



Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Study Supplement No. 17

Do All Religions Lead To God

By Joseph Tkach

“Invisible” Missionaries In China

By Randal Dick

Lessons From The Bible (6)

By J. Michael Fezell

Lessons From The Bible (7)

By J. Michael Fezell

When Bad Things Happen

By J. Michael Fezell

Bible Study: The Example Of Abraham

By Michael Morrison

Bible Study: Past, Present and Future Of Salvation

By Michael Morrison

Study Supplement No. 17

DO ALL RELIGIONS LEAD TO GOD?

By

Joseph Tkach



Perhaps you've heard people say that all religions lead to God. This idea is called religious pluralism. Pluralism comes in two forms. First is the fact that we live in a society that has many cultures and many religions, and we are to treat each with respect. That is true, and good. We should be tolerant, but that does not mean that we have to agree with everyone. Religious pluralism goes beyond this—it says that all religions are equally valid. What about it? Could all religions be valid paths to God?

What is a religion?

First, we have to define what a religion is. Is Taoism a religion, or just a philosophy of life? What about the branch of Buddhism that says there is no god? Is it a religion? And what about Satanism, which says there is a god, but they don't want anything to do with him? Are all these religions leading to God whether they want to or not?

People who say that all religions lead to God often accept anything and everything as a religion. The real goal, it seems, is not to invalidate anyone. As a result, they say that everyone will end up with God no matter what religion they have, even if they don't have a religion. So the original idea that all religions lead to God is not really about religions—it's a belief that everyone will be saved (universalism) regardless of their beliefs.

But there is another problem with the original idea: Different religions have different ideas of God. Some view God in spiritual terms, others more physical, and some religions have no God. Some have many gods, some have one, and some have none. Some people don't even want to get to God, so they wouldn't like the idea that they will get to him whether they like it or not.

Another problem is that each religion has its own idea of what salvation is. For some, it is nothingness, an elimination of personal consciousness. For others, it is an eternity with personal consciousness. It is

difficult to see how both of these teachings can lead in the same direction. If someone says, "All religions lead to God," we might ask: "How do you know? Have you tried them all and found God at the end of each one?"

Anyone who claims that all religions lead to God is actually claiming to know better than the Muslims and Hindus and everyone else. The Muslim says that only Islam leads to God, and the pluralist says: "No, you are wrong. Let me tell you, because I know more than you do. All religions may be good, but mine is better than them all."

How does the pluralist know? What authority do pluralists have for their view? Usually only themselves. They are their own religious authorities. They have decided what is right, and they don't want to be bothered with the facts about what any particular religion believes or does.

Different religions contradict one another. Logic says they could all be wrong, but logic says they can't all be right. Nevertheless, the pluralist says they are all right. Contradictory ideas are right. Believing in Jesus is just as good as believing in Mohammed, even though neither Christians nor Muslims would agree to that.

Biblical responses to pluralism

Paul wrote that Gentile unbelievers are shown mercy by God in only one way—through the gospel of Jesus Christ—not by staying in their old religions. Their pagan religions are futile—ineffective (Rom. 1:20-23). God has made himself plain to all people, so that they "are without excuse" (verses 18-20).

Paul knew that many people had not yet heard of Christ. Nevertheless, he said that they could not use ignorance as an excuse. Everyone sins and can be held responsible for their sins (Rom. 2:14-15). Paul said that God leaves people in disobedience so that through Jesus Christ he will have mercy on them all

Study Supplement No. 17

(Romans 11:32). How will he do that? The Bible doesn't give details.

God's will is that all people come to him (1 Timothy 2:4), but that does not mean all religions are valid. There are good people in all sorts of religions, but salvation is not a matter of being good people; it is a matter of being one with Jesus Christ, the Creator and Redeemer of all things.

Most religions teach some form of works—if we do this, and that, and if we do it well enough, then we will eventually get to God. The gospel says that all such approaches don't work. People can never work their way to God. Rules can't save anyone, or get anyone closer to God. The gospel teaches a different path of salvation than other religions do. At the heart of the gospel is that our own works cannot save us—and that means that the gospel also says that religions can't save us. People in other religions need grace, just like we need grace, and grace is found only in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Religious wars

One reason that pluralism is attractive is that many bad things have been done in the name of religion. Religious differences sometimes turn into religious wars. So people think that the best way to stop all this violence is for everyone to accept everyone else's religion, and then we'll have unity and peace.

That is a naïve view. Religions have developed so as to distinguish themselves from other religions, and wishful thinking won't change that. Differences in religions are as much a result of human division as a cause of it. In pluralism, there is no foundation for truth—no reason for people to agree, except that the pluralist wants them to.

I am not saying that all Muslims and Hindus are lost. What happens on the Day of Judgment is God's business, but we do know from the Bible that God encounters and saves people through Jesus Christ, not through their religions. God may save them despite their religions, but not because of them. Those whom God saves, he saves by drawing them into fellowship with Christ.

I am also not saying that all Christians are saved. Just because some people call themselves Christians does not mean that they trust Jesus Christ for grace and salvation. The gospel is for people who realize they need the mercy of God and who trust Christ to give it to them, turning their lives over to him as Lord and Master.

Whether a person is a Buddhist or a Christian, the only path to salvation is to accept God's free gift, which comes only through Jesus Christ. Hinduism says that not all Hindus will be saved; Islam says that not all Muslims will be saved, and Christianity says that not all Christians are saved. So it seems silly for

a pluralist to say that all Hindus, for example, are saved, when not even the Hindus say that. The pluralist is contradicting the religions he is trying not to offend. In trying to say that they are all valid, he ends up saying that they are all in error.

