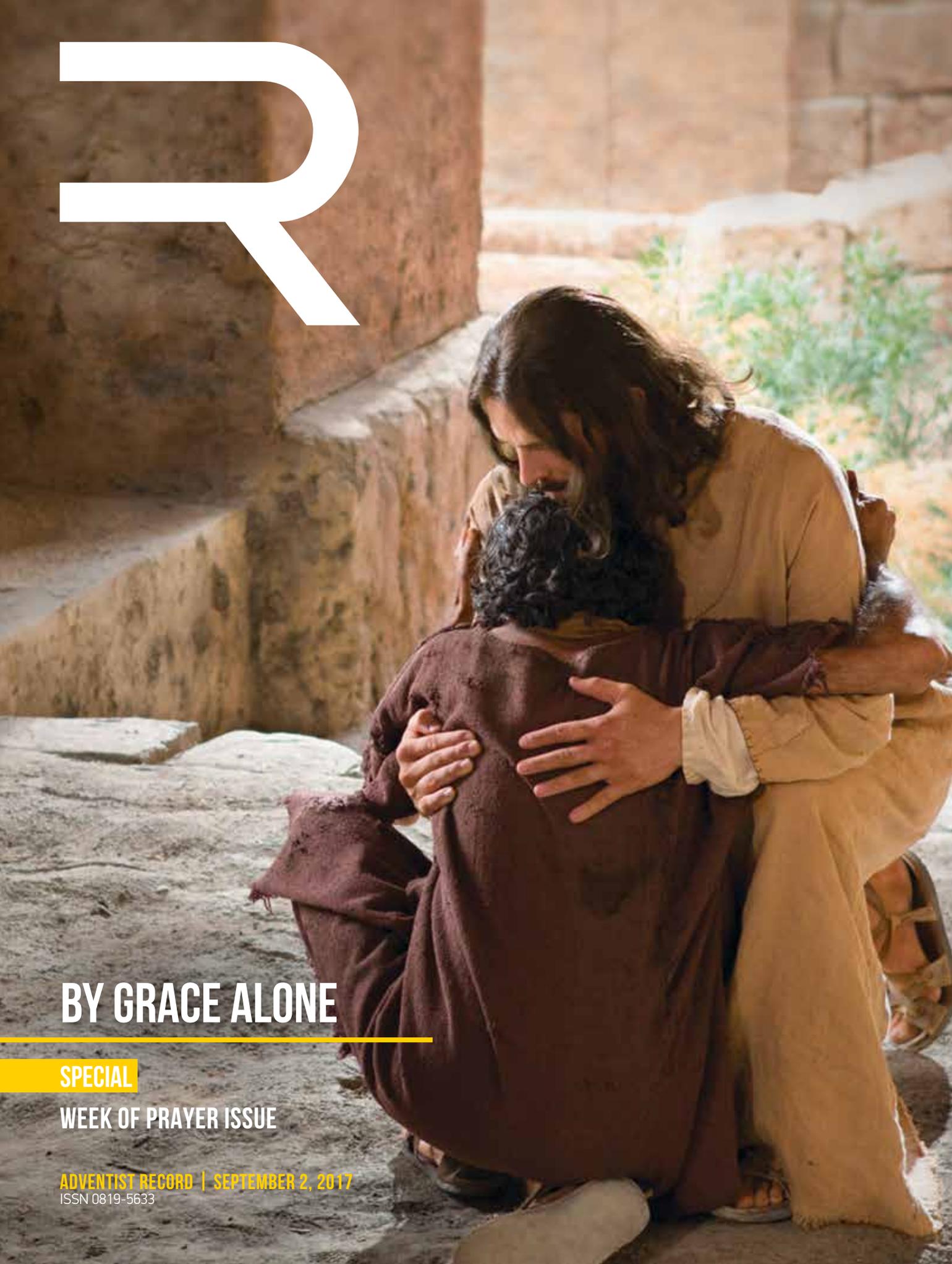


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BY GRACE ALONE

SPECIAL

WEEK OF PRAYER ISSUE

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WEEK OF PRAYER

- 3 FIRST SABBATH
- 6 SUNDAY
- 8 MONDAY
- 10 TUESDAY
- 13 WEDNESDAY
- 16 THURSDAY
- 18 FRIDAY
- 20 SECOND SABBATH
- 23 CHILDREN'S READINGS

BY GRACE ALONE

ON THE COVER: This year's Week of Prayer readings highlight the gospel as the basis of our salvation in Christ alone. Jesus' love and acceptance of sinners—no matter how bad—is why we have hope.

About This Special Issue

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, when the message of salvation through Christ alone was heard by many for the first time. Light spread not only through the teachings of the great Reformers, but through God's Word itself, as the Bible became available in common languages and people could read the truth for themselves.

It is fitting that our Week of Prayer readings in 2017 focus on "Christ Our Righteousness," for there is truly "no other name under heaven . . . by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Ellen White expressed this thought beautifully during a General Conference session when she said, "The only way in which men will be able to stand firm in the conflict is to be rooted and grounded in Christ. . . . The preaching of Christ crucified, Christ our righteousness, is what satisfies the soul's hunger. When we secure the interest of the people in this great central truth, faith and hope and courage come to the heart.*"

I encourage you this week not only to contemplate these special readings, but also to spend time in God's Word and prayer as we focus together on "Christ Our Righteousness." If you have younger ones in the home, be sure to share with them the accompanying children's readings.

May the Lord bless us as we come together as a world church family to study and pray during this important time of earth's history.

TED N. C. WILSON, *president*
Seventh-day Adventist Church

* In *General Conference Daily Bulletin*, Jan. 28, 1893 (see also *Last Day Events* [Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1992], p. 151).

MEET THE AUTHOR



Hans (Johann) Heinz, born in Vienna, Austria, studied theology at Séminaire Adventiste du Salève in Collonges, France. Following graduation he worked for four years as a pastor in Vienna. Beginning in 1957, he taught for 21 years at Seminar Schloss Bogenhofen (including seven years as director). After completing doctoral studies at Andrews University, he served as dean of Seminar Marienhöhe in Darmstadt, Germany, from 1982 to 1995. He has authored several books and many articles on theology and church history. His doctoral dissertation, *Justification and Merit*, dealt with the conflict between the Roman Catholic doctrine of merit and the biblical doctrine of righteousness by faith. Heinz and his wife, Louissette, enjoy an active retirement near Bogenhofen, Austria.

God's Word, Our Faith Foundation

By TED N. C. WILSON

At first glance the small group seemed similar to any other funeral procession: members of the clergy, curious onlookers, and men with grave digging tools. Only one thing was missing—a coffin with the deceased.

Strange and Angry Funeral

As the group entered the graveyard of the parish church of St. Mary in Lutterworth, England, a sense of excitement—and revenge—permeated the air. At last, 43 years after the arch-heretic John Wycliffe was laid in his grave, he would receive his due.

Reaching the gravesite, the men eagerly tore at the ground, digging deeper until at last their picks struck wood. Ripping open the coffin, unsanctified hands threw Wycliffe's bones from their resting place and into a blazing fire.

Not able to execute him during his life, the Papacy was determined to accomplish its ends following his death. After the bones of John Wycliffe were turned to ashes, the proud prelates scooped up his remains and poured them into the nearby River

Swift, hoping to leave no trace of the man or his work.

Why such hate? Why such vitriol? Because John Wycliffe had dared to defy the pope, had dared to preach against the freeloading friars, and worst of all, had dared to translate the Bible from Latin into the English language, providing God's holy Word to people in their native tongue. Priests, bishops, and the pope himself knew that the light of God's Word would dispel the darkness that was keeping them and their corrupt system in power.

"But the burning of such a man's bones could not end his influence," wrote theologian and historian George Townsend centuries later. "As John Foxe said in his book of martyrs, 'though they digged up his body, burnt his bones, and drowned his ashes, yet the Word of God and the truth of his doctrine, with the fruit and success thereof, they could not burn; which yet to this day. . . doth remain.'"¹

While Wycliffe escaped the fire until after his death, many others who came after were burned at the stake, beheaded, drowned—martyred for their faithfulness to God and His Word.

Providing the Bible for the People

The effort to provide the Bible for people in their own language continued. Two hundred years after the birth of Wycliffe, Martin Luther, the most well known of all the Reformers, published his German translation of the New Testament in 1522. His complete translation of the Bible was first published in 1534 and was warmly welcomed by the common German-speaking people. But the authorities were not pleased: "In vain both ecclesiastical and civil authorities were invoked to crush the heresy. In vain they resorted to imprisonment, torture, fire, and sword. Thousands of believers sealed their faith with their blood, and yet the work went on. Persecution served only to extend the truth."²

While Martin Luther was bringing God's Word to the common people in Germany, William Tyndale followed in the footsteps of Wycliffe by setting out to provide a new English translation of the Bible. While Wycliffe's Bible had been translated from the Latin text, Tyndale worked from the original languages of Greek and Hebrew. His work was not welcomed in England, so Tyndale fled to Germany, where in 1525 his New Testament emerged—the first to be printed, from the original Greek, in the English language.

Promptly smuggled into England, Tyndale's translation was welcomed by the people, but hated by the authorities. While translating the Old Testament, Tyndale was betrayed in 1535. After suffering in prison for 500 days, Tyndale was martyred—strangled with chains and burned at the stake. Trusted friends completed his work, and Tyndale's complete Bible translation was published several years after his death.

“Now is the time to develop **total** faith, confidence, and trust in the Word of God.”

The Reformers' Passion

Why did these men go through such pain and suffering, even death, to bring the Word of God to people? Because they longed for people to know God's truth. Once the public's eyes were opened to the truth of the Bible, they would see the contradictions between what God's Word said and what the priests taught. The truth would set them free from the grip of fear that the institutional church held.³

Ellen White shared the Reformers' passion for giving everyone access to the Scriptures. “The Bible was not given only for ministers and learned men,” she wrote. “Every man, woman, and child should read the Scriptures for himself or herself. Do not depend on the minister to read it for you. The Bible is God's Word to you. The poor man needs it as much as the rich man, the unlearned as much as the learned. And Christ has made this Word so plain that in reading it no one need stumble.”⁴

Because of the Protestant principles of accepting the plain reading of the text and allowing the Bible to interpret itself, most of our foundational truths—the Sabbath, the state of the dead, the sanctuary and the investigative judgment—were established by the time the Seventh-day Adventist Church was officially organized in 1863.

