

Saved by Faith Alone



SABBATH—JULY 15

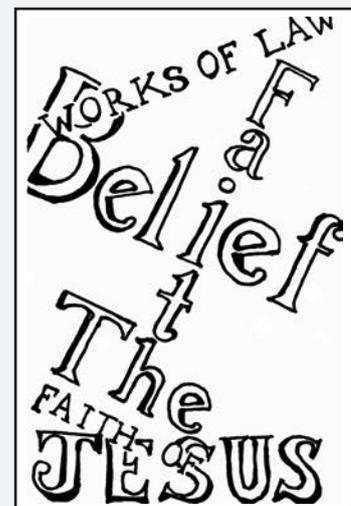
READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Galatians 2:15–21; Ephesians 2:12; Philippians 3:9; Romans 3:10–20.

MEMORY VERSE: “I have been crucified [put to death] with Christ. I [do not] live any longer, but Christ lives in me. Now I live my life in my body by faith in the Son of God. He loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20, NIV).

LAST WEEK we read about how Paul stood up to Peter in Antioch. Paul scolded Peter for saying one thing but doing another. Peter chose to stop eating with Gentile Christians. Gentile Christians are non-Jewish believers. Peter's choice sent a negative message to the Gentile Christians. His actions told them they were not as important as Jewish Christians. And what he did made it seem that Gentile believers must first be circumcised. To be circumcised means that the skin at the end of the sex organ of a man or a boy is cut off. Then Gentile males would be accepted into the family of God. But Paul made it clear to Peter that such ideas were wrong.

What were the actual words Paul said to Peter? This week, we will look at what probably happened. The verses in Paul's letter about this topic pack a lot of information into just a small number of words. These new verses also are very important because they mention several words and groups of words for the first time. These new words also help us to understand the gospel and the rest of Paul's letter to the Galatians. Some of these words include: works of law, belief, faith, and the faith of Jesus.

What does Paul mean by these words? And what do they teach us about the plan of salvation?



What does Paul mean by these words? And what do they teach us about the plan of salvation?

THE QUESTION OF HOW WE ARE SAVED
(Galatians 2:15–17)

In Galatians 2:15, Paul writes, “We are Jews by birth. We are not sinful Gentiles” (NirV). What does he mean?

The meaning of this verse can be found if you study the verses that surround it. Keep in mind that Paul wants to win over his fellow Jewish Christians to his way of thinking. So, he starts with a point they all can agree on. And that point is the separation that has been in place for many hundreds of years between Jews and Gentiles. Jews were God’s chosen people. God gave them His law. And the Jews enjoyed the blessings that came from being in a special relationship with God. But Gentiles were outside the promises of God’s covenant (Ephesians 2:12; Romans 2:14). The covenant is God’s special relationship with His people. It means His people will serve Him and obey His law, and God will bless them. Now, it is true that Gentiles were sinners. But in verse 16, Paul warns Jewish Christians that being Jewish does not make them more accepted in God’s eyes. Why? Because no one is made right with God by obeying the law.



“Justification” is a word used in courts of law. It has to do with clearing a person of all guilt.

Paul uses the wording “made right with God” (NirV) four times in Galatians 2:16, 17. Another way of saying “made right with God” is “justified.” What does Paul mean when he uses the wording “made right with God”? Also read Exodus 23:7 and Deuteronomy 25:1.

The verb “to justify,” or the phrase “to be made right” with God, describes an important idea for Paul. The noun form of the word “to justify” is the word “justification.” Justification means the act of being forgiven and being made right with God. Justification is a word used in courts of law. It has to do with clearing a person of all guilt. Justification is the opposite of saying someone is guilty. A person who is “justified” is someone who also is made holy.

For Jewish believers, justification centered on their relationship with God and His covenant. For them, to be “justified” meant that a person was a faithful member of the family of Abraham.

Read Galatians 2:15–17. What is Paul saying to you here? And how can you live out the truth of these words in your own Christian experience?

OBEYING THE LAW (Galatians 2:16, 17)

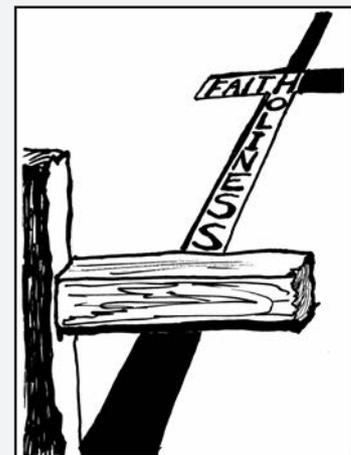
Three times in Galatians 2:16 Paul says we are not made right with God by “obeying the law” (NirV). Read Galatians 2:16, 17; Galatians 3:2, 5, 10; and Romans 3:20, 28. How do these verses help explain Paul’s meaning?

