

## Chapter 4 - Salvation through Justification

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**Therefore, 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

### The Way to Eternal Life Is Through Jesus

Consider these five statements:

The only way a sinner can receive eternal life is through justification.

Justification is a legal standing in the court of Heaven in which a sinner is viewed as though he has not broken the law (is without sin).

Justification occurs when a person becomes willing to obey the authority of the Holy Spirit and live a life of faith.

Justification can be illustrated in the following way: Angels record the words, actions and motives of every person. Within the book of records is a faithful record of each sinner's life. When a sinner becomes willing to obediently submit to the authority of the Holy Spirit and live by faith, Jesus justifies that sinner by placing His perfect life over the record of the sinner. As long as the covering life of Jesus remains intact, that sinner is not under the penalty of sin. He is free of the condemnation which God's law demands.

An absolute knowledge of God is not required for justification. However, a sinner's ongoing obedient submission to the Holy Spirit is required for the continuation of justification.

### Blessed Assurance

Any sinner can receive the assurance of eternal life *right now, this very minute*, if he or she agrees to obediently submit to the demands of the Holy Spirit. If you are willing at this very moment to go, to be, and to do all that the Holy Spirit asks of you, rejoice! The assurance of eternal life is yours through a heavenly process called justification. Whenever this transforming moment occurs, a new life of faith begins. Of course, a sinner can return to his sinful ways at any time because the power of choice still remains. (Ezekiel 18) Just because we are willing to submit to the demands of the Holy Spirit today does not mean that we have to submit to His sanctifying demands tomorrow. To a large extent, the internal authority of the Holy Spirit is limited by our desire and cooperation. If a person so desires, He can be permanently turned away. (Matthew 12:31,32)

How can we tell if the Holy Spirit is pressing us for submission? How can we distinguish between the guilt produced by the Holy Spirit or some kind of false guilt? The urging of the Holy

Spirit always conforms to Heaven's constitution of love. We are to love the Lord with all our heart, mind and soul, and we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The difference between false guilt and guilt imposed by the Holy Spirit becomes easier to differentiate as we learn more about Jesus. Jesus is the Author and Finisher of our faith. His example helps us understand many things about the properties of life. A growing knowledge of Jesus Christ sets us free of unnecessary guilt and burdens which God has not imposed.

The process of entering into the assurance of eternal life happens in a rather predictable way, although it is not limited to this process. Here's my experience: The Holy Spirit produced a strong feeling and relentless conviction that I was guilty of sin before God. My guilt and condemnation weighed often on my mind, because unbeknown to me at the time, the Holy Spirit was trying to motivate me to "get right" with God. Eventually, I recognized my condemnation as a sinner and I wanted pardon for my sins. I desired to know God. I had heard enough to know that people who do wicked things have no hope of a future life and I did not want to miss out on Heaven. I did not know much about God in those days, but I believed God would be pleased with me if I stopped doing things which I knew were wrong. I also knew that it was impossible for me to stop sinning and I wondered how God dealt with human beings like me. The problem was simple: He wanted me to stop sinning, but I could not stop sinning. How could I be saved and go on sinning? In those days, I did not understand the wonderful offer of justification.

Over time as my spiritual maturity developed, I became *willing* to go, to be and to do as God directed in my life – no holds barred. I did not become a Christian by invitation. That is, I did not decide to become a Christian by walking down the aisle to the front of a church. One day I made a commitment to God and became a Christian. I was at work when I resolved that from now on, I would be a follower of Jesus Christ, no matter what it cost. If I remember correctly, one of my first decisions involved restitution. I understood that God's grace and forgiveness were not a whitewash for wrong doing. From my personal Bible study, I concluded that God required me to make restitution to those whom I had defrauded in the past. So, I began to make restitution for past wrongs as best I knew how. This was expensive, and it required several hundred dollars. After reviewing my past and making every wrong right as far as possible, I confessed my sins to God and have had perfect peace about them ever since. I was happy and truly free of guilt, which made me feel much closer to God. I resolved, by God's grace, not to do those things again. Do not be fooled! Sin is always expensive! Sin will take you farther than you want to go and cost you more than you want to pay. During this transforming process in my life, some of my friends fled. They thought I had become a religious fanatic.

By faith, I accepted God's assurance that He was pleased with my actions. I was happier and felt closer to God, although my understanding of God and His will was very limited. Thirty years later, my peace and joy remain. As long as I continue to obey the demands of the indwelling Holy Spirit, I know Jesus *justifies* me before the Father as though I am without sin, even though I am a sinner. Because of this, I am at peace with God and have the joyful assurance of salvation. Yes, I still sin, but now I understand a few things about dealing with sin. First, accidental or unintentional sin does not bring eternal death. John says, "**All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.**" (1 John 5:17) Second, I am prone to sin and rebellion because I am under the curse of sin. Paul noticed the same thing after being a Christian for almost 25 years. He wrote, "**But I see another law at work in the members of**

**my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.”** (Romans 7:23) Last, when I do sin there is a process that I must obediently follow. First, I have to acknowledge to the Holy Spirit that I understand the guilt He is imposing in my heart because I have sinned. Next, I have to confess to my neighbor that I have sinned against him and I must provide restitution as far as possible. Last, I turn to Jesus. John says, **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”** (1 John 1:9) This order of events is well stated in Scripture. (Matthew 5:23-26) If I am faithful in dealing with the sin problem, my willingness to go, to be and to do God’s will is affirmed. Jesus sees the evidence of my faith and He, my Savior and Lord, grants me the covering of His righteousness.