Commenting on this foundational Bible study, Ellen White wrote, “Elder [Hiram] Edson, and others who were keen, noble, and true, were among those who, after the passing of the time in 1844, searched for the truth as for hidden treasure. I met with them, and we studied and prayed earnestly. Often we remained together until late at night, and sometimes through the

entire night, praying for light and studying the Word. Again and again these brethren came together to study the Bible, in order that they might know its meaning, and be prepared to teach it with power.”⁵

A Critical Eye

Today some disparage the idea of a “plain reading” of the text. To their way of thinking, it is necessary to approach the Bible with a critical eye to understand what parts of God's Word have meaning for us in the twenty-first century. Rather than comparing scripture with scripture, they set human wisdom as the arbiter between what is relevant and what is not.

One of the biggest battles we face as Seventh-day Adventists is the battle over the authority of the Bible.

Let's remember that the Scriptures are our only safeguard as we faithfully follow and promote the historical-biblical method of interpreting Scripture, allowing the Bible to interpret itself, line upon line, and precept upon precept.

Note the following instructions about accepting the Bible as it reads: “God requires more of His followers than many realize. If we would not build our hopes of heaven upon a false foundation we must accept the Bible as it reads and believe that the Lord means what He says.”⁶

Methods of Bible Study

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has an official document on how to study the Bible. Voted by the General Conference Executive Committee at its Annual Council in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the document “is addressed to all members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church with the purpose of

providing guidelines on how to study the Bible.” It then explains two different approaches to Scripture:

The historical-critical method minimizes the need for faith in God and obedience to His commandments. In addition, because such a method de-emphasizes the divine element in the Bible as an inspired book (including its resultant unity) and depreciates or misunderstands apocalyptic prophecy and the eschatological portions of the Bible, we urge Adventist Bible students to avoid relying on the use of the presuppositions and the resultant deductions associated with the historical-critical method.

In contrast with the historical-critical method and presuppositions, we believe it to be helpful to set forth the principles of Bible study that are consistent with the teachings of the Scriptures themselves, that preserve their unity, and are based upon the premise that the Bible is the Word of God. Such an approach will lead us into a satisfying and rewarding experience with God.⁷

God has given us a mandate from heaven to be defenders of His Word because it has been shown to be true and it changes people's lives. The world is awash in existential behavior—people think everything is relative, but it is not! There are absolutes, and they are found in the Word of God and our faithful adherence to His Word.

Make Time for God's Word

We are living in the Laodicean last-day period when Christianity is often superficial. The devil will try everything to distract us from the Bible and the truth. Every possible means will be used: recreation, media, amusements,

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When most of the religious leaders of Jesus' day focused on condemnation, Jesus emphasized grace and forgiveness, as seen in His interaction with the woman taken in adultery (John 8).



work, music, disagreements and internal fighting, false teachings, family discord, economic problems—anything that will take time away from God's Word.

But now is the time to make sure to read the Bible each day. God's Word is vitally important because it brings us face to face with Jesus Christ. It teaches us that salvation is possible only through complete reliance on Him. It tells of His life and death, His resurrection, and His ministry for us in the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary. It reminds us that the Sabbath is Christ's special seal and covenant with His commandment-keeping people. It confirms our belief and hope in a soon, literal second coming of Christ, our Redeemer. It helps us to know that we serve a God who will never fail and whose church will be triumphant against the attacks of the devil.

Now is the time to develop total faith, confidence, and trust in the Word of God. We know that a time is coming when we will not be able to trust our senses, that an "almost overmastering delusion"⁸ and deception so alluring

will be presented that "if possible, even the elect" will be deceived (Matt. 24:25).

Now Is the Time

A storm is coming. Now is the time to build upon the firm foundation of God's Word. Jesus Himself tells us how to be ready: "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock" (Matt. 7:24, 25).

Our faith and beliefs must be built upon the timeless Word of God. The Bible, which has been faithfully preserved and sealed with the blood of martyrs, transcends time and culture. It is God's living Word, and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can find the answers that are so desperately needed now. ■

¹ George Townsend, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe: With a Life of the Martyrologist, and Vindication of the Work*, vol. 3, p. 96.

² Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 196.

³ "William Tyndale," at <http://greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/william-tyndale.html>.

⁴ Ellen G. White manuscript 12, Feb. 7, 1901.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958, 1980), book 1, p. 206.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 5, p. 171.

⁷ "Methods of Bible Study," <https://www.adventist.org/en/information/official-statements/documents/article/go/-/methods-of-bible-study/>.

⁸ E. G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 624.

QUESTIONS FOR Reflection and Sharing:

- 1 What historical significance do you see in the story of (the burning of Wycliffe's bones)?
- 2 How can we improve our practice of Bible study so we can benefit more from it?
- 3 What is meant by "a storm is coming"? How are we preparing for it?

Philipp Melancthon, the peace-loving and consensus-seeking fellow Reformer of Martin Luther, was once asked by friends why he was so devoted to Luther, although the great man could sometimes be rather obstinate, bossy, and rude. Melancthon, himself being one of the great scholars of the Reformation period, simply and concisely replied: “I have learned the gospel from him.”

Through the influence of Luther and the Reformation “the gospel” returned to the center of Christian faith at the beginning of the modern era. According to the apostle Paul, it is the message through which “the power of God” works, bringing “salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16, NIV).

This definition provided by the apostle presents five terms of particular importance:

Gospel

This word means the “good news,” the “joyful message,” the “victory message.” It is the “gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1) because it comes from God and speaks of God. But it is also the “gospel of Christ” (Rom. 15:19), that is, the message of the mission, the sacrifice, and the atoning death of Jesus of Nazareth, the divine Messiah, for the world. Further, it also speaks of His victory over death, His mediation before God for His people who are still living and struggling in this world, and also of His future return to complete His work. Thus, the gospel consoles us that after the present

Learning the Gospel

“salvation in an unsaved world,” Christ will return to “change the whole world.”

The gospel provides the solution to the basic human problem: “For earth’s sin and misery the gospel is the only antidote.”¹

Power of God

The gospel has creative power because it is God’s Word. Human words do not hold creative power. They are often only “sound and fury.” But when God speaks the gospel, what He says also happens: everyone who believes receives salvation.

Salvation

Salvation does not occur as a result of philosophical speculation, theorems, or wisdom gleaned from books. The salvation of humanity from their misery of guilt and fleetingness of life is not produced by human speech, but by divine action

and divine acquittal. It is, what Luther called, the “*admirabile commercium*,”² the marvelous exchange or substitution.

At the cross “God . . . in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19) exchanged places with the world. He took over the judgment that should have been executed on the sinner: “The Judge judged in our place.”³ He took our punishment on Himself and gives us His righteousness (verse 21); He became weak and gives us His strength (2 Cor. 12:9); He became poor for us and gives us His abundance (2 Cor. 8:9); He exchanged misery for glory, suffering for joy, and “made himself ‘nothing’” (Phil. 2:7) in contrast to His ‘all,’ so that we ‘have all,’ although we ‘have nothing’” (2 Cor. 6:10).⁴

For All

The gospel’s wonders apply not only to a particular nation, gender or social status but are for all.

“I have learned the Gospel from him.”

—PHILIPP MELANCHTHON

Through his Damascus experience the apostle Paul, who would have proudly boasted of his Jewish ancestry and Pharisaic self-righteousness (Phil. 3:4-6), became a friend of the Gentile nations to which so many of his fellow Christians belonged. They were his “joy and crown” (Phil. 4:1). For him, Christ’s suffering and death for all (1 Tim. 2:6) erased all national, social, and gender prejudices (Gal. 3:26-28). The gospel breaks through all barriers and creates a supranational community.

In Christ diverse people with different origins and varied education and experience are merged into the “familia Dei,” the family of God: “Christ tears away the wall of partition, the dividing prejudice of nationality, and teaches a love for all the human family.”⁵ Above all, humans all become “children of God.” Christ unites us not only on the horizontal plane, but also and especially on the vertical: He reconnects humanity with God by His salvific death. How?

Through Faith in Christ

When Paul speaks of “believing,” he does not refer to surmising or imagining, nor even agreeing to a specific statement. Believing in the Scriptures—the Old Testament at that time—means to “take firmly hold of, grasp, be faithful.”⁶ In the New Testament, belief means “trust” and “faithfulness.” We receive salvation—forgiveness of sins, acceptance

by God, renewal of life and final redemption—by trusting Christ’s promise of salvation, holding firmly on to it, and remaining faithful to the end. What saves the “wicked,” or sinners, is not their religious achievements (“works”), but their trust in the God who declares them righteous in Christ (Rom. 4:5). Justification of sinners, that is, their declaration of being righteous before the mercy seat of God, happens by faith alone, apart from the works of the law (Gal. 2:16).

The church believed that it had preserved this gospel through the centuries, and that it was its faithful interpreter. Many who thought they understood Paul had forgotten the essence of his message. A type of “innocent righteousness of works”⁷ had taken possession of Christendom and had turned the apostolic preaching of grace by faith into a subtle work religion. Under the influence of synagogue legalism, Greek virtue teachings, and Roman legal thought, sinners’ acquittal by grace was replaced by an indispensable “toil,”⁸ in which salvation seekers never knew whether they had done enough to be worthy of salvation. There were dissenting voices, but either they were not entirely clear themselves, or they went unheeded.

Then came the glorious rediscovery of the apostolic message by the Reformation of the sixteenth century, when Paul’s word, “The righteous will live by faith” (Rom. 1:17, NIV), again began to shine, and Christendom

once more realized: “The only glory of Christians is in Jesus Christ alone.”⁹ ■

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1905), p. 141.

² Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), vol. 7, p. 25.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2009), Vol. IV.1, p. 211.

⁴ Horst Pöhlmann, *Abriss der Dogmatik* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 1975), p. 185.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), p. 823.

⁶ Rolf Luther, *Neutestamentliches Wörterbuch* (Hamburg: Furche Verlag, 1963), p. 95.

⁷ Barth, p. 523.

⁸ Tertullian *De poenitentia* 6.

⁹ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), vol. 13, p. 570.

QUESTIONS FOR Reflection and Sharing:

- 1 How has the gospel changed your life? What have you gained by it?
- 2 How can we interact with people of a scientific mind-set, to show them that they need the gospel?
- 3 What healing effect does the message of justification by faith alone have for our soul?
- 4 What in the gospel can attract young or old people to the importance of the Christian faith?

