

FAITH ALONE (*SOLA FIDE*)**ROMANS 4**

R. C. Sproul is a well known Bible teacher and scholar. He tells an interesting story about a conversation he had years ago with his son who was just a young boy at the time. Sproul asked his son a question, "Suppose you died tonight and appeared before God at the door into Heaven and He asked you, 'Why should I let you into My Heaven,' what would you say?" Sproul was interested to know what kind of response his son would offer. His son answered, "I'd say, 'Well, God, I'm dead, aren't I?'" Sproul's son apparently believed, at the time, all that was necessary to enjoy an eternal relationship with God in Heaven was to die. You could say he believed in "justification by death"! Sproul realized his son didn't grasp yet the fact there's nothing automatic about spending eternity with God in Heaven. It's not just the inevitable, default result when you die. Instead, the Bible makes it clear every human being needs to be saved. Rescued. We're all sinners who have earned God's judgment. Salvation is by God's grace through faith in what Jesus did by paying the penalty for our sin on the cross. Only then are we justified before God – declared "not guilty" of our sins and accepted by God as being right or in good standing with Him. No one is ever justified by death. Instead, justification is by God's grace alone through faith alone.

This morning we conclude a message series on the five *solas* that came out of the Protestant Reformation – a God-orchestrated event that rescued biblical Christianity. We are Protestant Christians, so it's been appropriate to remember something of our heritage. Now, Latin was sort of the official language among European scholars and leaders 500 years ago. *Sola* is the Latin word for alone. The five *solas* were the five most important concepts or convictions that emerged from the Protestant Reformation. We've considered for the glory of God alone. Christ alone. The Bible alone. Grace alone. Today, we look at faith alone. These represent five core convictions for all followers of Jesus for all time. Today, then, we consider *sola fide*. Faith alone. Let's begin with this thought.

FAITH ALONE IS HOW I BEGIN A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

God used the great Christian leader, Paul, to help us understand this great truth. Paul argued that faith alone was always the way human beings begin a relationship with God. Abraham was his great example. Let's read what Paul wrote. Abraham was the father of the Jewish people and the very first Christians were all Jews. But within a few decades of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, an increasing number of non-Jews had become followers of Jesus. Paul rightly saw this as being God's plan all along. He'd always wanted to rescue all humanity not just the Jewish people. Paul recognized Abraham had been made right with God by faith and faith alone. So, Abraham was also the spiritual father of these non-Jewish converts. From Abraham's life, we learn salvation isn't through personal morality. The Bible says, "If his good deeds had made him acceptable to God, he would have had something to boast about. But that was not God's way. For the Scriptures (Paul was quoting Genesis 15:6 there) tell us, 'Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith.'" (Rom. 4:2-3 NLT)

In addition, no one could argue Abraham made himself acceptable to God by keeping the Law of Moses because he lived 400 years before Moses. There was no Law of Moses yet to keep! But let's suppose Abraham adhered to some moral code of behavior given to him by God. The Bible says, "Clearly, God's promise to give the whole earth to Abraham and his descendants was based not on his obedience to God's law, but on a right relationship with God that comes by faith." (Rom. 4:13 NLT) Most people in the world today still believe God accepts you on the basis of how good you are, how many good deeds you do, and if your good deeds outnumber your bad deeds. In other words, your personal morality. But Scripture clearly teaches that salvation – a relationship with God - isn't through personal morality.

From Abraham's life we also learn that salvation isn't through religious rituals. The issue in Romans 4 was circumcision – a religious ritual God initiated with Abraham. We read there, "Well, we have been saying that Abraham was counted as righteous by God because of his faith. But how did this happen? Was he counted as righteous only after he was circumcised, or was it before he was circumcised? Clearly, God accepted Abraham before he was circumcised! Circumcision was a sign that Abraham already had faith and that God had already accepted him and declared him to be righteous—even before he was circumcised." (Rom. 4:9-11 NLT) I doubt any Christians today believe getting circumcised also punches your ticket for Heaven. But many Christians certainly do believe performing certain religious rituals somehow make you acceptable to God. In my years as a pastor, I've spoken with people who pretty much believe getting baptized gets you into Heaven. Others equate church membership or just going to church with automatically being a follower of Jesus. Partaking of the Lord's Supper is thought by some to secure your acceptance by God. Baptism, joining a church, and receiving the Lord's Supper are all important, valuable Christian rituals, but none of them have the spiritual power to get a relationship with God started. That's because salvation – a relationship with God - isn't produced through religious rituals.

