

Faith Against *All* Odds



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ps. 119:162; John 16:13–15; 2 Pet. 1:20, 21; Eph. 2:8, 9; Rom. 3:23, 24; Rom. 6:15–18.*

Memory Text: “Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You” (*Psalms 119:11, NKJV*).

The Protestant Reformers had something twenty-first century people desperately need—a purpose for their lives. In his book, *The Empty Self*, renowned American psychologist Philip Cushman discusses people who live purposeless lives. Their beliefs are shallow. Little of real significance matters to them, and they have nothing worth dying for, so they have little worth living for.

But the men, women, and children of the Protestant Reformation were dramatically different. They had an abiding purpose worth living for. What they believed mattered, and they were not willing to compromise their integrity. Their core beliefs were an inseparable part of them. To deny these beliefs was to deny their very identity. In the face of death itself, they had an inner peace.

In this week's study, with examples from the Reformation, we will explore how the life-changing teachings of Scripture provide the basis for genuine purpose and true meaning in life. Understanding these eternal truths will prepare us for the final crisis in the great controversy between good and evil. The battle the Reformers fought is not yet over, and we have been called to pick up where they left off. We, too, can discover a God big enough for every challenge we face, a God who gives our lives meaning and purpose as nothing worldly ever could.

* Study this week's lesson, based on chapters 7–11 of *The Great Controversy*, to prepare for Sabbath, May 4.

God's Word Alone

Read Psalm 119:103, 104; Psalm 119:147; and Psalm 119:162. What was David's attitude toward God's Word? How did this impact the Reformers, and how does it influence our lives today?

The Bible was the foundation of the Reformers' faith and the essence of their teaching. They understood that they were handling the inspired "word of God which lives and abides forever" (*1 Pet. 1:23, NKJV*). They treasured every word. As they read its pages and believed its promises, their faith was strengthened and their courage renewed. "So with all the promises of God's word. In them He is speaking to us individually, speaking as directly as if we could listen to His voice. It is in these promises that Christ communicates to us His grace and power. They are leaves from that tree which is 'for the healing of the nations.' Revelation 22:2. Received, assimilated, they are to be the strength of the character, the inspiration and sustenance of the life. Nothing else can have such healing power. Nothing besides can impart the courage and faith which give vital energy to the whole being."—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 122.

The Scriptures shine joy upon our sorrow, hope upon our discouragement, light upon our darkness. They give direction for our confusion, certainty in our perplexity, strength in our weakness, and wisdom in our ignorance. When we meditate upon the Word of God and by faith trust its promises, God's life-giving power energizes our entire being physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

The Reformers saturated their minds with Scripture. They lived by the Word, and many of them died because of the Word. They were not casual, complacent, careless Christians with a superficial devotional life. They knew that without the power of God's Word, they would not withstand the forces of evil arrayed against them.

John Wycliffe's passion was to translate the Bible into the English language so that the average person could read and understand it. Because that was illegal, he was tried for his faith, condemned as a heretic, and sentenced to death. At his trial, Wycliffe made an earnest appeal. "With whom, think you, are ye contending? With an old man on the brink of the grave? No! With Truth—Truth which is stronger than you, and will overcome you."—Wylie, book 2, chapter 13, quoted in Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 90. Wycliffe's dying words were fulfilled as the light of God's truth dispelled the darkness of the Middle Ages.

In what ways have the Scriptures comforted you in times of trial?

Passing on God's Word

Read 2 Corinthians 4:1–6 and 2 Corinthians 2:14. What do these passages tell us about the confidence Paul had, despite the challenges he faced in proclaiming the truth of God's Word?

The apostle Paul faced overwhelming odds in his work of spreading the gospel; yet, he had the confidence that God's Word would eventually triumph, "for," as he said, "we can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth" (*2 Cor. 13:8*).

