

HOW CAN WE BE JUSTIFIED BY FAITH?

Paul has established a lot of things in the opening three chapters of his Letter to the Romans especially about the purpose and work of God the Father and Jesus Christ His Son. When things were hopeless for mankind God acted by causing His Son to be born. Jesus was born as a man among men and women to show us how to live and especially to demonstrate that God was absolutely right to condemn sin. Jesus showed sin up for what it is – wilful disobedience to God’s law, that should stop now!

The problem is that we can’t stop because sin has a hold on us. This is partly because our nature prompts us to disobey God so that it is natural for us to want to please ourselves. When we do that, we find that we get into a pattern of disobedience which is extremely addictive. We like pleasing ourselves!

So how do we break the cycle and strike out in a different direction? How can we become acceptable to God and be forgiven for all the past misdeeds and bad things we have already done? This is the vital truth Paul now explains to the readers of his letter. He shows that God offers us a way of salvation which relies more on the things we *believe* than on the things we *do*. The things we do are important by way of confirming what we believe but, by themselves, they can never save us. We can never be acceptable to God by our actions alone.

❖ “Just and the Justifier”

We have already established that everyone without exception has disobeyed God’s law. Everybody was “guilty” in His holy sight because everyone had broken His law (Romans 3:19,23). God provided Jesus so that men and women could be declared “Not guilty”. He did this by working with Jesus to show us what righteousness is really like. How lovely and how appealing it is when somebody lives completely free of the power of sin, as only Jesus ever has. And how awful sin is: for sinners put that lovely man to death in a cruel and humiliating way.

God had to be shown to be *just* – to be right in the way He has gone about things in every respect. But He also wanted to save as many as possible, by *justifying* or *forgiving* them. God showed how serious He is about destroying sin by providing a Son and then asking him to die as a sacrifice for sin. Jesus did this willingly, as an act of submission and total obedience. So the death of Christ demonstrated both:

- ✓ *the gracious kindness and love of God and the Lord Jesus, and*
- ✓ *the awfulness of sin (the terrible excesses to which sinners will go).*

The death of the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished two things, as Paul explains:

“This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be [1] just and [2] the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:25,26).

God has to be just in His dealings – He cannot be otherwise. It is impossible for God to deal with matters in an unjust way. But He could have shown His justice in some way less favourable to mankind. For example, He could have destroyed the world that He created: the wickedness of man certainly deserved that. But because God is also loving and merciful, He is at present giving all men and women the opportunity to repent of their sins. When a person is truly repentant their attitude allows God both to be “*just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*”.

❖ Having Faith

‘Faith’ is another Scriptural term with a quite specific meaning. Nowadays people use the word loosely to mean all sorts of different things; they talk about having faith in something when they really mean ‘hoping for the best’. When the Bible uses that term it means quite specifically ‘*believing in God and in His promises*’. One whole chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews is taken up with key information about people who believed God. In it the writer explains what a difference faith made to their lives because it affected the choices they made and the things they did. He describes faith as something that gave them assurance and conviction (Hebrews 11:1). Then he demonstrates what it meant for people like this:

God's People	What their faith required of them
Noah	<i>"Being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (11:7)</i>
Abraham	<i>"Obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise" (11:8,9)</i>
Moses	<i>"Refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward (11:24-26)</i>

The important thing about these three faithful people, and something that is true of all those who get mentioned in this chapter, is that they believed in something specific. And what they believed was just as important as the way they believed it. If you were asked "Do you have Noah's faith?" you might think the questioner was asking: 'Do you have enough trust and confidence in God to do something about your own salvation?' But the real question is, 'Do you believe, as Noah did, that God is about to destroy our society, and will you find a safe hiding place in that day?' In other words, what we believe is a vital part of living by faith. Only then can we consider how much we believe those things.

❖ God's Coming Judgement

The apostle Peter said that God doesn't *want* people destroyed. Because of His long patience, He is waiting for them to respond to His gracious invitation to be saved from sin. But Peter also said that such waiting time is limited and that eventually judgement will come. Paul says exactly the same: a day of God's wrath and anger is coming when the world will be called to account and the present evil age of human rule will come to an end. In its place God will establish His new society – a world ruled over by the Lord Jesus Christ. Here are a few Scriptures that explain God's intention and which warn us of the importance of doing something about it:

*"Do you suppose ... that you will escape the judgement of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgement will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: **to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but **glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek****" (Romans 2:3-10);*

*"We will all stand before the judgement seat of God; for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So then **each of us will give an account of himself to God.**" (14:10-12);*

*"Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all ... so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed ... **Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it**" (Luke 17:26-33);*

*"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but **now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead**" (Acts 17:30,31).*

❖ "What must I do?"

Just by collecting those verses we can see some of the things we must do if we want to be saved from God's wrath when His judgements fall.