The whole point of Romans 4 is that salvation – a relationship with God – is by grace alone through faith alone. *Sola fide*. The Bible says, "We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are." (Rom 3:22 NLT) What is faith? The word itself has many different shades of meaning, so the better question is what is saving faith? What does the Bible mean by faith? It means putting all of my trust in someone else. Let's say you get sick and you go to the doctor. He writes you out a prescription that you can't read, but fortunately your pharmacist can. You take the bottle home, but you don't leave it on the kitchen counter. Because you trust your doctor, you take the medicine. You receive it into your body and you get better eventually. Or, let's say you're accused of a serious crime. You're scared and you call the best attorney in town. He conducts an investigation and when you go to court to stand trial, you simply sit back and allow him to plead your case. He does his job well and you're acquitted. You put your trust in that attorney, and as a result, you walk out of that court room a free person.

Saving faith isn't knowing all the important facts about Jesus. Biblical faith isn't admiring Jesus for being a great Person. Saving faith is when you stop trusting in yourself to get on the right side of God and, instead, you put all of your trust in Jesus and what He's done for you at the cross and the empty tomb. When you do that, you receive the grace God has extended to you. You're declared right with God and your sins are forgiven. Your eternal relationship with God begins and it will never end.

One way to remember how grace and faith work together is a simple illustration. I hold in my hand a \$20 bill and I offer it to you. It's a gift. I'm not returning a loan to you. You've done nothing to deserve or earn my gift. When does the \$20 actually become yours? When you take it from my hand, put it in your pocket, and buy lunch with it or whatever. That completes the transaction. In a similar way, God offers salvation to you, me, or anyone. That's the \$20 bill. God doesn't owe salvation to anyone. No one deserves or earns it. It's a gift. Now, that's grace. That's where salvation always begins. The grace of God alone. Sola gratia. But something else needs to happen if I'm ever to experience God's grace personally. I have to reach out and take the gift. I have to appropriate it for myself. I must receive it. Now, that happens through faith. Faith is how I lay hold of everything Jesus has done for me. The Bible says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." (Eph. 2:8-9 NIV) Faith alone completes the transaction grace alone made possible. Sola fide.

Think about this as well. Salvation can only be certain and sure if it's accessed by faith alone. If your relationship with God depended on keeping a set of laws, living up to some standard of personal morality, or performing religious rituals, how would you know you've ever done enough? How do you know for sure if you've been honest enough, moral enough, or gone to church enough? You could never be certain you'd done enough. But if a relationship with God is based on what He has done, then I can be certain about it. God is always faithful. He never lies. He never breaks His promises. I can be confident because my confidence is based on God not on me.

It's also true that because salvation is by faith alone, a relationship with God is truly available to any and to all. The Bible implies that when it says, "So the promise is received by faith. It is given as a free gift. And we are all certain to receive it, whether or not we live according to the law of Moses, if we have faith like Abraham's. For Abraham is the father of all who believe." (Rom. 4:16 NLT) If a relationship with God depends on my personal morality, but I was born into a family that cared less about God and His standards of right and wrong, I'd be at a distinct disadvantage. But if a relationship with God is accessed by faith, then salvation is open to everyone. All are invited and welcome. A relationship with God is offered to everyone regardless of who you are or what you've done. Salvation is available to good people and bad people, rich people and poor people, educated and uneducated people, people who've been to church thousands of times and those who've never set foot inside a church building ever. We're all on the same level before God. If you're excluded, it's only because you've excluded yourself. It's only because you prefer to shake your fist at God, or because you prefer your own miserably inadequate morality, or because you're

convinced God is impressed by your religious rituals for some reason. A relationship with God is by grace alone through faith alone. *Sola fide*. Faith alone is how you, I, or anyone begins a relationship with God. Now, here's an additional thought.