The Reformers faced similar trials; yet, by faith they remained faithful to God's Word. An example of courage in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds is William Tyndale. Tyndale's greatest desire was to give England an accurate, readable translation of the Bible. He determined to translate the Bible from the original languages and correct some of the errors in Wycliffe's translation about 140 years before. Eventually Tyndale, too, was arrested and tried. Many of his Bible translations, which were printed in Worms, Germany, were seized and publicly burned. His trial took place in Belgium in A.D. 1536. He was condemned on the charge of heresy and sentenced to be burned. His executioners strangled him while they tied him to the stake and then burned his body. His dying words were spoken with zeal in a loud voice and were reported as, "Lord, open the king of England's eyes." God miraculously answered Tyndale's prayer.

Within four years of his death, four English translations of the Bible were published. In 1611 the King James Version of the Bible was printed, and it was largely based on Tyndale's work. The 54 scholars who produced the work drew heavily from Tyndale's earlier English translation. One estimate suggests that the Old Testament of the 1611 King James Bible is 76 percent Tyndale's translation, and the New Testament is 83 percent. In 2011 the King James Version of the Bible celebrated its 400th anniversary by passing the milestone of one billion Bibles in print. The King James Version has impacted tens of millions of people around the world. Tyndale's sacrifice was well worth it.

No matter how difficult it seemed or how challenging the circumstances were, Tyndale and his Bible-believing colleagues trusted that God was working out everything according to His will. Tyndale's life made a difference for eternity.

Read Daniel 12:3 and Revelation 14:13. How do these texts apply to Tyndale's life in a powerful way? Now think about your own life and your impact on others. What encouragement do these texts give regarding the opportunity you have to influence others for eternity?

Enlightened by the Spirit

One day while studying in the university library, Martin Luther came to a turning point in his own life. He discovered a Latin copy of the Bible. He never knew before that a book like this even existed. With sheer delight, he read chapter after chapter, verse after verse. He was amazed at the clarity and power of God’s Word. As he pored over its pages, the Holy Spirit illuminated His mind. He sensed the guidance of the Holy Spirit as truths obscured by tradition seemed to leap off the pages of Holy Writ. Describing his first experience with the Bible, he wrote, “O that God would give me such a book for myself!”

What principles can we take from the following texts regarding how we should interpret the Bible?

John 14:25, 26 _____

John 16:13–15 _____

2 Peter 1:20, 21 _____

What’s so powerful in these verses is the assurance that the same Holy Spirit that inspired Bible writers guides us as we read Scripture. He is the divine interpreter of divine truth. Unfortunately, many professed Christians today downplay the supernatural element in the Bible and exaggerate the human element. Since Satan can no longer keep the Bible from us, he does the next best thing: strip it of its supernatural character, make it merely good literature or, even worse, an oppressive tool of religion to control the masses.

The Reformers saw clearly that the Holy Spirit—not the priests, prelates, and popes—was the infallible interpreter of Scripture. There is an interesting exchange recorded between John Knox, the Scottish Reformer, and Mary, Queen of Scots.

“Said Mary: ‘Ye interpret the Scriptures in one manner, and they [the Roman Catholic teachers] interpret in another; whom shall I believe, and who shall be judge?’

“ ‘Ye shall believe God, that plainly speaketh in His word,’ answered the Reformer; ‘and farther than the word teaches you, ye neither shall believe the one nor the other. The word of God is plain in itself; and if there appear any obscurity in one place, the Holy Ghost, which is never contrary to Himself, explains the same more clearly in other places, so that there can remain no doubt but unto such as obstinately remain ignorant.’ ”—David Laing, *The Collected Works of John Knox*, vol. 2, pp. 281, 284, quoted in Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 251.

Christ Alone . . . Grace Alone

Read Ephesians 2:8, 9; Romans 3:23, 24; Romans 6:23; and Romans 5:8–10. What do these verses teach about the plan of salvation?

God has provided salvation as a gift. His Holy Spirit leads us to accept by faith what Christ has so freely provided through His death on Calvary's cross. Jesus, the divine Son of God, offered His perfect life to atone for our sins.