Pluralists are often uncomfortable with the unique teachings of Christianity, because Christian claims about Jesus are often not acceptable to Muslims. And pluralists are often uncomfortable with claims about Mohammed, too, since those claims also cause mutual non-acceptance. So pluralism often tries to find the smallest common denominator in the religions, and to discard everything unique.

Actually, most religions aren't worried about the salvation of people in other religions. Most religions don't have a God who loves the whole world. The pluralist idea, that God must save people in other religions, is actually rooted in the Christian teaching that God loves the whole world.

Responding to pluralism

The best response to pluralism is to explain what we believe. In everyday language, the gospel says:

No one is perfect, and everyone has done something wrong. Right and wrong are not just a matter of opinion—they are rooted in reality, defined by an authority greater than human opinion. The wrong things we do hurt other people, and the wrong things they do hurt us. That's why they are wrong.

We all want to live in a world in which no one does anything wrong—that is, no one hurts other people. But the fact is, none of us is perfect, and therefore none of us is fit to be in a perfect world.

People cannot turn themselves around. Some people have pretty good ethics, but even they have flaws. It doesn't work to let people choose their own ethics, and it doesn't work to impose one person's ethics on everyone else. We need an authority for ethics that is greater than humanity.

We have all fallen short and cannot save ourselves. We need to be forgiven—and we need help that is stronger than human help. We need God.

The gospel teaches that God has supplied what we need—he supplies the definition of right and wrong; he supplies the forgiveness that we need; he supplies the supernatural power to change us, and he does all this in Jesus Christ.

The crucifixion of Christ shows us how awful wrongdoing is, and it assures us that the price for it has been paid. His crucifixion gives us evidence that we have been forgiven, and his resurrection gives us evidence that he is our salvation. God has come to us and saved us because we could not save

Study Supplement No. 17

ourselves. We need this kind of salvation, and the gospel of Jesus Christ teaches that God has given us what we need.

That's the good news, and we can trust in the goodness of God, not in the flimsy goodness of human beings. We can trust God not just for our own salvation, but also for the salvation of the people in

other religions who will ultimately trust in Christ. We may not know what, how or when God will draw them, but we trust that God will be gracious and good because we know that he is the Father of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the world.

Joseph Tkach

Copyright © 2003 Worldwide Church of God

Window on the World

From Randal Dick, superintendent of missions



'Invisible' missionaries in China

An important part of preaching the gospel effectively is being sensitive to opportunities.

An excellent example of this is the current global village economy, where rich or rapidly growing economies import cheap labour from other countries to fill their labour needs.

Every week, an average of 1,000 Filipinos leave the Manila airport on their way to be overseas guest workers. Increasingly, Christian leaders of the Philippines realize that these workers are being allowed into places where missionaries would not be permitted, and they have begun providing mission training to as many members as possible.

Among those who are now actively spreading the gospel in China are a couple we shall call Mary and Jesse Escara. Mary and Jesse had a deep desire to reach parts of China where the gospel has not penetrated.

They were given an opportunity to go to China on a one-month tourist visa. At the end of the month, in order to obtain an extension, Jesse had to become a student. Although he had very little money, he sought enrolment in one of the universities. God gave favour, and he and Mary were granted student visas. Jesse immediately enrolled at the university for classes in Chinese language studies. Extra funds had to be spent for the visa upgrade as well as for mandatory medical examinations. Additionally, Mary suspected that she might be pregnant.

Getting started in mission

Mary and Jesse spent those first months waiting on God, in prayer, to see how he would open doors for them to reach people around them with the gospel. The area where they were working was home to more than 20 recognized ethnic minorities.

At first Mary and Jesse went to universities, parks and public places to build friendships with the Chinese people. They invited them to their apartment. When they had enough people, they began an "English Corner." The group grew.

After several meetings, they were able to determine that most of the group was open to reading the Bible and decided to convert the English Corner into a small group Bible study.

Newcomers continued to show up. To keep numbers small and reduce the risk of being reported to the authorities for conducting private meetings, they thought it best to start an additional English Corner group on a different day of the week.

Blessed in China

God continued to bless and encourage them. It was confirmed that Mary was pregnant. By this time, their resources had dwindled down to about a two-week's budget. They transferred to a new apartment with nothing inside except for a small dining table and a bed. However, Jesse wanted to continue to host people in their apartment.

On one occasion they were expecting more than 15 people, and they did not have a sofa. They reasoned that it would be more affordable to purchase an

Study Supplement No. 17

inexpensive carpet, and the guests could sit on the floor. He measured the floor area and calculated that they would need about \$36 to cover the living room.

A few days before the event they were walking on a roadside when they heard a sound like falling dry leaves. When they looked down they found 300 RMB. One hundred RMB is about \$12. You do the math!

So that afternoon Jesse went to a hardware store and purchased the needed carpet. The big day arrived and Mary excitedly prepared Filipino dishes for their guests. They had a simple but joyful party. When the party ended and as their guests were departing, each of them, one by one, approached Jesse and gave him a gift of money. The total amount was more than 500 RMB (more than \$60 American)—more than one-month's food allowance.

The time arrived far too quickly and Mary had to return to the Philippines since it is illegal for foreigners to give birth in China. Jesse remained behind to complete the semester and to disciple the two groups, which had grown to 40 people. He then returned to the Philippines to be Mary's her side.

Please pray for them

Joshua was born, and the family arrived back in China the following year. This time they focused their work on a people in an even more remote province with a large Tibetan population. Joshua seems to be quite an effective missionary too. Mary and Jesse hoped the new baby would do well in the mission field. As it turns out, he is so full of smiles that many people cannot resist stopping to take another look at him, which of course results in many more conversations and some additional relationships.

They know that they cannot do the work of God without our support and prayers. They ask that you lift them up to God in prayer. Pray that God will bear much fruit during the remaining year. They ask for prayers for their son Joshua—that he will adapt to the climate and be healthy and strong. And finally, they ask that you please continue to pray for those God calls through them—that they will encounter the living God in their Bible studies.