The doctrine of justification by faith alone is the “sanctuary of the Reformation.”¹ When Martin Luther understood the marvelous promise of the sinner’s justification through trust in the crucified Christ, it was as if the Reformer had already entered into Paradise.

As monk, priest, and theology professor, Luther had struggled for years to understand Paul’s sentence: “In [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed” (Rom. 1:17). Day and night his thoughts revolved around that phrase. In his own words he hated the expression “righteousness of God” because he understood it philosophically, according to the church fathers and scholastics, as justice, which God demands, but which sinners cannot produce and consequently fall under God’s judgment.

Encounters in the Tower

In 1545, a year before his death, the former Augustinian monk and later Reformer looked once again back to the turning point in his life, belief, and practice. This turnaround was the breakthrough to the realization that the “righteousness of God” is not a demand, but a gift: the passive righteousness that God imputes to everyone who believes in Christ. According to Luther, he had realized this in the tower room of the Black Monastery in Wittenberg: “The Holy Spirit unveiled the Scriptures for me in this tower.”²

Biblical Righteousness

“*Deliver me in Your righteousness*” (Ps. 31:1). Already in the Old Testa-

ment, God’s righteousness is the righteousness that saves sinners. When Abraham received the promise of his future descendants (Gen. 15:5), he was not a “superhuman,” but a sinner, as we all are. But because he trusted the promise of God, God counted it to him as righteousness (verse 6). This means that God considered Abraham as “righteous” because of his trusting faith. As the “wicked” in the Bible does not represent an atheist in the modern sense, but a general “sinner” (Ps. 1:1; Prov. 11:31), so also the “righteous” is not the “sinless one,” but the “believer” (see Hab. 2:4). This allowed the apostle Paul to ascertain that even under the Old Covenant people were justified not by works but by faith (Rom. 4:6-8). So He who “justifies,” who “declares righteous,” or “counts someone as righteous,” is God alone: “The Lord [is] our righteousness” (Jer. 23:6).

Thus, justice in the Bible is a religion, not a moral or political, term.

People who follow state and government laws, who abide by the rule of law, are not exceptional in this world. But a person who claims to be righteous before God falls prey to a fateful mistake, because even the psalmist in the Old Testament knows that “no one living is righteous” before God (Ps. 143:2).

So if people want to come “right” before God, they need God’s righteousness. This is why the psalmist says: “Deliver me in Your righteousness” (Ps. 31:1; 71:2). This righteousness is primarily redemptive righteousness, salvation, not punitive justice.

In the light of the New Testament, this means that the God who assumes the guilt and the judgment of the wicked world (John 1:29), pays for that guilt in the judgment that takes the life of His righteous, sinless Son on the cross. Because of that same sacrifice He can forgive the unjust, accept them, work in them a new way of thinking as well as a new life, and give to them the

The Ground of Our Salvation

“All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into **paradise** itself through open gates.”

—MARTIN LUTHER

hope of a new, just world (2 Peter 3:13). Only those who reject this gift will fall under condemnation for their personal iniquity (Heb. 10:29, 30).

They Did Not Know

“Since they did not know the righteousness of God” (Rom. 10:3, NIV). Old Testament prophets clearly taught that humanity’s need of salvation cannot be supplied by mere human virtue (Isa. 64:5). Human salvation requires God’s righteousness—through His forgiveness and merciful acceptance. This truth did not remain clear during the centuries following the conclusion of the Old Testament.

During that period oral teachings intended to interpret the biblical texts came to be regarded as equivalent to the revealed Word of God. Thus Scripture combined with oral tradition became the foundation of faith. The Law, the Torah, was supplemented by many instructions on how to execute it, some of which even substituted (Matt. 15:1-6) and changed it (Rom. 9:31, 32). What was intended as “instruction for life” was converted to the “way of salvation.” This misconception led to religious formalism (Matt. 23:23), even religious arrogance (Luke 18:9-14) among the Pharisees of Jesus’ day.

Knowledge of the necessity of God’s grace was not completely lost, as illustrated by the Old Testament Apocrypha.³ But more and more there was an emphasis on the value of one’s own works, which were thought to atone for sins⁴ as well as claim merit before God.⁵

The whole life became a “yoke of

bondage,” and the Pharisees strove to “make a show of their piety,” a “glorification of themselves,” believing that their righteousness would serve as a “passport to heaven.”⁶

Lost People and Our Loving God

Jesus countered this doctrine of salvation with a clear “No.” He maintained and taught a fundamentally different image of God and humanity. He searched the nature of humankind much more deeply than any of His contemporaries. The individual, from whose heart “evil thoughts” arise (Matt. 15:19), is completely unable to do works that are good before God. It requires a radical conversion and faith in the gospel (Mark 1:15). But even if one has become a disciple, one has to completely depend on God, for we are always “empty-handed” before God (Matt. 5:3). What we do in following Jesus does not provide any merit but is the natural fruit of His abiding presence (Luke 17:10).

God, our merciful Father, loves His lost children unceasingly; He is ever forgiving the penitent and gladly accepting them back (Luke 15:20-24). We, His disciples, have been called to work. But the reward we receive for our efforts is not a due we can demand from or charge to Him, because He always gives us more good things than we deserve (Matt. 20:15). The reward God gives is not something He owes, but only one more gift of His goodness.

What gave Martin Luther the advantage over his opponents lay in the fact that he had not only acquired this knowledge but also experienced it.

Through many struggles with himself, with the theology of his time and its proponents, he had understood what needs to be the foundational experience of being a Christian: “Righteousness means to recognize Christ.”⁷ ■

¹ Wilhelm Dantine, *Die Gerechtmachung des Gottlosen* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1959), p. 248.

² Martin Luther, *Tischreden*, 3, 3232c.

³ Baruch 2:19, 27.

⁴ Tobit 12:9.

⁵ H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1961), Vol. IV/1, p. 491.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), pp. 204, 612, 409, 309.

⁷ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005), vol. 31/II, p. 439.

QUESTIONS FOR Reflection and Sharing:

- 1 What is the difference between the popular understanding of “righteousness” and what the Bible calls “God’s righteousness”?
- 2 How might God’s righteousness be more important than the world’s righteousness? How can we explain this to our contemporaries, both young and old?
- 3 How did Jesus’ understanding of God and humanity differ from the current thought of His and our time?

Faith alone justifies, but it does not remain alone. Following Martin Luther's courageous testimony to the emperor, the princes, and theologians on April 18 of 1521, during which he refused to recant any of his positions, the emperor's Spanish entourage shouted: "Into the fire with him!"

Luther threw up his arms and cried, "I've been through it, I've been through it."

What Righteousness by Faith Looks Like

"Behold, new things have come" (2 Cor. 5:17, NASB).¹

This dramatic event in the history of the Reformation provides a vivid illustration for what righteousness by faith means. Although Luther had not been acquitted, he had courageously stood firm before the court. Before the judgment seat of God we too can stand firm and be acquitted because of the saving work of Christ. By faith, we have already been through our personal judgment and have "crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24, NIV).

But there is a great difference between human judgments and God's judgment: a human judge can only acquit, but the divine judge is capable of creating anew. God's acquittal is a creative judgment that transforms the natural into a spiritual person: believers become what they already are! Justified, they now live just lives. Both together meant "justification in its fullest sense"² for the Reformer.

Today we speak of "justification" (forgiveness of sins) and "sanctifica-

tion" (overcoming of sins). Ellen White calls the Christian life a life "of faith, of victory, and joy in God."³ Miraculously, a new life begins.⁴

By faith we grasp Jesus and submit to heaven's reign. Christ and the Holy Spirit inspire in us a vibrant and dynamic spiritual life. This life is fruit and testimony of the salvation we have received. It is for the glory of God and for the good of others, because faith is, as the Reformer says, "a divine work in us that transforms and lets us be born anew from God (John 1:13)."

Faith "kills the old Adam, and changes our heart, courage, mind and all powers, bringing the Holy Spirit along. There is something lively, industrious, active, powerful about faith that makes it impossible to not continuously do good. It also does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before one asks, faith has already done it and continues to do so."⁵

Righteousness: A Practical Matter

*Does anything come after
justification?*

A Walk That Honors God

"So we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4).

Although this newness of life is indeed a consequence of the salvation received by faith, it is nevertheless necessary if the Christian life is to be credible. In His work of salvation God aims not only at forgiveness but also at transformation.

While being righteous before God occurs the moment we believe in Jesus, becoming righteous in our life is a process that continues throughout our lifetime. This process begins Christ's reign over the life of the faithful. It represents, as Luther says, "the beginning of the new creation."⁶ After believers have been legally justified, Christ through the Holy Spirit initiates in them a day-to-day life of godly existence.

God works with sinners like the "good Samaritan" who saved the man's life after he had been robbed and wounded. As the Samaritan did

“The Christian life is a life ‘of faith, of victory, and joy in God.’”

—ELLEN G. WHITE

not hesitate to help a Jew, so God does not shy away from loving those who live far away from God (Rom. 5:8). His ultimate intention is to save them (verse 10). And just as the Samaritan did everything and paid what was necessary for the healing of the wounded, so “God in Christ” has “done and paid” everything so we may be reconciled with Him, and become new in Him (see 2 Cor. 5:17, 19, 21).

But just as the victim needed time to heal, so it is with sinners. They need growth (2 Peter 3:18). Even if forgiveness has been received and a new life has already begun, there is nevertheless still sin in (Rom. 7:17) and around (1 John 5:19) sinners.

Through the working of the Holy Spirit, sin no longer reigns in Christians’ lives. Sin has, in fact, been reined in (Gal. 5:16). Nevertheless, believers are not now exempt from the battle with sin (verse 13). We are called to victory in this battle (1 John 2:1), and comforted to know that God’s forgiveness is not a one-off event, but is continuously offered to those who repent (verse 1; Heb. 7:25).