Justification is possible for three reasons. First, God’s offer of justification is based on nothing but God’s love for man. **“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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”** (John 3:16,17) Second, Jesus came to Earth and He lived a perfect life so that He might cover us with His righteous life! **“For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”** (Romans 5:10) Last, Jesus is qualified to justify repentant sinners because He paid our penalty for sin. In other words, sinners cannot be justified as sinless people if the penalty upon sinners has not been removed. Jesus provided the necessary restitution for every sinner. The merits of this restitution are transferred to sinners when they submit to the demands of the Holy Spirit. When I became *willing* to submit to God’s will, Jesus covered my sinful life with His perfect life. (Romans 5:17) Notice, I emphasized the word *willing*. We are not justified by works. Works are a reflection of the motives and desires of our heart. We can do right for the wrong reason (legalism) and we can attempt to justify wrong doing (rebellion). Making restitution in order to be saved is a corrupt motive. An honest motivation that prompts appropriate restitution comes from a deeper understanding of what loving our neighbor is all about.

A parallel between all sinners and Adam and Eve’s Garden of Eden experience provides an excellent illustration. When Adam and Eve sinned, they lost the covering of light that covered their bodies. Realizing their shame, they ran and hid from God. They tried to cover their nakedness with some large itchy fig leaves, but Jesus used this opportunity to present a wonderful object lesson. Jesus killed a flawless sacrificial lamb and I presume He covered the naked pair with its skin. (Genesis 3:7-21) The parallel for every sinner is that we too, stand naked before God. He knows who we are, where we are, and He knows all of our sins. Any attempt to cover up (or justify) sin is foolish. Jesus offers “His perfect skin” as the Lamb of God, the spotless wedding garment of His righteousness, to all of us. If we surrender our will to God and daily submit to the demands of the Holy Spirit, Jesus covers our nakedness with His perfect righteous life. Therefore, when the Father sees us wearing the robe of Jesus’ righteousness, we stand before God fully clothed, as though we never sinned! This is the profound beauty of “justification through faith!” (Ephesians 2:8,9) Justification is available to every person who has lived, regardless of religious background.

## Just as Though I Have Never Sinned

My joy and peace is full because I know that when the Father looks at me, He sees me as though I am without sin. Christ's perfect life of righteousness can cover the worst sinner. Justification does not require works, deeds or proof that I am a changed man. The thief on the cross did not prove that he was a changed man, but he was granted the righteousness of Jesus that very day. (Ephesians 2:8,9; Luke 23:43) I am sure the thief would have become a different man if he could have lived longer. The profound beauty of justification is that it begins in Heaven the moment we become willing to submit to the authority of the indwelling Spirit. As long as we continue in a submissive attitude (to be, to go, to do) toward God's authority over our lives, we have the assurance of eternal life.

This, in a nutshell, is how my justification and yours begin before God through Christ. Even though the process is simple, it is a miracle! How the Holy Spirit transforms a rebellious heart into a submissive heart is a mystery that God alone knows, but it does happen! (John 3; Romans 8) So, if you are missing the joy and peace that comes from "letting go and letting God," if you have not experienced the full assurance of God's salvation through the justification that Jesus offers, if you have not grasped something about God's great love for you, review the process and implement those portions that remain unfinished in your life. If the Holy Spirit is not beating you up with that strong and relentless conviction that you need salvation, perhaps you need to slow down and ask God to speak to your heart! The Spirit will reveal your true condition before God if you open your heart. I have been there, and my testimony is not unusual. Submit to the Holy Spirit's prompting, confess your sins, provide restitution where possible and joy and peace will surely follow.

### That's Not All!

Now comes the scary part! When a person receives the assurance of salvation through justification, he or she begins a faith-journey. The journey may seem frightening at times, because you do not know where the journey will lead, but you know Who is leading. You may not know which road you will take, but you know where you will end up. You do not know how you will get there, but you know a way will be made. In short, walking with Jesus is a scary experience at times, because The Good Shepherd leads His sheep over dangerous mountain trails and through the deepest ravines to take them home. The scary part should not be the travail of travel, but the possibility of losing sight of The Good Shepherd. When two people stand at the marriage altar and unite their lives by agreeing to vows of fidelity, they begin a journey of a lifetime that will take them through uncharted waters. So it is when we join ourselves to Jesus. People who join themselves to Jesus begin a journey that is uncharted to the human eye. Marriage requires fidelity, loyalty, faith and love and so does the journey with Jesus.