- Seek for glory, honour and immortality – another reminder in passing that we are, in fact, mortal beings who need to become immortal;
- Patiently try to do the things that are right in God’s sight and stop doing the things He tells us are wrong;
- Live in awareness of the fact that one day we will have to give an account of ourselves to God;
- Be willing to give up things in this life, so that we can obtain the life to come;
- Repent of our wrong way of life and become focused on God, His purpose and His Word.

One thing is very clear: we can never live a good enough life to satisfy the righteous requirements of God’s Law. Try as we might, we cannot earn eternal life by the things we do. Our lives are just not deserving of glory, honour and immortality. Eternal life has to be a gift of God’s grace, as Paul confirms:

*“When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. **For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord**” (Romans 6:20-23).*

We all deserve to die because of the way we live, but God offers us eternal life as a free gift of His grace. Paul argues that we will want to live better lives to show God how much we appreciate His gift. But how is it that God will give us eternal life in the first place? What do we have to do to become eligible? We have to believe God or, to put it in Bible terminology: we need *faith* if we are to be justified.

❖ **Justified by Faith**

This is something the apostle Paul taught over and over again, and it is quite understandable that he should put it right at the centre of his teaching. He had been brought up to understand that you were saved by keeping the commands of the Law that God had given through Moses. He believed that obedience was the key, and that meant keeping the sabbath law and the feasts, making the required offerings, and observing the meticulous rules and regulations which governed a Jew’s everyday life. By Paul’s day those rules were a mixture of commandments that God had given and others that men had added. They had been interpreted by various Jewish teachers in a way which made them a lot more complicated than God had intended. But Jews were expected to keep all of them, complicated or not!

Putting all those things together produced a way of life which Paul described as *“a law of works”* (Romans 3:27). The principle was that if you could keep the various laws you would get eternal life; but if you failed to keep them you got nothing! The more he had thought about it and the more earnestly he had tried to earn eternal life, the more he had realised what a failure he was. He describes his eventual sense of utter frustration later in the letter (in Romans chapter 7). Then, one day, everything became clear – blindingly clear!

On the way to Damascus to arrest and imprison some people who believed in Jesus, Saul the Pharisee met the risen Lord Jesus Christ. It was a vision in which Jesus appeared to him, brighter than the midday sun. The account of Saul’s conversion is to be found three times in the Acts of the Apostles – it’s that important! For Saul, who later took the Latin name Paul, it turned his life upside down. The things he had thought right were suddenly seen to be wrong; and those things that he had once despised, he now came to accept as true. The works that he had been doing – persecuting, arresting, imprisoning and executing those who believed in Jesus – now condemned him. He had thought he would be saved by those works. Now he realised that he would be condemned by them and that realisation stayed with him for the rest of his life. Writing to Timothy, over twenty years after his conversion, Paul said:

*“I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because **he judged me faithful**, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and **the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus**. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience **as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life**. To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory forever and ever. Amen” (1 Timothy 1:12-17).*

It came as a shock to Paul, blinded as he was by the glory of the risen Christ, to be told what it was he was to do (Acts 9:6): *“Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name”* (Acts 22:16). That was all he had to do to be justified in God’s sight – to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and to be baptized into his saving name. No feasts, no sacrifices, no tithes, no priests – all the things that he had before reckoned as vital were now seen to have become unnecessary. Belief in Jesus and in the promises of God had swept them all away.

Paul’s personal appreciation of salvation influenced his preaching. He made it a key part of his presentation of the gospel that we are saved by faith and not works. It is what we believe and who we believe in that is crucial to our salvation. Paul became an avid preacher of the gospel straight away, wanting to testify to Jesus in Damascus, to persuade the Jewish community there (Acts 9:19-22). What he preached there is only briefly mentioned – that Jesus is the Son of God and the Christ (the Messiah). When longer accounts of his teaching are given, and in his letters, like that to the Romans, you can easily see the same theme developed further.

It’s time we did some work in Romans again. If you read through the first ten chapters, notebook at the ready, see what sort of list you can compile to show what Paul says there about justification by faith. Then compare your findings with this table:

Romans	Justification by Faith
1:16,17	<i>“the gospel ... is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’”</i>
3:21-24	<i>“now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law ... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”</i>
4:5	<i>“to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness”</i>
4:9	<i>“faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness ... the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised”</i>
4:13	<i>“the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith”</i>
5:1,2	<i>“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God”</i>
9:30-32	<i>“Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but ... Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works”</i>
10:9,10	<i>“if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved”</i>
10:17	<i>“faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”</i>

This is not a comprehensive list as there are other references to faith in Romans. But it gives an overall impression of how important the theme is in Paul's thinking. We cannot earn salvation; instead we are entirely dependent on God's mercy and kindness towards us. The gift of eternal life is His to give as He sees fit and the marvellous thing is that God wants to give it to us. He cannot do so, however, unless we accept that He was and is right in His attitude towards sin, and we need to show that we accept that by confessing it to Him.

That confession is made public by baptism into the saving name of Jesus – something Paul explains in detail in Romans chapter 6 – and it has to follow a proper understanding of the gospel. For if we are to be justified by the things that we believe, clearly we have to understand those things first.

