

## **PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD, Part 3: “Is Jacob’s Ladder An Escalator? (Outline)**

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During my freshman orientation at Pacific Union College, one academic lecturer did his best to admonish us about the need for diligence in study. At one point he insisted: “Salvation may come by faith, but grades come by works.”

Well, with all due respect to that fine gentleman, I’m afraid he did not understand Biblical righteousness by faith. A thoughtful reading on his part of Hebrews chapter 11 might have been enough to disabuse him of his mistaken perspective on this key Bible doctrine.

When all is said and done, the fact is that any legitimate human endeavor, in any line—whether in the workplace, in the classroom, or on the upward path to the courts of glory, is a matter of active divine-human cooperation.

I’m reminded of a story I heard years ago about a farmer who was rejoicing with a neighbor over how well his fields were producing. The neighbor commented at one point, “You and the Lord have really made this field grow.”

The farmer replied, with a touch of sarcasm: “You should have seen it when the Lord had it all to Himself.”

Now I don’t know how true this story is. You never know about anecdotes of this kind. But I have a feeling this farmer wasn’t trying either to be sacrilegious, or to dispute the fact that God is fully able to do whatever He pleases, with any aspect of His creation, with all the power at His command.

Indeed, God is fully capable of making a field grow, with or without human planning or effort. The third day of Creation and the gourd that grew up over Jonah give ample proof of this.

God is fully able to miraculously heal men and women of physical ailments, with or without the cooperation of human medical practice. Indeed, the Bible offers countless examples of physical healings taking place without the involvement of any human medical personnel.

But is this the way God usually addresses the problem of physical illness? We all know the answer.

God is fully able to supply men and women with physical nourishment or a material livelihood, with or without their active participation. Look at the way He provided food and water for the children of Israel during their flight from Egypt, or for Elijah during the famine, and while he was in the wilderness fleeing from Jezebel.

Most of us are familiar with the passage in Phil. 4:19:

Phil. 4:19:

“But my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”

But how, may I ask, would most Christian parents react to a child who decided to use this verse as an excuse for not getting an education, or not actively seeking employment, thinking God would supply one’s needs without any human help? After all, as certain ones keep reminding us when this principle is applied to the spiritual realm, why does anyone need to help God out?

One of the best models of divine-human cooperation that I have found in the inspired writings is Ellen White’s description of the resurrection of Lazarus in *The Desire of Ages*:

DA 535:

“‘Take ye away the stone.’ Christ come have commanded the stone to remove, and it would have obeyed His voice. He could have bidden the angels who were close by His side to do this. At His bidding, invisible hands would have removed the stone. But it was to be taken away by human hands. Thus Christ would show that humanity is to co-operate with divinity. What human power can do divine power is not summoned to do. Christ does not dispense with man’s aid. He strengthens him, co-operating with him as he uses the powers and capabilities given him.”

Once again, our series this weekend is titled, “Prepare to Meet Thy God.” And our message for the divine hour this morning is titled, “Is Jacob’s Ladder An Escalator?”

### *The Conditions of Salvation*

What does the Bible say are the conditions for gaining eternal life? Jesus was asked this question a number of times, as we know. And His answers are frequently forgotten, I have found, among popular promoters of what is presumed to be “righteousness by faith.”

Matt. 7:21:

“Not every one that saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven.”

Matt. 19:16-17:

“And behold, one came and said unto Him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?”

“And He said unto him, Why callest thou Me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.”

Luke 10:25-28:

“And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted Him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

“He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?”

“And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.

“And He said unto him, Thou hast answered right; this do, and thou shalt live.”

Rom. 2:5-10,13:

“But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God;

“Who will render to every man according to his deeds:

“To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life;

“But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath,

“Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile;

“But glory, honor, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile....

“For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified.”

Rom. 8:13:

“For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die; but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.”

Heb. 5:9:

“And being made perfect He (Christ) became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him.”

Ellen White, as we might expect, agrees with the above Scriptures on the conditions of salvation:

RH June 26, 1900:

“When the lawyer came to Christ, saying, ‘Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ the Saviour did not say, Believe, only believe, and you will be saved. ‘What is written in the law?’ He said, ‘how readest thou?’ .... Here the false doctrine that man has nothing to do but believe is swept away. Eternal life is given to us on the condition that we obey the commandments of God.”

ST Nov. 24, 1887:

“The keeping of these (ten) commandments comprises the whole duty of man, and presents the conditions of eternal life. Now the question is, Will man comply with the requirements? Will he love God supremely and his neighbor as himself? There is no possible way for man to do this in his own strength. The divine power of Christ must be added to the effort of humanity.”

7BC 920:

“His (the Christian’s) perfect obedience to all God’s commandments, opens to him the gates of the Holy City.”

