

The Everlasting Gospel



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Heb. 4:2; Ps. 130:3, 4; Luke 15:11–32; Rom. 3:24–26; Heb. 10:1–4; Rev. 14:12.*

Memory Text: “The LORD has appeared of old to me, saying: ‘Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you’” (*Jeremiah 31:3, NKJV*).

In our study of James, we have looked at a number of issues connected with the gospel and made some comparisons with other biblical authors. It is not always easy to understand clearly how what James says fits with other parts of Scripture, especially when it comes to something as central as the gospel itself, but as we saw, it does. And this is very important, too, because the gospel is the foundation of our last-day commission to preach “the everlasting gospel . . . to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” (*Rev. 14:6*).

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

The crucial point to remember is that the Bible does not contradict itself, especially on something as basic as salvation. By finishing the quarter with a look at how the gospel appears in the Bible, we can better see how James fits this larger picture of God’s plan of redemption.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 27.

The Gospel in the Old Testament

“For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith” (Heb. 4:2, NIV).

This verse is startling in its implications. Foremost is that the gospel, not simply “good news” but *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. The problem, therefore, was not with the message but with the way it was heard. Today, too, different people can hear the same gospel message very differently. How crucial, then, that we surrender ourselves in utter faith to the teaching of the Word so that when the gospel is preached we hear it correctly.

Look at the following verses and summarize the gospel message in each:

Gen. 3:15 _____

Exod. 19:4–6 _____

Pss. 130:3, 4; 32:1–5 _____

Isa. 53:4–11 _____

Jer. 31:31–34 _____

Did you notice a common refrain? God intervenes to save us; He forgives our sins and puts “enmity” in us toward sin so that we can be “willing and obedient” (*Isa. 1:19*). One (Jesus) died for the many, bore their (our) iniquities, and justifies the undeserving. The new covenant is different from the old covenant because the law is written in the heart, and sins are “remember[ed] no more” (*Heb. 8:12*). In short, forgiveness and the new birth are a package: justification and sanctification represent God’s solution to the sin problem. These passages could be multiplied, for the message is the same throughout the Bible: despite our sin, God loves us and has done all that is possible to save us from it.

How can we, as people who believe in the importance of keeping the law, protect ourselves from the error of believing that law-keeping is what justifies us? Why is that not always so easy to do?

The Gospel Made Flesh

Some have a very hard time finding the gospel in the Gospels! The teachings of Jesus can seem legalistic but only if we fail to hear the rest of the story. Most people in Israel at the time of Jesus considered themselves to be in a good position before God. They supported the temple by paying the required tax and by offering the appropriate sacrifices. They abstained from unclean food, circumcised their sons, kept the festival days and the Sabbaths, and generally tried to keep the law as taught by their religious leaders. Then John came and cried “Repent,” and be baptized. Furthermore, Jesus said a new birth was needed (*John* 3:3, 5) and that “except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (*Matt.* 5:20). In other words, Jesus was saying, “You need what you do not have. Your works are not good enough.”

Read *Luke* 15:11–32, 18:9–17. How do these parables illustrate the gospel?

In the parable of the prodigal son, the son is lost and does not know it. Eventually, he begins to see his father’s love in a new way and longs to return. His pride is gone. Hoping for acceptance as a servant, he is astonished to be lavished with honor by his father. The relationship is not just restored. It is transformed. A similar reversal of expectations appears in the second parable. The “righteous” Pharisee is ignored by God, while the “sinful” tax collector is not only accepted but leaves justified, forgiven, and free from guilt.

Both stories help us to see God more clearly, as a Father and as a Justifier of the ungodly. When He describes the cup of crushed grapes as “My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins,” Jesus suffers as the real Passover Lamb, the death that should have been ours (*Matt.* 26:28, *NASB*; compare *Mark* 10:45). Thus, salvation is free to us because He, Jesus, paid the full price for it.

What hope can you take from each of these parables for yourself? In what ways can you relate to some of the people in them, and what should your answer tell you about what you might need to change in your spiritual life?

The Gospel in Paul

Like many of his countrymen, Paul thought he was in good spiritual standing. But then he saw Jesus as “the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself up for me” (*Gal. 2:20, NASB*). Suddenly, he saw himself not saved but lost; not God’s servant but God’s enemy; not righteous but the chief of sinners. The scales fell from his eyes, in other words, in his reading of the Old Testament. God’s revelation, to him personally and through the Scriptures, transformed his heart and changed his life forever. We will not understand Paul’s epistles until we recognize these basic facts, which produced them.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:14–16 in this light and then verses 2–6. What does Paul identify here as the crucial step?

