

The Gospel as it Really Is:
Romans simply Explained
Salvation has ALWAYS been by faith alone!
Romans 4:1-25
May 18th 2025 MHC & MPC

Introduction

The question most world religions try to answer is this: “How can I please God? How can I get into a right relationship with him? And the answer the majority have given, across the board, is this: “Engage in these good works— (live a good life) and / or do these religious duties such as prayers or fastings or offerings. To please Allah, as a good Muslim, for example, you must fulfil the Five Pillars of Islam:

1. declaration of faith (Shahada),
2. prayer (Salah),
3. charity (Zakat),
4. fasting (Sawm),
5. and pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj).

The Good News of Jesus Christ gives a very different answer to the question “How can I get right with God?” The Gospel says:

1. Number 1: we can do nothing to get right with God, because you and I are sinners in thought, word and deed.
2. But God, Number 2, out of his abounding mercy and love towards sinners, offers to us his righteousness, that makes us acceptable to him
3. Number 3: this righteousness has been accomplished by Jesus Christ, through his life, death and resurrection
4. Number 4: it is a completely free gift!
5. Number 5: we receive this gift merely by believing, by faith (not by doing any good works or performing any religious duties!)

It's these last two points in particular that make the Christian Gospel so radically unique—salvation is a *free gift* that we *receive merely by believing*.

Someone in one of our discussion groups yesterday, on our Men's Away Day, said “The Gospel is almost too good to be true!” God offers a full pardon of all our sins and all the blessings of heaven, as a free gift. All we have to do is believe! - Not do lots of good works to earn his favour! Not engage in a wearisome multitude of religious duties in order to appease God! Just believe! That's it!

In Romans chapter 4, we learn a simple truth, that salvation has *ALWAYS* been by faith alone! We

are not to think: “In the past salvation was by doing good works, but in the Gospel salvation is by faith!”

No, Paul goes all the way back to Abraham, the archetypal, the classic man of faith, and shows that he became the friend of God, not because he lived a “good life” or because his life was filled with “religious rites,” such as circumcision, No, Abraham became the friend of God simply *by believing God*, that’s all!

Now let me tell you *something very important* before we run through this chapter line by line. Why was this chapter written? Because there is an ever-present tendency for true inner faith to decline into outward religion. The Judaism of Paul’s day was the true faith of Abraham and David gone to seed.

Have you wondered why we have not mentioned the pope in the last month or so? Either the deceased pope or the new one? Perhaps you think we have been narrow-minded or parochial? There’s only one reason and it is this: No institution in the world better illustrates the slide from inner true faith to outward formal religion than the RC Church. There are, no doubt, true believers in the Roman Catholic Church, but *the system* which we saw on display, the ornate buildings, the red robes, the grand ceremonies, the outward pomp, has nothing *whatsoever* to do with the simplicity of New Testament faith!

I mention the RC Church because its been in the news. But here’s the important thing; lest any one of us take the spiritual high ground: true faith can go to seed in *any* human heart, in *any* true church, in *any* church denomination. The moment we lose the wonder of salvation *by faith alone*, the moment we begin to think that our baptism or christening, our prayers, our good works, our church attendance or our service is earning us spiritual brownie points in heaven, we are on the dangerous and downward slide from true and joyful inner faith Christianity to outward religion!

So let me ask you—do you think you are in a right relationship with God because you are a good person? Or because you’re life is filled with religious duties? Or do you believe that you have been put right with God simply and only because you believe in Jesus Christ?

Let’s make our way through Romans chapter 4; such an important chapter, you’ll need to don your thinking caps.

Abraham was made right with God by faith

What does the story of Abraham reveal?

“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?”

Every Jew honoured Abraham as the supreme example of a righteous man. Some even believed

that he had lived a perfect life. What do we learn from him about this “salvation by faith alone”?

If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.

If Abraham earned righteousness by his good works he would have had something to boast about: “God, you must let me into heaven because I have lived a good life.” But he wouldn't have been able to boast to God because Paul has just proved that everyone—and that includes Abraham—is a sinner.

(What does God say?)

Paul quotes Genesis 15:6:

“What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Abraham simply believed God and God credited him with righteousness. “Abraham you are now righteous in my sight *because* of your faith.”

The word “credit” is about giving not earning

“Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.”

If Abraham had worked for his salvation, words like “wages” or “obligation” would have been used, not the word “credit.” The word credit is all about giving— you give me your bank details and I will *credit* you with £100. Credit = gift.

And it's not just the story of Abraham that teaches salvation by faith alone...

“David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 7 “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. 8 Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.” (psalm 32)

David acknowledges he is a forgiven sinner but there's no hint in this psalm that he had *earned* forgiveness! It was free!