### Basic Law

By definition, "basic law" is an instinct or inherent ability to rationally determine right from wrong. This phenomenon is exhibited by most young people at an early age. When a child has

achieved enough maturity to determine right and wrong on his or her own, that age is often called the age of accountability. Thomas Jefferson eloquently noted the presence of “basic law” in the “Introduction” of the *Bill of Rights* for the *U.S. Constitution*. He wrote, “We hold certain truths to be self evident . . .” In other words, intelligent people can determine right from wrong because “basic law” is operating and this feature is self evident within all of humanity. Yet, the opposite is just as true. If someone does not want to understand or agree with the truth, no one can show them the truth! In fact, people who want to justify evil are the first to deny what is right. (John 3:20)

God created human beings with reasoning powers. Even before Eve tasted the forbidden fruit, God wanted man to distinguish between good and evil. If people strive to live right and be honorable – no matter what religion they belong to – they are doing all that God asks of them.

God does not hold a person guilty who does not know His will, but God will condemn a person who refuses to accept the truth! This is a critical point in understanding how salvation operates. Man is not saved by knowing or agreeing with absolute truth, instead man is saved by faithfully living up to all he believes to be righteous and true. Closely study Paul’s comments: **“Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law [e.g. the knowledge of God penned by Moses, but they], 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 [when they do wrong], and their thoughts now accusing [them of their wrong deeds], [this confirms they know right from wrong and their conscience is] now even defending them. This [is how the judgement] will take place on the day when God will judge men’s secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.”** (Romans 2:14-16, insertions mine.)

The word *law* as used by Paul in this context is a reference to Moses’ writings. The point Paul is making is that God judges the heart and takes into consideration the knowledge base that is in the heart. Therefore, Gentiles who know nothing about the true God and His ways will be judged by the *same process* as Jews and Christians who have had every opportunity to know God and His ways. God righteously judges each person on the basis of his or her knowledge base and the resulting actions. (Ecclesiastes 12:13,14) People who live up to the high ideals of what they honestly believe God wants of them demonstrate the kind of *faith* that pleases God! James also supports the concept of basic law. He says, **“Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins.”** (James 4:17)

I do not want to leave you with the impression that God is not concerned with absolute right and wrong. He is very concerned about absolute right and wrong. The Ten Commandments are ten absolutes. Period. They are not “Ten Suggestions” or a place to begin negotiation. Jesus Himself wrote the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone and His eternal law is more enduring than stone. Still, God understands that everyone on Earth does not know about His absolutes or the terms and conditions within the Plan of Salvation. Therefore, He righteously judges each person on their knowledge base, actions *and* willingness to search for and submit to higher truths as the Holy Spirit leads. God does not require that we know or understand all His marvelous truths in order to receive salvation, for no one on Earth understands everything there is to know about God! However, God does require that we submit, by faith, to a growing spiritual

process so we might know His will. (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8) If we honestly submit to the leading of the Holy Spirit as we understand it, to go, to be and to do His will, God is pleased. If we endeavor to grow in knowledge and understanding, Jesus will bless us with a deeper understanding of truth!

Nothing on Earth compares to walking with God. He is anxious to reveal the issues and ways of life! God knows our knowledge base and the motives that prompt our actions and still loves us in spite of our great ignorance. But, and this is an emphatic “but,” God is not pleased when we compromise our beliefs or shrink back from the demands of faith. Jesus said, **“If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”** (Luke 9:26)

While we are on the topic of ignorance and law, consider the practical side of ignorance of the law. Since one man cannot read the heart or determine the motives of another man, man has to take an opposite approach to the issue of ignorance and law. Man’s laws take the perspective: “Ignorance is no excuse for breaking the law.” So, when a person gives the excuse, “But officer, I did not know the speed limit was 35. . .,” we should not be surprised when the officer writes a traffic citation.

## Salvation Includes Full Restoration

The Plan of Salvation begins with “basic law.” Realization that we need a Savior comes after we sense guilt and become aware of sin’s penalty. Without the presence and operation of basic law, there would be no guilt and salvation would not be deemed necessary or desirable! In other words, an infant does not find salvation necessary or desirable, because an infant cannot reason. The Bible does not support infant baptism. The notion of infant baptism originally began from a distortion of Christ’s teaching. **“Jesus answered [Nicodemus], ‘I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.’ ”** (John 3:5, insertion mine.) A superficial reading of this text can result in this twisted meaning: “Unless a person is baptized by water, he or she cannot receive eternal life.” In ancient times, the Christian Church abused this text and unfortunately, the tradition continues today. History reveals that the early Church used baptism and other rituals to control access to salvation. If people were cut off (or excommunicated) from the rituals offered by the Church, they were not considered eligible for eternal life. Since adherents believed the rituals were mandatory for salvation, this gave a great deal of control to the Church. The Church implemented infant baptism because infant mortality rates were very high. To ensure that every infant would enter Heaven, the Church taught that children had to be baptized as soon as possible. Of course, an appropriate “gift” to the Church was also expected. Obviously, an infant does not know one thing about basic law, guilt or salvation, and the Bible clearly teaches that salvation does not come through rituals or works of the flesh. (Ephesians 2:8,9)

