

# Justification *and the* Law



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** *Gen. 15:6; 2 Samuel 11, 12; Rom. 3:20–23, 31; 4:1–17; Gal. 3:19; 1 John 3:4.*

**Memory Text:** “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law” (*Romans 3:31*).

In many ways, Romans 4 gets to the foundation of the biblical doctrine of salvation by faith alone. By using Abraham—the paragon of holiness and virtue—as an example of someone who needed to be saved by grace, without the deeds of the law, Paul left readers no room for misunderstanding. If the best one’s works and law-keeping weren’t enough to justify him before God, what hope does anyone else have? If it had to be by grace with Abraham, it has to be the same with everyone else, Jews and Gentiles.

In Romans 4, Paul reveals three major stages in the plan of salvation: (1) the promise of divine blessing (the promise of grace); (2) the human response to that promise (the response of faith); and, finally, (3) the divine pronouncement of righteousness credited to those who believe (justification). That’s how it worked with Abraham, and that’s how it works with us.

It is crucial to remember that for Paul, salvation is by grace; it’s something that is given to us, however undeserving we are. If we deserved it, then we’d be owed it, and if we’re owed it, it’s a debt and not a gift. And for beings corrupt and fallen as we are, salvation has to be a gift.

To prove his point about salvation by faith alone, Paul goes all the way to the book of Genesis, quoting Genesis 15:6—“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (*NIV*).

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 31.*

## The Law Established

**Read** Romans 3:31. What’s Paul’s point here? Why is this point important to us as Seventh-day Adventists?

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In this passage, Paul states emphatically that faith does not make void God’s law. Even those who kept the law, even the entire Old Testament corpus of law, were never saved by it. The religion of the Old Testament, as that of the New, was always one of God’s grace given to sinners by faith.

**Read** Romans 4:1–8. How does this show that even in the Old Testament, salvation was by faith and not by works of the law?

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According to this Old Testament narrative, Abraham was accounted righteous because he “believed God.” Therefore, the Old Testament itself teaches righteousness by faith. Hence, any implication that faith “makes void” (Greek *katargeo*, “renders useless,” “invalidates”) the law is false; salvation by faith is very much part of the Old Testament. Grace is taught all the way through it. What, for instance, was the entire sanctuary ritual if not a representation of how sinners are saved, not by their own works but by the death of a substitute in their stead?

Also, what else can explain how David was forgiven after the sordid affair with Bathsheba? Certainly it wasn’t law-keeping that saved him, for he violated so many principles of the law that it condemned him on numerous counts. If David were to be saved by the law, then David would not be saved at all.

Paul sets forth David’s restoration to divine favor as an example of justification by faith. Forgiveness was an act of God’s grace. Here, then, is another example from the Old Testament of righteousness by faith. In fact, however legalistic many in ancient Israel became, the Jewish religion was always a religion of grace. Legalism was a perversion of it, not its foundation.

**Dwell for a few minutes on David’s sin and restoration (2 Samuel 11, 12, Psalm 51). What hope can you draw from that sad story for yourself? Is there a lesson here in how we in the church should treat those who have fallen?**

## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Romans 4:1, 2*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Explain why an understanding of faith in God’s provisions for our righteousness has been the foundation of a right relationship with Him through the Old as well as the New Testament.

**Feel:** Sense the blessings of justification by faith.

**Do:** Abandon our own works and throw our entire trust on what Christ has done.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Abraham’s Faith**

**A** Why was Abraham, father of both the circumcised and uncircumcised, accounted righteous? What is the significance of knowing that this accounting occurred long before the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, the giving of Mosaic laws, or Christ’s death on the cross?

**B** Why has justification by faith, rather than by keeping the law, been a crucial belief for all people in all ages?

**II. Feel: The Blessings of Justification**

**A** Though David sinned grievously, how was God able to forgive him?

**B** What are the blessings that come from being justified by faith? (*Rom. 4:6–8*).

**III. Do: Abandoning Self for Christ**

**A** Because the law doesn’t give life or righteousness but only distinguishes between righteousness and sin, what do we do to become righteous and to have eternal life?

