

Salvation: By Grace or by Works?

By Gerald N. Lund



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When the Apostle Paul was imprisoned at Philippi, he was asked by a distressed jailer, "What must I do to be saved?"

Without reference to obedience or repentance or good works that he himself so often spoke of, Paul simply answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." ([Acts 16:30–31](#).)

But in a church that also has many ancient and modern scriptural passages stressing works of righteousness and the importance of obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel, scriptural passages like Acts 16:31 often give rise to confusion.

"As far as I'm concerned," one missionary said to his companion, "when somebody starts quoting Paul on salvation by grace, I just quote James on faith without works being dead (see [James 2:17–26](#)) and try to get off the subject as quickly as possible."

"Before I joined the Church," a Sunday School teacher confessed to his class of teenagers, "I quoted the words of Paul to everyone. Now I just kind of steer away from what he said. I know now how important good works are, so I put the emphasis there."

It isn't difficult to understand these reactions. Paul's ringing defense of salvation by grace and his emphatic denunciation of justification through works of the law seem almost in direct contradiction to our third Article of Faith: "We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel." [[A of F 1:3](#)]

The problem in understanding [Acts 16:31](#) isn't that Paul de-emphasizes the atoning sacrifice of the Savior, but rather that he seems to de-emphasize the need for works. What missionary hasn't been confronted with Paul's statement to the saints in Rome: "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" ([Rom. 10:9](#)). Furthermore, in both Galatians and Romans, he pointedly rejects any idea that justification comes through works of the old law:

"Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" ([Gal. 2:16](#); see also [Rom. 3:20, 28](#)).

Does Paul indeed reject the value of works for the disciple of Christ? Or was he simply reacting to the Jewish Christians who insisted that adherence to the law of Moses was necessary if one were to be saved? And, for us in the latter-days, does Paul's theological position coincide with that revealed in latter-day scripture?

Inadequate Explanations

There are two different ways in which Church members typically seek to synthesize Paul's teachings

with Latter-day Saint theology. The first suggests that by “the law” Paul means only the law of Moses. Without a doubt, there is merit in this. There was a tendency among some Jewish Christians to insist that Christianity still required obedience to Mosaic principles such as circumcision, the dietary laws, and the observance of certain festivals. Paul combats that doctrine strongly, saying that no matter how strictly a person kept the law of Moses, it of itself would not bring salvation. The power of salvation comes only through Christ because of his atonement.

However, to limit Paul’s meaning to the law of Moses alone would not be quite accurate. Paul rejects the adequacy of the Mosaic code in and of itself for salvation, but he makes it broader than that too. For example, in warning the Ephesians about concluding that a man is saved by works, he makes no reference to the law: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourself: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” ([Eph. 2:8–9](#).) So while this explanation is somewhat correct, it does not go far enough.

The second typical explanation goes something like this: The fall of Adam brought two kinds of death into the world—physical death, which is the separation of body and spirit, and spiritual death, which is separation of man from God. The atonement of Christ overcame physical death through the Resurrection. This is *salvation by grace* because it comes to all men automatically and does not depend on what kinds of lives they have lived. But, if we wish to overcome spiritual death and enter back into God’s presence, we must be obedient to laws and principles. This is *exaltation by works*. Thus, according to this explanation, we are *saved* by grace and *exalted* by works.

This is an appealing explanation because it seems to provide a logical argument that fits the statements of Paul neatly into it. However, there is a doctrinal error involved here. While the resurrection of the dead is certainly an integral part of the plan of salvation, and is unconditional and independent of men’s works, the term *salvation* as used in the scriptures does not mean physical resurrection alone. As Elder Bruce R. McConkie has pointed out, salvation is *synonymous* with exaltation:

“*Salvation* in its true and full meaning is synonymous with *exaltation* or *eternal life* and consists in gaining an inheritance in the highest of the three heavens within the celestial kingdom. With few exceptions this is the salvation of which the scriptures speak. It is the salvation which the saints seek.” (*Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed., Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966, p. 670.)

Those who are uncomfortable with Paul’s statements about grace and salvation should bear in mind that the same teachings are found in other scripture as well. Nephi, for example, nearly echoes Paul’s words to the Ephesians when he says, “For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” ([2 Ne. 25:23](#)). And Lehi’s explanation of the Atonement to Jacob is remarkably similar to Paul’s explanation of justification by faith in Romans 3 [[Rom. 3](#)], even down to the phrase “by the law no flesh is justified” (see [2 Ne. 2:5](#)). Likewise, the Doctrine and Covenants points out that both justification and sanctification come by grace (see [D&C 20:30–31](#)).