Let us examine the meaning of John 3:5. No one can enter the kingdom of God unless (a) his or her heart is made alive to spiritual matters by the Holy Spirit, and (b) he or she is washed clean of rebellion. During the time of Nicodemus, it was customary to immerse Gentile converts who wished to become citizens of Israel in the Jordan River. The Jews regarded baptism by

immersion as a symbolic act indicating death (burial) to the past and resurrection to a new life. In other words, a Gentile went down into the water and a Jew came out! Jesus used the symbol of baptism to make His point to Nicodemus that if a person wants to become a member of God's kingdom, he or she too, must to be "born of water" to become a member of a new kingdom. (Romans 6:1-7)

The Bible reveals that children are born with the assurance of salvation *until* they chose otherwise. In other words, God does not hold children accountable for sin until they know better (accountability begins when basic law starts working within a young person - James 4:17). Since Jesus paid the price for each sinner and children are not held accountable for sin, what prevents them from having the assurance of salvation? Some Christians believe just the opposite, believing that a child is born condemned to eternal death. This was the reasoning used in ancient times when infant baptism began. But consider this: If God considers an adult sinner a saint because of his or her faith in Jesus Christ's atonement, why not a mere child, who is simply too young to know right from wrong? God is much more generous than man and God loves every child – for of such is the kingdom of Heaven! (Matthew 19:14)

## How Man Became Unsaved

Why is justification necessary in the Plan of Salvation? What makes salvation necessary in the first place? Why did Jesus have to die on the cross? What issues are involved between God and man? These are very important questions and we will examine them.

According to the book of Genesis, God created man in His image, forming him out of dirt. God placed man in the Garden of Eden, where he had unrestricted access to the Tree of Life. As long as man had access to the fruit on the Tree of Life, man's life was sustained indefinitely. The point must be made that Jesus created man (and even the angels) as mortal beings. The word "mortal" means to be subject to death, having a beginning and the possibility of an end. The word "immortal" means to have no beginning or end and is a term that applies only to God. (1 Timothy 6:15,16; Hebrews 7:3; Revelation 1:18) Many people are surprised to learn the Bible teaches that human beings are mortal because they have a beginning and the possibility of an end. Genesis 2:7 says, **"The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man *became* a living being."** (Italics mine.) Adam did not exist as some intelligent entity prior to his creation. The soul of Adam came into existence on the sixth day of Creation when God put the breath of life into a body made of dirt. In a similar manner, the soul of Adam ceased to exist when the breath of life was taken from his body of dirt. After his death, Adam does not exist as some intelligent entity. The soul of man is mortal. **"The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him."** (Ezekiel 18:20)

Jesus told Adam, ". . . **You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.**" (Genesis 2:16,17) It may surprise you to learn that Adam and Eve were to perish *the very*

day they ate the forbidden fruit. The Hebrew text expresses the immediacy of death saying, **“in the day of your eating from it surely you will die,”** the King James Version says: **“... for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”** (Genesis 2:17) For me, the Bible is clear. Adam and Eve were to be executed the very day they sinned. The penalty for sin is death *by execution*. Most Christians overlook this important point. There are two types of death. Death caused by disease, accident or “natural causes” is the *consequence* of sin, but the *penalty* for sin is death by execution. This is why it was necessary for Jesus to be executed at Calvary and this also explains why the wicked will be executed by fire at the end of the 1,000 years. Many Bible students have difficulty interpreting Genesis 2:16,17 because Adam and Eve did not die the day they sinned. The reason they were not slain *that very day* is this: Jesus immediately went before the Father and offered to die in man’s place. The Father accepted the offer of Jesus and their execution was stayed. Ever since that fateful day, Jesus has fulfilled two roles in Heaven. He is our Intercessor and He is the Lamb of God. Later in this book, we will consider how these two roles reflect two unique processes that are necessary for man to be fully reconciled with God.

## Sin Begins

Genesis 3:6 says, **“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.”** I believe the devil schemed and planned his approach at the tree for some time and he was unbelievably successful. He gained Eve’s full attention and ultimately her confidence. The fruit was beautiful and desirable, and after he had beguiled Eve with his comments, she tasted it. The serpent quickly left the tree and Eve, no doubt, felt strange and uncomfortable inside. For the first time she felt the guilt of sin. Quickly she gathered up some of the fruit and ran to Adam. Adam recognized the forbidden fruit Eve was holding and knew she was in deep trouble. She excitedly explained the course of events and then, in an innocent way, sought his companionship by offering him some fruit. Adam must have thought: “God will strike Eve dead today because she ate the fruit and if she is taken from me, life will be miserable and lonely.” Eve was created to perfection, she was beautiful and she had been his “soul mate” since the day of their creation. She was part of him, they were of one flesh and spirit, and he was deeply distressed. Therefore, out of love and devotion for Eve, he chose to eat the fruit and share God’s punishment with her. Unfortunately, Adam loved Eve more than he trusted God to resolve the problem.

