

Key Bible Doctrines

Part 4: God's Grace / Election / The Gospel Call / Regeneration / Conversion / Justification / Adoption

God's Grace

God's grace is the undeserved and unmerited blessing of God.

The grace of God in the world can be seen in the many good things that he has provided for all of his creatures. While sin and evil have corrupted most of these blessings to some degree, nevertheless, they are still evident to the discerning. This type of God's grace is called *common grace* since it is common to all people, whether they know God or not. In addition to common grace, God has provided, through the atoning work of Christ, a grace that leads people to salvation. This is called *saving grace*, and it is the greatest and most wonderful of all God's blessings to mankind.

In stark contrast to God's grace is the punishment that people deserve for the sin and evil that they continually commit in the world. We sin against God, our Creator, ourselves and each other, and we destroy the earth, the beautiful home that God has given us. What we deserve is to be destroyed ourselves! This is what happened in the time of Noah when God destroyed all of the people and animals that were alive at that time with a great flood because of their wickedness, except for Noah and his family and some of the animals (Genesis 6:5-8:22). The patience that God has exhibited since then is testimony to the love and compassion that he has for us, even for those people who do not love him in return (cf. 1 John 4:10).

Examples of God's common grace include:

- His continual care and provision for his creation: "The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. ... The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing" (Psalm 145:9, 15-16; see also Psalm 65:9-10; 104:10-30; Matthew 6:25-30; Acts 14:16-17).¹
- His provision of intellectual, artistic and physical skills to mankind. God's command to Adam and Eve to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28), was also a promise that he would provide the necessary skills and abilities to allow mankind to rule over the earth (cf. Genesis 4:20; Exodus 35:30-35; Ecclesiastes 2:24-25).²
- His provision to people of an inward sense of morality so that they are able to discern between right and wrong, and to prefer good over evil: "When [people] who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them" (Romans 2:14-15).³
- His provision to people of an inward sense of his existence. Even people who have

¹ Notwithstanding this universal provision, God does send scarcity and natural disasters upon the earth from time to time for his own purposes (e.g., Psalm 104:29; Amos 3:6; 4:6-10; Luke 13:1-5).

² This should not be interpreted as implying that God approves of every human achievement. Indeed, any activities which are not consistent with the moral standards of Scripture will not be acceptable to God (e.g., abortion, genetic engineering, lewd art, etc.)

³ However, the Bible also warns that people who persist in sinful and evil behaviour will eventually be given over to total depravity (Psalm 81:12; Romans 1:18-32; 1 Timothy 4:2).

ignored God for most of their lives will call out to him for help in times of trouble, and because of his love for everyone, he will often answer their prayers even when he knows that they will never come to a believing faith in him (Ezekiel 33:11; Mark 7:24-30; 1 Timothy 2:1-4).

- His provision to mankind of governments and law: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ... For [they are] God’s servant to do good” (Romans 13:1, 4).⁴

The *common grace* of God reflects both the love that he has for sinners and his patience with them: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). It also demonstrates his mercy in that he did not destroy Adam and Eve when they sinned, but instead set into motion a plan of redemption for a select few (Matthew 22:14). It also reveals the justice of God in giving people every opportunity to turn away from their evil ways and return to him (Mark 1:14-15). Finally, God’s glory is revealed in his exercising dominion over his creation, and also in the way that men and women reflect the likeness of God in their daily lives (Genesis 5:1-2).

The blessings that arise from God’s common grace fall on both believers and unbelievers alike without distinction.⁵ For believers, these blessings, while they are only temporal and of no lasting value, should be received with thanks and praise, as with the much greater blessings that come through having a saving faith in Christ Jesus. They should also remind us of God’s love and concern for the unsaved. This is reflected in the command of Jesus to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:44-45).

God’s *saving grace* applies only to the elect of God. In the previous paper, the atoning work that Christ did to earn salvation for the elect was discussed. In the following sections the process of salvation from the point of view of the believer is presented. It is convenient to divide this process into a series of events which typically occur in a specific order as shown in the following table.

The Order of Salvation

Event	Description	When
Election	God’s choice of people to save	Before the world existed
The gospel call	Receiving the gospel message	Becoming a Christian
Regeneration	Being born again	
Conversion	Faith and repentance	
Justification	Right legal standing	
Adoption	Membership in God’s family	
Sanctification	Right conduct of life	Living as a Christian
Perseverance	Remaining a Christian	

⁴ This is not to say that every government and every law is good. Also, notwithstanding the general principle of obedience to human authorities taught by Paul in Romans 13:1-7, there are times when Christians must disobey the laws of man in order to obey the greater law of God (e.g., Acts 4:18-20).