7BC 972:

“The gospel that is to be preached to all nations, kindreds, tongues, and peoples presents the truth in clear lines, showing that obedience is the condition of gaining eternal life. Christ imparts His righteousness to those who consent to let Him take away their sins.”

TDWG 72:

“Thank God, He attends us every step of the way through, if we are willing to be saved in Christ’s appointed way—through obedience to His requirements.”

AA 482:

“The work of gaining salvation is one of copartnership, a joint operation.... Human effort of itself is not sufficient. Without the aid of divine power it avails nothing. God works and man works.”

Now when we turn back to Scripture, we find the same clarity so far as God supplying the power for the obedience that, according to these statements, is required for salvation. When the rich young ruler turned away from Jesus, because he felt the standard for salvation was too high, the disciples asked, “Who then can be saved?” (Matt. 19:25). Jesus then answered, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (verse 26).

Jesus stated elsewhere:

John 15:5:

“Without Me ye can do nothing.”

And of course we saw this statement in Paul’s writings a moment ago:

Rom. 8:13:

“For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die; but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.”

So how, then, are the conditions of eternal life to be met?

First, by forgiveness for past sins. The Bible speaks of this phase of salvation in such verses as the following:

Eph. 1:7:

“In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.”

And what are the conditions for receiving this forgiveness? The Bible tells us:

II Chron. 7:14:

“If My people, which are called by My name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sins, and heal their land.”

Prov. 28:13:

“He that covereth his sins shall not prosper, but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.”

Isa. 55:7:

“Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him: and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.”

Jesus spoke about conditions for receiving God’s forgiveness as well:

Matt. 6:14-15:

“For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. “But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

I John 1:9:

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

It is on the basis of this Biblical evidence that Ellen White declares:

1SM 366:

“God requires the entire surrender of the heart, before justification can take place.”

This is why there is no way the whole world could have been unconditionally justified when Jesus died on the cross, as some folks believe. Ellen White says in another statement:

PP 522:

“The unconditional pardon of sin never has been, and never will be.”

And when God forgives us, and declares us righteous, the Bible is clear that this declaration makes us righteous as well:

Titus 3:5-7:

“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost.

“Which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour,

“That being justified by His grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

The fact that justification makes us righteous is really one of the oldest truths in the Bible.

At the creation, what happened when God said:

Gen. 1:3:

“Let there be light. And there was light.”

What happened when the leper came to Jesus for cleansing in Matthew chapter 8?

Matt. 8:2-3:

“And, behold, there came a leper and worshiped Him, saying, Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean.

“And Jesus put forth His hand, and touched him, saying, I will: be thou clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.”

Ellen White speaks as follows regarding Paul’s doctrine of justification in the book of Romans:

Ed 254:

“In the creation, ‘He spake, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast.’ He ‘calleth those things which be not as though they were’ (Psalm 33:9; Rom. 4:17); for when He calls them, they are.”

Folks, the pen of inspiration is absolutely clear that justifying righteousness is both declarative and transformative. In the prophet’s words:

RH Aug. 19, 1890:

“To be pardoned in the way that Christ pardons, is not only to be forgiven, but to be renewed in the spirit of our mind. The Lord says, ‘A new heart will I give unto thee.’ The image of Christ is to be stamped upon the very mind, heart, and soul.”

YRP 96:

“Justification means pardon. It means that the heart, purged from dead works, is prepared to receive the blessing of sanctification.”

KH 336:

“The grace of Christ purifies while it pardons, and fits men for a holy heaven.”

MB 114:

“God’s forgiveness is not merely a judicial act by which He sets us free from condemnation. It is not only forgiveness *for* sin, but reclaiming *from* sin. It is the outflow of redeeming love that transforms the heart. David had the true conception of forgiveness when he prayed, ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.’ Psalm 51:10.”

The pen of inspiration is also clear that God’s forgiveness covers only past sins and sins of ignorance:

6BC 1092:

“Christ bears the penalty of man’s past transgressions; and by imparting to man His righteousness, makes it possible for man to keep God’s holy law.”

ST Dec. 15, 1887:

“There is no way back to innocence and life except through repentance for having transgressed God’s law, and faith in the merits of the divine sacrifice, who has suffered for your transgressions of the past.”

Folks, there is no such thing as justifying righteousness that covers past, present, and future sins. Some call this the “umbrella” theory of justification. That’s really just another form of the Catholic doctrine of indulgences—only in this case the indulgences are free!

And according to the inspired writings, the ground of our salvation not only includes justification, but sanctification as well. The idea that sanctification doesn’t save us, that only justifying righteousness is salvational, is absolutely contrary to the Bible. Hence the following passage from Paul’s writings:

II Thess. 2:13:

“God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.”

