

The Everlasting Gospel



SABBATH—DECEMBER 20

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Hebrews 4:2; Psalm 130:3, 4; Luke 15:11–32; Romans 3:24–26; Hebrews 10:1–4; Revelation 14:12.

MEMORY VERSE: “The Lord appeared to us in the past. He said, ‘I have loved you with a love that lasts forever. I have kept on loving you with faithful love’ ” (Jeremiah 31:3, NlrV).

IN OUR STUDY OF JAMES, WE HAVE LOOKED AT SEVERAL ISSUES CONNECTED WITH THE GOSPEL. We also made some comparisons with other Bible writers. It is not always easy to understand clearly how what James says fits with other parts of the Bible, especially how it fits with the gospel itself. But it does. And this is very important, too, because the gospel is the foundation of our last-day command to preach the everlasting gospel “to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Revelation 14:6, NlrV).

In this, our final week, we will focus on basic questions about “the everlasting gospel,” which is salvation by faith.¹ This is a belief taught all through the Bible, including James.

The important point to remember is that the Bible does not have disagreements within itself. This is very true on something as basic as salvation. We are finishing this quarter with a look at how the gospel appears in the Bible. In this way we can better see how James fits this larger picture of God's plan of redemption.²

DEFINITIONS

1. salvation by faith—the process of saving souls and being saved.
2. plan of redemption—God's plan of purchasing or buying our freedom from sin with the gift of His Son's blood.

THE GOSPEL (GOOD NEWS) IN THE OLD TESTAMENT (Hebrews 4:2)

“The good news was preached to our people long ago. It has also been preached to us. The message they heard didn’t [did not] have any value for them. They didn’t [did not] combine [join] it with faith” (Hebrews 4:2, NlrV).

This verse is very surprising. The chief reason is that it says that the gospel (the good news) was preached in the Old Testament. Second, it was preached then *just as* in New Testament times. There is no hint that there was any difference in the message itself. So, the problem was not with *the message* but with the way that people heard it. Today, too, different people can hear the same gospel message very differently. How important it is for us to surrender ourselves in full faith to the teaching of the Word (Bible). We do it so that when the gospel is preached, we may hear it correctly.

Look at the following verses and write down the gospel message in each: Genesis 3:15; Exodus 19:4–6; Psalm 130:3, 4; Psalm 32:1–5; Isaiah 53:4–11; Jeremiah 31:31–34.

Did you notice something that is much the same throughout? God acts to save us. He forgives our sins and makes us “enemies” of sin. This will help us to be “willing and obedient” (Isaiah 1:19). One (Jesus) died for the many, accepted their (our) sins, forgives and makes sinners righteous. The new covenant³ is different from the old covenant. This is because the law is written in the heart, and God “will not remember their sins any more” (Hebrews 8:12, NlrV). In summary, forgiveness and the new birth are a package: justification⁴ and sanctification (holy living) are God’s answer to the sin problem. These verses are just a few of many such promises. But the message is the same throughout the Bible. This message is that God loves us and has done all that is possible to save us from sin.

We, as people, believe that keeping the law is important. But how can we protect ourselves from the error of believing that law-keeping is what makes us righteous? Why is that not always so easy to do?



The old covenant was written on stone, but the new is written in the heart.

DEFINITIONS

3. covenant—the promises and agreements between God and His people. If the people agree to keep God’s law of love, He promises to bless them.

4 justification—forgiveness and cleansing so that we may be clothed in righteousness (Christ’s perfect character).

THE GOSPEL IN HUMAN FORM (Luke 15:11–32)



Salvation is free to us,
because Jesus paid
the full price for it.

Some have a very hard time finding the gospel in the Gospels (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)! The teachings of Jesus *can* seem to be too strict. But this is not so if we hear the *rest* of the story. Most people in Israel at the time of Jesus thought themselves to be in a good position before God. They supported the temple by paying the required tax and offering (giving) proper animal sacrifices. They refused to eat unclean food. They circumcised⁵ their sons. They kept the festival days and the Sabbaths and tried to keep the law as taught by their religious leaders. Then John the Baptist came and cried, “Repent [turn back to God] and be baptized.” Jesus said we needed a new birth (John 3:3, 5). He said, “Here is what I tell you. You must be more godly than the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. If you are not, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20, Nlrv). Jesus was really saying, “You need what you do not have. Your works are not good enough.”

Read Luke 15:11–32 and Luke 18:9–17. How do these parables⁶ show the gospel?

In the parable of the prodigal (wandering) son, the son is lost and does not know it. Slowly he begins to see his father’s love in a new way and wants to return. His pride is gone. He hopes to be accepted as a servant. But he is surprised when he receives much honor by his father. The relationship is not just brought back. Instead, it changed. In the second parable, the theme is the same, but it has almost the opposite ending. The “righteous [holy]” Pharisee is ignored by God. But the “sinful” tax collector is accepted and leaves justified (made righteous), forgiven, and free from guilt.