How, then, are the principles of grace and works to be understood in relationship to each other? To come to that understanding we must first look at some related concepts—the concepts of sin and transgression, of justice, and of the Fall.

Sin, Transgression, and the Law of Justice

The concept of sin rests upon the concept of law. If there were no law, there could be no sin (see [2 Ne. 2:13](#); [Alma 42:17](#)), because “sin is the transgression of the law” ([1 Jn. 3:4](#)). However, for purposes of understanding the Atonement better, it might be helpful to draw a distinction between two important variations in how the law may be violated. A person may violate the law in spite of his knowledge of it; that is, he breaks the law deliberately. But others may violate the law because they are unaware of its existence (ignorance) or because they do not have sufficient maturity to understand the implications of it (lack of accountability). For clarification, let us use two terms to delineate the important differences in these two concepts. Any violation of the law that is willful and knowing we shall call “sin.” But any violation that results either from ignorance or lack of accountability we shall call “transgression.” The

scriptures do not distinguish between these two terms consistently, but such a distinction may help us understand some important points about the Atonement. For example, it helps us understand why children under the age of accountability cannot sin (see [D&C 29:47](#)). Any parent who has observed his children's behavior knows that they often violate laws of the gospel. They hit brothers and sisters, demonstrate extreme selfishness at times, and can be unmercifully cruel to playmates. But while these are "transgressions" they are not "sins," because as Mormon points out, children are "not capable of committing sin" (see [Moro. 8:8](#)). Much the same is true of those who have reached adulthood but have relatively little or no opportunity to learn the principles of righteousness. They also violate the laws of God, sometimes horribly so, as in the case of many primitive peoples, but they are of necessity judged differently because they do not "sin" in the sense of willing and deliberate rebellion against God. (See [Rom. 2:12](#); [D&C 82:3](#); also *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938, p. 218.)

Standing alongside the concepts of sin and transgression is the law of justice, which implies consistency in reward and punishment. In other words, there would be no justice if one person could violate the law and escape its punishment while another was punished for the same act. Elder McConkie points out that "justice demands that a penalty be paid for every violation of the Lord's laws" (*Mormon Doctrine*, p. 406). The opposite, or positive side, of that idea is that for every keeping of the Lord's law there is a reward (see [D&C 130:20–21](#)). If these punishments and rewards were not consistent throughout the universe and in all of eternity, justice would be violated. Briefly stated, then, the law of justice is that for every violation of law there is a punishment (ultimately suffering and misery), and for every obedience to the law there is a reward (ultimately joy and peace).

Also embodied in the concept of justice is the idea that men are punished only for those things of which they themselves are guilty. This would make it unjust to punish one man for another's sin; likewise, if through ignorance or lack of accountability there is no guilt, it would be unjust to mete out punishment.

The Fall of Man

Just as the violation of the law has a dual nature (sin and transgression), and the law of justice has a dual nature (reward and punishment), so does the fall of man have a dual nature. The two falls are, as one person termed them, "the fall of Adam" and "the fall of me."

When Adam transgressed the commandment given him by the Father in the Garden of Eden, he brought about the fall of man. Because of his transgression, death—both spiritual and temporal—entered the world; as a result, all men are born into a state of existence where they are separated from God and also must suffer physical death. Though these both end up working for our positive benefit, neither is the result of our own actions, but of Adam's transgression and fall. They come upon us automatically and inescapably. However, "the fall of me" takes place for each of us as we individually sin. We'll have more to say of this aspect of the Fall later.

Having discussed sin and transgression, justice, and the Fall, we have now laid enough groundwork to understand one of the important aspects of the atoning sacrifice of the Savior, that part that can be termed the "unconditional" atonement. The first application of the unconditional atonement is to the fall of Adam. We have pointed out that it would be unjust for a person to be punished for violations of the law that he did not commit. So regardless of the kind of life a person has led, the ultimate effects of the fall of Adam that we have been discussing are overcome for every soul that comes to earth. All persons will be resurrected and overcome physical death, and also, all will be brought back into the presence of God by the power of Christ for the period of judgment and the assignment of glory. (See [1 Cor. 15:22](#); [2 Ne. 9:38](#)) Thus, both physical and spiritual deaths are removed through Christ. However, *remaining* in the presence of God is a matter relating to the "conditional atonement."