To understand what Paul means by “obeying the law,” we first need to understand what he means by “law.” The word “law” comes from the Greek word *nomos*. It is found 121 times in Paul’s letters. It can mean many things. For example, “law” can mean God’s plan for His people. Or it can mean the first five books of Moses or all the Old Testament. It can even mean a rule. Paul uses the word “law” to mean all God’s commandments given to His people through Moses.

The wording “obeying the law” likely includes all that God commanded His people to do through Moses. We can try as hard as we can to obey the law. But Paul’s point is that our obedience will never be good enough to save us. It never will be good enough to make us right with God.

In other Bible versions, the wording “obeying the law” is translated as “works of the law” (NET; NASB). The wording “works of the law” does not appear in the Old Testament. And in the New, the wording is found only in Paul’s writings. But the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, in 1947, helps to show what Paul means. The Dead Sea Scrolls were a collection of writings copied by a group of Jews called Essenes. The Essenes lived at the time of Jesus. One of the Hebrew scrolls contained the wording “obeying the law.” The title of the scroll is *Miqsat Ma’as Ha-Torah*. This title can be translated as “Important Works of the Law.” The scroll discusses many important topics that deal with the law. For example, it talks about how to prevent holy things from becoming unclean. And it talks about how Jews were to be separate from Gentiles. At the end, the Essene writer of the scroll says that following these “works of the law” will make a person right with God. This writer and Paul do not agree. The Essene writer insists that holiness comes from obeying the law. But Paul says it comes through faith.

How well do you obey God’s law? Do you feel you follow it so well that your obedience makes you right with God? (Read Romans 3:10–20.) If not, why not? And how does your answer help you understand Paul’s point that works do not save us?



Paul says that holiness does not come through obeying the law. It comes through faith.

THE ONLY FOUNDATION FOR BEING SAVED (Philippians 3:9)

We should not think Jewish Christians felt that faith in Christ was not important. After all, they believed in Jesus. They had faith in Him. But their behavior showed that they felt faith was not enough to make a person right with God. They thought faith needed obedience. So, they insisted that being made right with God came from both faith *and* works. Paul was very much against this way of thinking. Faith, and faith alone, makes us right with God.

For Paul, faith is not just an idea. Instead, it is being connected to Jesus. The wording that is translated as “faith in Christ” in Galatians 2:16 really cannot be put into words. It is so rich with meaning. In Greek, “faith in Christ” means “the faith,” or “the faithfulness,” of Jesus. These translations show the powerful difference between the works of the law that we do and the *work* Christ did for us.

It is important to remember that faith itself does not add to whether we are made right with God at all. Instead, faith is how we take hold of Christ and His work in our behalf. We are not justified or made right with God based on our faith. We are made right with God because of Christ’s faithfulness for us. We lay hold of His faithfulness for us through faith.

Christ did what every person has failed to do. He alone was faithful to God in everything He did. So, our hope is in Christ’s faithfulness, not in our own. This great truth helped spark the Protestant Reformation. This religious movement started in the 16th century with Martin Luther. Its purpose was to return to a Christianity based on the Bible. The truth of being justified by faith is as important to us today as it was to Martin Luther all those years ago.

An early translation of Galatians 2:16 in the Syriac language helps us see Paul’s meaning: “We know that a man is not made right with God by obeying the law. He is made right by the faith of Jesus. And we believe in Him. His faith, and not our obedience, makes us right with God.”

Read Romans 3:22, 26; Galatians 3:22; Ephesians 3:12; and Philippians 3:9. How do these verses help us understand that our salvation is based only on Christ’s perfect obedience to God?



Faith is the way by which we take hold of Christ and His work in our behalf.

THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH (Genesis 15:5, 6)

Paul is clear that faith makes the Christian life possible. Faith helps us lay hold of the promises we have in Christ. But what is faith exactly? What does it include?

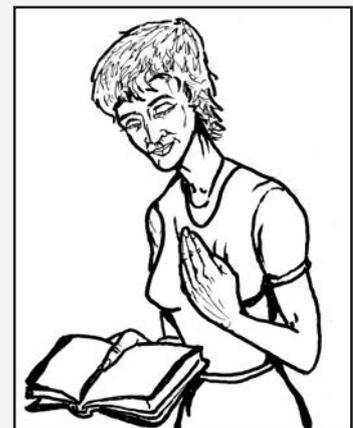
Read Genesis 15:5, 6; John 3:14–16; 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15; and Galatians 5:6. What do these verses teach us about where faith starts?

Real Bible faith is always an answer to God. Faith is not a feeling that a person decides to have because God demands it. Instead, true faith begins in a heart filled with thankfulness and love for God's goodness. Faith works in this way in the lives of men and women in the Bible. And faith always comes as a result of steps God has taken. For example, Abraham has faith in the promises God makes to him (Genesis 15:5, 6). In the end, Paul says faith grows out of our understanding of what Christ did for us on the cross.