Luther vividly described this tension between being righteous before God and the struggle with sin in the world. Growth in sanctification is progressive, but will be completed only when the “beloved day of judgment” dawns: “This life is not about being pious but becoming pious, not being healthy, but becoming healthy, not being, but becoming, not rest, but exercise. We are not there yet, but we are getting there. Not all is said and done, but it is under way and in

motion. It is not the end, but it is the way.”⁷ It is God’s will that “day by day we will be more sanctified.”⁸

Similar thoughts can be found in the writings of Ellen White: Sanctification is “the work . . . of a lifetime”; a “lifelong” experience. The struggle with sin is “daily work,” but “faith” gives “victory” even though our struggle never ends while we are alive on earth.⁹

Love Known by Action

“Faith working through love”
(Gal. 5:6).

We affirm that both the righteousness that God declares and the newness of life we live depend on faith in Christ. For the apostle Paul this faith shows itself in love, and love shows itself in action.

To understand what believers receive in the gift of justification and sanctification, justification has at times been compared to a \$100 bill, given by a father to his son. The son is not to keep the bill for himself; he should change it into smaller bills in order to do good with the gift: This is sanctification, or as Luther wrote: “For such a Father, then, who has overwhelmed me with these inestimable riches of His, why should I not freely, cheerfully, and with my whole heart and from voluntary zeal, do all that I know will be pleasing to Him, and acceptable in His sight? I will therefore give myself, as a sort of Christ, to my neighbor, as Christ has given Himself to me; and will do nothing in this life, except what I see will be needful, advantageous, and wholesome for my

neighbor, since by faith I abound in all good things in Christ.”¹⁰ ■

¹ Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the *New American Standard Bible*, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

² Paul Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 1975), p. 205.

³ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 477.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), vol. 39/I, p. 98.

⁵ Quoted from Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1983), p. 182.

⁶ Luther, p. 83.

⁷ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), vol. 7, p. 337.

⁸ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), vol. 40/II, p. 355.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), pp. 560, 561; *idem, Messages to Young People* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1930), p. 114; *idem, The Great Controversy*, p. 471.

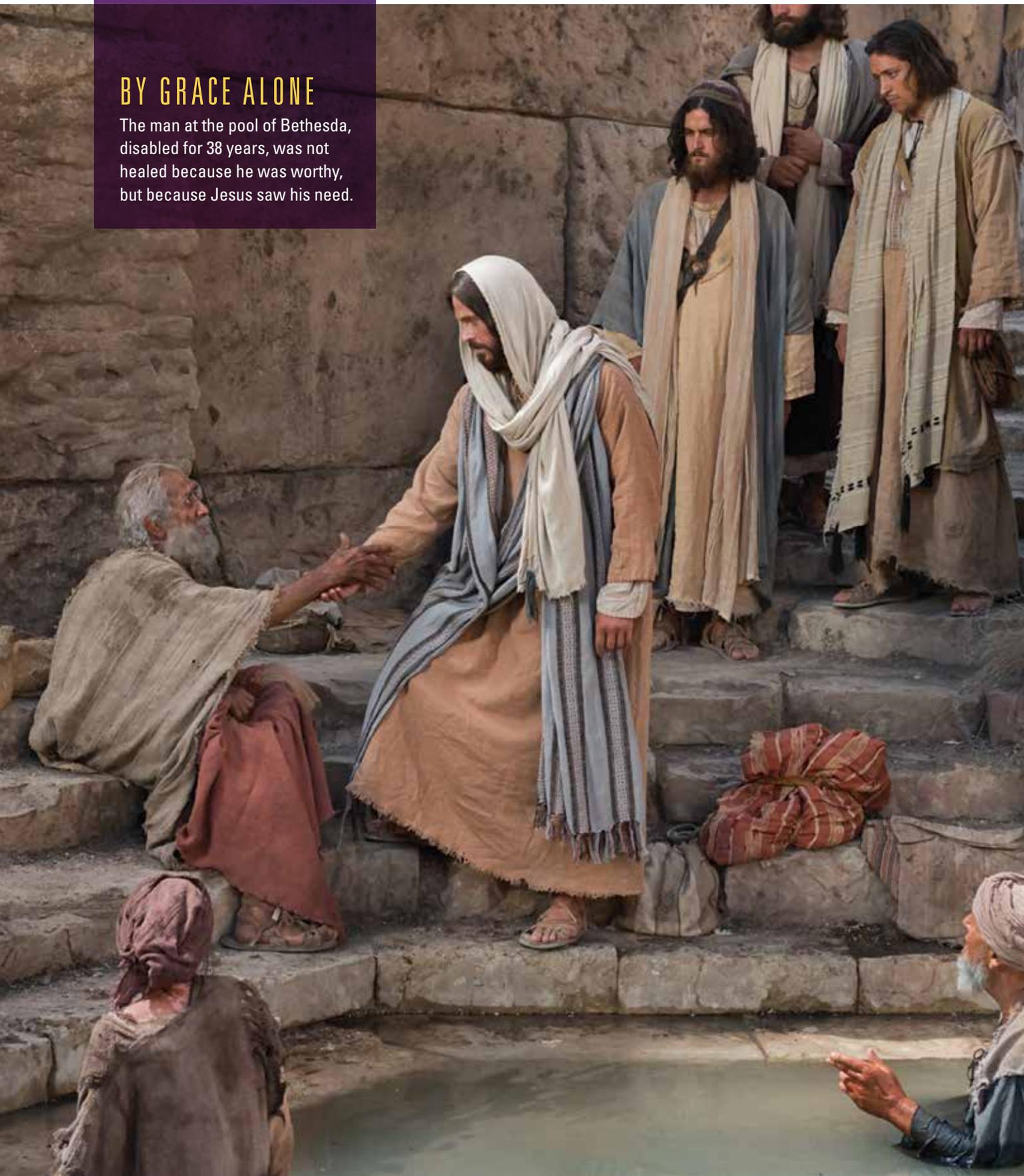
¹⁰ *First Principles of the Reformation or The 95 Theses and the Three Primary Works of Dr. Martin Luther*, ed. Henry Wace and C. A. Buchheim (London: John Murray, 1883), p. 127.

QUESTIONS FOR Reflection and Sharing:

- 1 What gift does God give us through justification and sanctification respectively?
- 2 How does sanctification relate to sinlessness?
- 3 What does sanctification mean in the daily life of Christians?
- 4 Sanctification does not create salvation, but is a necessary testimony of it. Discuss.

BY GRACE ALONE

The man at the pool of Bethesda, disabled for 38 years, was not healed because he was worthy, but because Jesus saw his need.



God's Commandments a Reflection of God's Character

We do because we have become.

The Christian world on the eve of the Reformation was a world of busy and vigorous religiosity. Most people at the time were pious and faithful to the church. However, their piety was largely misled. This is acknowledged even by Catholic historiography: “Prayer, life, and teachings were far removed from Scripture and the apostolic ideal.”¹

Religious life was frequently marked by formalism and routine. In Cologne, Germany, alone, hundreds of Masses were officiated every day, but no single prayer service was offered in the local vernacular, and no instruction was given to youth. People flocked to monasteries to find secular and spiritual security. Germany then had perhaps 20 million inhabitants, 1.5 million of whom were priests and monks. Believers were not encouraged to read the Holy Scriptures, but rather to undertake arduous pilgrimages (such as the journey to the “Holy

Robe of Christ” in Trèves, Germany) or to marvel at the numerous collections of relics. Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony, the sovereign who reigned over the region where Luther lived, possessed a collection of more than 19,000 relics,² which included “hay from Jesus’ manger,” a “twig from the burning bush,” and “milk drops from Mother Mary.” The authenticity of these artifacts was never questioned.

The Battle Over Indulgences

Jesus’ demand to do “good works” (Matt. 5:16) was distorted in a way completely foreign to the gospel. When Jesus forgave people their sins (Mark 2:5; John 8:11), He did not burden them with further punishment, but sent them off in peace. Medieval theologians, however, turned Jesus’ mercy into a complex legal and works-oriented system. It was said that one could get the remission of guilt from

the priest during confession, but then one still needed to provide the works of the penitent to make up for the sin. Fortunately, one could also be exempted from these works of penance. Consequently, the doctrine of indulgences from temporal sin punishments was developed. Beginning in the Middle Ages such indulgences could be bought for the dead who were (supposedly) in purgatory. Aside from the discontinuation of the sale of indulgences after the Reformation, the Roman Catholic doctrine of indulgences is still in existence today.³

The Reformation arose because of the struggle over the legitimacy of such works of penance and the sale of indulgences. Popes at the time needed funding for the construction of St. Peter’s Dome in Rome, so they promoted the sale of indulgences. A “scandalous money business”⁴ began to spread, writes Catholic Church historian Joseph Lortz. One of the most prominent preachers of indulgences was the Dominican priest Johann Tetzel, who promised believers: “As soon as the gold in the casket rings; the rescued soul to heaven springs.”⁵

This aroused the anger of the young theology professor Martin Luther in Wittenberg. In a letter to the archbishop Albrecht of Mainz he protested this deformation of Christian doctrine: “Christ has nowhere commanded the preaching of indulgences, but with all emphasis the preaching of the gospel.”⁶

Based on the account of his friend, Philipp Melancthon, Luther wrote these lines on October 31, 1517, and nailed 95 theses concerning indulgences and works of penance to the

“The Christian lives ‘under the law, but without the law.’”

door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The first thesis hit like a bombshell: works do not represent punishment for sin; repentance is the constant manner of the Christian’s life: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”⁷

“Keep the Commandments!”

In the “Treatise on Good Works” (written in 1520), the Reformer expounded what the intended works of Christians should be. Good works are only those that God requires and not those that people demand. If one wants to know what these works are, one should listen to Christ speaking to the rich young ruler: “If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matt. 19:17).

These commandments are the Ten Commandments, not ecclesiastic canons or traditions. To keep these commandments, God-given faith is needed, which provides the necessary power. Without Christ, works are dead.⁸ Without works as a consequence, faith is only an appearance of faith: “Combine faith and good works, so that the sum of all Christian life is contained in both.”⁹ Good works are “sign and seal” that faith is true.¹⁰ Faith manifests itself in love and love in following the commandments.¹¹

Thus, Christians live “under the law, but without the law.”¹² “Without the law” because believers in Christ may not be condemned by the law; “under the law” because it remains

valid even for born-again Christians. The law is needed to recognize sin (Rom. 3:20) and to reorient oneself—enlightened and motivated by the Holy Spirit—toward the will of God (Rom. 8:4; Heb. 8:10).