Before analyzing that principle, however, there is a second application of the "unconditional" atonement. The "unconditional atonement" applies to those who are guilty of transgression but not sin in the sense we defined these terms. If there was no knowledge or accountability, it would be unjust to mete out punishment. Nevertheless, justice demands payment for every violation of the law, whether the violation

be sin or transgression. So, as one example, the atonement of Christ automatically redeems children who die before they reach the age of accountability, and they are brought back into the presence of God. (See [D&C 137:10](#).)

The Fall of Me

Now let us turn to the second aspect of Christ's atonement, the "conditional" atonement.

While all of us were born into a situation where we are separated from God because of Adam (this we shall recognize as a form of spiritual death), we (only those who are accountable, of course) *remain* in that state because of our own personal fall which results from our own sins. The Doctrine and Covenants clearly points out, however, that we could enter back into God's presence in this life if we would but purify ourselves from sin—or, in the terms we are using, overcome the effects of our own personal fall. (See [D&C 67:10](#), [D&C 88:68](#); [D&C 93:1](#); see also [Ether 3:13](#).) This purification from sin strongly involves the role of works—works of repentance and obedience are indispensable to the achievement of such a high and holy privilege. Even so, is it really by *our* works that we are saved from spiritual death? Again Paul and the other prophets indicate no. And to understand this, we must once again look at the law of justice.

Remembering that every violation of the law demands punishment of suffering, there are only two ways possible to meet the demands of the law of justice. Either one keeps the law perfectly and never gets in debt to the law, or else one must pay the debt of suffering. The law is very exact. Even if it is violated only once, the violator is in its debt and must suffer the consequences. Perhaps this is why James warns, "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" ([James 2:10](#)).

Now we can see why both Paul and Lehi warn us that no one can be justified by the law: no one (with one exception) has ever kept the law perfectly. Every soul is in debt to the law. "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" ([Rom. 3:23](#)).

The Need for Grace

In Greek, the word which is translated as *grace* means "good-will, loving kindness, favor." In the New Testament usage, the word implies "the idea of kindness which bestows upon one what he has not deserved." (*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. Joseph Henry Thayer, Grand Rapids: Zonderron Publishing House, 1962.)

In the scriptural sense of the term, it is impossible for a man to be justified (brought back into a proper relationship with God) by his own works, because no one can keep the law perfectly. This was the very mistake that the Pharisees fell into with regard to the Mosaic law. We sometimes smile at their tremendously careful attempts to define the law and what was acceptable to it; but if you hold that a man is brought into the proper relationship with God by his own works alone, then theirs was a logical position to take. If the tiniest infraction of the law puts one's relationship to God in jeopardy, then one must be extremely careful about any violation. The early rabbis simply carried that idea to its extreme. For example, in the law it said, "Keep the Sabbath day holy." Very well then, what does that mean in terms of my behavior? Well, for one thing, I mustn't do any work. All right, but what happens if my house should catch fire on the Sabbath? Is it "work" to take things out and save them from destruction? A ridiculous question?—not if you are seeking justification by the law. And so, with great precision the rabbis enumerated what could and could not be saved. They even defined how much food could be saved, depending on what time of day the fire occurred. If it broke out on Friday evening (the Jewish Sabbath went from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday), one could save enough for three meals; if Saturday morning, two meals; and if Saturday afternoon, only one. (See *Mishnayoth* [The Oral Law], "Tractate Sabbath," 16:2.)

These are the kinds of logical conclusions one is forced to if one seeks justification by the works of the law alone.

To better see why such attempts are ineffective, let us analyze a parable given by Elder Boyd K. Packer in an April 1977 general conference address (“The Mediator,” *Ensign*, May 1977, pp. 54–56), in which he refers to the spiritual jeopardy of all those who are born on this earth:

“There once was a man who wanted something very much. It seemed more important than anything else in his life. In order for him to have his desire, he incurred a great debt.

“He had been warned about going into that much debt, and particularly about his creditor. But it seemed so important for him to do what he wanted to do and to have what he wanted right now. He was sure he could pay for it later.

“So he signed a contract. He would pay it off some time along the way. He didn’t worry too much about it, for the due date seemed such a long time away.” (p. 54.)

Thus, having entered mortality in a state of innocence, man begins to sin and loses his perfect worthiness. He incurs a debt (a burden of sin) which, unless paid in full, will extend into the eternities “the spiritual death, which is separation from the presence of our Heavenly Father” (p. 56).