**B** How should those who are saved by Christ’s sacrifice relate to the law?

► **Summary:** All people in every age have faced the same need to abandon any sense of working for salvation by following rules or rituals. Salvation comes only by allowing God to make us right through the blood that was shed for us in Christ Jesus.

## Grace or Debt?

The issue Paul is dealing with here is much more than just theology. It gets to the heart and soul of salvation and of our relationship to God. If one believes that he or she must earn acceptance, that he or she must reach a certain standard of holiness before being justified and forgiven, then how natural to turn inward and to look to oneself and one's deeds. Religion can become exceedingly self-centered, about the last thing anyone needs.

In contrast, if one grasps the great news that justification is a gift from God, totally unmerited and undeserved, how much easier and more natural is it for that person to turn his or her focus on God's love and mercy instead of on self?

And in the end, who's more likely to reflect the love and character of God—the one self-absorbed or the one God-absorbed?

**Read** Romans 4:6–8. How does Paul here expand on the theme of justification by faith?

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“The sinner must come in faith to Christ, take hold of His merits, lay his sins upon the Sin Bearer, and receive His pardon. It was for this cause that Christ came into the world. Thus the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the repenting, believing sinner. He becomes a member of the royal family.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 215.

Paul then continues, explaining that salvation by faith was not only for the Jews but for the Gentiles, as well (*Rom. 4:9–12*). In fact, if you want to get technical about it, Abraham wasn't Jewish; he came from a pagan ancestry (*Josh. 24:2*). The Gentile-Jewish distinction didn't exist in his time. When Abraham was justified (*Gen. 15:6*), he was not even circumcised. Thus, Abraham became the father of both the uncircumcised and the circumcised, as well as a great example for Paul to use in order to make his point about the universality of salvation. Christ's death was for everyone, regardless of race or nationality (*Heb. 2:9*).

**Considering the universality of the Cross, considering what the Cross tells us about the worth of every human being, why is racial or ethnic or national prejudice such a horrible thing? How can we learn to recognize the existence of prejudice in ourselves and, through God's grace, purge it from our minds?**

## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** God is the source of both the justice in His law and the grace seen in the atoning death of Jesus Christ that saves us from sin.

**Just for Teachers:** In this week's lesson, we discuss and explore the relationship between God's law and His grace.

Imagine that you were in a school that offered only one of two grades: pass or fail. The only problem was that in order to pass, you needed a perfect score on every quiz, every test, every paper. Even one wrong answer, just one, would ruin your chances of passing. In other words, you could get every question right, every time, and then get the last question on the last test wrong, and you would get the same failing grade as someone who got every question on every test wrong.

In a sense, that is what salvation is like. We need an absolute perfect score for salvation—absolute perfect holiness, absolute perfect obedience to God's law. Anything short of that leads to a failing grade. The most wonderful saint who has even the most minor character fault is in the same boat as the nastiest and most degenerate criminal. Without absolute righteousness, we are lost.

Now, suppose in the school there was a student who not only got a perfect score but offered to share that score with you. That is, his perfect score would be yours, the only way you could possibly pass.

In a sense, that's the gospel. None of us have a passing grade. All of us have missed more than one question for sure, for we all have violated the law. Jesus alone has perfect righteousness, and the good news of the gospel is that He offers that perfect righteousness to all who claim it truly by faith.

**Consider This:** God's law stems from His righteousness and goodness and grace. Therefore, why does it make no sense that He would simply do away with it, as many Christians believe He did?

### ► **STEP 2—Explore**

## Bible Commentary

I. **Abraham** (*Review with your class Genesis 15:6 and Romans 4.*)

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## Promise and Law

**“For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith” (Rom. 4:13).**

In this verse, “promise” and “law” are contrasted. Paul is seeking to establish an Old Testament base for his teaching of righteousness by faith. He finds an example in Abraham, whom all the Jews accepted as their ancestor. Acceptance or justification had come to Abraham quite apart from the law. God made a promise to Abraham that he was to be “heir of the world.” Abraham believed this promise; that is, he accepted the role that it implied. As a result God accepted him and worked through him to save the world. This remains a powerful example of how grace was operating in the Old Testament, which is no doubt why Paul used it.

