

Salvation by Faith Alone: The Book of Romans

The Faith of Abraham

Lesson #5 for November 4, 2017

Scriptures: Genesis 15:6; 2 Samuel 11; 12; Romans 3:21-23,31; 4:1-17; Galatians 3:19; 1 John 3:4.

1. The *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for October 28 says: "In many ways Romans 4 gets to the foundation of the biblical doctrine of salvation by faith alone." The clear focus of this lesson is on *justification by faith alone*. It should be noted that the word *alone* is not found in the original Greek manuscripts of that verse, but rather, it was added by Martin Luther in his German translation. So, what do we mean when we say that salvation is by faith *alone*?
2. Read Genesis 15:6. This is the famous verse regarding Abraham that was quoted by Paul in Romans 4:3. In the Greek New Testament, Paul used the word *logizomai* to describe that transaction. The Greek lexicon or dictionary goes out of its way to point out that this word means "it is really so." So, what does that, in turn, mean? If salvation is by faith alone, then the trust that Abraham placed in God's promises of an heir were sufficient in God's eyes, and probably in light of the rest of the evidence that God knew about the life of Abraham, that he could be trusted as a future citizen of heaven. What evidence does God need to know if one is safe to admit?
3. Why did God pick Abram, later to be called Abraham? (*Ed* 187.2) Why is Abraham so often used as a great example of faith? (Hebrews 11:8-19; Romans 4; Galatians 4; James 2:21-24) In the original context, it suggests that Abram trusted God's word that he would be given an heir. In Genesis 17:17, after Abraham had tried to help God out by taking Hagar as a secondary wife (Genesis 16) and when God repeated His promise, Abraham just laughed. In Genesis 18, when God repeated His promise again in the presence of Abraham and Sarah, Sarah laughed and then lied that she had laughed. (Genesis 18:9-15) They got their son anyway, so they named him "Laughter"! **So, what does *trust* mean in the context of people who laugh at God's promises? And what does this story tell us about the plan of salvation?**

In Romans 4 Paul reveals three major stages in the plan of salvation: (1) the promise of divine blessing (the promise of grace), (2) the human response to that promise (the response of faith), and (3) the divine pronouncement of righteousness credited to those who believe (justification). That's how it worked with Abraham, and that's how it works with us.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*,* October 28, 2017.

4. What is the meaning of "Abraham believed God, and because of his faith God accepted him as righteous"? (Romans 4:3, *GNB*) Was that a legal transaction? Did any real change take place in Abraham? Why do you think God "accepted" him? One's understanding of both faith and justification are involved in how one understands this phrase.

We need to remember that Romans 3:4 says:

God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, **That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings**, and mightest overcome when thou art judged. (*KJV**)

Certainly not! God must be true, even though every human being is a liar. As the

scripture says, "You must be shown to be right when you speak; you must win your case when you are being tried." (*GNB**) [Bold type is added.]

5. In what sense does God need to be justified? He certainly does not need forgiveness from His sins! This is the same word in Greek that is used for our word *justification*. It means to be "set right" or "put right." Does this help us to understand the real meaning of *justification*?
6. The Greek word translated *justify* is *dikaioō*. But, scholars have done an interesting thing when translating that word. *Dikaios* is translated as *righteous*. *Adikos*, the negative form is translated *unrighteous*. *Dikaiosunē* is translated *righteousness*. But, when scholars translate the verb form of this word, they say, "*Justify*." Why is that? We need a word, *right-ify*. But, in the history of Christianity, the gospel moved west; Rome became the headquarters of the Christian church. So, they eventually wanted the Bible to be in Latin. Jerome spent years translating the Bible into Latin; that version has come to be known as the *Vulgate*. In Latin the word for *right* is *iustitia* from which we get *justify*. In the verb form, it means to be "put right," "set right," or "made right." But the meaning of *justice* in English has dramatically changed over the years. It now has to do with the court system, the police, and legal correctness. We need to go back to the original meaning of the word. Do we ever misrepresent God as we talk about Him?
7. What does it mean to be "accounted righteous" or "accepted as righteous"? Abraham was later called God's friend. (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23) So, why was he called God's friend? Was it not because he chose to do what God asked him to do? What are the requirements for friendship? Don't friends talk together and agree on things? Speaking to Isaac after Abraham's death, God said: "I will bless you, because Abraham obeyed me and kept all my laws and commands." (Genesis 26:5, *GNB**) That was long before the law from Sinai!
8. To be justified is not some legal or accounting process. It means that God, despite knowing all about our past in detail, sees that we really want to be His friends, and He treats us like friends. We may not be able to do all the things that we should. Abraham lied about his wife, twice that we know of. (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18) He took Hagar as a secondary wife in order to get a son. (Genesis 16:1-16) But, Abraham trusted God and was even willing to offer his son Isaac on an altar when God asked him to do that. (Genesis 22) Under those circumstances, God considered Abraham His friend. *Faith* is just a word we use to describe a relationship with God as with a good friend. Abraham was a prime example; and so, God called him a friend.
9. Human beings who take God seriously are very concerned about how they will be saved. Martin Luther, a lawyer, was preoccupied with it. This brings us to a question which has been raised many times on this subject: Does God declare that we are savable because we are? Or, are we savable because God declares it? How does the divine pronouncement actually affect us? Does it matter how sinful we were before God made such a pronouncement?
10. In our previous lesson discussing Romans 3:1-4,25-26, we saw how God took His case into court—the court of the universe—and won because all the evidence was on His side. Through His "blood"—which is a code word for His sacrificial death—Jesus demonstrated the trustworthiness of God's words despite the fact that He had apparently overlooked men's and women's former sins. Notice carefully that Paul repeated this declaration three times! Finally, after this triple pronouncement he said, Oh, yes, and God will put us right if we have faith in Him. Doesn't this suggest that God's righteousness is more important than our justification?
11. In this context, it might be easy for people to jump to the conclusion that obedience to the law is no longer required. Has God, in fact, taken care of everything? Paul came back with one of his most emphatic statements in all of Scripture: "Does this mean that by this faith we do away