Copyright © Worldwide Church of God, 2003

LESSONS FROM THE BIBLE

The Gospel of Mark

Lesson 6: Mark 1:12 - 13

A Lesson About Temptation

At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

"I can resist anything but temptation!" says the bumper sticker. It's funny, but as with so many things, one of the reasons it is funny is because sometimes it is all too true. As Christians, we know that temptation toward sinful, illegal or destructive things needs to be resisted, and yet we often find ourselves losing the battle. That is not only frustrating, it can get downright depressing. It can even make us start to question whether God still loves and cares about us.

More than a role model

The fact that Jesus was tempted in all points like as we are (Hebrews 4:15), teaches us at least two things. One thing it teaches us is that just as Jesus overcame every temptation, so we need to follow his example and make every effort not to fall to temptation either. But there is so much more here, and it makes all the difference. If Jesus were merely a great role model that we should follow, there would be no hope for us.

Following Jesus would then just be another of the world's many religions—humanly devised systems of coping with bad behaviour and plagued consciences.

The other thing these temptation passages teach us is that Jesus overcame every temptation in our place, as one of us, both representing us and substituting for us before God. Notice where Hebrews 4 places the emphasis: First, Jesus is presented as an incomparable High Priest (v. 14). The job of a high priest is to mediate on behalf of the people toward God. He offers the sacrifices and acts as the go-between to get everything straightened out between sinning people and God. In religion, this concept keeps people mindful of the need to behave better and establishes a hierarchy of humans that can exercise control over the masses.

Gospel not another religion

But the gospel is not another religion. The gospel tells us that the real and true High Priest is God himself, the Second Person of the triune God—the one who became Jesus Christ. He died and rose from the dead in glory, and now is in heaven as a glorified man and

Study Supplement No. 17

the Son of God at once, making actual peace between sinning humans and God.

Jesus did not sin; he took all the sin of humanity onto his own head. But all the sin in the world was no match for the Son of God. In him, sin, all sin, found its demise. In Christ, God destroyed the work of the devil and defeated sin—our sin—once and for all. This is not religion; it is the gospel.

That is why Hebrews 4 emphasizes the truth that Jesus sympathizes with us in our weaknesses, and the truth that because of Jesus doing what he did regarding sin, we can come with boldness to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

We find the same emphasis in Hebrews 2:17-18. He became like us humans in every respect for the express purpose of being a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God. He can help those who are being tested because he was tested like they are. How does he help them? By his sacrifice of atonement (restoration to fellowship with God) and by being merciful (he forgives you) and faithful (he'll do it every time).

Trust him

How do you get in on all this grace and mercy? Hebrews 3 says, "Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (v. 12, New Revised Standard Version). It goes on to say, "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (v. 13). How does sin deceive us? One-way is by telling us, in effect: "Ha! God won't forgive you this time. You've crossed the line, pal, and the jig's up. His mercy only goes so far, you know, and frankly, it's reserved for those who clean up their act and stay in shape—not for the likes of you, sin-bag."

Look how verse 14 puts it: "For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end" (NRSV). In other words, trust him. Trust him to do what he says he does for you—forgives you. Trust him to be what he says he is for you—faithful. Trust him to know what he's doing. Trust him to love you the way he says he loves you. Trust him to be the Creator and the Redeemer of his Creation that he claims to be.

How can you lose out on such a great salvation? The same way you would lose out on a million dollars if you got a letter from the bank telling you someone had put it in your account, but you didn't believe the bank and never went to take it out—by not believing. By not trusting the giver of the gift. By not trusting God to love you and forgive you and transform you and make you his own child like he tells you he has already done (Ephesians 2:4-6; Colossians 1:13-14, 22; 2:13; 1 John 3:2).

Good news

The gospel really is good news! Trouble is, for many of us, it seems too good to be true. We want to have at least a short list of "do's and don'ts" to separate the wheat from the chaff. But God gave us no list. He gave us himself. In Christ, we have everything we need for salvation. He saves us; not Hail Mary's or holy days or verbose prayers or even great worship music and perfect doctrinal understanding. We're not worth saving because we convince him we are; we're worth saving because he decided we are and did it.

We devote ourselves to love and good works and righteous living because Christ has given us a new mind and heart, not because we figured out by intensive study that "we'd better or else." And even so, we fall to temptation far more often than we wish we would. But in spite of our failures, it is Christ who saves, so who will bring a charge against us? Paul figured nobody could—and make it stick, that is—because nothing "in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

So, why bring a charge against yourself? The only thing charging yourself can do is erode your trust in Christ to be the Forgiver and Grace-giver that he says he is for you.

For the love of us

Consider Jesus' temptation. First, the Spirit drove him into the desert. That reminds us that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God with one purpose for us, and that purpose is the redemption of the entire creation. Why the wilderness? Because the wilderness is the barren habitation of lizards, snakes, scorpions, barbed plants, buzzards and such like. It is representative of the world of sin, the world of the devil, the world of lies, deception and death.

It was there, on the devil's own turf, so to speak, that Jesus encountered the devil and defanged his power to overpower humanity. Jesus was at his weakest, physically speaking, after 40 days without food, but even at his weakest, he made short work of the devil's best stuff—satisfaction of physical appetites ("turn these stones into bread"), power, wealth and influence ("rule all the kingdoms of the world"), and self-indulgent arrogance ("parade your prerogatives by jumping off the temple wall and making the angels catch you").

When it was over, the angels waited on him. He ate a legitimate meal, provided from the Father by the angels, not a meal the devil offered. And all this was only the starting point of his long journey to Jerusalem to be murdered, buried and resurrected to glory—as one of us for all of us.