A very important distinction can be made between the sins of Adam and Eve. Eve believed a lie and she sinned in ignorance. Adam, chose to disobey God and eat the forbidden fruit because of his love for Eve. Even though Adam’s sin was not an act of defiance, it was intentional and willful. Remember the text? **“And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.’ ”** (Genesis 2:16,17) Adam knew better, his sin was deliberate, whereas Eve’s sin was not. Therefore, Paul concludes that Adam is responsible for the entrance of sin on Earth and not Eve! **“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned. . . .”** (Romans 5:12) This verse explains why Jesus could not overlook the

sin of Adam and Eve. It would have been great if God could have said, "O.K. Adam and Eve, we will overlook your sin this one time, but you had better not sin again!" God could not say these words for two reasons: First, Adam and Eve were now subject to the penalty of sin. They had violated God's law. God's law cannot be cancelled or altered because His universal government is based on the rule of unchanging law. Second, after Adam and Eve sinned, they were not the same. They were immediately transformed by sin and their minds and hearts suddenly became hostile to the authority of the Godhead.

## Passing the Blame

Adam and Eve were confronted with their sin that evening. When they heard Jesus approaching, they ran and hid. They were ashamed, naked and defensive. When confronted with their deeds, they were strangely unrepentant! Eve blamed her actions on the serpent. She said, "**The serpent deceived me, and I ate.**" (Genesis 3:13) Even worse, Adam blamed his rebellion on his Creator and then on Eve! Adam said, "**The woman *you* put here with me - *she* gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it.**" (Genesis 3:12, italics mine.) The moment Adam and Eve became sinners, their natures changed. Instead of having a predisposition toward righteousness, they became rebellious and carnal. The Creator listened and then He spoke. He addressed the serpent first, then He placed a curse upon the woman, and last, He turned to Adam and said, ". . . **because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life . . . By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.**" (Genesis 3:17-19)

## Access Denied to Garden of Eden

God drove Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden for one simple reason. They could not have access to the Tree of Life! Read the following text carefully, as it contains a conversation between the members of the Godhead: "**The Lord God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever [without end].' So the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the Tree of Life.**" (Genesis 3:22-24, insertion mine.)

## Two Types of Death Created

At this point in the story, it is very important to consider a development that occurred that fateful day. Remember, God had warned that Adam and Eve would be executed the very day they ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. If the execution had been carried out, that would have been the end of the story. However, when Jesus stepped "in the way" of their execution, offering to die in man's place, an important development occurred: Two types of death were created. It became possible for man to die twice. We know the *penalty* for sin is death by execution, but the

*consequence* of being shut away from the Tree of Life is also death. The “first death” occurs as a consequence of sin. People die of cancer, accidents or old age. This type of death is called “sleep” 53 times in the New Testament because in God’s eyes it is a temporary death. (See John 6 and 11.) The second death, that is, death by execution, is a future event. The second death is reserved for people who remain defiant against God’s authority during their life. The annihilation of the wicked occurs at the end of the 1,000 years. (Revelation 20:14) Currently, no one has experienced the “second death” (except Jesus) because God has not executed the wicked. The second death occurs by fire and the results are eternal and final.

The reason Adam and Eve had to be banished from the garden and denied access to the Tree of Life was because God did not want sin to live forever. Notice how this works: Man was created a mortal being (man has a beginning and the possibility of an end). If man cannot obtain the fruit from the Tree of Life, he dies. Have you ever considered how the rebellious predisposition of Adam and Eve, like a biological trait, has been passed down to all the offspring of the guilty pair for nearly 6,000 years? The heritage and power of sin were quickly revealed in their firstborn son, Cain, who became a murderer!

Think of Adam and Eve’s suffering outside the garden. The Bible says that Adam lived 930 years. (Genesis 5:5) Imagine living that long and observing the terrible consequences of your own sinful choice! Adam had to watch the consequences of his own deed for an extended period of time. He had lived *within* that glorious garden before sin began, now he survived by the sweat of his brow *outside* the garden. He saw the effects of the infectious blight of sin within his family and on all of nature. Think of Adam’s mental and emotional agony – living nine centuries to witness the degenerate effects of his wrong doing – all this to be with Eve. And, of course, Eve painfully experienced the degenerate effects of sin within her own body during childbirth, not to mention the disappointing behavior of her children. I am sure that as she held in her arms the lifeless body of her second son, Abel, she was overwhelmed with grief as she began to choke on the bitter taste of sin.

## **Jesus Not Caught by Surprise**

The sins of Adam and Eve did not catch Heaven by surprise. In fact, the very day Adam and Eve sinned, Jesus became man’s intercessor by stepping “in the way” of the executing angel. (Isaiah 53:12; Job 16:20,21; Hebrews 7:25) Jesus stepped between the wrath of God’s law (death by execution) and the guilty pair when He offered to die in man’s place. In my mind’s eye, I can visualize the scene. The executioner was preparing to leave Heaven to slay Adam and Eve, but Jesus ran to the Father. Jesus petitioned the Father to allow Him to die in man’s place. The Father agreed to the petition of Jesus and the work of execution was delayed. Jesus came to Earth and shared with Adam and Eve that a way had been provided for them to one day be restored to their Eden home. Ever since that day, the way back to the Garden of Eden has been called the “Plan of Salvation.” The plan includes many features that reveal a Godhead of love. One marvelous feature about the plan is the Father’s willingness to justify sinners with the righteousness of Christ.