⁵ Conversely, natural disasters fall on the righteous and the unrighteous with equal impartiality.

Death	Going to be with the Lord	End of earthly life
Glorification	Receiving a resurrection body	Return of Christ

Election

Election is the decision of God, made before the world existed, to save some people, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign pleasure and will.

Several passages in the New Testament confirm that God ordained beforehand those who would be saved. In Romans 8:28-30, we read that, “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” Again, in Ephesians 1:4-6, Paul said of the elect that God “chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.” Peter said to the believers, “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). And in Revelation 13:7-8 we learn that the Antichrist “was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast – all whose names have not been written from the creation of the world in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain.”

From the first two passages quoted above, we see that the elect have been “called according to his purpose” and chosen “in accordance with his pleasure and will”. Nowhere does Scripture indicate that the believers were chosen based on any merit that God foresaw in them. Rather, the Scriptures teach that salvation is obtained only by the grace of God through faith: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Note in this passage that even our faith is “the gift of God” and, therefore, it was not even by their potential to believe in Christ that the elect were chosen (cf. Hebrews 12:2). Note also from this passage that the elect were chosen “to do good works, which God prepared in advance”. In the same epistle, Paul wrote of the believers, “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:11-12). In this passage we see that it is for both the “purpose of his will” and “for the praise of his glory” that the elect were chosen.

It is clear from these and other passages⁶ that the elect of God were predestined for salvation from before the world was created. However, only God knows who the elect are, and so Paul exhorts the believers to “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12-13).

When we understand election as God’s sovereign choice of some people to be saved, then we must also accept that God has chosen others for condemnation. This is called *reprobation* which may be defined as follows:

⁶ For example: Acts 13:48; Romans 9:11-13; 11:5-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 1:8-10; Revelation 17:8.

Reprobation is the decision of God, made before the world existed and with deep sorrow, to not save some people but to punish them for their sins so as to manifest his justice.

The doctrine of reprobation logically follows from the doctrine of election, but is also supported directly by a few scriptures. Jude speaks of “certain men who were marked out for condemnation long ago” (Jude 4). Peter said of those who reject the gospel, “They stumble because they disobey the message – which is also what they were destined for” (1 Peter 2:8; also cf. 2 Peter 2:3). In regard to his fellow Jews, Paul said, “What Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.’” (Romans 11:7-8; cf. Matthew 13:10-17). Similarly, speaking of those who will be deceived by the Antichrist, Paul proclaimed, “They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness” (2 Thessalonians 2:10-12).

On the face of it this teaching may appear harsh, but we need to remember that God “is patient with [sinners], not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). The compassion of God is also seen in his plea to wayward Israel: “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why would you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11). Again, in Isaiah 30:18 we read that “the Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!” Ultimately, the grace and compassion of God, along with his justice, is seen most vividly in the life and death of Jesus: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Paul wrote at length about election in Romans chapter 9, particularly in regard to Israel. At one point he attempts to address the issue of God’s justice: “What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’” (vv. 14-15). Paul is here quoting from Exodus 33:19 where God proclaims his divine right to show favour to whomever he chooses. Paul then explains: “One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’ But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?”’ Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?” (vv. 19-21). In this passage Paul, quoting from Isaiah 29:16 and 45:9, first warns against passing judgment on God before proposing that election and reprobation serve to glorify the Lord.

The predetermination of God as to who will be saved and who will perish is consistent with the doctrine of God’s providence as discussed in *Part 1: The Nature of God – The Providence of God*. The main encouragement of this doctrine for the believer is in knowing that God is in complete control of his creation, and that nothing is left to chance. However, it should not lead to a fatalistic outlook on life because this is not compatible with Scripture. As discussed in *Part 2: Mankind – Man Has a Free Will*, the Scriptures also clearly show that man has a free will and is fully responsible for his own actions. Indeed, the central theme of the whole of the Bible is of a personal and loving God reaching out to wayward men and women so that they might *choose* to be saved. The doctrine of election should make believers grateful for the wonderful gift of eternal life with God that they have received, and humble in knowing that there is nothing that they have done to deserve this. It should also motivate them to reach out to those that do not know Christ so that they also can have the opportunity to receive his

saving grace.