Ellen White similarly wrote that the law is indeed unable to save us. But when God impresses it upon our hearts, Christians can and should fulfill it.¹³

Struggling with “antinomians,” “opponents of the law” from within his own ranks, the Reformer at the time deplored that many of his followers would only indulge the “sweet gospel,” where the justification of sin is more important than the justification of the sinner. He suspected that there would come a time that people would be living according to their own discretion and saying that there is no God.¹⁴

God has called Advent people to warn of this danger and plead for faithfulness toward God’s commandments. He has given us a “special message,” a Reformation message to restore, preserve, and follow the “law of God.” Ellen White described it as the “last message of warning to the world.”¹⁵ ■

¹ Joseph Lortz and Erwin Iserloh, *Kleine Reformationsgeschichte* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1969), p. 25.

² Roland Bainton, *Martin Luther*, 4th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), pp. 54, 55.

³ *Katechismus der katholischen Kirche* (Munich: 1993), § 1494-1498.

⁴ Lortz and Iserloh, p. 41.

⁵ Martin Luther, 27th thesis, quoted from Ingetraut Ludolph, *Die 95 Thesen Martin Luthers* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1976), p. 23.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition, Briefe* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2002), vol. 1, p. 111.

⁷ Ludolph, p. 20.

⁸ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), vol. 6, pp. 204, 205. Unfortunately, Luther himself went back to ecclesiastic tradition, when he thought to have discovered elements in the Ten Commandments that were dependent on the time they were given, describing the Sabbath as Jewish, which, however, originated in the order of Creation (Gen. 2:2, 3). At the same time, he had to admit that Sunday worship finds its origin in ecclesiastic tradition (*Der große Katechismus* [Munich: Siebenstern, 1964], pp. 37, 38).

⁹ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), vol. 12, p. 289.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 10/III, pp. 225, 226.

¹¹ Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luthers Vorreden zur Bibel* (Frankfurt/Main: Insel Verlag, 1983), p. 179.

¹² Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), vol. 39/I, p. 433.

¹³ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1890), p. 373.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition, Deutsche Bibel* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), vol. 11/II, p. 117.

¹⁵ Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), p. 225.

QUESTIONS FOR Reflection and Sharing:

- 1 Why is it important for Christians to know their norm of conduct?
- 2 What significance do the commandments of God have in our lives? How do we experience the “freedom from the law” and the “freedom for the law”?
- 3 What was Luther afraid of already during his time? Did his premonitions come true? What is the purpose of the Advent people for our time?

Whenever Christians remind themselves of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone, people experience an awakening, revival, and reformation. This was the case when Martin Luther reached back to the apostle Paul (“Paul, my Paul”) across a church tradition of more than a thousand years, and with this “supreme thesis”¹ set the Reformation of the sixteenth century in motion.

On May 24, 1738, after John Wesley in Aldersgate Street, London, listened to Luther’s *Preface to Romans*, he started a revival movement in England, which became “a ruling epoch of English history.”²

This was also the case when in 1888 at the General Conference session in Minneapolis a new Christ-centric chapter of Adventist church history began with the contemplation of Christ’s righteousness. The fruit of that turnaround were a number of Ellen White’s Christ-centered books: *Steps to Christ*, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, and *The Desire of Ages*.

On the other hand, times during which Christians focused on their own achievements and merits were always periods of decline. As early as the second century A.D., Paul’s focus on righteousness by faith alone was no longer properly understood. During the Middle Ages his followers were a minority, and on the eve of the Reformation the opinion prevailed that “if a man does what is in his own might, then God will add His grace.” This

sentence appalled Luther and drove him to exclaim in his lecture on Romans: “Oh, you fools!”³

Justification of Sinners or Justification of God?

If one considers these circumstances in the context of the present religious situation, they seem to have little significance for today:

In modern theology the doctrine of justification plays only a subordinate role. It is considered a time-limited polemic against Judaizing legalism during apostolic times. After all, it occurs only in two of the Pauline epistles, and thus is only of “secondary importance” for the Christian doctrine of redemption. It is a disappearing doctrine because, so it is said, the historical situation for which it was formulated has no relevance today.

An exception to the current lack of interest is registered only in the area of ecumenical church policy, where the

“Joint Declaration” of 1999 between the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation claimed a “principal consensus” on the doctrine of justification, which Pope Benedict XVI rated as a “milestone on the road to Christian unity.”⁴ But since that time it has gotten very quiet regarding this document, as it, in the opinion of many commentators, says only with similar words what continues to be understood differently.

Finally, most people, often secular people, no longer search for a “merciful God” as Luther did, but ask whether this God really exists. If so, then He should justify Himself for all the suffering and evil in the world!

Of course, most secular-minded people are not aggressive atheists. The prevailing attitude among them is one of “practical atheism,” an outlook in which one is not fighting against God, but simply ignores Him, because one lives pretty well without Him.

Justification by Faith Today

*Where theology meets
daily life*

“The only solution to this dilemma can be found in Jesus of Nazareth, the “absolute man,” whose life, death, and resurrection **guarantee** present and future salvation.”

Our Challenge

How can we Christians approach people like this and raise an awareness for the gospel? Most do not know what sin is, let alone that it is primarily an offense against God (Ps. 51:5-11). They also do not know how sin can be forgiven (1 John 2:2) and that part of a fulfilled life consists in a peace (Rom. 5:1) and a hope (Titus 2:11-14) that are not found in this world.

While people don't seem to have space for God, they do suffer from guilt on the horizontal level: interpersonal conflict, social and political injustice, wars among nations, and the destruction of nature—the very foundation of our existence.

Christian-Adventist preaching can connect to this self-awareness of people in several ways:

We recognize that the alienation from ourselves and from our environment lies in the alienation from the Life-giver and Creator. The apostle's verdict is clear: “There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away” (Rom. 3:11, 12, NIV).

Our experience testifies to the truthfulness of Scripture's claim: “Can an Ethiopian change his skin or a leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil” (Jer. 13:23, NIV).

The problem lies not so much in the circumstances but in humanity itself that is unable to control itself and to find a solution for this world. It is, as Jesus says and Paul affirms:

“For out of the heart come evil thoughts” (Matt. 15:19, NIV) and we are “sold as a slave to sin” (Rom. 7:14, NIV). Sin (in the singular, as a condition) is ultimately turning away from God and turning toward creation: we think we can master our lives. This attitude leads to sins (plural, actions of sin).

What Then Shall We Do?

The only solution to this dilemma can be found in Jesus of Nazareth, the “absolute man,” whose life, death, and resurrection guarantees present and future salvation. He lived among us “in the world” but was not “of the world.” He is the way back to God, because, as the Son of God, He Himself is the “revelation of God” (see John 14:6, 9).

If we are honest, we recognize that human aspiration to achieve the “brave new world” is really utopian. Despite great technological advances—think nuclear power, space exploration, the digital realm of bits and bytes—this “perfect world” remains elusive. Sinners are not able to create something sinless! The “new earth, where righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13, NIV), can be promised and given only by God; then it can be hoped for and expected by Christ's followers.

All this turns the Christian doctrine of salvation into a timeless and indispensable option for our helpless and hopeless fellow humans. Advent people are called to preach this message for our time to the world: Only

“in Christ” can we make peace with God and one another; only His love gives meaning to life and hope for a world in which righteousness reigns! As Ellen White wrote: “Of all professing Christians, Seventh-day Adventists should be foremost in uplifting Christ before the world.”⁵ ■

¹ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), vol. 21, p. 219.

² William Lecky, quoted in Julius Roessler, *Johannes Wesley*, 2nd ed. (Giessen: Brunnen, 1954), p. 24.

³ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2007), vol. 56, p. 274.

⁴ *ideaSpektrum* 46 (November 2005): 12.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946), p. 188.

QUESTIONS FOR Reflection and Sharing:

- 1 Why have people so little appreciation for the doctrine of the justification of sinners? What does the Seventh-day Adventist Church need to experience a revival? What is our task in these times?
- 2 What gives you confidence and hope in a world that believes it can save itself, yet finds itself on the edge of a bottomless pit?
- 3

The Reformation of the sixteenth century is one of the grand events in human history. For historians it is an epochal divide between medieval and modern times. For believing Protestants (including Adventists), however, it represents divine intervention. Christianity was to align itself in doctrine and practice back with the standard of the biblical Word, not human traditions. This is the essence of this enormous religious upheaval that ended the “Dark Ages.” As Ellen White wrote: “[Protestantism] lays down the principle that all human teaching should be subordinate to the oracles of God.”¹

“Come, Dear Last Day”²

This important principle made of Martin Luther not only a Reformer regarding the question of how a person is justified before God, but also concerning the renewal of the early Christian attitude toward the Last Day.³

Medieval Christians believed in the second coming of Christ, but this promise was primarily a subject of fear and terror. Without the assurance of salvation, the end appeared as a “day of vengeance and horror,” wrote the medieval Franciscan monk Thomas of Celano, when the “judge comes to sternly mete out justice.” But Luther, based on his study of the Bible, brought early Christian joy back into the expectation of the end, because he recognized that the Christian hope is a “better hope” (Heb. 7:19), a “living hope” (1 Peter 1:3), and therefore “the

blessed hope” (Titus 2:13).

One can easily understand the passionate longing for liberation in Christ that the Reformer experienced in his faith walk. The older Luther became, the stronger this expectation grew. The promise of the return of Christ was for him “a sweet and cheerful sermon.” If the day would not come, the Reformer did not want to be born. Thus, it is understandable that he had only one wish to God throughout the struggles and sorrows of his life: “You promised the day, to redeem us from all evil. So let it come this very hour, if it should be, and make an end to all our misery.”⁴

A “Having” and a “Not Yet Having”

The life of the Christian in this world, expounded Luther, is a life filled with tensions. The state of the believer is a “having” and at the same time a “not yet having,” a “being” and

a “not yet being.” Christians already have salvation by faith, but they do not yet have it by sight. Already they are righteous before God, but they still live in a fragmented world estranged from God. Considering the biblical principle of “already” and “not yet,” we can understand the passion and longing with which Luther expected the day of Christ’s return. For we, who have the assurance of the gift of salvation based on a trusting faith in God, will—as long as we remain in God—long for the day with fervent desire and deep joy, when personal redemption will turn into the redemption of all creation. As Luther put it: “Help, dear Lord God, that the blessed day of Your holy future may come soon.”⁵

Signs of the Times—“A Sweet and Cheerful Sermon”

The hope for Christ’s return became increasingly stronger with the advancing age of the Reformer

The Summer That Will Never End

*Anticipating the Second
Coming of Jesus*

“The life of the Christian in this world, expounded Luther, is a life filled with tensions.”

because he often felt helpless in dealing with humanity and the world. It became clear to him that neither princes nor the pope could solve humanity’s problems: “The world is the devil’s child . . . one cannot aid it nor instruct it.” And: “No preaching, shouting, admonishing, threatening, or pleading” can help anymore. It’s the “devil’s tavern,” the “reversed Ten Commandments” are its mark, and, therefore, it is and remains a “den of thieves.”