Divine justice demands perfect obedience. Christ's perfect life stands in place of our imperfect lives. The divine law we have broken condemns us to eternal death. The Bible is clear. Through our sinful choices, we have "fallen short" of God's ideal for our lives. We have sinned. Left to ourselves, we cannot meet the just, righteous demands of a holy God. As a result, we deserve eternal death. But there is good news. The apostle Paul assures us, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (*Rom. 6:23, NKJV*). It is a gift, undeserved; if it were by works, we would earn it, and if there is any one truth that shines out of the gospel, it is that we cannot earn salvation.

Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformers discovered Christ and Christ alone as their source of salvation. It was then that Luther began to preach the message of Christ's saving grace. Crowds flocked to hear his heartfelt, life-changing messages. His words were like a drink of cold water in the barren desert of their lives. The people were shackled by the traditions of the medieval church and kept in bondage with centuries-old rituals that provided no spiritual life. Luther's biblical messages touched hearts, and lives were changed.

As Luther read the New Testament, he was overwhelmed with the goodness of God. He was amazed at God's desire to save all humanity. The popular view taught by church leaders at the time was salvation as partly a human work and partly God's work. Luther discovered that Christ's death on the cross was all-sufficient for all humanity.

"Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 25.

What a powerful and wonderfully written summary of the gospel, that we could be justified by a righteousness "in which we had no share." What a promise!

If salvation is the work of God in Christ, what role do our good works play in the Christian life? How can we affirm the importance of good works in our experience without making them the foundation of our hope?

Obedience: The Fruit of Faith

Read Romans 3:27–31; Romans 6:15–18; and Romans 8:1, 2. What do these verses teach us about salvation through Christ’s righteousness alone?

A new wind was blowing through the Christian church in the days of Luther. Tens of thousands of people were taught to look away from their sinful selves and look to Jesus instead. No doubt these people, looking at themselves and what they were like, saw only things to discourage them. What believer today doesn’t have the same experience? That’s why we need to look, instead, to Jesus.

God’s grace changes us. One day, John Wesley attended a Moravian meeting in London. Wesley sat amazed as he heard Luther’s introduction to Romans read. For the first time in his life, he began to understand the gospel. Something stirred within, and he felt strangely drawn to this Christ who had given His life for him. He exclaimed, “I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”—John Whitehead, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.* (London: Stephen Couchman, 1793), p. 331.

Read 1 Peter 2:2, 2 Peter 3:18, Colossians 1:10, and Ephesians 4:18–24. What vital truths do these passages reveal about the Christian life?

The Reformers systematically studied the Word to discover more truth. Not content with the status quo, nor a rigid religious experience with little or no growth, they were constantly yearning to know Christ better. Many Bible-believing Christians in the Middle Ages paid an extremely high price for their commitment. They were tortured, imprisoned, exiled, and executed. Their properties were confiscated, their homes burned, their lands ravished, and their families persecuted. When they were driven from their homes, they looked for a city “whose builder and maker is God” (*Heb. 11:10*). When they were tortured, they blessed their tormentors, and when they languished in dark, damp dungeons, they claimed God’s promises of a brighter tomorrow. Although their bodies were imprisoned, they were free—free in Christ, free in the truths of His Word, free in the hope of His soon return.

When you look to yourself, what hope of salvation do you have?

Further Thought: “God’s faithful servants were not toiling alone.

While principalities and powers and wicked spirits in high places were leagued against them, the Lord did not forsake His people. Could their eyes have been opened, they would have seen as marked evidence of divine presence and aid as was granted to a prophet of old. When Elisha’s servant pointed his master to the hostile army surrounding them and cutting off all opportunity for escape, the prophet prayed: ‘Lord, I pray Thee, open his eyes, that he may see.’ 2 Kings 6:17. And, lo, the mountain was filled with chariots and horses of fire, the army of heaven stationed to protect the man of God. Thus did angels guard the workers in the cause of the Reformation.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 208.