What more could we ask? The very God we are afraid doesn't like us, is fed up with us and won't forgive us again, is the God who loved us so much that he sent

Study Supplement No. 17

his Son, not to condemn the world, but to save the world (John 3:16-17).

Take heart

In Christ, God has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. He has taken our sins on himself, forgiven us, reconciled us with himself and made us a new creation in Christ—redeemed, healed in mind, spirit and body and perfectly unified with him. Though we do not yet see what he has made us to be in Christ, we can trust his word that at his appearing, we will be like him (1 John 3:2).

In our own temptations, then, we can take heart. Christ is with us, drawing us to him and away from sin, but when we do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, who not only set the example for us, but also made atonement for the sins of the whole world, including ours (1 John 2:1-2).

Trust him. He did it for you!

J. Michael Feazell

Copyright 2003 Worldwide Church of God

LESSONS FROM THE BIBLE

The Gospel of Mark

Lesson 7: Mark 1:14 - 15

A Lesson About Fulfilment

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent, and believe the good news!"

John's message of repentance was over; the time had come for Jesus' message to begin. Jesus' message is not identical to John's. John was preaching about a time to come; Jesus preached that the time had come. John preached a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; Jesus preached that the kingdom itself was at hand, so believe the gospel. John did not preach the gospel; he preached that the gospel bearer was coming (for more on this, see Lesson 1).

Repentance and faith

Jesus preached the gospel, the good news that God had fulfilled his promises to Israel by sending the Messiah, or the Anointed One, to save the people. As a whole, however, the nation rejected Jesus as Messiah, because he did not fit the commonly accepted profile of what the Messiah should do. The Messiah was expected to lead the Jews to victory over the Roman occupation forces and restore the nation to a place of dominance in the world. Jesus showed no signs of becoming such a Messiah. Even John the Baptist finally began to wonder whether Jesus was really the one sent by God (Matthew 11:3).

The Messiah God sent was different from the one the people expected, because God's purpose in the world was different from what the people expected. The people expected God to vanquish their enemies and make their nation great. But God's purpose was to

make a new covenant with the people, to write his laws in their hearts.

In the very midst of Israel's rejection of God's Messiah, a rejection in which every human shares, God chose to bring all sin to a head and destroy it once and for all. In that act of turning the pinnacle of human rebellion and opposition to himself into the means of human salvation, God not only fulfilled all his promises to Israel for their redemption (Acts 13:32-33), but also his word of promise for all the world (Genesis 22:18).

In other words, we are saved by God's act of salvation on our behalf, not by our repentance and faith. Were it not for the righteousness and the faith of the Son of God, we would not have repentance and faith. Our repentance and faith have meaning only because they are taken up into Jesus' righteousness and faith on our behalf and given meaning in him, for they neither have meaning nor substance on their own.

Not a transaction

It is a popular notion that repentance and faith are two different things. The idea is that a person has to repent of all his sins and then ask Jesus to come into his life, and then, on the basis of this repentance and commitment to Jesus, God will forgive the person's sins and grant him salvation.

That is not the gospel. The gospel is not a transaction. It is not a deal. It is not a tit for tat, nor an I'll-do-this-if-you-do-that arrangement. When we believe the gospel we are not causing God to save us. We are not satisfying some prerequisite. What we are doing when we believe the gospel is trusting God's word that he has already saved us through what he has already

Study Supplement No. 17

done for us in Jesus Christ. Our faith enables us to enjoy the gift we already have; it doesn't cause God to give it to us.

The gospel is good news. It is the good news that God loved everybody so much that he did something to save them from the destruction and alienation of sin. What God did—send his Son—he did purely and simply because he wanted to, not because we did something, or said something, or thought something in our hearts to bring it about.

We are saved because God already, in Christ, did everything necessary to make our salvation the reality that it is. Jesus said, "God so loved the world," not "God so loved several carefully picked ones." For us to repent and believe the gospel is to turn from our empty lives, ignorant of God's love and grace, and turn to belief in God's word about who he is for us and what he has done for us in Christ. It is a matter of believing a thing that is already true. And it is a matter of believing it because God tells us that it is true. That is not a transaction. It is not a matter of the gospel not applying to us unless or until we do the right thing. Salvation is not remuneration for repentance. It is not remuneration for faith. It is not remuneration for anything. It is a gift, and a gift given to the world is ours, whether we like it or not.

Role of faith

To believe that God has given you a gift is not a pathway to receive the gift. It's a gift, and it is given by grace, not by saying the magic words. But believing is the path to taking up, using and enjoying the gift. If you don't believe you have a gift, you'll never take it up and use it, and you'll never enjoy its benefits.

So it is with the gospel. The gospel is true for us because God made it true for us. It doesn't suddenly become true when we repent and believe. It does, however, suddenly become plain to us what God has given us when we repent and believe. And in belief, or faith, or trust, we can walk in the light of Christ, where we once walked in darkness because of unbelief. Our unbelief did not mean that the gospel was not so for us; it only meant that we could not sense it. We were in the dark about it. We didn't know that God had redeemed us in Christ long before we were ever born.

Redemption

The gospel was fulfilled when the Son of God became one of us for our sakes. He was the fulfilment of all the prophecies to Israel (Acts 13:32-33), and the means by which Israel became a blessing to all nations (Genesis 22:18; Galatians 3:8). He transformed the

meaning of human life, human history and human time. All times, from the creation to the end of the world, are redeemed in him. All of human history—past, present and future—including your personal history, are redeemed in him. Human life itself, including your human life, is redeemed in him, made new, saved (see Colossians 1:19-20; Ephesians 1:9-10).