The Gospel Call

The gospel call is an act of God the Father, working through the human proclamation of the gospel, in which he summons the elect to salvation.

When Paul wrote about the way that God brings salvation into our lives, he said, “those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Romans 8:30). This shows the process of salvation starting with God’s choice of the elect as discussed in the previous section, followed by his calling them to himself before justifying them through the atoning work of Christ, and finally raising them to glory at the end of the age.

The process by which God calls the elect to receive the salvation that he has predestined for them involves both the human preaching of the gospel and a work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts to draw them to Christ. Paul, quoting from Joel 2:32, confirms that, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”, but goes on to ask, “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’” (Romans 10:13-15 – the last quote is from Isaiah 52:7). And to the believers in Thessalonica he said, “from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). On the other hand Jesus said, “No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:44; cf. Acts 16:14).

As previously noted, the purpose of God’s calling of the elect is that they “be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29). More specifically, we are told that he calls them “out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9), “into fellowship with his Son” (1 Corinthians 1:9), and ultimately, “into his kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:12). We are also told that those who have been called by God “belong to Jesus Christ” and are called “to be saints” (Romans 1:6-7). They are also called “to live a holy life” (1 Thessalonians 4:7); “to live in peace” (1 Corinthians 7:15); “to be free” but not to “indulge the sinful nature; rather, [to] serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13); “to one hope ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all” (Ephesians 4:4); to the patient endurance of suffering and insult (1 Peter 2:20-21; 3:9); and to eternal life (1 Timothy 6:12).

The gospel message includes the following facts: (a) everyone has sinned (Romans 3:23); (b) the penalty for sin is death (Romans 6:23); (c) Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins (Romans 5:8); and (d) when we repent of our sins, and by faith receive Christ into our lives, he will forgive our sins and grant us eternal life with God (John 3:16; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 2 Corinthians 7:10; 1 John 1:9). To this may be added the assurance that Christ will accept all who come to him in sincere repentance and faith (John 6:37; 10:28-29; Acts 2:21). Lastly, new believers should understand that having repented of their sins they are not to return to them because, “Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness” (2 Timothy 2:19).

Regeneration

Regeneration is an act of God in which he imparts new spiritual life to those who are being saved.

This is sometimes called “being born again” using the language of John 3:3-8. In this passage, Jesus declares to Nicodemus, “I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (v. 3). When Nicodemus asked him what this means, Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (vv. 5-6).⁷ We see from this teaching that regeneration is an act of the Holy Spirit within a person which imparts to them a new spiritual life. The most immediate result of this new birth is that the recipient is now able to “see the kingdom of God” and, therefore, to accept the gospel call: “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 John 5:1).

The regeneration is an instantaneous event that happens only once. At one moment we are spiritually dead, and then at the next moment we have new spiritual life from God. We do not know exactly when this happens, but in most cases it will be shortly before, or during, the first time that we hear and accept the gospel call. Peter said, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ... And this is the word that was preached to you” (1 Peter 1:23, 25). And James said, “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” (James 1:18). The *outward* evidence of the regeneration will be seen some time later as the Holy Spirit at work in the new believer begins to produce the “fruit of the Spirit” which includes “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

From the moment of our regeneration we are “a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Whereas before the regeneration we were dead in our sins, “because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ” (Ephesians 2:4-5). This mysterious work of renewal within sinful people was promised by God long before he sent his Son into the world: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezekiel 36:26-27; also 11:19-20; cf. Jeremiah 24:7; 31:33).

The Scriptures tell us that the person whom God has blessed with regeneration is now able to understand spiritual truths. In contrast, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). From the first epistle of John, we also learn that the regenerated person is set free from enslavement to sin: “No-one who is born of God will continue to sin,” (v. 3:9), and conversely, “everyone who does what is right has been born of him” (v. 2:29). That person will also develop a Christlike love for others: “Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (vv. 4:7-8). Following on from this we are also told, “This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world” (vv. 5:3-4). Another result of the regeneration is protection from Satan himself: “We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him” (v. 5:18).

It is important to note that regeneration is seen in the character of the believer and not in the works that the believer is able to perform. In fact, Jesus warned that on the day of judgment, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, evil doers!’” (Matthew 7:21-23). But those who do the will of God can greatly rejoice because, “In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:3-5).