Both stories help us to see God more clearly, as a Father and as a Justifier (Forgiver) of the sinner turned believer. He describes the cup of crushed grapes as “My blood of the new covenant. It is poured out to forgive the sins of many” (Matthew 26:28, Nlrv). As the real Passover Lamb, Jesus goes through the death that should have been ours.

What hope can you take from each of these parables for yourself? In what ways have you had the same experiences that some of the people in the parables have? And what should your answer tell you about what you might need to change in your spiritual life?

DEFINITIONS

5. circumcised—removal of the foreskin from the male sex organ.

6. parables—very short stories that teach a lesson or a truth.

THE GOSPEL IN PAUL (2 Corinthians 3:14–16)

Like many of his countrymen, Paul thought he had a good spiritual standing with God. But then he saw Jesus as “the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20, NASB). Suddenly, he saw himself not saved but lost. He also was not God’s servant but God’s enemy. He was not righteous (holy) but the chief of sinners. The mist (fog) disappeared from his eyes. And his understanding of the Old Testament was changed too. God showed His love to him as a Person and through the Bible. It changed Paul’s heart and his life forever. We will not understand Paul’s letters until we know these basic facts.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:14–16 with this information in mind. Then read verses 2–6. What does Paul recognize as the important step?

The meaning of the old covenant becomes clear only “when one turns to the Lord” (verse 16, ESV). Jesus is the way to salvation. Israel trusted in its own obedience. Paul also trusted in his own obedience before his conversion. They both experienced the old covenant as a minister (preacher) of death. But believers in Corinth were “a letter written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God. You are a letter written not on tablets made out of stone but on human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:3, NIV).

Read Romans 1:16, 17 and Romans 3:24–26. How does Paul describe the gospel? What do we receive through Christ by faith?

The gospel is the *power* of God to save *all who believe*. Righteousness is based not on what we do but on what Christ has done for us. We can claim this only by faith. It is a belief that grows “from faith to faith” (Romans 1:17). What Paul means by this is explained in the rest of Romans. The heart of this meaning is found at the end of chapter 3. Through Christ we have *redemption*.⁷ (We have *justification*). And we have *forgiveness* (God accepts us back and “forgets” our past sins). God, through the sacrifice of Christ, proves Himself to be just (righteous; holy) in justifying (forgiving) sinners who have put their faith in Jesus.

DEFINITIONS

7. redemption—salvation received through Christ’s sacrifice.

THE “NEW” COVENANT (Hebrews 8:1, 2, 6)

The book of Hebrews describes the new covenant as “better” than the old covenant (Hebrews 8:1, 2, 6, NRSV). Then, the clear question is, *Why did God establish the old covenant if it was faulty?* The real problem was not with the covenant. It was how the people answered it.

Read Hebrews 7:19; Hebrews 8:9; and Hebrews 10:1–4. What problems with the old covenant are named?

The people “did not remain faithful” to the covenant (Hebrews 8:9, NIV). Instead, they were disobedient and rebellious (fought against God). This and the animal sacrifices of the old covenant could never take away sins (Hebrews 10:4). This meant that the sin problem remained. Only “the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” could forgive and cleanse us of sin, including those sins done under the old covenant (Hebrews 10:10, NKJV; Hebrews 9:15). And that was because “the law didn’t [did not] make anything perfect. Now a better hope has been given to us” (Hebrews 7:19, NIV).

“The covenant of grace is not a new truth. This is because it was in the mind of God from all eternity. This is why it is called the everlasting covenant.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By*, page 77.

But, as we saw from what happened to Paul, something special happens when we turn to the Lord. In connection with the everlasting covenant, God made a promise. “I will cause them to respect me. Then they will never turn away from me again” (Jeremiah 32:40, NIV). Without faith, bringing animal sacrifices was almost like making payment for sins. Instead, “let us keep looking to Jesus. He is the author of faith. He also makes it perfect. He paid no attention to the shame of the cross. . . . He put up with attacks from sinners” (Hebrews 12:2, 3, NIV). This shows the great cost of sin to God and the good news that the cost has been paid by Someone else through “the blood of the eternal covenant” (Hebrews 13:20, NIV). This “new” covenant changes how we look at everything, such as the commandment to love one another. It is not really new (Leviticus 19:18). Still, we are to love our neighbors and *ourselves* “as I [Jesus] have loved you” (John 13:34).

How can we ever learn to love others as *Jesus has loved us*?