**Read** Romans 4:14–17. How does Paul here continue showing how salvation by faith was central to the Old Testament? *See also Gal. 3:7–9.*

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It’s important to remember, as we said in the beginning, to whom Paul is writing. These Jewish believers were immersed in Old Testament law, and many came to believe that their salvation rested on how well they kept the law, even though that was not what the Old Testament taught.

In seeking to remedy this misconception, Paul argued that Abraham, even prior to the law at Sinai, received the promises, not by works of the law (which would have been hard, since the law—the whole Torah and ceremonial system—was not in place yet) but by faith.

If Paul here were referring to the moral law exclusively, which existed in principle even before Sinai, the point remains the same. Perhaps even more so! Seeking to receive God’s promises through the law, he said, makes faith void, even useless. Those are strong words, but his point is that faith saves, and the law condemns. He’s trying to teach about the futility of seeking salvation by the very thing that leads to condemnation, because we all, Jew and Gentile, have violated the law, and, hence, we all need the same thing as Abraham did: the saving righteousness of Jesus credited to us by faith.

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

As humans we tend to put other humans on a pedestal, sometimes literally! Never is this tendency truer than in how we Christians view biblical figures and other great heroes of faith. What we forget is that they are heroes *of faith*. They are what they are because they had faith in what God could do through and for them, not because they were born with a special holiness gene that most of us lack.

Consider Abraham. Abraham is revered by three world religions that agree on little else. In the ancient world even pagans regarded Abraham as a figure worthy of respect. The pagan Roman emperor Alexander Severus (who ruled from A.D. 222–235), missing the point spectacularly and flamboyantly, included a bust of Abraham—along with others of Moses, Jesus, Orpheus, and Apollonius of Tyana—in his private chapel.

Yet, where did Abraham’s greatness lie? He “ ‘believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ ” as stated in Romans 4:3 (*NASB*), quoting Genesis 15:6.

Abraham had to have righteousness credited to him, because he was not righteous on his own. He made mistakes. Sometimes he based his decisions on cowardice and faithlessness. For example, review Genesis 12:10–20, in which he denies that Sarah is his wife and allows her to be taken by the pharaoh as a concubine, and his reprise of that error in regard to Abimelech in Genesis 20. And then there was his decision, in Genesis 16, to *help* God along in fulfilling the promise God had made to give him a son. In short, a close look reveals that Abraham’s past is as riddled with failures as any one of ours might be, and his is recorded in Scripture.

Nor was Abraham’s lineage particularly holy, although the Jewish people in Paul’s time took great pride in being of the lineage of Abraham. Abraham was a descendant of Noah, as was everyone else inhabiting the earth. Although the most evil antediluvians had died, leaving no heirs, descendants of Noah soon proved they had no mean talent for betraying and disappointing God. These were Abraham’s forebears.

Neither Abraham’s predisposition to goodness and holiness, nor his heritage, was particularly noteworthy, but Abraham was special, as any of us can be special: he believed that God could change him, work through him, and bless the world through him. He believed God, God accepted him as righteous, and God made him capable of righteousness.

**Consider This:** Just as God intended Abraham to bless the whole world in spite of his individual flaws, God wants to bless the whole world through all of us. How does Abraham’s story inspire you to believe in God as He believes in you?

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## Law and Faith

As we saw yesterday, Paul showed that God’s dealings with Abraham proved that salvation came through the promise of grace and not through law. Therefore, if the Jews wished to be saved, they would have to abandon trust in their works for salvation and accept the Abrahamic promise, now fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah. It’s the same, really, for everyone, Jew or Gentile, who thinks that their “good” deeds are all that it takes to make them right with God.

