaries, or can we leave evangelism to the Holy Spirit?
3. How do we share the gospel without imposing our culture?
Background (Gal. 2:14–21)
In Galatians 2:14–21, Paul is responding to the news that church leaders including Peter (or Cephas), Barnabas, and other former Jews were requiring non-Jewish converts to follow Jewish custom and be circumcised. This was about far more than the conduct of the church's leaders. “The welfare of the Gentile believers was at stake, and even the fate of the gospel itself. If the Judaizing party [had] its way, then the gospel—salvation through faith in the atoning death of Jesus—would be [replaced] by the doctrine of salvation through the works of the law. Thus ‘the truth of the gospel’ would no longer be proclaimed.”

The Importance of Faith (Gal. 2:20)
Since Paul did not use either paragraph breaks or quotation marks, it is not clear whether his address to Peter ends with verse 14 or continues through to verse 21. Since Peter now drops out of sight, it is probably better to see Paul's rebuke to him as ending with verse 14 and to regard the verses that follow as a statement of Paul's understanding of the gospel in miniature, specifically in the context of the situation in Galatia.2

In verse 20, Paul makes it clear that for him the question of faith is at the heart of both his own relationship with Christ and of the gospel as a whole.

“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (verse 20, ESV).

This affirmation of the importance of faith is a recurring theme in both the Gospels (John 1:12; 3:16) and Paul's other writings (see Rom. 4:3; 5:1).

The Doctrine of Justification by Faith (Ps. 143:2)
Paul argues that justification (a legal term whereby we are spared the consequences of sin) comes as a free gift of God through Christ. Works have no part in the transaction. On God's part, it is a gift made possible through Christ. On humanity's part, we have to trust that God is able and willing to justify us as sinners. Faith and faith alone is the means by which we are justified.3

For Paul, this doctrine is above all about a personal reaching out to the love and peace of God as revealed in Christ. Justification may be a legal term, but it simply signifies that we are accepted by God, granted permission to stand as members of His household, and recognized as His children with all the potentialities of heirs. Our status is restored just as the prodigal son

Faith and faith alone is the means by which we are justified.
was restored to his former position through his father's grace when all he sought was the rank of a servant. Note how Paul supports his argument with a quotation from the Old Testament (Ps. 143:2). Scripture was for the Jews the final court of appeal.

By the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ, without the need for the works of the law, Paul avoids two difficulties. First, the grace of God becomes essential, whereas if we could be justified through works, there would be no need of grace. Second, the death of Christ remains central, whereas if we look for salvation to the law of Moses, Christ's death is unnecessary.4

**Faith and the Reformation (Rom. 1:17)**

The doctrine of justification by faith lies at the heart of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Martin Luther, a leading figure in the Reformation, came to reject the Medieval church's claim that forgiveness could be bought with acts of penance or with money.

The story goes that the pope had promised an indulgence (a reduction in punishment) to all who climbed on their knees up "Pilate's staircase," said to have been descended by Christ and to have been miraculously conveyed from Jerusalem to Rome. One day Luther was devoutly climbing up these steps, when suddenly a voice like thunder seemed to say to him, "The righteous shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17, ESV). He sprang to his feet and left the place in shame and horror. That text never lost its power for him.

From that time on, he saw clearly the fallacy of trusting to human works for salvation and the need, instead, for faith in Christ. "His eyes had been opened, and were never again to be closed, to the delusions of the papacy. When he turned his face from Rome, he had turned away also in heart, and from that time the separation grew wider, until he severed all connection with the papal church."5

**REACT**

1. Do we need to understand everything before we can have faith in God? Why, or why not? (see Job 13:15)
2. Why is the doctrine that the just shall live by faith so important to the Christian walk? Is faith a leap into the darkness or a leap into the light?
3. What reformation do you think would occur if we studied Galatians afresh? What needs reforming in our church or lives?

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Roy King, Bracknell, England
Ellen White’s writings contain much thought and extensive discussion on the topic of salvation by faith and the role of works.

“Justification by faith is placed beyond controversy. And all this controversy is ended, as soon as the matter is settled that the merits of fallen man in his good works can never procure eternal life for him.

“The light given me of God places this important subject above any question in my mind. Justification is wholly of grace and not procured by any works that fallen man can do.”

“We must not think that our own grace and merits will save us; the grace of Christ is our only hope of salvation.”

“We must learn in the school of Christ. Nothing but His righteousness can entitle us to one of the blessings of the covenant of grace. We have long desired and tried to obtain these blessings, but have not received them because we have cherished the idea that we could do something to make ourselves worthy of them. We have not looked away from ourselves, believing that Jesus is a living Saviour. We must not think that our own grace and merits will save us; the grace of Christ is our only hope of salvation.”