Only the coming of Christ can help, because in the world Christians are “surrounded by a multitude of devils.” Pope and emperor put their hope in politics, and people considered them to be their “saviors.” But Luther cautioned to wait for the “true Savior,” who has given the sure promise of His return.

To strengthen His church in this expectation, Christ pointed to “signs of the times,” including natural disasters and wars. The clearest sign for Luther were the major dangers of his time, which are still relevant today: The decline of faith within Christendom and the conflict between Islam and Christianity. With great concern Luther observed the drifting away of the papal church from the gospel and the wave of Islamic expansion that had already flooded southeastern Europe and in 1529 even surged to the gates of Vienna. But he also saw a distinct sign of the coming judgment in the ingratitude of the Reformation’s followers in terms of the light they had received: “I want to prophesy over

Germany, not from the stars, but from theology I proclaim against it the wrath of God . . . Let us just pray, and God and His word not despise!”⁶

According to Luther, all signs occur for the encouragement of believers and for the judgment of unbelievers. The latter ones still have “grace” not to worry about them, while the former ones are probably able to see “God’s wrath” in them, which will not hurt them as God preserves His people.

The Reformer did not want to argue about how far the signs had already been fulfilled, but he was convinced that the “majority [of the signs] have already occurred,” and this was a reason for Christians to rejoice despite disasters and distress. This joy is characteristic for the true interpreters of the Bible, because the “star gazers and soothsayers”—Luther was probably thinking of astrologers and esoterics—speak only of catastrophes. Only Christians understand the “cheerful, sweet word, ‘your redemption’ (Luke 21:28).” Therefore, the return of Christ must be seen through the eyes of Christian hope, not through the eyes of secular reason.

Luther thought that Christians have to “bite the bullet” and drink the “bitter cup,” but afterward “sweetness” will come. That is why Christ is now calling His family to rise and to rejoice. Even if the proclamation of the gospel is not received well by most people, the “small throng” will understand it and will work and pray with Christ’s coming in view, because, as noted by Luther, “it has been a long

enough winter, now wants to come a beautiful summer, and such a summer that will never end.”⁷ ■

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 204.

² Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition, Briefe* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2002), vol. 9, p. 175.

³ Paul Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers*, 4th ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1975), p. 351.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2005), vol. 34/II, p. 466.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition, Tischreden* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2000), vol. 5, no. 5777.

⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 3, no. 3711.

⁷ Luther, *Luthers Schriften*, vol. 34/II, p. 481.

QUESTIONS FOR Reflection and Sharing:

- 1 How did Martin Luther regard human endeavors to achieve salvation? Compare his analysis with modern concepts of salvation.
- 2 What role did the hope of the second coming of Christ play in Luther’s faith?
- 3 To what extent was Luther’s expectation of final events different from that of medieval humanity?
- 4 What does the hope of Christ’s second coming mean for your life to you?

Let the subject be made distinct and plain that it is not possible to effect anything in our standing before God or in the gift of God to us through creature merit. Should faith and works purchase the gift of salvation for anyone, then the Creator is under obligation to the creature.

“Here is an opportunity for falsehood to be accepted as truth. If any man can merit salvation by anything he may do, then he is in the same position as the Catholic to do penance for his sins. Salvation, then, is partly of debt, that may be earned as wages. If man cannot, by any of his good works, merit salvation, then it must be wholly of grace, received by man as a sinner because he receives and believes in Jesus. It is wholly a free gift. Justification by faith is placed beyond controversy. And all this controversy is ended, as soon as the matter is settled that the merits of fallen man in his good works can never procure eternal life for him.

Wholly of Grace

“The light given me of God places this important subject above any question in my mind. Justification is wholly of grace and not procured by any works that fallen man can do. The matter has been presented before me in clear lines that if the rich man has money and possessions, and he makes an offering of the same to the Lord, false ideas come in to spoil the offering by the thought he has merited the favor of God, that the Lord is under obligation to him to regard him with special favor because of this gift.

“There has been too little educating in clear lines upon this point. The Lord has lent man His own goods in trust—means which He requires be handed back to Him when His providence signifies and the upbuilding of His cause demands it. The Lord gave

the intellect. He gave the health and the ability to gather earthly gain. He created the things of earth. He manifests His divine power to develop all its riches. They are His fruits from His own husbandry. He gave the sun, the clouds, the showers of rain, to cause vegetation to flourish.

“As God’s employed servants you gathered in His harvest to use what your wants required in an economical way and hold the balance for the call of God. You can say with David, ‘For all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee’ (1 Chron. 29:14, KJV). So the satisfaction of creature merit cannot be in returning to the Lord His own, for it was always His own property to be used as He in His providence should direct.

God’s Favor Forfeited

“By rebellion and apostasy man forfeited the favor of God; not his

rights, for he could have no value except as it was invested in God’s dear Son. This point must be understood. He forfeited those privileges which God in His mercy presented him as a free gift, a treasure in trust to be used to advance His cause and His glory, to benefit the beings He had made. The moment the workmanship of God refused obedience to the laws of God’s kingdom, that moment he became disloyal to the government of God and he made himself entirely unworthy of all the blessings wherewith God had favored him.

“This was the position of the human race after man divorced himself from God by transgression. Then he was no longer entitled to a breath of air, a ray of sunshine, or a particle of food. And the reason why man was not annihilated was because God so loved him that He made the gift of His dear Son that He should suffer the

The Assurance of Salvation

Let grace transform your will and actions

By ELLEN G. WHITE

penalty of his transgression. Christ proposed to become man's surety and substitute, that man, through matchless grace, should have another trial—a second probation—having the experience of Adam and Eve as a warning not to transgress God's law as they did. And inasmuch as man enjoys the blessings of God in the gift of the sunshine and the gift of food, there must be on the part of man a bowing before God in thankful acknowledgment that all things come of God. Whatever is rendered back to Him is only His own who has given it.

“Man broke God's law, and through the Redeemer new and fresh promises were made on a different basis. All blessings must come through a Mediator. Now every member of the human family is given wholly into the hands of

Christ, and whatever we possess—whether it is the gift of money, of houses, of lands, of reasoning powers, of physical strength, of intellectual talents—in this present life, and the blessings of the future life, are placed in our possession as God's treasures to be faithfully expended for the benefit of man. Every gift is stamped with the cross and bears the image and superscription of Jesus Christ. All things come of God. From the smallest benefits up to the largest blessing, all flow through the one Channel—a superhuman mediation sprinkled with the blood that is of value beyond estimate because it was the life of God in His Son.

“Now not a soul can give God anything that is not already His. Bear this in mind: ‘All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee’

(1 Chron. 29:14, KJV). This must be kept before the people wherever we go—that we possess nothing, can offer nothing in value, in work, in faith, which we have not first received of God and upon which He can lay His hand any time and say, they are Mine—gifts and blessings and endowments I entrusted to you, not to enrich yourself, but for wise improvement to benefit the world.

All Is of God

“The creation belongs to God. The Lord could, by neglecting man, stop his breath at once. All that he is and all that he has pertains to God. The entire world is God's. Man's houses, his personal acquirements, whatever is valuable or brilliant, is God's own endowment. It is all His gift to be returned

BY GRACE ALONE

Jesus never turned anyone away. Even those who were marginalized or looked down upon were welcomed into Jesus' circle of care.



“The reason so many fail to be successful laborers is that they act as though God depended on them, and they are to suggest to God what He chooses to do with them, in the place of their depending on God.”

back to God in helping to cultivate the heart of man. The most splendid offerings may be laid upon the altar of God, and men will praise, exalt, and laud the giver because of His liberality. In what? ‘All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee’ (1 Chron. 29:14, KJV). No work of man can merit for him the pardoning love of God, but the love of God pervading the soul will lead him to do those things which were always required of God and that he should do with pleasure. He has done only that which duty ever required of him.

“The angels of God in heaven that have never fallen do His will continually. In all that they do upon their busy errands of mercy to our world, shielding, guiding, and guarding the workmanship of God for ages—both the just and the unjust—they can truthfully say, ‘All is Thine. Of Thine own do we give Thee.’ Would that the human eye could catch glimpses of the service of the angels! Would that the imagination could grasp and dwell upon the rich, the glorious service of the angels of God and the conflicts in which they engage in behalf of men to protect, to lead, to win, and to draw them from Satan’s snares. How different would be the conduct, the religious sentiment! . . .

Supernatural Power for Supernatural Works

“The reason so many fail to be successful laborers is that they act as though God depended on them, and

they are to suggest to God what He chooses to do with them, in the place of their depending on God. They lay aside the supernatural power and fail to do the supernatural work. They are all the time depending on their own and their brethren’s human powers. They are narrow in themselves and are always judging after their finite human comprehension. They need uplifting, for they have no power from on high. God gives us bodies, strength of brain, time and opportunity in which to work. It is required that all be put to the tax. With humanity and divinity combined you can accomplish a work as enduring as eternity. When men think the Lord has made a mistake in their individual cases, and they appoint their own work, they will meet with disappointment.