**“The principle that man can save himself by his own works lay at the foundation of every heathen religion. . . . Wherever it is held, men have no barrier against sin.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 35, 36. What does this mean? Why does the idea that we can save ourselves through our works leave us so open to sin?**

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**How** did Paul explain the relationship between law and faith in Galatians? *Gal.* 3:21–23.

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If there had been a law that could impart life, it certainly would have been God’s law. And yet, Paul says that no law, not even God’s, can give life, because all have violated that law, and so all are condemned by it.

But the promise of faith, more fully revealed through Christ, frees all who believe from being “under the law”; that is, from being condemned and burdened by trying to earn salvation through it. The law becomes a burden when it’s presented without faith, without grace—because without faith, without grace, without the righteousness that comes by faith, being under the law means being under the burden and the condemnation of sin.

**How central is righteousness by faith to your walk with God? That is, what can you do to make sure it doesn’t get blurred by other aspects of truth to the point where you lose sight of this crucial teaching? After all, what good are these other teachings without this one?**

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*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED**II. By Grace, Through Faith** (Review Romans 4:13–16 and Ephesians 2:8 with your class.)

*Grace* and *faith* are words that usually are found in close proximity in the New Testament. Ephesians 2:8 tells us that it is “by grace you have been saved through faith” (NKJV). Faith is the only way we can reach out to God. But even faith would be futile if God first did not reach out to us. God’s act of reaching out to us is an act of grace, or unmerited favor.

In the Old Testament the word usually translated as “grace” refers to the regard or favor of one person toward another, quite often for no apparent motive or reason. Used theologically in the New Testament, it means much the same, except that it is *God* who sees us and *loves* us simply because He *is* and He *does*.

Besides grace, there is God’s law. God gave us the commandments, and all we have to do is obey them. There are, after all, only ten. We try very hard. But the reality is that apart from God, we lack the capacity to obey even those ten simple truths.

Can God simply waive all or some of the requirements of the law? Not without compromising His justice and holiness. But God can and does extend more grace to us, which we perceive and appropriate through faith. For the sake of the perfect life and atoning sacrifice of His Son, God views us as sharing the righteousness of Jesus.

**Consider This:** How do we exercise God’s gift of faith to receive His saving grace?

**►STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** Encourage your students to use these questions to think about the relationship between grace and God’s law.

**Thought Questions:**

❶ A great many people in Paul’s time were confused about the relationship between the law and grace. Some believed it was necessary to obey the law in order to be worthy of receiving grace. Others even thought that it was possible to obey the law without reference to grace, thus collecting salvation as an account receivable, so to speak. What is the correct relationship between grace and law?

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## The Law and Sin

We often hear folk say that in the New Covenant the law has been abolished and then they proceed to quote texts that they believe prove that point. The logic behind that statement, however, isn't quite sound, nor is the theology.

**Read 1 John 2:3–6, 3:4, and Romans 3:20. What do these texts tell us about the relationship between law and sin?**

A few hundred years ago, Irish writer Jonathan Swift wrote, “But will any man say that if the words *drinking, cheating, lying, stealing* were by Act of Parliament ejected out of the English tongue and dictionaries, we should all awake next morning temperate, honest and just, and lovers of truth? Is this a fair consequence?”—Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal and Other Satires* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995), p. 205.

In the same way, if God's law has been abolished, then why are lying, murder, and stealing still sinful or wrong? If God's law has been changed, the definition of sin must be changed, too. Or if God's law was done away with, sin must be, as well, and who believes that? (*See also 1 John 1:7–10; James 1:14, 15.*)

In the New Testament, both the law and the gospel appear. The law shows what sin is; the gospel points to the remedy for that sin, which is the death and resurrection of Jesus. If there is no law, there is no sin, and so what are we saved from? Only in the context of the law, and its continued validity, does the gospel make sense.