The meaning of the old covenant becomes clear only “when one turns to the Lord” (*vs. 16, ESV*). Jesus is the way to salvation. It all begins and ends in Him. Israel—by trusting in their own obedience, as Paul did before his conversion—experienced the old covenant as a minister of death. Why? Because “all have sinned” (*Rom. 3:23*), including the people of Israel, and so the commandments could only condemn them (*2 Cor. 3:7*). By contrast, believers in Corinth were “a letter of Christ . . . written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (*vs. 3, NASB*).

Read Romans 1:16, 17; 3:24–26. How does Paul define 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, which we claim by faith. It is a belief that grows “from faith to faith” (*Rom. 1:17*). What Paul means by this is unpacked in the rest of Romans, the heart of which is found at the end of chapter 3. Through Christ we have *redemption* (God has bought us back by paying for our sins), *justification* (we are cleared of guilt and cleansed by grace), and *forgiveness* (God accepts us back and “forgets” our past sins). Amazingly, God, through the sacrifice of Christ, proves Himself to be just in justifying the ungodly who have put their faith in Jesus.

The “New” Covenant

The book of Hebrews describes the new covenant as “better” than the old covenant (*Heb. 8:1, 2, 6, NRSV*). The obvious question, then, is Why did God establish the old covenant if it was faulty? The problem, however, was not with the covenant but with the response of the people to it.

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

The people “did not remain faithful” to the covenant (*Heb. 8:9, NIV*) but were disobedient and rebellious. This, together with the fact that the animal sacrifices of the old covenant could never take away sins (*Heb. 10:4*), meant that the sin problem remained. Only “the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” could atone for sins, including those committed under the old covenant (*Heb. 10:10, NKJV; 9:15*). And that was because “the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God” (*Heb. 7:19*) through the promise of the new covenant.

In one sense, the new covenant is not new at all because—since the promise in Eden of the Seed who would bruise the serpent’s head—the plan of salvation has always been predicated on the death of Christ, “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (*Rev. 13:8; see also Jer. 32:40; Heb. 13:20, 21; John 13:34*).

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

On the other hand, as we saw with Paul, something special happens when we turn to the Lord. God promised, in connection with the everlasting covenant, “I will put into their hearts reverence for Me, so that they do not turn away from Me” (*Jer. 32:40, NJPS*). Without faith, bringing animal sacrifices was almost like making payment for sins. Gazing at Jesus instead, who “endured the cross, despising the shame,” and “who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself” (*Heb. 12:2, 3, NKJV*), reveals the immeasurable cost of sin and the good news that the cost has been paid by Someone else “through the blood of the everlasting covenant” (*13:20, NKJV*). This “new” covenant transforms how we look at everything, such as the commandment to love one another. It’s not really new (*Lev. 19:18*), except in that we are not just to love our neighbor as ourselves, but “as I [Jesus] have loved you” (*John 13:34*).

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

The Climax of the Gospel

“But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound, then the mystery of God is finished, as He preached to His servants the prophets” (Rev. 10:7, NASB).

Significantly, Revelation 10:7 is the only other verse in Revelation (besides Revelation 14:6) that specifically refers to preaching the gospel (the Greek word translated “preached” is *euangelizō*, “to proclaim good news”). These two chapters are special for Seventh-day Adventists, because we find our calling and commission described in them. In other words, God has specifically commissioned us, in a way He has no other group, to proclaim the “everlasting gospel.”

As we have seen, the gospel is the same from Genesis to Revelation. The law is the same. The covenant is the same. Jesus, Paul, and James all affirm that the gospel is the same one believed by Abraham (*John 8:56, Rom. 4:13, James 2:21–23*). Some have difficulty with this assertion only because they define the gospel more narrowly than Scripture. Abraham’s obedient faith, however, originated through his foreseeing Jesus’ sacrifice. We do not need to balance faith with works in order to be saved. Faith alone is sufficient, but it must not be an intellectual faith as the devils have, nor a presumptuous faith that claims the promises of God without complying with the conditions of salvation; rather, it must be a faith that works.

Why are the references in Revelation 12:17 and Revelation 14:12 to keeping the commandments, and to the testimony and faith of Jesus, significant in the context of the everlasting gospel?

The decisive issue at the end of time is: Whom will we worship and obey? The God who “made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters” (*Rev. 14:7*)? Or the beast and his image? Obedience to the commandments (including the Sabbath) through the faith of Jesus signifies those who remain faithful to the end. True religion demands both faith and obedience.

“Though often in the midst of reproach and persecution, a constant testimony has been borne to the perpetuity of the law of God and the sacred obligation of the creation Sabbath.