with the Law? No, not at all; instead, we uphold the Law.” (Romans 3:31, *GNB**)

12. When these words were written, Paul was fully aware that a short time earlier he had written Galatians 3:19,24 regarding the purpose of the law. There, Paul indicated that it is to protect us and guide us until we grow up enough and become mature enough so that we know that the right thing to do is to go to Christ.
13. But, returning to the example of Abraham, we notice some very interesting facts: 1) This famous promise was made to Abram before the law—as we know it—was given at Sinai. (Exodus 20:3-17) Furthermore, 2) Abraham was descended from a group of pagan idol worshipers! (Joshua 24:2) And 3) Abraham had not yet been circumcised. (Genesis 17:10-14,23-27)
14. David is cited as another example of righteousness by faith. We know a great deal about the life of David. At one time, he had idols in his home. (1 Samuel 19:9-16) He committed adultery and arranged for the murder of Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah. (2 Samuel 11) He was determined to number the children of Israel to see how big an army he could build even though his general advised against it. (2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 21) But, one outstanding thing we do know about David is that when his sins were pointed out, he immediately confessed them, forsook them, and returned to his faith in God. Paul went on to say that happiness came to David because of his trust in God. (Romans 4:6-8)
15. It is very easy to allow religion to become focused on our own behavior. One of the important things to understand about righteousness by faith is that it should focus us away from ourselves and to God. If we do that, we will inevitably be changed by what we see. (*Great Controversy* 555.1)

The sinner must come in faith to Christ, take hold of his merits, lay his sins upon the sin-bearer, and receive his pardon. It was for this cause that Christ came into the world. Thus the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the repenting, believing sinner. He becomes a member of the royal family, a child of the heavenly King, an heir of God, and joint heir with Christ.—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*,* April 5, 1898, par. 11; compare *Selected Messages*,* book 1, 215.1.

16. If *faith* is just a word we use to describe a relationship with Jesus Christ, how does one “come in faith to Christ”? How does one “take hold of His merits”? What are Christ’s merits? How does one “lay his sins upon the Sin Bearer”? These are metaphors that we use all the time; however, do we actually understand what they mean?
17. Think for a moment what *salvation* means. First of all, remember that the Greek word itself means “healing” or “saving.” When God saves us and takes us to heaven, He is saying that we can be trusted to live a life without rebellion, without sin, and without selfishness for the rest of eternity! How could any of us ever in our short lives on this earth demonstrate that level of trustworthiness? Many Christian theologians have looked at this dilemma and suggested that the solution is a legal transaction. The perfect record of Christ’s life on this earth is copied and credited to our account. Thus, it looks like we have lived such a life! If God does that, is He deceiving Himself? Is He trying to deceive the onlooking universe?

A legal religion can never lead souls to Christ; for it is a loveless, Christless religion. Fasting or prayer that is actuated by a self-justifying spirit is an abomination in the sight of God. The solemn assembly for worship, the round of religious ceremonies, the external humiliation, the imposing sacrifice, proclaim that the doer of these things regards himself as righteous, and as entitled to heaven; but it is all a deception. Our own works can never purchase salvation.

—Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages** 280.2.

A legal religion has been thought quite the correct religion for this time. But it is a mistake. The rebuke of Christ to the Pharisees is applicable to those who have lost from the heart their first love. A cold, legal religion can never lead souls to Christ; for it is a loveless, Christless religion. When fastings and prayers are practiced in a self-justifying spirit, they are abominable to God. The solemn assembly for worship, the round of religious ceremonies, the external humiliation, the imposed sacrifice—all proclaim to the world the testimony that the doer of these things considers himself righteous. These things call attention to the observer of rigorous duties, saying, This man is entitled to heaven. But it is all a deception.—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*,* March 20, 1894, par. 9; *Selected Messages*,* book 1, 388.1; 5SDABC* 1098.5.

18. For many of our Christian friends, the solution to this problem is to do away with the law! If we could eliminate the law, then we would not have to worry about meeting its requirements! If we do away with the law, have we done away with sin? (1John 3:4) Then it would not have been necessary for Christ to die. So, one wonders, if God can actually do this, why didn't He do it immediately after Adam and Eve sinned? Or, even better, when Lucifer first rebelled in heaven?
19. Read Romans 4:13. This verse clearly points out that Abraham was not saved by keeping the law. Did Paul overlook Genesis 26:5 (*GNB*) where it says: "Abraham obeyed me and kept all my laws and commands"?
20. Read Romans 4:14-17. Let us try to take apart verse 14 and understand it. It seems to say that if those who try to keep the law are heirs of salvation, then faith is made void and the promise is useless. Why is that? Was Paul assuming that—as we have learned by hard experience—no human being could keep the law, and therefore, none would ever be saved? Compare two other translations of this verse (Romans 4:14):

For if the heirs are produced by legalism, then trust is pointless and the promise worthless. *Jewish New Testament**

If those who get what God gives them only get it by doing everything they are told to do and filling out all the right forms properly signed, that eliminates personal trust completely and turns the promise into an iron-clad *contract*! That's not a holy promise; that's a business deal. *The Message**

21. There are several verses in Scripture suggesting that the principal function of the law is to point out sin. If we turn to considering the ceremonial law and the sacrifices in the Old Testament, the author of Hebrews says plainly that the sacrifices can never take away sin. (Hebrews 10:3-4) If the law is what condemns us, how could it possibly be what saves us or takes away our sin? This leads to the conclusion that since keeping the law could never save us, faith is the only means by which we can be saved. There is no legal system that can save anyone!
22. To many Protestant Christians, the most significant event in the life of Abraham was the time when he was willing to take his son to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him. (Genesis 22) This terrible test came to Abraham apparently because he had failed in other tests earlier in his life. In Genesis 12:10-20, he lied about Sarah being his wife and allowed her to be taken by the Pharaoh as a concubine. In Genesis 20, he did the same thing with Abimelech! In Genesis 16, he thought God was not able to keep His promise; so, he took Hagar as a secondary wife, and thus, Ishmael became his firstborn son. Finally, in his old age—about 120 years of age—Abraham was given this final terrible test. No doubt, Satan was laughing at God and God's friend here on this earth. He must have toured the universe pointing out Abraham's sins saying:

“Look at the kind of people that God calls His friends!” (See 2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23.) But, when Abraham faithfully went through that terrible three-day ordeal without sleeping a wink and finally took the knife in his hand to actually kill his son, God said: “Are there any more questions about the trustworthiness of my friend Abraham?” And the onlooking universe realized that Abraham could be trusted to follow God’s directions explicitly. (PP 155)