This is not something we are waiting for—it is fulfilled already, though we do not yet experience its fullness. We still wait for the redemption of our bodies, as Paul said, when "this mortal shall put on immortality." We still wait for the revealing of the new, clean and righteous us, which is hidden with Christ in God and will be revealed with him in glory when he is revealed (Colossians 3:3-4). But we already walk by faith in the light of the knowledge of the Son of God, tasting and drawing on today the fulfilment of the reality that awaits us with Christ in the age to come. Christ has wrought a new creation (see 2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15), which we do not yet see in full, but we are part of it. In believers, the age to come has already begun to manifest itself.

Approach

It is this light, the light of the gospel, that we seek to share with all those who still walk in the darkness of unbelief. When we share the gospel, we are not saying, "You are hanging by a thread over the fires of hell; say these words and God will change his mind about you." Instead we are saying, as Thomas F. Torrance put it, "Jesus Christ died for you precisely because you are sinful and utterly unworthy of him, and has thereby already made you his own before and apart from your ever believing in him.... He has believed for you, fulfilled your human response to God, even made your personal decision for you, so that he acknowledges you before God as one who has already responded to God in him, who has already believed in God through him ... in all of which he has been fully and completely accepted by the Father, so that in Jesus Christ you are already accepted by him. Therefore, renounce yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus as your Lord and Saviour" (*The Mediation of Christ*, page 94).

When we understand the gospel of the unconditional grace of God, we no longer rely upon our faith or our commitment, but upon what Jesus Christ has done for us. Indeed, the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel.

J. Michael Feazell
Copyright 2003 Worldwide Church of God

When Bad Things Happen

Just as Jesus trusted himself to God in the miscarriage of justice that resulted in his execution, so he stands with us, trusting God for us in the course of our tragedies, injustices and disasters.

You've probably seen this short prayer displayed on a wall, on a desk or on a plaque in a gift shop. Every member of Alcoholics Anonymous knows it by heart: *GOD, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

It's a great prayer. Perhaps our greatest plague is that of anxiety, that old fiend that manifests itself in fear, worry, frustration, dread and the like. We fear that we might be victimized by some disastrous turn of events. We worry that things might turn out badly for us. We feel our frustration levels rise when the world and the people in it do not conform to our expectations. We dread the possible outcomes of a future that has shown itself unreliable in its treatment of us.

But we Christians believe that God makes a difference in our world of vulnerability. The Serenity Prayer above draws our attention to the fact that there are many things we cannot change. Bad things do happen to good people. We can spend our time blaming others, or ourselves or we can learn to trust our lives, with all the tragedies and all the triumphs, to Jesus who loves us.

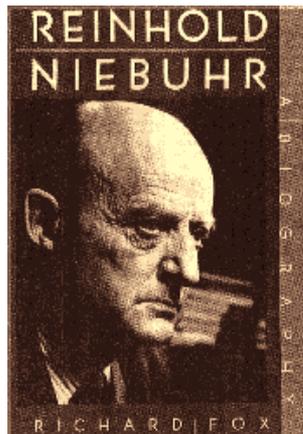
It's not that Jesus keeps bad things from happening. Sometimes I think he does—maybe even oftentimes. But there are plenty of times that he doesn't. It's when the bad things happen that we share in the sufferings that Jesus suffered for us. And just as Jesus trusted himself to God in the miscarriage of justice that resulted in his execution, so he stands with us, trusting God for us in the course of our tragedies, injustices and disasters. Jesus trusts God for us even when we are paralysed with doubt. He's our Intercessor even when we are so hurt that we wish God would take his intercession, stuff it and get out of our lives.

He's our Intercessor even when we put the blame on God for what we know he could have stopped from happening, but didn't. And he's our Intercessor, full of faith on our behalf, even when we are so scared and worried that we've hardly thought of God in weeks.

Here's what you may not have known about that little prayer I mentioned earlier. It's part of a longer prayer penned by the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr. It goes like this:

GOD, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardship as the pathway to peace. Taking, as he did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that he will make all things right if I surrender to his will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with him forever in the next. Amen.

(Reinhold Niebuhr, 1926)



Reinhold Niebuhr

The idea of taking this sinful world as it is, rather than how I would have it, is not what I learned as a boy. I learned, like most little boys and girls, to be good and hope for the best, and then feel betrayed, crushed and either angry or depressed if something worse happened—worse meaning anything I did not want.

But the world is not designed to bend to our hopes and desires. Good things happen, but so do bad things. They happened to Jesus, and they happen to us.

Bad things happened to Paul, too, so bad that he tells us he "despaired of life" (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). But he passes on to us what he learned: When bad things happen, it helps us learn not to rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead—the God who raised Jesus, our Intercessor.

The gospel is good news. It calls us not to account, but to rest. The gospel is not about the snowstorm of things we either should have done or should not have done. It is about trusting God, about throwing all our cares on the one who loves us, about resting in Jesus Christ. In him, we can indeed accept what we cannot change, find the courage to change what we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

J. Michael Fezell

Copyright © 2003 Worldwide Church of God

Bible Study

The Example of Abraham

A study of Romans 4



By Michael Morrison

In the last section of Romans 3, Paul declares that the gospel of salvation announces a righteousness from God, a righteousness that “is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (3:22, TNIV throughout). This righteousness is given to all who believe in Jesus—in other words, believers are justified or saved by faith in Jesus Christ, not by observing the law (3:28).

But some people would object: Paul, are you saying that the law is wrong? Paul answers: “Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law” (3:31). The law does not contradict the gospel, and the gospel does not contradict the Old Testament. Paul began this section by saying the Law and the Prophets testify to this gift of righteousness (3:21). He began the entire letter by saying that his gospel had been promised in the Scriptures (1:2).

The law was designed to lead people to the gospel, and the gospel does not nullify the law in the same way that the Messiah does not nullify the prophecies that predicted his coming. Rather, he fulfils them. Similarly, the gospel fulfils the law, brings it to completion, and accomplishes what the law could only point at.