THE SUCCESSFUL CLOSING OF THE GOSPEL (Revelation 10:7)

“But in the days when the seventh angel is ready to blow his trumpet, the last part of God’s plan will be carried out. God told all this to the prophets [special messengers] who served him long ago” (Revelation 10:7, NirV).

Revelation 10:7 is the only other verse in Revelation (besides Revelation 14:6) about preaching the gospel. (The Greek word translated “preached” is *euangelizō*, “to proclaim [preach] good news.”) These two chapters are special for Seventh-day Adventists, because we find our special command as a church described in them. In other words, God has commanded us—in a way He has no other group—to preach the “everlasting gospel.”

The gospel is the same from Genesis to Revelation. The law is the same. The covenant is the same. Jesus, Paul, and James all support the idea that the gospel is the same one that Abraham believed (John 8:56; Romans 4:13; James 2:21–23). Some have difficulty with this idea because they describe the gospel more narrowly than the Bible. But Abraham’s obedient faith was started with his ability to foresee Jesus’ sacrifice. We do not need to balance faith with works in order to be saved. Faith alone is enough. But it must not be only a faith of the mind as the devils have.

According to Revelation 12:17 and Revelation 14:12, why is keeping the commandments and the testimony and faith of Jesus very important to the true meaning of the everlasting gospel?

“Often the general public has mocked and sneered [laughed] at Sabbath-keeping believers. But the Sabbath-keeping believers have always given a faithful testimony to the eternal law of God and the creation Sabbath.

“These truths in Revelation 14 in connection with ‘the everlasting gospel’ will especially separate the church of Christ from others at the time of Jesus’ second coming. For as the result of the threefold message of Revelation 14, it is announced: ‘Here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.’ ”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy [War Between Christ and Satan]*, pages 453, 454.



We are saved by faith alone, but it must be a faith that does good works.

ADDITIONAL STUDY: Read Ellen G. White, “The Loud Cry,” pages 198–202, in *Last Day Events*.

“We need to come up to a higher standard. We are to go forward and claim our honored rights. We should walk humbly with God and make no proud boasts of perfection of character [thoughts; feelings; and actions]. But in simple faith claim every promise in the word of God. These promises are for those who obey and not for the breakers of God’s law. We are simply to believe the testimony of God, and depend fully on Him. In this way all signs of self-glory [praise] or pride will be removed. We are really saved by faith, not by an inactive faith, but by the faith which works by love, and makes the soul pure. The hand of Christ can reach the greatest sinner, and bring him back from law-breaking to obedience. But no Christianity is so high that it can soar above the requirements of God’s holy law. This would be beyond Christ’s power to help. And it would be outside of His teachings and examples. This is because Jesus says, ‘I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide [remain] in his love.’ All who follow Christ will obey God’s holy law.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, March 31, 1890.



“In simple faith, claim every promise in the word of God.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① Discuss the focus on the gospel in the teachings of Jesus, James, and Paul. Discuss how they are the same or different. By putting them together and seeing the whole picture, how can we protect ourselves from falling into either legalism⁸ or a cheap grace?

② Suppose you feel discouraged about your spiritual condition. Then what gospel promises can you claim to help keep you from discouragement? In the darkest times, why must you never give up? And why is the promise of Christ’s righteousness as a gift to unworthy sinners the key to protecting you from giving up?

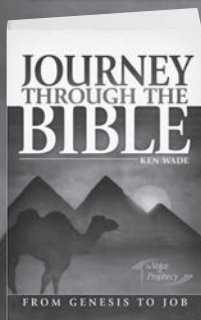
③ The three angels’ messages connect Creation very closely to salvation. So does John 1:1–14. Why are these two topics so closely related? How does this close connection help explain why the Sabbath is such a very important part of God’s law? How does this close tie help us understand the importance of the Sabbath in the last days?

DEFINITIONS

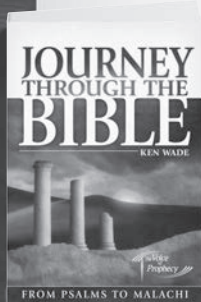
8. legalism—believing that you can be saved by your good works or by keeping or obeying the law.

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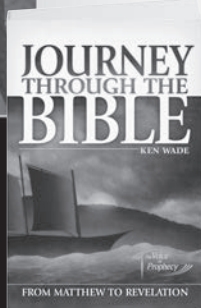
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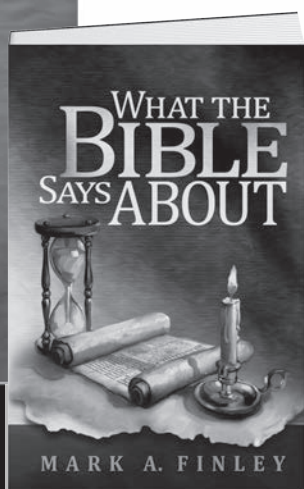
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