⁷ To be “born of water” is an allusion to baptism which itself represents the act of dying to our old self and becoming a new creation in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:3-7; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:22-24).

Conversion

Conversion is our willing response to the gospel call in which we sincerely repent of our sins and place our trust in Christ for salvation.

The word *conversion* means “turning”, and here represents a turning away from sin to Christ. The turning from sin is called *repentance*, and the tuning to Christ is called *saving faith*. These terms may be defined as follows:

Repentance is a heartfelt sorry for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ.

Saving faith is trust in Jesus Christ as a living person for the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of eternal life with God.

In today’s culture the word *trust* may be a better word to use than *faith* or *belief*. The word *faith* is often used today to refer to an irrational commitment to something in spite of strong evidence to the contrary, while the word *belief* is often associated with personal opinions which may or may not be true. The word *trust* is closer to the biblical idea, because we are familiar with trusting people in everyday life. The more we come to know someone, and the more we see in that person behaviour that warrants our trust, the more we are able to trust that person. At the time of conversion, however, our trust in Christ is not based on our relationship with him, but rather on the faith that God has put into our hearts through the process of regeneration as described in the previous section. After this, our trust in him grows stronger as we come to know him better. Hence, Paul prayed for the believers at Ephesus, “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better” (Ephesians 1:17). Jesus himself offers this invitation: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (John 7:37-38). In the next verse we are told that the “streams of living water” refer to the Holy Spirit, “whom those who believed in him were later to receive.”

While faith is essential, since “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6), yet faith without repentance will not result in salvation. Paul taught that “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2 Corinthians 7:10). On another occasion he rebuked the believers in Rome asking, “do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you towards repentance?” (Romans 2:4). The apostle Peter, after healing a man crippled from birth, preached to the astonished onlookers, saying, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, [and] that times of refreshing may come from the Lord” (Acts 3:19). Again, Paul said to the Greeks, “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).

Both faith and repentance are necessary for true conversion. There are many scriptures that talk about the need for faith without mentioning repentance (e.g., John 3:16; Acts 16:31; Romans 10:9; Ephesians 2:8-9; etc.), but there are also many scriptures that refer only to the need to repent, with the understanding that faith will also be present. For example, Jesus told his disciples, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47). Paul summarised his gospel ministry as one of “testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21, NKJV). In the same vein, the prophet Isaiah provides an eloquent testimony that is typical of the message of many of the Old Testament prophets:

Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon (Isaiah 55:6-7).

Faith and repentance are attitudes of the heart that continue throughout our lives as Christians. Jesus told his disciples to pray daily, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). And to the wayward church at Laodicea he said, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent” (Revelation 3:19). With regard to faith, Paul said, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20; see also 1 Corinthians 13:13). Therefore, the heart attitudes of repentance and faith, which begin at conversion, must continue throughout the course of our Christian lives. Each day we should express a heartfelt repentance for sins that we have committed, and trust in Christ to provide for our needs and to empower us to live the Christian life.

Justification

Justification is a legal act of God in which he: 1. Declares us to be righteous in his sight; 2. Thinks of our sins as forgiven; and 3. Thinks of Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us.

In the previous sections we have seen that the *gospel call* is God’s invitation to us to put our trust in Christ for the forgiveness of our sins, *regeneration* is the act of God which allows us to respond to that invitation, and *conversion* occurs when we choose to respond with repentance and faith. The next step in the process of redemption is that God must fulfill his promise to forgive our sins so that we are no longer liable to punishment. This part of the process is known as *justification*. As Paul said, “those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified ...” (Romans 8:30). This shows that justification comes after our faith and as God’s response to our faith.

The verb *to justify* (Greek, *dikaioō*) means either to “bring out the fact that a person is righteous, or if he is not, to make him righteous. ... Everywhere in the Old Testament the root meaning of *dikaioō* is to set forth as righteous, to justify in a legal sense (Ezekiel 16:51-52). In the New Testament it means to recognise, set forth as righteous, justify as a judicial act (Luke 10:29; 16:15)” (*Lexical Aids To The New Testament*, NASB). The word does not, however, indicate the means by which the justification has been achieved.

Paul taught that no one is able make himself righteous before God, but instead we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone: “Therefore no-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:20-24). He goes on to teach that God, “justifies those who have faith in Jesus”, and that “a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Romans 3:26; 28). Again he explains, “For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Therefore, it is not by any good works on our part that we are made right with God, but only by the work that Christ did on our behalf “as a sacrifice of atonement” and our having “faith in his blood” (Romans 3:25; cf. 5:9).