23. The principle that man can save himself by his own works lay at the foundation of every heathen religion; it had now [in Jesus’s day] [36] become the principle of the Jewish religion. Satan had implanted this principle. Wherever it is held, men have no barrier against sin.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages** 35.2-36.0. [Words in brackets are added.]
24. What is implied by this passage? In what sense do followers of pagan religions try to save themselves? Aren’t the idols they set up just glorified images of themselves? (Psalm 115:1-8) If a man never looks higher than a glorified image of himself, he will inevitably sink lower. If there was such a thing as a law that could make us righteous or bring life, then, theoretically, everyone could be put right. But, not even God’s law can do that. We are left with no alternative but to turn to God’s promise, following God’s way of righteousness; by beholding we become changed.
25. Have you ever thought that you were capable of keeping the Ten Commandments? All ten of them? Shouldn’t it be possible to keep ten simple rules? If anything is clear in the Bible, it is clear that we cannot succeed in doing that ourselves. But then, amazing as it sounds, if we trust God, He can transform us into the likeness of His Son. Is that just a legal transaction? Or, are we really changed? Is God just pretending? What does it mean to be “saved”/“healed”?
26. Read Romans 8:3 especially the last portion. How does God “deal with sin”? 1 John 3:4 tells us that sin is “lawlessness” or “rebelliousness.” Can a legal transaction overcome rebelliousness? What does it take to overcome rebelliousness?
27. If we take the time to study the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ and understand what actually happened in the light of the great controversy over God’s character and government, what effect would that have on our lives? We would learn that: 1) Sin does indeed lead to death. 2) Sin can even lead to the death of innocent victims. 3) Satan was wrong in all his accusations and claims against God. 4) It is sin—not God—that kills the sinner in the end. 5) By coming forth from His grave in His own power, (John 10:18) Jesus proved that He, in fact, is God, and thus, Lucifer never was on an equal plane with Jesus, thus refuting Lucifer’s earliest claims. 6) If we claim Jesus as our Savior and trust Him with our lives—being completely willing to follow His directions, recognizing that they are always what is best for us—then He will be more than happy to welcome us into His coming kingdom. Thus, the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus make it abundantly clear that God has always been righteous, has always told us the truth, and can be trusted. On the other hand, Satan has lied (John 8:44) and has tried to kill as many of God’s children as he could, even trying to kill God Himself in human form on several occasions. If we accept his temptations, we have chosen him as our leader.
28. God had told the truth when He warned that the wages of sin is death. [Genesis 2:17] In His Son He was dying that death. But God was not executing His Son. He only “gave Him up,” as He will give up the wicked at the end. And though by rights we should have died, God did not ask us to prove the truthfulness of His Word. He sacrificed Himself in His Son.

What more could God do to warn us from our sin and win us back to faith?

If you are a believer and are seeking to do God’s will, what makes you willing to obey?

Could you say, “I do what I do because God has told me to, and He has the power to reward and destroy”? Is this why you don’t murder or commit adultery, because God has said you mustn’t? You would otherwise, but you can’t afford to incur His displeasure.

This might be all right for a beginner or a little child, but it suggests that God’s laws are arbitrary and do not make good sense in themselves. That does not speak very favorably of God.

Would you rather say, “I do what I do as a believer because God has told me to, and I love Him and want to please Him”? Is this why you don’t steal or tell lies? You would see nothing wrong or harmful about doing these things. It is just that you want so much to please God. For some reason He does not like it when you steal or lie, and since He has been so good to us, you feel under some obligation to please Him. It would only be grateful and fair.

Again, this might be all right for a beginner or child. It might even be progress beyond the obedience prompted only by fear of punishment and desire of reward. But it still implies an arbitrariness in God’s commandments and does not speak so well of His character and government.

There is another possible approach to obedience. Could you say this? “I do what I do because I have found it to be right and sensible to do so, and I have increasing admiration and reverence for the One who so advised and commanded me in the days of my ignorance and immaturity.” Then hastening to add, “Being still somewhat ignorant and immature, I am willing to trust and obey the One whose counsel has always proved to be so sensible, when He commands me to do something beyond my present understanding.”—A. Graham Maxwell, *I Want to Be Free* 34,35. [Content in brackets is added.]

29. This lesson has focused on the fact that we are saved by faith alone. But, the Bible also teaches that we are to be judged by our works. Is that why so many people are concerned about the law? (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14; Revelation 20:12-13) If, in fact, we are saved by faith, does it matter that we are judged by our works? Could we be judged guilty and still be saved? Since we are all sinners, aren’t we all guilty and judged guilty? (Romans 3:23,10-18)

Righteousness is obedience to the law. The law demands righteousness, and this the sinner owes to the law; but he is incapable of rendering it. The only way in which he can attain to righteousness is through faith. By faith he can bring to God the merits of Christ, and the Lord places the obedience of His Son to the sinner’s account.—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*,* November 4, 1890, par. 7; 6SDABC* 1073.8; *Selected Messages*,* book 1, 367.1; FW* 101.1; AG* 265.3.

If Satan can succeed in leading man to place value upon his own works as works of merit and righteousness, he knows that he can overcome him by his temptations, and make him his victim and prey. Lift up Jesus before the people. Strike the door-posts with the blood of Calvary’s Lamb, and you are safe.—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*,* September 3, 1889, par. 20.

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*Electronic version.

Info@theox.org

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