Ellen White is clear that both imputed righteousness (justification) and imparted righteousness (sanctification) form the basis of our salvation:

SC 63:

“So we have nothing in ourselves of which to boast. We have no ground for self-exaltation. Our only ground of hope is in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and in that wrought by His Spirit working in and through us.”

So there is no such thing, in either the Bible or the writings of the Spirit of Prophecy, as salvation by justification alone. So some may ask, What in fact does the Bible mean when it says we are not saved by works? We know the verses that say this:

Rom. 3:20,28:

“Therefore by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. . . .

“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.”

Gal. 2:16:

“By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”

Eph. 2:8-9:

“For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.

“Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Now this passage enables us to understand what kind of works Paul is speaking of, and what kind he is not speaking of. First he says, “not of yourselves,” then he says, “not of works, lest any man should boast.” What kind of works originate with self, and what kind produce boasting?

When we go back to the second chapter of Romans, Paul explains what this self-generated righteousness is all about.

Rom. 2:17-23:

“Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God.

“And knowest His will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law;

“And art confident that thou art thyself a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness,

“An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which has the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law.

“Thou therefore that teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal?

“Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege?

“Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonorest thou God?”

In other words, folks, Paul is not talking here about the righteousness of sanctification. He is talking about surface piety, self-generated works. John the Baptist talked about this when he rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees by the Jordan:

Matt. 3:9:

“And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham as our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.”

We might call this “righteousness by heredity.”

I want to touch briefly on the heresy certain ones have embraced in modern Adventism, which teaches that righteousness by faith in the Bible includes justification only. The late Desmond Ford was a prominent teacher of this error, and there are those today who continue to teach it.

But when one reads Hebrews chapter 11, among other Bible passages, it becomes clear that righteousness and faith have as much to do with sanctification as with justification. Let’s look at perhaps the strongest verse on this point in what is often called the Faith Chapter (Hebrews 11):

Heb. 11:7:

“By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house, by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.”

How did Noah become an heir of righteousness by faith? By building an ark and warning the world of coming judgment? That sounds like sanctification to me.

That lecturer at my freshman orientation would have done well simply to read this verse, along with the rest of the chapter. Like the building of Noah's ark, good grades for the Christian student come through divine-human cooperation.

Those who might be interested in further exploring the question of whether righteousness by faith in the Bible includes justification alone, or both justification and sanctification, might be interested in reading an online article of mine, titled, "The Biblical Scope of Righteousness by Faith":

**<https://advindicate.com/articles/2019/7/3/the-biblical-scope-of-righteousness-by-faith>**

### *The Role of Human Effort*

Now I want to talk for a few minutes about the role of human effort in Biblical sanctification, and thus in our salvation. Another very dangerous heresy in modern and postmodern Adventism, even among some professedly conservative Adventists, is the idea that all the Christian needs to do in the experience of sanctification is to focus on maintaining a personal relationship with Jesus, through what some have called the "three tangibles": prayer, Bible study, and witnessing.

It is toward these so-called "three tangibles," according to this theory, that all human effort in the Christian life is to be directed. However, so far as the struggle against sin and Satan is concerned, that—according to this theory—is to be entirely left to God. That's what they call "God's department."

But is that what the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy writings teach? Let's consider the evidence:

II Cor. 7:1:

"Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God."

Eph. 6:12:

"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

James 4:7-8:

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners, and purify your hearts, ye double minded."

Notice that the above passage doesn't say, Submit yourselves to God, then He will resist the devil in your place. The above verses are clear that resisting the devil, along with the cleansing and purifying of our hearts, are as much our duty as submission and drawing near to God. It's all part of the cooperative process. The apostle Paul says it well in the book of Philippians:

Phil. 2:12-13:

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.”

Ellen White echoes this passage when she writes:

6T 130:

“Man is to work out that which God works in.”

Elsewhere she writes:

COL 331:

“God gives the talents, the powers of the mind; we form the character.”

A popular notion in this so-called “relationship theology” is the difference they seek to draw between what they call the “fight of faith” and the “fight of sin.” But neither the Bible nor Ellen White make this distinction. Remember these verses:

II Cor. 7:1:

“Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.”

Eph. 6:12:

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”

That sounds like we have to fight both sin and Satan. In one very clear statement Ellen White equates the fight of faith with the fight against Satan:

5T 222:

“The Christian life is a warfare. The apostle Paul speaks of wrestling against principalities and powers as he fought the good fight of faith.”

Elsewhere she writes:

RH Sept. 6, 1892:

“We must come, we must resist the Devil, we must strive to enter in at the strait gate, we must run the race with patience, we must fight the fight of faith, we must wrestle with

principalities and powers, we must agonize before God in prayer, if we would stand blameless before the throne of God. We must have the faith that works, or it will be powerless.”