## **What Must I Do?**

**“ ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.’ ”** (Acts 16:30,31) A frightened jailer cried out for his life in the middle of the night and an assuring response came from two prisoners. The words that Paul and Silas spoke that night have echoed from that prison cell for almost 2,000 years. However, Paul and Silas’ response includes much more than many Christians understand! To understand this passage of Scripture the student has to take off his Nike’s and put on the sandals of Paul and Silas. In other words, we have to consider the circumstances during which these words were spoken.

The setting in Acts 16 begins a few years before the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The mutual hatred between the Romans and Jews was fierce. To make matters worse, the Romans regarded Christians as just another Jewish sect because most Christians were former Jews who continued to observe a number of Jewish customs even after they became Christians. While in the Macedonian city of Philippi, Paul cast a demon out of a young slave girl, who was “a fortune teller.” She had earned large sums of money for her owners and when the owners realized their financial loss, they initiated a riot saying, “ ‘. . . **These men are [those rebellious] Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.**’ ” The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.” (Acts 16:20-23, insertion mine.)

Notice in the previous text that Paul and Silas were identified as Jews – their nationality was the inflammatory word that justified the riot. The instigators of the riot did not need to say more. However, in the mob’s angry rush to assault two more Jews who were not welcomed, city leaders failed to consider whether Paul and Silas were Roman citizens – a significant oversight since Roman law mandated that Romans could not be punished or imprisoned without a fair trial. Non-Romans could be punished on the spot.

After Paul and Silas were flogged severely, they were placed under the care of a Roman jailer. The jailer understood the rules of Roman guardianship and he was paid good wages to guard well. If prisoners escaped from his jail, he was automatically guilty of negligence – end of discussion and end of life. Such were the no-nonsense, ironclad rules of Roman government. The jailer had heard Paul and Silas preach. No doubt, the jailer was also a good judge of character. He was fascinated with their teachings about Jesus Christ and their miracle working power, but he was foremost a public servant and prisoners were his highest priority.

**“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody’s chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, ‘Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!’ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. . . .”** (Acts 16:25-29) When the jailer reached the open cell of Paul and Silas, he uttered the most important question on Earth, **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”** When I consider his question in the light of his immediate

circumstances, I have wondered if the jailer's concern was focused on the receipt of eternal life. In fact, could the jailer really be asking, "What must I do to save my present life and that of my family, because I will be promptly executed if any prisoners escape?" If this was the case, then Paul and Silas' response was instruction leading to justification in God's sight – "Put your trust in Jesus *right now* and you will not lose your life, nor will your household perish." Look at the verse again: "**'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.'**"

I have yet to meet one Christian who says this verse actually means, "Mr. Jailer, if you will believe in the Lord Jesus this very minute, you and your entire household will be granted eternal life." In other words, most Christians do not believe that one person's acceptance of Jesus saves other family members. So, what did Paul and Silas mean when they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus"? Here are two choices: First, they could have meant, "Believe that Jesus Christ is a real person. Believe this simple historical truth and He will give you eternal life." I mention this option because some Christians actually believe this to be the intent of Paul and Silas. I find this view makes a mockery of the biblical definition of faith. Second, they could have meant, "Believe that Jesus Christ is your Savior and *submit* your life to His authority. All who do will receive life eternal *at the last day*." (John 6:39-44) My study leads me to believe that the last choice is the correct answer. Paul and Silas invited a desperate man to immediately submit to the authority of Jesus Christ (as they had done in their own lives) and allow Him to work out the details. This story is paradoxical. Paul and Silas are telling the jailer to submit his life to the Lord Jesus as they had done. However, consider their misfortune – sitting in prison stocks covered with cuts and bruises – inviting the jailer to submit his life also. The point Paul and Silas were making was that when you submit your life to the authority of the Lord Jesus, your life and future are in God's hands. But truthfully, after considering the issues of life and all the options, it really is the only way to go. This story reaffirms that justification begins with total and complete submission. If it takes a life-threatening experience or even an earthquake to produce submission, then so be it. (Remember, Paul himself had a life-threatening encounter with the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. This experience led Paul to surrender his life to Jesus immediately. See Acts 9.)

## Will Words do the Trick?

Some Christians claim that salvation comes only after a person *publicly confesses* faith in Christ as Savior. In other words, to become saved a person has to publicly state that "Jesus is Lord." While this may sound good among church members, the flip side of this concept is a doctrine teaching that most of the world is eternally doomed because more than 70% of the world's population has not confessed, "Jesus is Lord." Carefully notice these texts: ". . . **If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.**" (Romans 10:9,10) "**Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.**" (Acts 4:12)

While "proof texts" sound good in a Christian environment, what about the remaining 4.4 billion

people who are not Christian? Are people doomed to destruction simply because they were born in a place where there are no Christians or any knowledge of Jesus? Be careful how you answer this question, because God's offer of salvation to the world is not as narrow and simplistic as some Christians claim. There is more to the concept of salvation than first meets the eye. For example, what does a loving God do with:

- a. billions of people down through the centuries who have lived and died without having an opportunity to hear about Christ's generous offer of salvation?
- b. billions of people who rejected Christianity because the "Christians" they knew were disgusting examples of immoral and uncivil behavior?
- c. billions of people who have never honestly considered the teachings of Christianity because they were born into another religious system or culture that taught their religion was superior to Christianity?
- d. billions of good people living right now, as well as in ages past, who never showed serious interest in religion because their parents were not religious?