In Romans 4, Paul points to Abraham, the father of Israel, as an example of justification by faith. Quoting from Genesis 15:6, he notes that “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (v. 3; cf. vv. 13-16). He also interprets the words of David in the same way: “David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.’” (vv. 6-8). In Romans 5, Paul notes that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (v. 8). He then explains that by our

faith in Christ our sinfulness is exchanged for his righteousness, thereby reversing the effect of Adam’s sin upon all mankind: “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (vv. 18-19).

An apparent contradiction to the teaching of justification by faith appears in Romans 2:13 where Paul says: “For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.” But Paul is here describing the standard by which God will judge us which he goes on to explain is a standard that cannot be met by any man. It is, however, the standard which Christ was able to meet both practically (John 8:46; Luke 23:13-15) and morally (John 8:29; 14:30-31).

Another apparent contradiction occurs in the teaching of the apostle James who argues that “faith without deeds is useless” and that “a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone” (James 2:20, 24). Also using Abraham as an example, James explains that “his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did” (v. 22). He concludes, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (v. 26). But James is here teaching fellow believers that their faith must be demonstrated by good deeds, and is not discussing the subject of our justification through faith in Christ. In effect, while Paul is saying that no man can *earn* salvation by doing good works, James is saying that everyone who has been saved through faith in Christ must *demonstrate and develop* their faith by doing good works.⁸

Since we are justified by faith and not by anything that we can do in our own strength, and since this justification means that we now have imputed to us the righteousness of Christ (Romans 5:17), we can have complete assurance of God’s forgiveness of our sins and full confidence to draw near to him (Hebrews 10:19-22). As Paul said, “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). Also, “since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1-2).

Adoption

Adoption is an act of God whereby he makes us members of his family.

In addition to the amazing gifts of regeneration and justification which we receive at the time we become Christians, God also at this time makes us members of this family: “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent ... but born of God” (John 1:12-13; cf. Galatians 3:26; 1 John 3:1-2). Paul taught that, “those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Romans 8:14). By contrast, those who do not believe in Christ are not children of God but are “children of wrath” and “sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2-3; 5:6, NKJV and NASB). To the Jews who would not believe in him, Jesus said, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God” (John 8:42); but because they were planning to kill him he said to them, “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire” (John 8:44).

In becoming God’s children, Jesus said that his disciples would be set free from slavery to sin: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent

⁸ A similar argument arises in relation to sin and grace. Paul taught that “where sin increased, grace increased all the more” which raises the question, “Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase?” Paul replies, “By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?” (Romans 5:20-6:2). This again shows the difference between the saving work of God and the subsequent practice of believers.

place in the family, but a son belongs to it for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed” (John 8:34-36). Similarly, Paul taught that “Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into [your] hearts, the Spirit who calls out, ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir” (Galatians 4:6-7).⁹ In regard to this wonderful inheritance to which the children of God are entitled, Paul said, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Romans 8:16-17).

Our adoption into the family of God by becoming disciples of Christ means that we are also the “spiritual” descendants of Abraham. In Romans 4:13-17, Paul explains that the promise given to Abraham “that he would be heir of the world ... comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: ‘I have made you a father of many nations.’ He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.” Paul explains this further in Romans 9:6-13, where he says that “it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring” (v. 8). The faithful Christians, therefore, are adopted into the same family as the faithful descendants of Abraham. As to the former, Paul explains that they are the ones whom God spoke about through the prophet Hosea:

I will call them “my people” who are not my people; and I will call her “my loved one” who is not my loved one,

and,

It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, “You are not my people,” they will be called “sons of the living God” (Romans 9: 25-26).

In regard to the latter, Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah: “Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand of the sea, only the remnant will be saved” (Romans 9:27; see also Galatians 4:21-31).

While Christians are adopted into God’s family at the time of their conversion, Paul indicates that the process of becoming the children of God will not be fully completed until we are raised up with Christ in our resurrection bodies at the end of the age: “Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23).

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Acknowledgments

Bible quotations are from the New International Version, 1984 unless otherwise indicated. Other versions referred to from time to time are:

Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible, New American Standard Bible, 1977 (NASB).

The Spirit Filled Life Bible, New King James Version, 1991 (NKJV).

⁹ The word *abba* is an intimate expression for “father” similar to the words *dad* or *papa*.