We often hear that the Cross nullified the law. That's rather ironic, because the Cross shows that the law can't be abrogated or changed. If God didn't abrogate or even change the law before Christ died on the cross, why do it after? Why not get rid of the law after humanity sinned and thus spare humanity the legal punishment that violation of the law brings? That way, Jesus never would have had to die. Jesus' death shows that if the law could have been changed or abrogated, that should have been done before, not after, the Cross. Thus, nothing shows the continued validity of the law more than does the death of Jesus, a death that occurred precisely because the law couldn't be changed. If the law could have been changed to meet us in our fallen condition, wouldn't that have been a better solution to the problem of sin than Jesus having to die?

**If there were no divine law against adultery, would the act cause any less pain and hurt than it does now to those who are victims of it? How does your answer help you understand why God's law is still in effect? What has been your own experience with the consequences of violating God's law?**

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

2 One of the reasons that the law cannot be changed or abolished is because its underlying principles represent the will and character of God and are, therefore, eternally valid. How would you describe those principles in two or three sentences or less?

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3 Why is the belief that one gets to heaven or achieves salvation through one's good deeds still so prevalent, even in Christian circles?

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**Application Questions:**

1 Even with the knowledge that we are saved by grace, we tend to become obsessed with our own performance. What are the dangers of this obsession? How can we refocus?

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2 Although Paul and other New Testament writers clearly emphasize the universality of Christ's salvation, how do we still—even in the Christian church—put up barriers that may be artificial?

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3 Abraham believed God's promise, and the sign of his belief was circumcision. What are the outward signs by which we indicate our belief today?

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**► STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** This week we have learned that God's law is still valid because of (not in spite of) the salvation from sin we receive in Jesus Christ.

God's law is not arbitrary. We especially can see this in the Ten Commandments, which sum up the rules for human behavior toward God and toward one another. Even the staunchest believer in the law's nullification by the New Testament would not want to live in a society in which people ignore or consider optional the principles in the Ten Commandments.

Write one or more of the Ten Commandments on a dry erase board. Ask one of the class members to read it aloud. Ask what the principle might be behind that commandment and how else one might apply it.

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “Christ the Center of the Message,” p. 388, in *Selected Messages*, book 1; “The Call of Abraham,” pp. 125–127; “The Law and the Covenants,” pp. 363, 364, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Sermon on the Mount,” pp. 307, 308; “Controversy,” p. 608; “‘It Is Finished,’ ” pp. 762, 763, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“In that age of caste, when the rights of men were often unrecognized, Paul set forth the great truth of human brotherhood, declaring that God ‘hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.’ In the sight of God all are on an equality.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 238.

“In order for man to be saved, and for the honor of the law to be maintained, it was necessary for the Son of God to offer Himself as a sacrifice for sin. He who knew no sin became sin for us. He died for us on Calvary. His death shows the wonderful love of God for man, and the immutability of His law.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 240.

“Righteousness is obedience to the law. The law demands righteousness, and this the sinner owes to the law; but he is incapable of rendering it. The only way in which he can attain to righteousness is through faith. By faith he can bring to God the merits of Christ, and the Lord places the obedience of His Son to the sinner’s account.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 367.

“If Satan can succeed in leading man to place value upon his own works as works of merit and righteousness, he knows that he can overcome him by his temptations, and make him his victim and prey. . . . Strike the door-posts with the blood of Calvary’s Lamb, and you are safe.”—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, Sept. 3, 1889.

## Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Why is it important to understand salvation by faith alone without the deeds of law? What errors can that knowledge protect us from? What dangers await those who lose sight of this?
- ❷ What other reasons can you give for the continued validity of God’s law, even when we understand that the law and obedience to it are not what save us?
- ❸ Dwell more on this idea that because of the Cross all human beings are equal. Why is it that so often Christians, who have the Cross before them, seem to forget this important truth and can be guilty of racial or ethnic or even national prejudice?
- ❹ As justified sinners, we have been made the recipients of grace and undeserved favor from God, whom we have sinned against. How should this fact impact how we deal with others? How full of grace and favor are we toward those who have wronged us?