## **Are All Four Groups of People Doomed for Destruction?**

Through the years I have asked people about these four groups of people and a disappointing number of Christians have callously said that all four groups are doomed for destruction because they never gave their heart to Christ. When I respond, "But billions of people have never had the opportunity to know about Jesus! What does God do with them?" Sometimes I just get an irritated look because it seems unreasonable to say that God would destroy people who have not had a chance to know about salvation. If the frown is not too bad, I have dared to ask further, "Who will receive greater condemnation: The Christian who did little or nothing to propel the gospel of Jesus throughout the world, or the pagan who did not hear the gospel because a Christian did not share the good news with him." These questions are important to consider, because the Bible says that God's love for each person on Earth is the same! (John 3:16; Acts 10:34,35; Romans 2:14,15)

Far too many Christians have a view regarding salvation that is too narrow. Many church members believe that salvation requires sameness. Consider the logic: "If others are going to be saved, they must become like me for I am convinced that I am saved." This concept is the mainspring of many evangelical efforts. However, the larger idea behind justification is that God can justify anyone, anywhere, and at any time a person becomes willing to obediently submit to the authority of the Holy Spirit. Consider the magnanimity of God! When a man (or woman) experiences the "born again" miracle in his heart and receives the assurance of eternal life, he becomes motivated to help others experience the joy and peace that he has received. For example, if he finds the "born again" experience within a particular denomination, it is only natural that he would want others to find the same joy he has found when attending his church. This is not inherently bad. The misunderstanding occurs, however, when one denomination concludes that God will not save people who understand His will in a different way. Unfortunately, this is the basis for Christian exclusivity. In reality, the Christian experience should be one of inclusiveness because the Christian life is a mixture of doctrine and experience. If the balance is right, there will be joy and happiness from wholeheartedly serving God and man. Remember this: Good doctrines stimulate good faith. Bad doctrines produce

toxic faith.

## Which Church is the Right Church?

A large number of Christians believe that salvation is church specific; that is, you must believe the right things and belong to the right church to be saved. As a result, some Christians will brazenly say that members of other churches are doomed for destruction because they do not follow God correctly! Interestingly, every Christian denomination on Earth claims to be the true church of God. For example, the Roman Catholic Church believes it is the *only* true church of God on Earth. Notice this recent comment: "The fullness of religious truth, unmixed with error, is found only in the Catholic Church, the very Church which Jesus Christ Himself established." (Joel Peters, "*Scripture Alone?, 21 Reasons to reject Sola Scriptura*," p. 64, 1999, Tan Books and Publishers, Inc.) Mr. Peters also concludes that neither the pope nor the Catholic Church can lapse into error. "The Holy Spirit was given to the Church by Jesus Christ, and it is exactly the same Spirit who protects the Church's visible head, the Pope, and the teaching authority of the Church by never permitting him or it to lapse into error." (*Ibid*, p. 26) I use these quotes by a recent Catholic author to demonstrate that Catholics are not reluctant to declare everyone else wrong and themselves the only inerrant depositories of God's truth. However, I must quickly add that every Christian church does the same thing (more or less), even though they may not be as "up front" or boastful about their claims as this Catholic writer.

## Religions Differ, but They are Similar

Even though the religions of the world differ, they share certain characteristics. Although we may be a world of many languages, religions, governments and cultures, the ways of humanity are surprisingly similar. Whether we realize it or not, certain laws govern the exercise of religion on Earth and this similarity among diverse religions proves the presence and operation of "basic law." Consider these five laws and the effects they produce:

**Law #1:** Religion usually limits a person to one view or perspective of God. For this reason, 95% of the world's population stay within the religious system they were born. Moslems tend to stay Moslems, Jews tend to stay Jews, Catholics tend to stay Catholics, Protestants tend to stay Protestants, etc. Why does this phenomenon exist? Ideas about God become a part of a person's conscience at an early age and many people cannot have their views about God challenged without feeling threatened or becoming hostile. Unfortunately, for 95% of the world's inhabitants the only exit from an inherited religion is death.

**Law #2:** Religion does not change very fast. People who decided to follow Christ were expelled from Judaism because Jewish leaders could not update their thinking. Protestants were expelled from the Roman Catholic Church because papal leaders refused to change their thinking. For a more modern example, the Worldwide Church of God (Armstrong) literally disintegrated during the 1990's when leaders suddenly changed key doctrines. This also reveals that laymen, too, cannot adopt new ideas or change their views very fast either.

**Law #3:** Religion usually encompasses a body of knowledge that is far larger than laymen care

to understand. For this reason, few laymen thoroughly investigate the origin and teachings of their religion. People usually submit (more or less) to the views of their religious authorities unless or until there is a divisive controversy. The confidence, allegiance and trust laymen place in their religious authorities is so great that they usually will not consider a contradicting point of view no matter how logical or well-presented it may be. Often, religious controversies are more about social issues than theology. Because religion is a complex influence that integrates with culture, churches often establish their own publishing houses because laity prefer to read material produced by their own denomination. Of course, this self-indoctrinating process tends to keep the views of the reading laity in line with church tradition.