Under these circumstances (disregarding the Atonement for the moment), even if he suddenly realized that he had cheated himself of the opportunity to go back to the presence of God and stopped increasing his debt (that is, he stopped committing sin and became obedient), there is still no way that he could ever qualify to return to the Father. Even if he only committed one sin (which is unrealistic, of course, for most of us sin not once but many times), he still could not get back; full payment is the condition for admittance, and there can be no exceptions—justice is perfectly exact. Ceasing to sin merely stops the increase in the burden of debt—it does not generate the means to repay.

There is, of course, an advantage in keeping the burden of sin (the debt to the law) as small as possible; nevertheless, at the commission of the first sin a person loses his ability to return to God.

Elder Packer continues:

“As it always does, the day came, and the contract fell due. The debt had not been fully paid. His creditor appeared and demanded payment in full.”

The debtor’s dilemma is acute: “ ‘I cannot pay you, for I have not the power to do so,’ he confessed.

“ ‘Then,’ said the creditor, ‘we will exercise the contract, take your possessions, and you shall go to prison.’ ”

But the debtor begged, “ ‘Will you not show mercy?’ ”

The creditor replied, “ ‘Mercy cannot rob justice.’ ”

“There they were: One meting out justice, the other pleading for mercy. Neither could prevail except at the expense of the other. ...

“Both laws, it seemed, could not be served. They are two eternal ideals that appear to contradict one another. Is there no way for justice to be fully served, and mercy also?

“There is a way! ... but it takes someone else. And so it happened this time.

“The debtor had a friend. He came to help. He knew the debtor well. ... He wanted to help because he loved him. He stepped between them, faced the creditor, and made his offer: ...

“ ‘You demand justice. Though he cannot pay you, I will do so. You will have been justly dealt with and can ask no more. ...’

“And so it was that the creditor was paid in full. ... The debtor, in turn, had been extended mercy. Both laws stood fulfilled. Because there was a mediator, justice had claimed its full share, and mercy was fully satisfied.” (pp. 54–55.)

Once the debt was established, then, outside payment had to be introduced from somewhere or the debt would have stood forever. And thus it is that only in the sacrifice of the Only Begotten Son, who had no sin, could man be delivered from this sad state.

Christ—The Source of Unlimited Reserves

The Savior could effect the deliverance for two important reasons. First, he met the demands of the law of justice for himself because *he kept the laws of God perfectly*. In other words, Christ was justified by his works. He avoided the debt altogether and qualified himself to return to the Father—the only one of all mankind to do so. Secondly, he met the demands of the law for all of the rest of mankind. He himself owed no debt to the law, but he went before it and in essence said: “I am perfect and therefore owe you no suffering. However, I will pay the debt for all mankind. I will undergo suffering that I might pay the price for every transgression and sin ever committed by any man.”

And so, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Christ stood before the law and paid the price in suffering for every sin as though he himself had committed them. Such suffering was beyond the power of any mortal man to endure. We can't understand how he did it, only that he did, and that “through Him mercy can be fully extended to each of us without offending the eternal law of justice” (Packer, p. 56). In terms of our parable, he generated sufficient payment to satisfy the debt of every other man. He met the demands of the law for himself through obedience, and for all others through suffering.

Alma told his son Corianton that mercy could not rob justice, or else “God would cease to be God” ([Alma 42:25](#)). And the merciful love of the Father and the Son did not rob justice of its rightful demands. Rather, it paid justice! Their Love said to Justice, by virtue of the price paid in the Garden, “Here is payment for the wrongs committed. You are paid in full. Now let the captives go free.”

In one of the most beautiful images in all of scripture, we find the solution to that awful dilemma we all face as sinners. We are standing before the bar as defendants, facing the great judge, God the Father. Our defense attorney—our “Advocate with the Father”—steps forward, not to refute the charges or to hold up a record of good works on our part to counterbalance our guilt, but to plead our case in a different manner:

“Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—

“Saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified;

“Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life.” ([D&C 45:3–5](#).)

Nothing man could do for himself could bring him past that judgment bar successfully without such an Advocate. That is why eternal life is always a gift, and those who receive it do so by “inheritance.” It is interesting to note that the word *inherit* and its cognate words are used seventy-eight times in the Doctrine and Covenants, while the word *earned* and its related words are not used once.

The Conditional Atonement

But the sacrifice which pays the debt and frees us from the results of our own spiritual death, though it comes to us through the grace and goodness of God, is not unconditional. What, then, are the conditions? Very simply stated they are: first, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, then repentance, followed by baptism. If one truly moves through those steps—mentally, spiritually, and physically—then he is prepared for the reception of the Holy Ghost. When one is given the *gift* (there's that word again) of the Holy Ghost, he has overcome spiritual death to a degree, for he has come into the presence of one member of the Godhead. The Holy Ghost's role, of course, is to help us continue in the pre-conditions of this part of the Atonement and fully overcome spiritual death by coming back into the presence of the Father and the Son.