Real faith is our answer to God's love. So, what should our answer include? Read John 8:32, 36; Acts 10:43; Romans 1:5, 8; Romans 6:17; Hebrews 11:6; and James 2:19. What do these verses say about faith?

Many people say that faith is "belief." But this meaning causes problems. Why? The Greek word for "faith" is only the noun form of the verb "to believe." So, to use the verb to explain the noun is the same as saying, "Faith is to have faith." This explanation tells us nothing!

A careful study of the Bible shows that faith includes knowledge about God. It also includes accepting that knowledge with one's mind. So, that is one reason why having a true picture of God is so important. Wrong ideas about who God is can make it harder to have faith. But believing the gospel is true is not enough. After all, "even the demons believe" (James 2:19, NIV). But true faith also changes how a person lives. In Romans 1:5, Paul writes about the need to "obey God" (NIV). Paul is not saying that obedience is the same as faith. Instead, he means faith affects the whole life, not just the mind. It includes following Jesus—not just a set of rules. So, faith is not just what we believe. It is also what we do, how we live, and in whom we trust.



True faith begins in a heart filled with thankfulness and love for God's goodness.

DOES FAITH CAUSE SIN? (Galatians 2:17, 18)

One of the main attacks against Paul was that his gospel encouraged people to sin. Paul taught we are saved by faith alone. No doubt Paul's accusers thought people would take this teaching to mean the law was not important. They feared people would not bother to live holy lives. Martin Luther also faced the same attacks in the 1500s.

Read Galatians 2:17, 18. Paul's accusers say that his teaching that we are saved by faith alone encourages people to sin. How does Paul answer these attacks?

Paul answers his accusers' attacks in the strongest words possible: "Certainly not!" (NirV). True, a person might fall into sin after coming to Christ. But Christ is not the cause. Now, suppose we break the law. Then we are the law-breakers—never Christ. He never leads us into sin.



A person might fall into sin after coming to Christ. But Christ did not cause the fall.

Read Galatians 2:19–21. How does Paul describe his being united to or joined to Christ? In what way does his answer prove his accusers wrong?

Paul finds the thinking of his accusers ridiculous. God does not make a person right with Him without changing how that person lives. Accepting Christ by faith involves fully joining with Him. It means being united or joined with Him in both His death and His return to life. Paul uses the word picture of our being put to death with Christ on the cross to explain what joining with Him means. Our old sinful ways die (Romans 6:5–14). We break away from our past. We are made new (2 Corinthians 5:17). We also have been "raised" to a new life in Christ. The risen Christ lives within us. Day by day, He makes us more like Himself.

So, faith in Christ is not an excuse for sin. Instead, faith in Christ is a call to a much deeper, richer relationship with Him. This deep relationship could never come from a religion that teaches we are saved by keeping the law.

How do you feel about the teaching that we are saved by faith alone? Do you feel that this teaching is an excuse for sin? Or does it fill you with joy? What does your answer say about how you understand salvation?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “There is a danger to our people that comes from false ideas about being saved by faith. I saw that Satan would work to confuse minds on this point. The law of God has been preached to our people in a way that is without a true knowledge of Christ or His connection to the law. This way of preaching shows the same wrong understanding of the law that Cain’s offering showed. Many have not become believers because of these confusing ideas. And pastors have worked in the wrong way to reach hearts.

“For years I have felt that we need to spend more time on the topic that faith in Christ alone saves us. This topic more than any other needs to be clear in the minds of all. It is impossible for us fallen humans to earn anything by our own works. Even our best works will not save us. Being saved comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone.”
—Adapted, Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works*, pages 18, 19.

“The law demands perfect obedience. And sinners are responsible for obeying it. But we do not have the power to obey. The only way we can be holy is through faith. By faith, we can bring to God the perfect obedience of Christ. And the Lord gives us credit for the obedience of His Son. Christ’s faithful life of obedience is accepted in place of our failures. God receives, forgives, and makes right with Himself the sorrowing and believing soul. God treats this soul as if he or she were holy. And God loves him or her as He loves His Son.”—Adapted, Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, page 367.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 In the first quote, Ellen G. White says the topic of being saved by faith, more than any other topic, needs to be clear in the minds of the people. Is this as true for us today as it was when she wrote it more than 100 years ago? If so, why?
- 2 Paul and Martin Luther lived in different times and places. But why was Paul’s truth about how we are saved so important to the work Luther did to free minds from the spiritual slavery of Rome?

SUMMARY: Peter’s behavior in Antioch seemed to say that non-Jews had to be circumcised before they could be true Christians. Paul pointed out how wrong Peter was. Instead, we must accept what God has done for us in Christ. Only then can sinners be made right with God.



“God receives, forgives, and makes right with Himself the sorrowing and believing soul. God treats this soul as if he or she were holy. And God loves him or her as He loves His Son.”