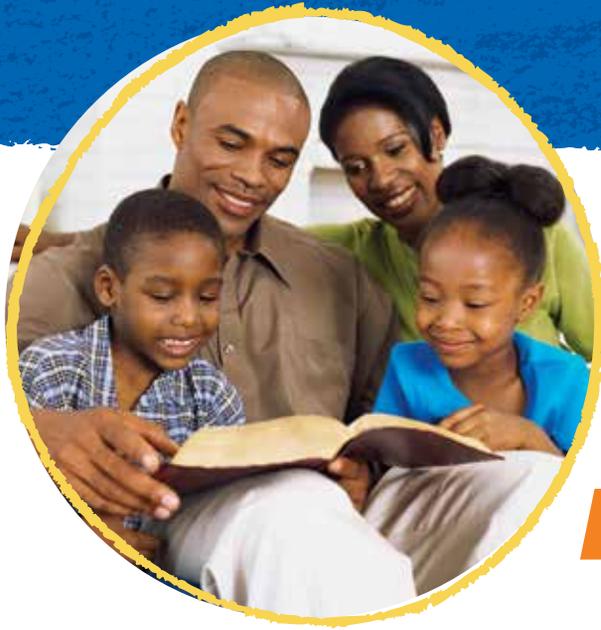
“By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God’ (Eph. 2:8). Here is truth that will unfold the subject to your mind if you do not close it to the rays of light. Eternal life is an infinite gift. This places it outside the possibility of our earning it, because it is infinite. It must necessarily be a gift. As a gift it must be received by faith, and gratitude and praise be offered to God. Solid faith will not lead anyone away into fanaticism or into acting the slothful servant. It is the bewitching power of Satan that leads men to look to themselves in the place of looking to Jesus. The righteousness of Christ must go before us if the glory of the

Lord becomes our reward. If we do God’s will, we may accept large blessings as God’s free gift, but not because of any merit in us; this is of no value. Do the work of Christ, and you will honor God and come off more than conquerors through Him that has loved us and given His life for us, that we should have life and salvation in Jesus Christ. ■

This article is excerpted from *Faith and Works* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1979), pages 19-28. Seventh-day Adventists believe that Ellen G. White (1827-1915) exercised the biblical gift of prophecy during more than 70 years of public ministry.

QUESTIONS FOR Reflection and Sharing:

- 1 How do faith and works relate to divine grace and redemption?
- 2 How can we experience the assurance of salvation?
- 3 What can we bring to God as we accept His invitation of grace? What can we do for God once we have committed ourselves to this grace?



By GARY WAGNER and DEENA BARTEL-WAGNER

The Truth About God

"It's time for family worship," Dad called out. "Bring your Bibles."

Luc, Tess, and Jake grabbed their Bibles, and after prayer Dad asked, "Did you know there was a time that people didn't have Bibles in their homes?"

"Didn't they have money to buy them?" asked Jake.

"Bibles and others books were very expensive because they were copied by hand," Mom explained. "Also, Bibles were written in Latin, and most people couldn't read them."

"So how did they learn about Jesus?" Tess asked.

"The pastor told them stories from the Bible at church," said Dad. "The problem, though, was that some people said God was harsh and wanted to hurt people. Luc, would you please read Psalm 11:7 for us?"

Luc read, "The Lord does what is right, and he loves justice [ICB]."

"This verse tells us God is always right. He never says,

thinks, or does anything that is wrong," said Dad.

"In the Garden of Eden Satan told a lie to Eve, and she believed him," said Jake. "She didn't trust what God had said."

"God wanted to be with all His friends on earth," said Dad. "But as earth became more populated, some people began telling Satan's story about God being harsh and unloving."

"Martin Luther, a boy who lived in Germany, heard these stories about a harsh God and was sure that God was angry with him. So he tried to live a perfect life," said Mom. "He learned to read Latin and studied to be a lawyer. One day during a terrible storm Martin vowed that he would work for Him. He became a pastor and studied his Bible even more. This didn't make Martin any happier, though. He still believed he had to live a perfect life. The harder Martin tried, the more miserable he became."

"If Martin loved Jesus, why

was he so unhappy?" asked Tess.

"We'll talk more about that tomorrow during our worship time," said Dad.

Bible Verse

"All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching and for showing people what is wrong in their lives. It is useful for correcting faults and teaching how to live right" (2 Timothy 3:16, ICB).

Activity

When you think of God, what pictures do you see in your mind? Draw a picture of God to share with your family.

Thought Question

If you didn't have a Bible, how could you remember the things God wants you to know about Him?

Scriptures credited to ICB are quoted from the *International Children's Bible*, copyright © 1986, 1988, 2008, 2015 by Tommy Nelson. Used by permission.

God's Rescue Plan



STOCKBYTE

Luc was eager to have family worship. He wanted to hear more of the story of Martin Luther.

After Tess prayed, Dad reviewed that sin happens because of disobedience and separates people from God. He also reminded the family that Satan wants people to believe that God is harsh and unloving. Martin Luther believed this and was always trying to do things on his own to live a perfect life.

"One day as Martin was reading the book of Romans, something changed his life," said Dad. "Let's read Romans 1:16, 17:

"I am not ashamed of the Good News. It is the power God uses to save everyone who believes. . . . The Good News shows how God makes people right with himself. God's way of making people right with him begins and ends with faith. As the Scripture says, 'The person who is made right with God by faith will live forever [ICB].'"

Luc asked, "Isn't the good news the story of Jesus and His life?"

"That's right," encouraged Dad.

"Then Paul is saying that if people believe the story and that Jesus died, God can save them," Luc said. "I'm not sure what the 'made right' means, though."

"It means a person who isn't blamed by God for anything wrong," said Dad. "Romans 3:10 says there is no human being who is sinless. God is the only one who is always right. Martin realized Romans 1 tells us that God had a plan to rescue humans from sin. When Jesus died on the cross, that was part of the plan. We must have faith that He will save us."

"Martin then began to tell other people," said Mom. "He even made a list of 95 ideas about this and nailed it to the door of his church in Wittenberg, Germany. Others then learned that God wanted them to trust His plan."

"About this same time a man named Johannes Gutenberg invented a printing press that could be used to print Bibles," said Dad. "And scholars began translating the Bible into English. Soon many people were able to read and own their own Bibles."

I'm going to study my Bible every day, thought Luc.

Bible Verse

"Lord, you do what is right.
And your laws are fair"
(Psalm 119:137, ICB).

Activities

Find the city of Wittenberg, Germany, on a map.

Make a list of reasons you want to tell others about God.

Thought Question

Do you think it took courage for Martin Luther to nail his list of ideas to the church door?

Reaching for Jesus' Hand



Luc and his family opened the storage shed door and began taking out yard tools. A windstorm during the night had caused a lot of damage. Tess and Jake began picking up sticks.

Mom sent Luc to help his dad, who was setting up a ladder next to the house.

Dad was going to clean the branches the storm had blown onto the roof.

Dad climbed the ladder up to the roof.

"You're a long way up," said Luc.

Dad quickly pulled all the branches off the roof, then moved back to the ladder and looked down at Luc.

"This ladder reminds me of our worship talks," said Dad.

"How can a ladder have anything to do with sin and being righteous?" asked Luc.

"Run get Mom, Tess, and Jake," said Dad.

As soon as everyone gathered, Dad said, "We've been studying about sin separating us from God. This ladder made me think about Jesus, His death, and what that means for us. Even if we stretched our arms as far as we could, we wouldn't be able to touch each other. When Adam and Eve sinned, they created a gap between themselves and God."

"But God sent Jesus to die for our sins," said Tess. "Didn't that take care of the gap?"

"That's right," said Dad. "Jesus became the mediator between

God and each one of us."

"Mom, would you climb half-way up the ladder?" asked Dad. "After Jesus lived a sinless life, died, and rose again, He filled the gap between us and God. Now, if I stretched my arm out to Mom and she stretched her arm out to me, our hands could touch. Now, Luc, you step on the bottom ladder rung and reach up to Mom."

Luc carefully stepped on the ladder and reached out and touched Mom's hand.

"When we accept Jesus, we move toward Him and stretch out our hands. He reaches out to us, but doesn't let go of His connection with God," said Dad. "He is the connection between us and God."

Bible Verse

"There is only one way that people can reach God. That way is through Jesus Christ" (1 Timothy 2:5, ICB).

Activity

Luc and his parents stretched out their arms to show how Jesus is the mediator between people and God. Try this with your family.

Thought Question

What would happen if Jesus wasn't holding out His hand to us and to God?

Washing Off the Dirt



Luc, Tess, and Jake were working in the family vegetable and flower garden when Mom called them inside. "I have something to show you," she said.

Luc, Tess, and Jake hurried to wash the dirt off their hands and went into the house. Mom was standing at the counter in front of two vases of white flowers.

"When I put the flowers in the vases, I began to think about our worship time," Mom said. "We've been talking about how Jesus' death justified us before God. These flowers reminded me of what happens after we are justified. I'm going to put some coloring in the water of one vase. See how the water changes colors?"

"It turned red!" said Jake."

"That's right," said Mom. "The red water symbolizes the blood of Jesus, and the white flower is our life. Keep watching the flower and see what happens. We know that when Jesus died, He shed His blood for us."

Mom then explained: "Another word for Jesus' dying and shedding His blood for us is "atonement." It means that the blood of Jesus takes away our sin and makes us spiritually clean. Until we accept Jesus and His death, our lives are dirty, just as your hands were before you washed them."

"Look, the white petals are turning red!" Luc said excitedly.

"The red coloring in the water is being absorbed into the flower petals," Mom said. "Our lives are like that when we accept Jesus and follow Him. We begin to change and become different in how we act and treat other people. When we ask Him to help us to say and do the right things, we can overcome the bad things we want to do."

Mom added, "Jesus' life flows into ours, just as the colored water made the white flower red."

"I love Jesus and want to be changed," said Luc.

"Me, too," said Tess.

Bible Verse

"But he was wounded for the wrong things we did. He was crushed for the evil things we did. The punishment, which made us well, was given to him. And we are healed because of his wounds" (Isaiah 53:5, ICB).

Activity

 The blood of Jesus washes away our sins and makes our lives new again. With your family, sing the song "Nothing but the Blood of Jesus."

Thought Question

 How can you be like the flowers in the story and let Jesus fill your life?



Who's Tapping on Your Shoulder?

School was out for the day, and Luc's new friend Simon wanted to play video games. Luc didn't want to ask permission to go to Simon's. He already knew what Mom and Dad would say.

"Hi, Mom. Can I go over to Simon's?" Luc said quickly as he dropped his backpack by the door. When Simon asked him to come over and play video games, Luc was too embarrassed to tell him he wasn't allowed to play them.

"Are his parents at home?" asked Mom. "And what are you going to do while you are there?"

Mom asked the two questions he dreaded the most.

"I don't know if his parents are home," Luc admitted. "Simon wanted to hang out and play video games."

When Simon joined their class six weeks ago, Luc invited him to sit with him at lunch. Simon seemed nice, but some things he said made Luc uncomfortable.