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8, NKJV). “Here is truth that will unfold the subject to your mind if you do not close it to the rays of light. Eternal life is an infinite gift. This places it outside the possibility of our earning it, because it is infinite. It must necessarily be a gift. As a gift it must be received by faith, and gratitude and praise be offered to God. Solid faith will not lead anyone away into fanaticism or into acting the slothful servant. It is the bewitching power of Satan that leads men to look to themselves in the place of looking to Jesus. The righteousness of Christ must go before us if the glory of the Lord becomes our reward. If we do God’s will, we may accept large blessings as God’s free gift, but not because of any merit in us; this is of no value.”

**REACT**

1. Are we saved by faith alone or is there always a “but,” for example, “but we have to repent first”?
2. Is it easy to accept that salvation is a free gift and there is nothing you can do to earn it?

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The argument in Galatians 2 over circumcision is about being exclusive and about belonging to a distinctive community of the “saved” by obeying the law. Paul is “astonished” by such behavior (Gal. 1:6, NIV), calling it a perversion of the gospel. So how can we make sure we avoid it?

*Don’t use the law to judge others.* Adventists are encouraged to live by certain guidelines about what to eat, what to wear, and how to behave. The guidelines are intended to keep us healthy and to protect us from what Paul calls the “acts of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19, NIV). But it’s tempting to use them to judge others, turning them into sinners in the eyes of our community and creating barriers for new believers.

None of us will be judged perfect because of how we’ve lived our lives, however obedient we were or however much good we did.

Our tendency to judge one another, and our hypocrisy in doing so, is a constant theme in the Gospels. Remember the tax collector (Luke 19:1–9) and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3–11), presented to Christ as sinners but forgiven by Him. Both of them and each of us are made right with God (“justified”) through faith—not by what we’ve done.

*Reflect on the judgment and what saves us.* Standing before God at the judgment, none of us will be judged perfect because of how we’ve lived our lives, however obedient we were or however much good we did. Instead, through grace (a free gift we do not deserve) Jesus will stand in our place. Although He is sinless, He suffered the punishment we deserve. Accepting this will keep our focus on faith rather than works. “This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Rom. 3:22, NIV).

*Act in line with your faith.* Your faith in Christ will show in your life—in your choices, your actions, and the way you treat other people (yes, they will notice). As James says, “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds” (James 2:18, NIV).

**REACT**

1. Have you ever made judgments about whether someone else is a good Christian? Or have you heard others discuss church members in this way? Should they?
2. The world is very competitive. Some people strive for perfection and feel bad when they don’t achieve it. What does this week’s lesson say to them?
For psychologist Izzy Kalman, most of the world’s problems are caused by good intentions.1 The witch hunters of the Middle Ages burned tens of thousands of women to try to end epidemics. Even Hitler believed he was doing the right thing, making the world a better place without Jews and other people he thought were impure.

The same applies to our actions in the natural world. “In the 1970s, catfish farmers introduced Asian carp into their fisheries with the good intention of keeping the water clear of plankton and algae, allowing for healthier catfish.”2 Now the voracious and aggressive Asian carp have decimated native species. That well-known expression, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions,” is all too often true.

Kalman states, “We can’t assume that everything that results from our good intentions will be positive. . . . Good intentions alone are not enough to make our actions moral.” We have to take responsibility for the consequences of our actions, even if they’re unintended.

In Galatians 5, Paul provides us with a way of testing whether our actions are truly moral. If we're acting in accordance with God's will, everything we do will demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit, “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22, 23, NIV). Just think how different history would be if world leaders had applied this test.

For Christian philosopher C. S. Lewis, the age-old argument about whether faith or works is more important is not really an argument at all. Both matter.

“Christians have often disputed as to whether what leads the Christian home is good actions, or Faith in Christ. . . . It does seem to me like asking which blade in a pair of scissors is most necessary.”3

REACT

1. Have you ever done something that had unintended consequences?
2. Do terrorists think they have good intentions? Do you think they do?
3. Do the ends ever justify the means?

2. Ibid.

Elizabeth Rhodes, Somerset, England
To be an observant Jew in the first century was to wrestle with identity. The glory days of Israel were many generations past, and whether one lived in Judea or Galatia, they were ruled by a government indifferent to their religious principles. To hold on to identity, people emphasized customs that set them apart. The trouble came when those practices, though meant to point to God, came to overshadow God. When Jewish Christians pushed Gentile converts to follow Jewish customs, Paul reminded them that it’s our internal faith in Jesus that saves us, not our external actions. After all, Paul said, if our works could save us, Jesus could have saved Himself the trip to Earth.

CONSIDER

- Listing different ways you and people you’ve known have tried to earn favor with God.
- Diagramming the percentage of your relationship with God that you think is based on works versus trusting in and relying on Him.
- Meditating on the role faith plays in reconciling us to God.
- Celebrating what God has done for you and what you’ve overcome.
- Discussing whether Christians today give too much emphasis to works or to relationship.
- Role-playing the debate between Paul and those pushing justification by works.
- Planning how you will live by faith in God.

CONNECT