“When powerful foes were uniting to overthrow the reformed faith, and thousands of swords seemed about to be unsheathed against it, Luther wrote: ‘Satan is putting forth his fury; ungodly pontiffs are conspiring; and we are threatened with war. Exhort the people to contend valiantly before the throne of the Lord, by faith and prayer, so that our enemies, vanquished by the Spirit of God, may be constrained to peace. Our chief want, our chief labor, is prayer; let the people know that they are now exposed to the edge of the sword and to the rage of Satan, and let them pray.’ ”—D’Aubigné, book 10, chapter 14, quoted in Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 209.

Justification by faith, the great truth that Luther discovered anew, is the foundation of the gospel, the truth upon which our hope of salvation rests. His hymn “A Mighty Fortress” powerfully articulates the gospel: “Did we in our own strength confide, Our striving would be losing, Were not the right man on our side, The man of God’s own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He, Lord Sabaoth His name, From age to age the same, And He must win the battle.”—*The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1985), no. 506.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 How can we explain the balance between grace and law, between faith and good works?
- 2 Why do you think it is so easy to let our minds slip into legalism? How would you define legalism? Why is it so detrimental to our Christian faith?
- 3 Are there dangers if the concept of “salvation by grace” is not rightly understood? Where might that misunderstanding lead?
- 4 What do some people mean when they use the term “cheap grace”? Is grace ever cheap?

Letters to the Rich and Famous

By REBECA RUIZ LAGUARDIA

A Spanish housewife read a startling passage that prompted her to embark on a 35-year letter-writing campaign to proclaim Jesus' coming to Spanish royalty, actors and singers, and the late Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

The missionary initiative was born when the housewife, my mother, Pilar Laguardia, read, "Men in business life, in high positions of trust, men with large inventive faculties and scientific insight, men of genius, teachers of the gospel whose minds have not been called to the special truths for this time—these should be the first to hear the call. To them the invitation must be given."—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 230.

Reading the statement, my mother wondered, *How can I, a simple housewife, reach these people?* Moments later, she hatched a plan. She would listen to interviews with prominent people on television and the radio and read them in newspapers and magazines. She would seek any hint that they were interested in spiritual matters and introduce them to God. My mother found many opportunities. As soon as she heard someone say "I wish I had faith" or "I'm agnostic" or "I have an emptiness inside," she wrote a letter.

My mother has lost count of the number of letters that she has mailed to Spanish presidents and government ministers, bishops, priests, actors, singers, authors, journalists, and inmates. In addition to Fidel Castro, recipients include Spanish King Felipe VI and Queen Letizia, Italian tenor Al Bano Carrisi, and authors Paulo Coelho and José Saramago. She never had trouble finding mailing addresses, even before the internet. Sometimes, newspaper articles offered clues. Other times, she called television stations and prisons.

Many people have responded. Madrid's mayor wrote, "I'm reading the Conflict of the Ages series, and I'm in the chapter 'The Awakening in Spain' in *The Great Controversy*. It's very interesting, and I will continue reading."

A bishop expressed gratitude for *Steps to Christ* and the Conflict of the Ages and wrote, "May divine mercy do what's needed to bring us light."

Another bishop said, "I want to study the Bible better and to serve God better. Maybe I need to correct some of my interpretations of the Bible."

Isabel, a physician who gave up her career to enter a cloistered convent as a nun, kept contact with my mother by phone and mail for months. In her first letter, she said, "You can send me all the Bible materials you want." So, my mother did, and a seed was planted. The results are in God's hands.

"The important thing is to plant seeds," my mother says. "The Lord says, 'Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days' " (*Eccles. 11:1, NKJV*).

Join the Seventh-day Adventist world church in the mass promotion and distribution of The Great Controversy in 2023 and 2024. Visit greatcontroversyproject.com for more information or ask your pastor.