(Circumcision came after faith, not before)

Paul has now conclusively proven that salvation is given freely by simply believing. But he knows that religious people reading his letter, both then and today, will say “what about religious ceremonies, don't they count towards my salvation?” “I've been christened or confirmed or baptised

or become a member, don't those things count towards my salvation?" (In Paul's day it was the religious rite of circumcision—doesn't circumcision count towards my salvation?)

"9 Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. 10 Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!"

Abraham was declared righteous in God's eyes *before* he was circumcised! (about 14 years before!) So *that religious ritual* had nothing to do with his salvation.

11 "And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised."

The religious rite of circumcision was merely an outward symbol of the inner faith that he already possessed. Stay with me!

"So then, Abraham is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. 12 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."

Since Abraham had faith before he had circumcision, without circumcision, he is the spiritual father of *everyone who has faith*, whether that person is circumcised or not.

The blessings also came by faith, not works

There's more! All the other blessings that God promised Abraham: descendants as many as the sand on the seashore, a land of his own, blessings to himself and to the world through him! All those blessings also came just by believing, not as a reward for obeying the ten commandments.

13 It was not through the law (that is obeying the 10 commandments) that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. 14 For if those who depend on the law are heirs (heirs that is to God's promises), faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, 15 because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

Paul's words may be difficult, but the meaning is plain.

Abraham didn't have the 10 commandments—they were given 430 years later—so God could not make his promised blessings to Abraham dependent on Abraham obeying those unknown ten commandments. {When we read the story of Abraham's life we need to go easy on the mistakes he made because Abraham didn't have the ten commandments (where there is no law there is no transgression").}

And besides God can't go changing the conditions of his promises to Abraham and his descendants. He can't make his promises free of charge to Abraham and then 430 years later turn round and say to Abraham's descendants, "Oh by the way, if you want all my blessings you'll have to obey the 10 commandments," that would make the promise worthless.

"Law" is a very different animal from "promise", teaches Paul! Promise is about blessing, law is about failure and therefore wrath

All the grand promises of God were given to Abraham just because he believed—and there was a good reason for this:

Verses 16-17 Therefore, 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. He is the father of us all. 17 As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He 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." (what an awesome God)

If the promises of God came to Abraham because he had the ten commandments, then all the promises of God would only apply to the Jewish nation who were in possession of the commandments. But because the promises were received by faith, everyone who just believes will enjoy the promises of God! All the wonderful promises that come with salvation, such as peace with God, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the hope of heaven come to us by faith, not by obedience to the law.

Isn't faith amazing!

Paul ends his account of Abraham by showing us how amazing faith is. God had promised Abraham when he was 75 years old that he would be the father of many nations! As the years rolled on and he was approaching 100 and his wife was clearly barren, humanly speaking this promise became more impossible, but Abraham kept on believing!

18 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." 19 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. 20 Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

Faith is a mighty gift from God! (I wish my charismatic and Pentecostal friends would big-up the gift of faith in the same way they exalt the gifts of tongues or prophecy or healing!)

22 This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." 23 The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, 24 but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. 25 He was delivered over to death

for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Those precious words “it was credited to him” apply not only to Abraham, but to everyone who has faith in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and was raised to make us righteous in God's eyes.

Here's a Summary of Romans chapter 4

How do you and I get right with God? And how do we receive all the great promised blessings of the Gospel? Merely by believing, by faith alone! That has *always* been the way of salvation, from Abraham to today.

What does this all mean for us today?

1) A warning—don't allow true faith to turn into works!

First a warning—don't allow true faith turn into a religion of works. The very moment we add anything to faith, as a requirement for salvation or the blessings of salvation—whether we add christening, confirmation, baptism, church membership, whatever—we are moving from the pure Gospel of salvation by faith ALONE to salvation by works. Christians and churches can drift imperceptibly from salvation by faith to salvation by works.

2) A great comfort

Secondly, Romans 4 should bring great comfort to every true believer. You know you are a sinner, you are sorry and lament your sin. Perhaps you are walking through one of the penitential psalms even today. Listen! If you have faith—just faith! - then all the blessings of heaven belong to you!

3) An invitation

And finally an invitation. Not far from here, nestled on the Malvern Hills, is the Wyche Free Chapel. In years gone by, during the summer, the good folks there would offer free cream teas to weary walkers. The man who ran this good work told me that every year exactly the same thing happened. The kids would come running up to the tables and eagerly grab a scone and drink. But the adults would stand at a distance with a quizzical look on their faces. Free gift? Can't possibly take that. Some of them would offer to pay, others insist on despite every “It's a free gift!”

Today, God offers you the free gift of salvation, all you must do is believe the message! But you must come with child-like faith and humble open hands.