"I'm glad you are trying to make Simon feel a part of your class," said Mom. "It's important that we treat everyone kindly. But you know that you aren't allowed to play video games without us checking them out first."

Silence filled the room as Mom waited for Luc to speak. "Simon is new and doesn't have many friends. I want to try to reach out to him. But he does and says things that make me feel uncomfortable," said Luc.

"When you feel uncomfortable about something that you

know is wrong, that is the Holy Spirit nudging you," said Mom. "Do you remember when we talked about asking Jesus every day to take over our lives?"

"Yes, and I've been praying that every morning," said Luc.

"Jesus is answering your prayers by sending the Holy Spirit to you," said Mom. "The job of the Holy Spirit is to help us think about what we are doing and whether it is right or wrong.

"You have asked Jesus to be part of your life," Mom continued. "The Holy Spirit wants to help you make right choices. As you let Him work in your life, others will be able to see it."

Mom paused, then asked Luc, "So what are you going to do now?"

"I think I'll call Simon and see if he can come over here," said Luc. "I need some help building my backyard fort!"

Bible Verse

"The true children of God are those who let God's Spirit lead them" (Romans 8:14, ICB).

Activity

Wrap up in a blanket and imagine that the blanket is the Holy Spirit wrapping around you. How does it make you feel?

Thought Question

If we can't see the Holy Spirit, how do we know He is with us?



My Heart Is Full of JOY

Luc looked at the bags sitting beside the door. Excitement filled him knowing that in just a few hours he would see his grandparents.

During the trip Luc thought about his grandparents. Grandpa always told them stories and Grandma cooked and baked wonderful food. A warm feeling came over Luc as he thought about them and he soon fell asleep.

"Hey, sleepyhead." Luc rubbed his eyes.

"Are you going to sleep this entire visit?" the voice asked again.

"Grandpa!" Luc cried with happiness. "I guess I must have fallen asleep on the trip."

Luc grabbed his bag with one hand and Grandpa's hand with the other. Together they went into the house. The smell of freshly baked bread tickled Luc's nose.

As the family ate their evening meal, everyone shared about what was happening in their lives. Soon the meal was over, and it was time for worship.

Grandpa prayed to begin things. "Tonight I'd like everyone to share something they are thankful for and why," said Grandpa. "Jake, let's start with you."

Finally it was Luc's turn. "I'm thankful that I have a family that is so happy," said Luc. "Some of my friends have families who fight all the time. I'm glad mine doesn't."

When Luc looked at Grandpa, he noticed tears in his eyes.

"What you said means so much to me," said Grandpa. "You see, there was a time when I was just plain mean."

Luc was shocked. Grandpa couldn't be mean. He was one of the nicest people Luc had ever met.

Grandma confirmed it: "A long time ago Grandpa had a very bad temper."

Grandpa looked off into the distance and remembered something from long ago. "Grandma is right. I didn't have any control over my temper or my attitude," said Grandpa. "That was before I accepted Jesus into my heart. When I confessed my sins to Him, I asked for Him to change me and take away my bad temper."

"Every day I prayed that Jesus would help me keep my temper under control," said Grandpa. "Some days I did. Then I would thank Jesus for helping me."

Some days I would get really angry. Then I would have to ask God to forgive me again.

With God's help I eventually controlled my temper."

"Wow!" said Luc. "We've learned about the fruit of the Spirit, such as peace, kindness, joy, and self-control. I think you have the fruit of the Spirit, Grandpa!"

Grandpa chuckled. "That's right, Luc. When we accept Jesus and confess our sins, our lives are changed."

Bible Verse

"Also, I will teach you to respect me completely. I will put a new way to think inside you. I will take out the stubborn heart like stone from your bodies. And I will give you an obedient heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26, ICB).

Activity

▶ Mix four tablespoons of white vinegar with one teaspoon of iodized salt. Drop several coins in the mixture and allow them to soak for several minutes. Take the coins out of the solution and dry. What happened to the coins?

Thought Question

💡 What in your life do you need Jesus' help to change?

What Can I Say?

It was raining, so the planned fellowship lunch in the park had to go indoors.

Mr. Jones came and stood by Luc. "I'm disappointed we couldn't go to the park," said Mr. Jones. "The park is a great place to eat lunch and find people to witness to."

"You find people in the park and witness to them? How?" asked Luc.

"Sometimes I look for a person who looks sad," said Mr. Jones. "I'll smile at them and tell them I hope they have a good day. Sometimes they will talk about what things bother them. I listen and then ask if I can pray for them."

"You could do the same thing at school. I'm sure there are other students who have struggles," Mr. Jones added.

"I've seen some of them, but was never sure what I should say," admitted Luc. "I'd like to tell my friends at school about Jesus, but I stumble over the words. It's really embarrassing."

"I have just what you need, and you can make it yourself," said Mr. Jones. He pulled a little book out of his pocket and handed it to Luc.

The book had a green cover. Inside were blank pages that

were black, red, white, and yellow. "How can a book with no words help me remember what to say?" Luc asked.

"The colors will help you," said Mr. Jones. "Black reminds us that we are sinners who do wrong things. This is what our life is like with sin."

Mr. Jones turned to the red page. "Red reminds us that Jesus died and shed His blood on the cross for us."

The next page was white. "White means that our sins are washed away!" Luc said excitedly.

"And here's the best part—yellow promises we can go and live with Jesus forever! What does the green cover mean?" asked Mr. Jones.

"Green usually means growing things," said Luc.

"That's right," said Mr. Jones. "Once we accept Jesus, we have to grow in our new life. We do that by reading the Bible, sharing Jesus with others, and spending time in fellowship with other believers."

"I just happen to have some sheets of colored paper with me. Would you like to make a witnessing book after lunch?"

"I sure would," said Luc with a grin. "I can't wait to show this to my friends at school!"

Bible Verse

"Jesus said, 'Come follow me. I will make you fishermen for men' " (Matthew 4:19, ICB).

Activity

Make your own witnessing book. You can use colored paper, cloth, or felt.

You will need:

black (2 1/2" x 3" square)
red (2 1/2" x 3" square)
white (2 1/2" x 3" square)
yellow (2 1/2" x 3" square)
green (5" x 3" rectangle)

1. Place the colored squares on top of each other in this order: black, red, white, and yellow.
2. Wrap a length of green paper, cloth, or felt around the colored squares to form a book binding.
3. If you are using paper squares, staple the edge of the book that is the spine. If you are using cloth or felt squares, sew a one-inch seam down the green felt side, making sure to sew through all colored squares. The seam should bind the book and its pages together.

Thought Question

How can you overcome being afraid to share your wordless witnessing book with others?

The Best Family Reunion

"I'm so excited, I can't stand still," Tess exclaimed as she swept the floor. "Uncle Jack and Aunt Mary will be here soon. I finally get to see Beth again!"

Luc was excited too. "Billy, Sam, and I will be able to play ball together," he said. "It's going to be so much fun."

The minutes ticked by as they waited for their aunt, uncle, and cousins to arrive, but it seemed as if time stood still. Finally a horn honked in the driveway.

Tess flung the door open just as Uncle Jack started to knock. "We thought you'd never come," said Tess.

Everyone got settled, and Mom poured glasses of iced lemon water.

Mom asked if anyone needed a refill. "I would like one, please. It was a long trip today, and this cold drink tastes good," said Uncle Jack. "A family reunion makes a long journey worthwhile."

"I just wish you could stay here forever," said Luc.

"Wouldn't that be nice," said Aunt Mary.

Luc thought for a minute and then said, "One day we'll have a family reunion that will never end."

"That's right," Dad agreed. "I can't wait!" Everyone nodded in agreement.

"You should have seen Luc and Tess before you arrived," said Mom. "Every few minutes they were running to the window to see if you had arrived. It was a good reminder of how we should watch for the second coming of Jesus."

"We didn't just get ready today. Mom has been cooking and baking all week long. She said she wanted to be prepared



when you arrived," Tess said.

"That reminds me of a Bible verse I read this week," said Uncle Jack. "It's 1 Corinthians 16:13. It says, 'Be careful. Continue strong in the faith. Have courage, and be strong'" (ICB).

During the next few days the kids played and explored the backyard and prayed and studied their Bibles together. The families sang around the piano. As a special treat they all went to the lake for a picnic and swimming. Too soon the family reunion was over.

As the car was loaded up, Tess couldn't hold back her tears. "We had so much fun together," she said. "I wish you didn't have to go."

Uncle Jack held her close. "It is sad, but we'll see each other again," said Uncle Jack. "If we don't, remember to watch and stand firm. We all want to be

ready for Jesus to come. Then the best and never-ending family reunion with Jesus will begin."

Bible Verse

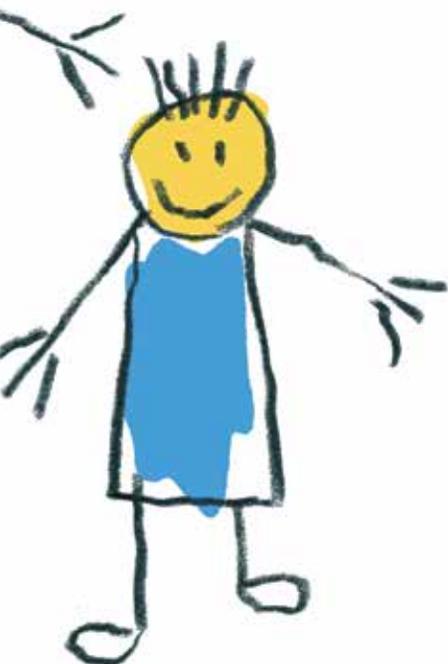
"Then when Christ, the Head Shepherd, comes, you will get a crown. This crown will be glorious, and it will never lose its beauty" (1 Peter 5:4, ICB).

Activity

➤ Draw a picture with all the people from your family you want to come to your reunion. Do all of these people know who Jesus is and that He's coming back? If they don't, make sure you invite them to the party.

Thought Question

💡 Does it ever feel as if Jesus is never going to take us home to heaven? What can you do that will help keep you excited about the Second Coming?



The children's readings were written by **Gary Wagner** and his wife, **Deena Bartel-Wagner**. Gary serves as a pastor in the New York Conference. Deena uses her gifts of communication as editor for Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries at the General Conference. They eagerly anticipate the soon return of their Savior, Jesus Christ.

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