“These truths, as presented in Revelation 14 in connection with ‘the everlasting gospel,’ will distinguish the church of Christ at the time of His appearing. For as the result of the threefold message it is announced: ‘Here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 453, 454.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Loud Cry,” pp. 198–202, in *Last Day Events*.

“We need to come up to a higher standard, to go forward and claim our exalted privileges. We should walk humbly with God, make no proud boasts of perfection of character, but in simple faith claim every promise in the word of God; for they are for the obedient, not for the transgressors of God’s law. We are simply to believe the testimony of God, and have entire dependence on him, and all possibility of self-glory or pride will be removed. We are indeed saved by faith, not by a passive faith, but by the faith which works by love, and purifies the soul. The hand of Christ can reach the veriest sinner, and bring him back from transgression to obedience; but no Christianity is so lofty that it can soar above the requirements of God’s holy law. This would be beyond Christ’s power to help, it would be outside of his teachings and his example; for he says, ‘I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love,’ and all who follow Christ will render obedience to God’s holy law.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*[®], March 31, 1890.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Discuss the various gospel emphases in the teachings of Jesus, James, and Paul, including similarities and differences between them. How, by placing them together and seeing the whole picture, can we protect ourselves from falling into either legalism or a cheap grace?
- 2 When feeling discouraged about your spiritual state, what gospel promises can you claim to help keep you from discouragement? Why, even in the darkest times, must you never give up, and why is the promise of Christ’s righteousness as a gift to undeserving sinners the key to protecting you from giving up?
- 3 The three angels’ messages connect Creation very closely to Redemption and 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 central component of God’s law? How does this close tie help us understand the centrality of the Sabbath in the final conflict of the last days?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Luke 15:11–24*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that the parable of the lost son reveals God’s grace in action toward His wayward children.

Feel: Embrace wholeheartedly God’s gifts of mercy and grace.

Do: Relate to God as a loving Father, who is ever waiting with open arms to receive His repentant children back home again.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: A Son’s Sorrow

A Explain how the story of the lost son reveals the nature of God’s grace toward us.

B What must transpire in the prodigal son’s heart before he can return home, and why?

II. Feel: A Father’s Love

A What does the father’s response to his lost son, upon his return home, reveal to you about the depths and passion of God’s love for you?

B How can you permit God to live out His life within you, so that you are a conduit for loving and blessing others?

III. Do: A Brother’s Rage

A When those whom we trust fall away from God and return, how can we guard against giving in to the temptation of harboring bitterness, as experienced by the self-righteous older brother?

B How does the story of the lost son help you to love others as God loves you?

► **Summary:** Every second of our lives, God is exerting all His power, grace, and mercy to reconcile us to His great heart of love.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Luke 15:11–24*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Every second of our lives, God is exerting all His power, grace, and mercy to reconcile us to His great heart of love.

Just for Teachers: Emphasize to your class members the importance of relating to God as to a loving Father, who is ever waiting with open arms to receive us back again.

Opening Activity: Think of a time when you left home for an extended period of time. What was the reason? Perhaps it was for a family vacation, a business trip, or to study abroad. Using as many senses as possible, describe how you felt when you returned home again at last.

Consider This: How might this homecoming experience help you to imagine what it felt like to be the prodigal son at the moment of reunion with his father? How does this help you to understand more fully the Father's unconditional love for you?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Emphasize the image of the father in the story of the prodigal's return, rushing down the road to meet his son. Emphasize that God is always ready to embrace us with compassion, clothe us in forgiveness, and heal us with His mercy.

I. The Lost Son (*Review Luke 15:11–24 and Romans 3:24–26 with your class.*)

As fallen beings, with sin-scarred pasts and propensities toward falling back into sin, we are deeply and daily in need of the restorative and regenerative powers of grace. The story of the lost son in Luke 15 takes the exegesis of grace, as outlined in Romans 3:24–26, and fleshes it out in a deeply moving narrative of what it means for God to bestow grace upon the repentant sinner and what it means for the sinner to receive it. As the Standard Edition points out, the relationship between the father

and his wayward son is not simply restored; it is transformed. Let's look at the key points in the story to identify those transformational elements of grace in action in order to understand better how God yearns to heal our wrecked relationship with Him, transform our lives, and restore us to Him in unbroken communion.

From the outset, it is important to note two things: (1) where the action begins and (2) what the relation is between the main characters. We note that the setting is on an estate and that the relation between the prodigal, or younger heir, and the older man is one of father and son. This paternal relation reveals that the young man is no stranger to the owner; rather, he acknowledges his authority over and his relation to him. So, the problem is not that the young man doesn't know who the father is but that he knows and doesn't appreciate the relation.