FAITH IS HOW I PERPETUATE A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

There's been much debate among followers of Jesus about the relationship of faith and living a godly life and doing good deeds. One reason is because we find Scripture passages that apparently contradict each other. For example, the Bible says, "So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law." (Rom 3:28 NLT) But, in another place, it says, "What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless." (Jam. 2:14, 17 NLT) A contradiction, right? Not really. If we had the time today, we'd see the biblical writers were dealing with different issues. What the Bible teaches overall, however, is completely consistent. My faith must change how I live. Saving, biblical, real faith always affects what we do and how we live. It's just inevitable.

We all recognize the difference between what I actually believe and what I think I believe. I believe if I touch fire, I'll get burned. As a result, I don't touch a hot stove. I believe in gravity. Therefore, I don't jump off the roof of tall buildings. There's complete consistency between what I believe and how I act. When it comes to what I believe about God and following Jesus, my actions speak louder than my words. When the Bible says faith without good deeds is worthless, it's not saying you need to go out and engage in ten good deeds or maintain perfect personal morality for ten straight days in order to be saved. Instead, it's making the point that if you claim to believe something, but your actions contradict your words or thoughts, then you don't actually believe what you thought you believed. When it comes to faith – what you believe - your actions are a more reliable indicator than your words.

Martin Luther, the great champion of justification by faith alone, made the same point. "Faith is a living, creative, active, and powerful thing. Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn't stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing. Anyone who does not do good works in this manner is an unbeliever." In other words, if you call yourself a follower of Jesus, but you actively hate people, you sleep with people you're not married to, you disdain people of other races, you despise poor people, you cheat on your taxes, you have no interest in reading the Bible, you could care less about spiritually lost people, and you tell lies, why should anyone think your "faith" in Jesus is genuine? Why should anyone consider you to be a Christian? It's just as impossible to separate godly living and good deeds from saving faith as it is to separate heat and light from fire. It can't be done. My faith must change how I live. Saving, biblical, real faith always affects what we do and how we live. It's just inevitable.

Here's another way faith perpetuates my relationship with God. My faith will be tested. Abraham might be the best example of that truth in the entire Bible. One day God came

to him and said, "I want you to get up and leave your home, your extended family, and everything familiar and go to a different part of the world, because I want to give that land to you and reveal Myself to you there." His faith was tested. Later on, God promised Abraham a son would be born to him and a great people would be descended from him. Abraham and his wife were old people when God gave him that promise. Abraham had to believe God would perform a miracle. His faith was tested. When that miracle son, Isaac, was a young man, God came to Abraham yet again and said, "Go up to that mountain and kill your son, Isaac, as a sacrifice to Me." That was the greatest test of Abraham's faith. No, Isaac did not die. Abraham was fully prepared to kill his son believing God would raise him from the dead, but God spared Isaac's life.

Granted, that was an extreme test of faith. But I want to remind you and myself that God will allow our faith in Him to be tested. It might be through a terminal illness – either yours or someone you love. It might be through a child who brings you constant grief because of his or her lifestyle choices. It might be through great difficulties in your marriage or in a divorce. It might come through losing a job or experiencing a major financial reversal. It might come through unfulfilled dreams or ambitions. Faith tests come in all shapes and sizes. Faith tests are never enjoyable or pleasant. They stretch us and challenge us in ways that are always uncomfortable. Sometimes it seems like life is kind of a series of faith tests with periods of relative calm and peace in between the tests. God appears to be fascinated by how you and I will answer His question, "Will you trust Me in this test? Will you continue to have faith in Me for this test?"