Abraham’s faith

Paul then illustrates this with an example from the Old Testament. The patriarch Abraham is a great example of what Paul is saying—that salvation is given on the basis of faith, not through the law. In Romans 4, Paul elaborates on the meaning of both justification and faith. He asks in verse 1, “What then shall we say that Abraham, the forefather of us Jews, discovered in this matter?”

He sharpens the focus of the question by saying, If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God (v. 2). If Abraham were considered righteous because of his works, he would have something he could brag about, even though it would not put him anywhere near to God.

Paul has already said that boasting is excluded (3:27). He is contrasting two approaches to righteousness—one based on what people do and can take credit for, and one that depends on faith, which they cannot brag about but merely accept with thanks. What kind of righteousness did Abraham have?

Paul finds an answer in the Law: What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (4:3, quoting from Gen. 15:6). Abraham’s belief was counted as righteousness. The patriarch, representing the entire nation (and even the world), was declared to be righteous not on the basis of what he did, but on the basis of believing God’s promise.

Justifying the wicked

Paul then begins to reason what this means. He builds the contrast between works and faith: Now to anyone who works, their wages are not credited to them as a gift, but as an obligation (v. 4). Abraham was given his status—if he had earned it through good works, then God would not have to credit his faith as righteousness. Some Jews thought that Abraham was perfect in his behaviour, and God was obligated to count him righteous, but Paul is saying that, according to the Scriptures, Abraham had to be counted righteous on the basis of faith.

Paul then says, “However, to anyone who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, their faith is credited as righteousness” (v. 5). Paul is increasing the contrast—he is not talking about someone who works and has faith, but someone who believes but does not work. Of course, works normally follow faith. But at this point in the story, Abraham had only faith, and no works. He trusted God, and his faith was credited as righteousness.

Paul increases the contrast again by saying that God justifies the wicked. He is using a strong word, one not normally associated with Abraham. But

Study Supplement No. 17

Jews had only two categories of people: the righteous and the wicked. And if God had to intervene in order for Abraham to be counted as righteous, then that meant that he was not righteous beforehand, and he had been in the category of the wicked.

God does not need to rescue the righteous. He saves the wicked; there is no point in saving people who aren't in any danger. Abraham was a sinner, but because of his faith, he is now counted as righteous.

Evidence from the Psalms

Paul will return to the example of Abraham in a few verses. But at this point he gives more evidence from the Old Testament that God can count the wicked as righteous. Paul uses Psalm 32, written by David, another highly respected patriarch of the Jewish people: David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed are those whose sin the Lord will never count against them" (4:6-8).

David talks about someone who had sins, who would have to be counted wicked if judged by works, but who had all their sins forgiven. David didn't mention faith here, but he is talking about a person to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. There is a way to be right with God that doesn't depend on perfect behaviour. The sins are not counted against us, but faith is counted in our favour.

For Jews only?

Paul then returns to the example of Abraham, asking, "Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?" (v. 9). Is the blessing of forgiveness available only to Jews, or also to Gentiles? Can Gentiles be counted among the righteous? We have been saying, he reminds them, that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! (vv. 9-10).

Abraham was circumcised in Genesis 17. So in Genesis 15 (which is 14 years earlier), when his faith was counted as righteousness, he was not circumcised. Not only was Abraham credited with being righteous apart from works in general, he was counted as righteous apart from Jewish works in particular.

Therefore, a person doesn't have to become Jewish in order to be saved. They don't have to become circumcised, or keep the laws that distinguished Jews from Gentiles, because

Abraham was a Gentile when he was counted as righteous. Abraham shows that God doesn't mind calling sinners righteous, and he doesn't require circumcision, or the laws of Moses.

Abraham received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised (v. 11). Abraham became circumcised later, but that doesn't prove that we also need to become circumcised after we come to faith. Circumcision was simply a sign of the righteousness that he already had. That didn't add anything to his righteousness and didn't change his category.

So then, Paul concludes, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. Abraham is the father of all the Gentiles who believe. He set the precedent for an uncircumcised person being counted as righteous.

And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (v. 12). As Paul has already argued, a person is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly (2:28). To truly belong to the people of God, a person must be changed in the heart, not necessarily in the flesh. If Jewish people want to be counted among the people of God, they need to have faith—the same kind of faith that Abraham had before he was circumcised.

The basis of salvation is faith, not flesh. Gentiles don't need to copy Jews in order to be saved. Instead, Jews need to copy a Gentile—that is, Abraham, before he was circumcised. We all need to copy the Gentile named Abraham.

Faith, not law

Paul now brings the word *law* back into the discussion: It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith (v. 13). The law of Moses wasn't even around in the days of Abraham, but Paul is saying that the promise wasn't given by law at all. God didn't say, If you do this or that, I will bless you. No, he simply said he would bless him. It was an unconditional promise: Abraham, you are going to have descendants enough to fill the earth, and the whole world is going to be blessed through you. Abraham believed that promise, and that is why he was counted as righteous. It was not on the basis of a law.

Because, Paul reasons, if those who depend on the law are heirs, [then] faith means nothing ... (v. 14). It's either faith or law—it cannot be both. If we are saved by our works, then we are looking to our

Study Supplement No. 17

works, not trusting in God. If Abraham had earned this blessing by keeping a law, then there would be no point in mentioning his faith.

But even more seriously, Paul says that if salvation is by law, then the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath (vv. 14-15). The promise would do us no good because we all fall short of what the law requires. We are sinners, and all the law can do for us is bring wrath and punishment. It cannot deliver the promises, because by its criteria, we fall short.