**Law #4:** Every religion is inherently self-exalting. Each denomination concludes it has *the* truth about God and all other religions have less truth or no truth. No religious system on Earth will concede that another church has greater truth about God than itself. Christ's experience with the religious leaders of His day should be a warning to religious leaders today. Be careful not to become so devoted to your religion that God Himself cannot open your mind to greater truth.

**Law #5:** Everyone born on Earth inherits three basic elements of religion, whether institutional religion is practiced or not. Just as we inherit a carnal nature from our parents, we also inherit a basic need to know God. Because Jesus created human beings this way, we should not be surprised that adversarial religions flourish all over the Earth. The basic elements of religion are:

- a. adoration of someone or something greater than self
- b. submission to someone or something greater than self
- c. association with others who share similar adoration

These five laws help to explain *why* religious forces are so strong, why they exist, and why they plague the *entire* human race. These laws explain, in part, why human beings are diverse, yet similar. These laws also explain why a religious gridlock exists throughout our world. Every religion is self exalting; therefore diverse people from all over the world cannot discuss *truth* because there is no common authority from which to start. Every definition of God is different. The Jew has no common ground with the Moslem. The Moslem has no common ground with the Christian, etc. Do not despair; there is good news! God has a plan that will soon break up the religious gridlock of the world. Jesus has a plan that will show the world how each religious system is not the answer to salvation. Jesus is the answer for man's need of salvation. He will extend the offer of salvation to every human being alive during the Great Tribulation. He will save hundreds of millions of people from every nation, kindred, tongue and people who love truth. God will use the world's religious diversity to make a profound point about the way He loves humanity! Here's how: Jesus will send a *powerful* testimony throughout the world during the Great Tribulation. Individuals who love truth and are currently living up to all they know to be right will quickly see the beauty of this simple, but powerful testimony. Millions of people will accept God's truth, even at great peril to life itself. Jesus has carefully designed this final exam. At the end of the Great Tribulation, the people of Earth will be separated into two groups: the sheep and the goats. The sheep will be following The Good Shepherd. The goats will be corralled by the Antichrist.

## Confessing that Jesus is Lord

I would like to go back to the text, “. . . **If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.**” (Romans 10:9,10) Some people read this text with the same disregard for its setting, as they do the earlier text in which Paul and Silas told the jailer to trust in Jesus and his household would be saved. To say that eternal life comes by merely stating, “Jesus is Lord” is to miss the essential point of what Paul was saying. When Paul wrote these words, the believers in Rome were in serious trouble. As far as the Romans were concerned, the only difference between the hated Jews and the Christians was words. Consequently, many Christians in Rome lost their possessions, homes and freedom because they would not bow down to Caesar and worship him as Roman law dictated. The Caesars believed they were gods among men. To face Caesar (or one of his governors) and testify with your mouth that “Jesus is Lord” was a surefire recipe for the severest punishment, even death. The Apostle Paul himself died at the hands of the Romans for his confession that “Jesus Christ is Lord.” So, Paul’s point in Romans 10 is about faith and loyalty to Christ in the face of life-threatening circumstances. Paul is encouraging the believers to stand firm in their faith, and like the jailer, God will honor your faith and reward your commitment to Him when He returns or maybe sooner! (John 6:39-54) God *eventually* rewards everyone who puts their faith in Him. (Romans 8:28, Hebrews 11) Standing up in a Christian church and confessing that Jesus is Lord is not exactly what Paul had in mind when he penned these words, although there is certainly nothing wrong with doing this. However, Paul is encouraging all believers like you and me to stand firm when your life and the lives of your family members are being subjected to severe punishment. Continue to confess that Jesus is Lord, and through faith alone, you will be justified and ultimately saved.

### Summary

The Bible is full of good news. God uses a legal and fair process in Heaven called justification to justify sinners on Earth. Justification is not a whitewash for rebellion against God. Justification is an enormous gift which the Father is willing to bestow upon any sinner if that sinner is willing to live in obedient submission to the Holy Spirit. Justification was made possible through the perfect life and death of Jesus. Every person who has lived on Earth, except Jesus, is a descendant of Adam and Eve. (Acts 17:24-27) Therefore, sin and rebellion are part of every generation because of our grandparents. Of course, our Creator foreknew that sin would rise, just as He knew that when He created the world it would someday be populated with billions of people speaking different languages, following different customs and having many religious beliefs. Therefore, from the beginning of time, the Plan of Salvation has been inclusive of *all* people, even though most of Earth’s population at any given time does not know the truth about God. The Plan of Salvation includes Chinese, Indians, Russians, Americans and all humankind in every nation – even if they are not Christian. The receipt of God’s offer for justification does not require that we first know the whole truth or absolute truth about the Father or Jesus. Remember, “Christians” did not exist prior to Christ’s ministry on Earth, yet everyone before Christ who placed their faith in God was justified by faith! (See Romans 2 - 4 and Hebrews 11.) It might be said that they were justified on the promise that Jesus would be forthcoming.

Nevertheless, justification is the only way to life eternal and if you are willing to submit to the authority of the Holy Spirit, the assurance of eternal life will be yours absolutely free!