Just remember something else about your faith and mine as we continue to interact with and relate to God. My faith will be imperfect. You will pass some tests. You will fail others. Again, Abraham is our great example. Yes, he is celebrated here in Romans 4 and elsewhere in the New Testament as the model for faith. But if you know his story, you know his faith wasn't perfect at all. Sometimes Abraham's faith was downright unimpressive. On two occasions, Abraham tried to pass off his exceptionally beautiful wife, Sarah, as his sister because he was afraid he was going to get killed by some powerful man who would then take Sarah as his wife. Abraham certainly had no faith God was going to protect him. But there was an even bigger failure than that one. After waiting eleven years to get pregnant with no success, Sarah said to Abraham, "I know what God promised us, but we've been waiting a long time. We're not getting any younger. Why don't you sleep with my servant girl, Hagar, and get her pregnant? Then, we'll just raise her son as our son. Let's help God out." Did Abraham say, "Oh, no, Sarah, we have to trust God"? No, Abraham agreed it was a good idea. It ended up being an unmitigated disaster and everyone got hurt.

Why does the Bible honor Abraham's faith when the story of Abraham in the Bible itself reveals a kind of mediocre, inconsistent, and imperfect faith? Well, here's a final thought today about faith. My faith must focus on the object of my faith, not the quality of my faith. The hero of Abraham's story isn't Abraham. The hero is God. Abraham put his faith in the right God and that made all the difference. A Muslim might have more faith than you. A Hindu might have more faith than you. A secular humanist might have more faith than you. But they've all put their faith in the wrong god. It's

better to put just a little faith in a big God than big faith in a little god. It's better to put faith – even if it's small faith - in the one, true, real God than to put faith - even if it's impressive faith – in a god who doesn't exist or can't do anything. This is good news. This is why Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, if you had faith even as small as a mustard seed, you could say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it would move. Nothing would be impossible.” (Mt. 17:20 NLT) What matters isn't the size of your faith; what matters is the size of your God.

In what we read today, it says, “For Abraham is the father of all who believe.... This happened because Abraham believed in the God....” (Rom. 4:16-17 NLT) Wait just a minute now. What God is that? What kind of God is that? “... the God who brings the dead back to life and who creates new things out of nothing.” (Rom. 4:17 NLT) James Dunn, a Bible scholar, put it like this, "The character of Abraham's faith is determined by the character of the God in whom he believed." Abraham's hope was never in the strength of his own faith; his hope was in God. What God? The God who created all things. The God who called into being things that did not exist before. The God who called the dead to life. What do you do when you feel like you don't trust God enough? What do you do when you want to believe that you're saved by faith alone, but you feel like you don't have enough faith? Just keep walking and living by faith. The Bible says, “And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith.” (Heb. 12:1-2 NLT) That's what I see in the life of Abraham. Don't worry about whether or not you have enough faith. Don't focus on the quality of your faith; focus instead on the object of your faith – the Lord Jesus Christ.

You've undoubtedly been on an elevator that bears his name. Otis elevators have been the industry standard for more than 150 years. While Elisha Otis didn't invent the elevator, he did devise the braking system that ensured its safety. At the time, most elevators were little more than open platforms, and they'd come apart and people would be seriously injured if the cable broke. Without a trustworthy braking system, building heights were limited to only six stories. With it, the sky was the limit. The braking system for elevators made modern skyscrapers possible. But initially Elisha Otis had trouble selling his elevators. In 1853, he concocted a creative sales pitch at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in Manhattan. Every hour at the exposition, the World's Fair of its day, Otis stepped into his machine. He gave the order to an assistant who cut the rope. The crowd held its breath. The brake kicked in, the elevator stopped and Otis announced: "All safe, gentlemen. All safe." Because the demonstration was so effective Otis quickly sold his first three elevators for \$300 apiece. Today, New York City alone has about 70,000 elevators, and it's estimated that the equivalent of the world's population travels on an Otis elevator, escalator, or moving walkway every three days.

When you step onto an elevator confidently, is your confidence based on the quality of your faith? Of course not! Your confidence is based in the object – the elevator. And when it comes to salvation – having a relationship with God - is your confidence based on the quality of your faith? How weak or strong your faith feels today? Of course not! Your confidence is based in the object of your faith - the Lord Jesus Christ. *Sola fide.* Faith alone.