Now with all this in mind, remember that Paul said we are justified *through* and *by* faith (see [Gal. 2:16](#); [Rom. 3:28](#)), which is the first principle of the gospel. In other words, faith is the principle that activates the power of the Atonement in our lives, and we are put back into a proper relationship with God (justification) as faith activates that power. There are marvelous implications in this concept, and perhaps another analogy can help us see more clearly the role faith and works play in achieving salvation:

We are like a powerhouse on a mighty river. The powerhouse has no power residing in itself; the potential power rests in the energy of the river. When that source of power flows through the generators of the power plant, power is transferred from the river to the power plant and sent out into the homes (lives) of others. So it is with faith. The power to achieve justification does not reside in man. Man requires the power of the atonement of Christ flowing into him. If no power is being generated, one does not—indeed, cannot—turn the generators by hand (justification by works); but rather, an effort is made to remove those things which have blocked the power from flowing into the generators (working righteousness as a result of faith). With this background then, one can understand why the scriptures clearly stress that faith *includes* works (see [James 2:17–26](#)); that is, obedience, commitment, and repentance—these are the works of faith that open up the channels so that the power of the atoning sacrifice of Christ can flow into us, redeem us from sin, and bring us back into the presence of God. Disobedience and wickedness dam those channels. (How literal is the word *damnation!*) The righteous works in themselves do not save us. The atoning power of God saves us. But our righteous works, activated by our faith in the Savior, are the condition for the operation of that power. Thus, each of us has something to say about whether he will be able to seek the gift and power of the Atonement in his behalf.

We Are Saved by Grace

In summary then, there is no need to go to extraordinary lengths to apologize for Paul, or try to explain away his statements on salvation by grace. We *are* saved by grace—saved by Christ’s love from physical and spiritual death; saved by Christ’s love from Adam’s fall and our own; saved from sin and transgression by the grace or gifts of God. The atoning power of God unto salvation is a freely available gift from him—but our works of righteousness are essential to bring the gift into power in our lives. Sin brings alienation from God. The more we sin, the greater the alienation and the more difficult it becomes to effectively tap the power of God, which alone is sufficient to save us from our sins.

President Joseph Fielding Smith has summarized the relationship between grace and works as follows:

“So Paul taught these people—who thought that they could be saved by some power that was within them, or by observing the law of Moses—he pointed out to them the fact that if it were not for the mission of Jesus Christ, if it were not for this great atoning sacrifice, they could not be redeemed. And therefore it was by the grace of God that they are saved, not by any work on their part, for they were absolutely helpless. Paul was absolutely right.

“And on the other hand, James taught just as the Lord taught, just as Paul had taught in other scripture, that it is our duty, of necessity, to labor, to strive in diligence, and faith, keeping the commandments of the Lord, if we would obtain that inheritance which is promised to the faithful. ...

“So it is easy to understand that we must accept the mission of Jesus Christ. *We must believe that it is through his grace that we are saved, that he performed for us that labor which we were unable to perform for ourselves, and did for us those things which were essential to our salvation, which were beyond our power; and also that we are under the commandment and the necessity of performing the labors that are required of us as set forth in the commandments known as the gospel of Jesus Christ.*” (*Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols., Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56, 2:310–11.)

Thus, we can with Paul fervently exclaim that “the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” ([Rom. 6:23](#)). We should continue to stress the importance of obedience,

of repentance, of faith, and strive with all our hearts to demonstrate good works in our lives. But we should never lose sight of the great overriding fact of the grace of God and the wholly *central* part it plays in our atonement and salvation.

Moroni, in the closing words of the Book of Mormon, teaches the relationship between the grace of Christ and the need for our righteous efforts. Note how he keeps distinctly clear what it is that perfects us, and yet what must happen in our lives to bring that about.

“Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God.

“And again, if ye by the grace of God are perfect in Christ, and deny not his power, then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot.” ([Moro. 10:32–33.](#))

[illustration] *Paul*, by Rembrandt. Courtesy BYU Art Museum Collection.

[illustration] *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane*, by Harry Anderson.

[illustration] *Lehi Blesses his Children in the Wilderness*, by Ron Crosby.

[illustration] *The Last Supper*, by Carl Bloch.

Notes

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