TM 240:

“The Lord does not propose to perform for us either the willing or the doing. This is our proper work. As soon as we earnestly enter upon the work, God’s grace is given to work in us to will and to do, but never as a substitute for our effort. Our souls are to be aroused to cooperate. The Holy Spirit works the human agent, to work out our own salvation.”

GC 510:

“The fact that Christ has conquered should inspire His followers with courage to fight manfully the battle against sin and Satan.”

PP 460:

“We have a work to do to resist temptation. Those who would not fall a prey to Satan’s devices must guard well the avenues of the soul; they must avoid reading, seeing, or hearing that which will suggest impure thoughts.”

7BC 929:

“If Jesus resisted Satan’s temptations, He will help us to resist. He came to bring divine power to combine with human effort.”

4T 32-33:

“Man must work with his human power, aided by the divine power of Christ, to resist and to conquer at any cost to himself. In short, man must overcome as Christ overcame.... This could not be the case if Christ alone did all the overcoming. Man must do *his* part; he must be victor on his own account.”

RH Oct. 30, 1888:

“You are to open the door of the heart. You are to clear away the rubbish from the portals, and throw wide the door, that the heavenly Guest may find a welcome and an entrance. Christ will not enter a heart that is defiled with sin. It is our work to put away all iniquity.”

And again, we don’t put away all iniquity by ourselves. We do it in cooperation with divine grace and power.

*Conclusion: Is Jacob’s Ladder An Escalator?*

In a word, No. But let’s explore for a few moments what Jacob’s ladder is. Jesus said to Nathanael when He called him to be His disciple:

John 1:51:

“Verily, verily I saw unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.”

Now what story does this language call to mind?

Gen. 28:12:

“And he (Jacob) dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.”

So Jesus identified this ladder with Himself. And Ellen White does the same thing:

DA 311:

“Christ is the ladder that Jacob saw, the base resting on the earth, and the topmost round reaching to the gate of heaven, to the very threshold of glory.”

In another statement she identifies Jacob’s ladder with the one Peter describes in his second epistle:

OHC 74:

“To make our calling and election sure requires far greater diligence than many are giving to this important matter. ‘For if ye do these things’—live on the plan of addition, growing in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ—ye shall mount up, step by step, the ladder Jacob saw, and ‘ye shall never fail.’”

Now we’re going to look at two statements which help us see the difference between the rightful blending of human effort with divine strength, and the false substitution of human effort for divine strength:

6T 147:

“We are saved by climbing round after round of the ladder, looking to Christ, clinging to Christ, mounting step by step to the height of Christ, so that He is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption. Faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly-kindness, and charity are the rounds of this ladder.”

Now what we find fascinating is the contrast drawn by the following statement between efforts to gain heaven by “our own righteousness,” and ascending the ladder of progress we’ve been studying by means of the merits of Christ:

ST June 26, 1884:

“Those who enter Heaven will not scale its walls by their own righteousness, nor will the gates be opened to them for costly offerings of gold and silver; but they will gain an entrance to the many mansions of the Father’s house through the merits of the cross of Christ. Jesus is the ladder by which every soul must mount who would climb from earth to Heaven. But there is round after round of painful ascent; for our characters must be brought into harmony with the law of God, and every advance step in this direction requires self-denial.”

Notice the contrast she draws between scaling heaven’s walls by our own righteousness, and the round after round of painful ascent through the merits of Christ, which in fact constitutes

the condition of salvation. Righteousness by faith is not effortless, painless salvation, brothers and sisters. It is divine-human cooperation.

Finally, I always like to close a sermon on righteousness by faith with this passage from the book of Revelation:

Rev. 19:7-8:

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready.

“Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints” (NIV).

You’ll notice I’ve used the New International Version here because modern translations render this passage more clearly than the King James Version. The word “righteousness” here very explicitly refers to righteous actions, unlike other words for righteousness in the original language which can refer either to declarative or practical righteousness.

Ellen White speaks of this white raiment as our Lord’s imparted righteousness, which she elsewhere equates with sanctification (MYP 35):

4T 88:

“The True Witness counsels us to buy of Him gold tried in the fire, white raiment, and eyesalve. The gold here recommended as having been tried in the fire, is faith and love. It makes the heart rich, for it has been purged until it is pure, and the more it is tested the more brilliant is its luster. The white raiment is purity of character, the righteousness of Christ imparted to the sinner.”

As anyone who has been in a wedding understands, getting ready is a lot of work! The long checklists of things to do, all the arrangements to make—it’s all very tiring, even frustrating at times. But it is work that the bride and groom perform with joy, because of the ultimate intimacy they anticipate, that will soon be theirs.

Such will be the experience of God’s people as they prepare for translation.