If salvation is by the law, then we have no hope. The good news, however, is that where there is no law there is no transgression (v. 15). If salvation is not on the basis of the law, then we cannot disqualify ourselves through our transgressions. Since the law is not part of the method by which we are saved, our sins are not part of the picture, either. They don't take away what God has given to us by a promise (see 8:1).

By faith

Therefore, Paul says in Rom. 4:16, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham (v. 16). The promise given to Abraham was for uncountable descendants, and we can share in Abraham's promise by being one of his descendants, through a spiritual union with Jesus, who descended from Abraham.

The promise of salvation comes to us by faith, by grace, not by works, and it is consequently guaranteed. We don't have to be afraid that we will lose our salvation through some sin that we have trouble getting rid of. Grace doesn't keep count of works, either good or bad. In this way, the promise goes not only to the Jews, but also to all people.

Abraham is the father of us all, Paul concludes, and he follows it up with a confirming quote from the Torah: As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations" (v. 17, quoting Gen. 17:5 and using the common word for Gentiles). Abraham is the father not just of the Jewish nation, but also of many other nations. Gentiles are also his descendants, and they do not have to become Jewish in order to be counted.

Abraham is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not (v. 17). Why does Paul bring this up? Perhaps he is thinking of the spiritually dead—Gentiles and unbelieving Jews. God can rescue them, and he can take people who were alienated, and make them his people. He can take people who are wicked and call them righteous.

Abraham's faith

Paul concludes with a summary of the story of Abraham. His audience knew the story well, but Paul emphasizes certain points to reinforce what he has been saying:

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be" [Gen. 15:5]. Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised (vv. 18-21).

According to the flesh, Abraham didn't have any reason to hope, but he had faith in what God had promised, and his faith was a witness to how great God is. Abraham knew that the promise was physically impossible, but he trusted in God's power and faithfulness rather than in his own abilities.

In our salvation, too, we have no hope according to the flesh, no hope according to our works, but we can trust in the promise of God, given to Abraham and extended through Jesus Christ to all who believe in him. We should not be discouraged by our human inability to be righteous, but we should trust in the promise of God to count us righteous on the basis of faith. Paul reminds us that because Abraham trusted in God, this is why "it was credited to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:5).

As his final point, Paul reasons that the words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us (vv. 22-23). Actually, those words were not written for Abraham at all, for they were written long after he died. They were written primarily for us, so that we will also have faith. We are the ones to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead (v. 24).

No matter whether we are Gentile or Jewish, we will be counted as righteous, as God's people, if we trust in God. What he did for Jesus, he will do for us: raise us from the dead. He has done it before, and he will do it again.

Paul concludes the chapter with a brief restatement of his gospel message: Jesus Christ was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification (v. 25). The deed has been done; the promise has been given. We need to accept his gift—the gift of righteousness—given to those who believe in Jesus Christ. If God can raise the dead, he can save anyone!

Study Supplement No. 17

Questions for discussion

1. If God saves the wicked (v. 5), does that allow me to be wicked?
2. What is the seal or evidence of my righteousness? (v. 11)
3. Does the law have any role in my salvation? (v. 14)
4. If salvation is guaranteed (v. 16), can I refuse it or lose it?
5. Am I discouraged by my own weaknesses? (v. 19)
6. What gives me evidence that God will save me? (v. 24)

Michael Morrison

Bible Study

Past, present and future of salvation

A study of Romans 5

Michael Morrison

In the first four chapters of Romans, Paul announced that the gospel is a message about the righteousness of God being given to people because of Jesus Christ. First, Paul described the problem: Everyone deserves to die because they fall short of what God wants.

Then Paul described the solution: The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is a gift, not a result of us keeping laws. In chapter 4, Paul proved this with the example of Abraham, who was declared righteous by God on the basis of faith before the laws were given. Salvation is by grace and faith, not by law or works.

Faith, hope and love

In chapter 5, Paul explains a little more—and in the process, he says a few things that have caused questions for centuries. We will discuss these and notice the main point that Paul makes. He says in verse 1, ***“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith”***—that’s the main point of chapters 3 and 4—***“we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”*** (TNIV throughout). The problem between us and God has been fixed.

Before, we were sinners, enemies of God, and unless something was done, he would have to punish us. But since we were powerless to do anything about it, God took the initiative—he sent his Son to bring us peace. In legal terms, we have been declared righteous, and in relationship terms, we are given peace instead of hostility.

It is through Jesus, Paul says in verse 2, that ***“we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.”*** We enter grace, or forgiveness, by faith in what Christ did. And when Paul says that we stand in grace, he implies that

this is a state in which we can remain. Because of God’s grace, based on what Christ did in the past, we rejoice in the hope that this gives us for the future—the hope of sharing in the glory of God. This hope is not just a wishful thought—it is confidence based on what God has done for us.

This has practical results in our lives: ***“Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope”*** (vv. 3-4). We rejoice not only in hoping for future glory, but we rejoice now, even when things are not going well for us.

We may not rejoice *because* of our sufferings, but we can rejoice *in* them. Trials and difficulties help us grow in determination to endure, and in our character, our consistency in doing the right thing even in difficult circumstances. And if we stay on the right path, we can be confident that we will get to the goal. Our hope is not in ourselves, but in what Jesus is doing in us.

Paul says more about hope in verse 5: ***“And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”*** We do not hope in vain, because even in this life we have benefits in Christ, such as the love that God puts into us. Our ability to love is increased because God begins to put his own characteristics into our hearts, and that includes love.

By doing this, God lets us know that he loves us, and he helps us love others, through the Holy Spirit living in us. God gives us something of himself, so we are changed to be more like he is. Through faith, God gives us hope and love. He is changing our outlook on life and the way we live.

Study Supplement No. 17

Saved by his love

Paul then tells us what he means about God's love: **"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly"** (v. 6). Who are the "ungodly"? We are! No matter how ungodly we have been, Christ is able to save us. He didn't wait until we repented; he did not wait until we deserved it. No—he died for us while we were powerless. He helped us when we were helpless.

"Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die" (v. 7). It's not likely that we can die for someone else, though some people do risk their lives to save others. This rare situation provides a contrast to Christ: **"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (v. 8). He had to do it while we were sinners, because sin is what we had to be rescued from. So God took the initiative, sending Christ to die for us, and this demonstrates God's love. He is good to us even when we are rebels; he gives generously even when we deserve nothing.

The action of Christ demonstrates the love of God, because Christ is God. They have the same love because they are one. When we have trials, we can look to Jesus as evidence that God loves us. His willingness to die for us should reassure us that God wants to help us, even at great cost to himself.

Paul draws a conclusion in verse 9: "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" Because of what Jesus did in the past, we are now forgiven, and on the Day of Judgment we will escape condemnation.

Paul explains his reasoning in verse 10: **"For if, while 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!"** If God did this much for us when we were enemies, we can be sure that he will accept us now that Jesus has reconciled us, and he now lives for us.

"Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation" (v. 11). We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God and we rejoice in our sufferings, but we especially rejoice in being reconciled to God, because he is better than all his blessings put together.

Christ and Adam

In the next section of this chapter, Paul makes a contrast between Adam and Christ. His question is, How can one person bring salvation to the

whole world? Paul shows that in God's way of doing things, one person can indeed have that much effect on others. "Therefore," he begins in verse 12, and he follows it with a comparison—"just as such and such..."—but he does not finish the thought until verse 18. He first has to tell us how he reached his conclusion.

So verse 12 introduces to us what he wants to say: **"Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—"** He's going to say that just as sin entered the world through one person, salvation also entered the world through one person, and just as Adam brought death to all who followed him, Christ brought life to all who follow him. Death is a consequence of sin (Gen. 2:17). Paul may be thinking of physical death, or of spiritual death. Either way, Christ brings life after death, life that reverses the results of sin.

This section of Romans 5 has been important in Christian theology because it teaches that all people are counted as sinful because Adam sinned. This is the doctrine of original sin. These verses say that Adam's sin affected all humanity. But Paul's main point is the contrast between Adam and Christ. In verse 12, Paul says that everyone sinned—that's in the past tense. We all sinned when Adam sinned, because his sin counted for all his descendants. And since what Adam did affected everyone, it should be no surprise that what Christ did could also affect everyone.

In verse 13 Paul explains how he reached his conclusion: **"To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law. Nevertheless, sin reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come"** (vv. 13-14).

People before Moses sinned, breaking unwritten laws. But Paul is connecting their sin with Adam. The people were counted as sinners not only because of their own sins, but also because of what Adam did. Adam was a pattern of a future man—Jesus. He shows more contrast than similarity.

"But the gift [of God] is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!" (v. 15). The grace of Christ is a total reversal of the sin of Adam. Everyone died because of Adam's transgression, but because of Christ, everyone can

Study Supplement No. 17

live. Everyone was judged guilty because of Adam's sin; everyone can be judged righteous through faith in Christ.

“Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification” (v. 16). The contrast is in numbers: one sin produced condemnation for all people, but even after a tidal wave of sins, one man brought justification. Justice said we deserved death, but grace said we were righteous.

By being joined with Christ, we can be counted as righteous. Adam causes our condemnation, but the same principle (one person representing others) says that Jesus brings us salvation—not by our own works, but because of what Jesus did.

Paul gives another illustration in verse 17: ***“For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”***

Because of the sin of Adam, death reigned over all humanity. It is even more certain, Paul says, that everyone can be saved through Christ, because he brings superabundant grace. Adam's sin put us into bondage, being ruled by sin and death. Christ's grace reverses that, moving us from being a slave to being a ruler: We reign in life through Jesus Christ. By being united with Christ, we have been brought from the kingdom of death into the kingdom of life. Instead of being dominated by the results of Adam's sin, we are dominated by the results of Christ's righteousness.

In verse 18, Paul finishes the thought he started in verse 12: ***“Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all.”*** Just as Adam brought guilt and death to everyone, Christ brought justification and life for everyone.

Verse 19 is similar: ***“For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made***

righteous.” Through the sin of Adam, everyone was made a sinner. In a similar way, but with opposite results, all who trust in Christ are made righteous—given the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Just as we receive guilt from Adam, so also our guilt can be given to Jesus, and his death can count for ours. We were represented by Jesus on the cross, just as we were represented by Adam when he sinned. The bad news is totally reversed in Jesus Christ: he has brought justification for everyone who believes.

The reign of grace

Paul has dealt with the time between Adam and Moses. Now he makes a brief comment about the law of Moses: ***“The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase”*** (v. 20). The law could not reduce sin or forgive sin—it could only increase sin. The more rules there are, the more transgressions there will be. The law showed us that humanity is sinful—fatally flawed.

“But where sin increased, grace increased all the more...” The grace of God is more than enough to take care of the increase in sin. ***“So that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”*** (v. 21). Christ is the solution to the problem of sin and death. Before Christ, everyone was in Adam, under the domination of sin and death. Now, grace overpowers sin, bringing the gift of righteousness, and with it, the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Questions for consideration

1. Is it realistic to have glory in my sufferings? (v. 3)
2. How has God's love changed my heart? (v. 5)
3. Was there a time in my life when I was an ungodly sinner, an enemy of God? (vv. 6-10)
4. Do I believe that everyone is counted guilty because Adam sinned? (vv. 12-19)
5. Do I believe that I can be counted righteous because of Christ? (v. 19)

Michael Morrison

Copyright © 2003 Worldwide Church of God

If you would like to discuss with us any information printed in this free booklet please contact:

The Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Tel. (03) 9726 8898