Notice, too, that the younger son does not give a reason for his demands; nor does the father ask for one. He simply divides the estate and gives the son what he requests. If we choose to leave Him, no matter how much it breaks His heart, God will not coerce us into staying. Proof that God is not indifferent to our leaving is seen in the fact that when the son returns but is still a long way off, the father rushes down the road to meet him.

But before that moment in the story can happen, the son must come to a place of self-recognition of his lost and fallen state. In order to realize he is lost, he must lose everything. A time of famine occurs; and in this sense the landscape of the story mirrors the inner landscape of the heart: there is a spiritual famine, as well as a literal one. The son is starving literally as well as figuratively for God's grace. But the famine is only the beginning of sorrows, or catalyst, for what the son must endure to be transformed. In order to see that he is fallen, he must fall into utter ruin and despair. He loses his fortune through riotous living. He loses his friends when the money is lost. He loses his status, his self-respect, so much so that he "would gladly have fed on and filled his belly with the carob pods that the hogs were eating" (*Luke 15:16, Amplified*).

Wallowing in misery and mud with the swine, the younger son "came to himself, and he said . . . I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; [just] make me like one of your hired servants. So he got up and came to his [own] father" (*vss. 17–20, Amplified*). Notice the story says, twice, that the son literally "got up." Sunken in sin, we can go in only one direction: up.

Romans 3:24–26, in its explanation on what grace is, uses similar language to describe our restoration, or vertical ascent, through God's

unmerited grace: “[All] are justified and made upright and in right standing with God, freely and gratuitously by His grace (His unmerited favor and mercy) through the redemption which is [provided] in Christ Jesus” (*vs. 24, Amplified*). The use of the word *up* in the story of the lost son to describe his return to his father echoes the deeper notions of what grace in action does, as outlined in Romans: it is God’s redeeming mercy and grace that cleanses us, lifts us up out of the mire of sin, makes us righteous or upright before God, and permits us to stand up in His presence free from sin and condemnation.

But just as that grace is made possible only through the sacrifice of Jesus, as Romans tells us, the story of the lost son also shows that there can be no restoration to God apart from sacrifice. The fatted calf must die. It is killed for the celebration, and its flesh feasted upon. And while it dies in order that the reunited family may celebrate, its death is a sobering reminder that our joyous return to the Father in heaven is predicated upon the death of His Son on this earth.

One other detail of note in the story must not be overlooked: the older son’s fury at his younger brother’s return. Notice the language the heir uses to describe the prodigal; it is not “my brother” but “your son.” Adam used similar language about Eve when responding to God about his transgression. He did not refer to her as “my wife” but as “the woman whom You gave to be with me” (*Gen. 3:12, NKJV*).

This language is intentionally distancing and accusatory. It is meant to segregate one’s fellow sinners from oneself, forgetting our relation to one another and our accountability to our brethren (the church) and neighbors (the world). It is the language of self-justification. The heir is furious, because the father’s actions of restoring the younger son destroy completely his cherished belief that somehow he has “earned” his inheritance through his good works, through his unblemished record of service. The fact that the younger son can come back and receive the trappings of inheritance again, after squandering his entire inheritance, dismantles forever the erroneous notion that salvation is by works.

Consider This: What does the younger son’s parting from the father represent? What first must transpire before he can come to his senses and return home? What is the father’s response when the son returns? How does this reunion demonstrate grace? What is his brother’s response to his return, and how does this demonstrate the danger in thinking that salvation is merited by works?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Help students to apply the principles of grace, as outlined in the story of the prodigal son, to practical situations in their own lives.

Application Questions:

❶ The story of the lost son isn't simply about God's love for us, but it is also a rebuke against the hardness of heart of one brother or believer for another. How can your own experiences of return and repentance inoculate you against the kind of hardness of heart the older brother exhibits?

❷ What are some of the ways you find yourself acting toward God like the reckless younger son? What are some of the ways you find yourself acting toward your fellow believers like the self-righteous older brother? What principles does the story give that can help you to return to the Father and let Him live out His life through you, loving others as He loves you?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Encourage your learners to remember that no matter how far we've sunken in sin, we're never so low that God can't lift us up and that He will never stop yearning for us to return to Him.

Activity 1: Close by singing "Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling" or some other song that captures Christ's invitation to us to return to Him.

Activity 2: Finish the story: even though the household celebrates the return of the lost son, all is not happily ever after. The older son, at least, shows no desire to join the celebration. The last words are the Father's. Imagine the rest of the story when the two brothers meet. Given how the oldest feels, seething with resentment, how could the Father's words begin to melt his heart and bring about reconciliation? How would you tell it?