❖ Understanding the Gospel

There is a pattern in the Acts of the Apostles which shows us what “justification by faith” meant in practice in first century days. When the gospel was preached by the apostles, people were taught about the purpose of God, centred in the work of the Lord Jesus. There are several accounts of talks that were given, in Jerusalem, Asia and Europe, usually either by Peter or Paul. They were the two leading apostles, for Jews and Gentiles respectively. You can examine those talks for yourself by reading Acts chapters 2, 3, 7, 13 or 17.

Jewish listeners were very well acquainted with the Old Testament Scriptures, so it was customary to demonstrate how Jesus had fulfilled the promises made in those Scriptures. However, it was all new to most Gentile listeners; so a rather different approach was appropriate when preaching to them. Paul made it his practice to start his preaching at the Jewish synagogue in the towns he visited, if there was one. But he usually got a better response from Gentiles.

As Romans 9:30-32 says (in the table we have compiled above), Jews were often insistent on working their way into God's Kingdom. They did not want to abandon the past and to believe new things. Yet faith would only come if they heard the Word of God and listened to what it had to say about Jesus Christ. This is equally true for us. Here's a quick analysis of one of Paul's Bible Talks, this one given in a place called Antioch, in modern Turkey, in a Jewish synagogue. You can read the full text in Acts chapter 13.

- 1 God chose the nation of Israel when they were in Egypt so He rescued them from there and brought them to the land of Canaan as an inheritance (13:16-20);
- 2 He then gave them judges and later kings – the second king being David who was “*a man after my heart, who will do all my will*” (13:21-22);
- 3 Jesus is the long-promised descendant of King David, whose coming was announced by John the Baptist (13:23-25);
- 4 Now the message of salvation that Jesus preached has come to you. It was not understood by the people of Jerusalem which was why Jesus was executed, just as the Scriptures had predicted (13:26-29);
- 5 God raised Jesus from the dead and he then appeared to many people. We are witnesses of what happened and bring you the good news that “*what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus*” (13:30-33);
- 6 All that happened is in fulfilment of the Scriptures – Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 55:3 and Psalm 16:10 (these are the Scriptures Paul quoted). Jesus fulfilled them. King David is now dead and his body has corrupted away; not so Jesus (13:33-37);
- 7 “*Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that **through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything** from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses*” (13:39);
- 8 Take care that you understand these things, because the Scriptures warn that Jews might not believe the great work that God is doing in their midst (13:40,41). (This warning was taken from Habakkuk 1:5.)

❖ Check Your Own Understanding

The benefit of a summary like this is that you can see at a glance the sort of things that were taught in the first century – things that comprised the original gospel taught by the apostles. That list is fairly typical of the message then being preached to a Jewish audience. It comprises:

- ❖ a selection of Old Testament predictions – both good things and bad;
- ❖ an explanation that these things had been fulfilled by the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus; and
- ❖ a challenge to believe and receive forgiveness of sins: an appeal to be justified by faith, not by works.

The original hearers of that message found it very disturbing, as you will see if you read the chapter, and it can be equally challenging for us as we learn to understand the Bible message for ourselves. Here are a few questions for you to consider. Do you know –

- a Why God chose Israel as His special nation and whether or not the Jews are still important in the purpose of God?
- b Why King David is so important in God’s purpose that the New Testament begins with an immediate reference back to him and to Abraham (Matthew 1:1)?
- c What the Scriptures say about David’s special descendant?
- d What God promised “*to the fathers*” about the work that Jesus would accomplish?
- e Why Psalm 2 talks about all the nations of the earth fighting against God’s resurrected Son?
- f How King David, a man after God’s own heart, who “*fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption*”, is going to inherit eternal life?
- g If forgiveness comes as a result of belief, what exactly do we have to believe in order to be saved?

❖ **Beliefs Matter**

This book will look at all those issues as we work our way through to a fuller understanding of the gospel. For the moment the key thing to note is that there was a lot of teaching and understanding involved in first century Christianity. Saying that we believe in Jesus, or having a general conviction that God loves us are not enough for salvation - though those two things are important. Read right through the Acts of the Apostles and you will find that the content of the message was very important indeed. The apostles reasoned and explained from the Scriptures, backing up their explanations by reference to their own experience and knowledge of the teaching of Jesus. Here’s just one chapter which shows the apostle Paul’s method of approach:

*“He **reasoned** in the synagogue every Sabbath, and **tried to persuade** Jews and Greeks ... And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and **reasoned** with the Jews ... he powerfully **refuted** the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus” (Acts 18:4,19,28).*

If you want to check that pattern out for yourself, look at Acts 17:2-3,17; 24:25; 26:22-23; 28:23. All the time the apostles were seeking to persuade and instruct from the Scriptures because the message they were preaching mattered and the Bible was the authority they used. And when the apostle wrote to the early churches themselves, as in the Letter to the Romans, he explained again what it was that he believed. That’s why he was giving such a carefully reasoned statement of his faith to the believers in Rome – because this is the faith that saves!

In the letter to the Galatians we read of people who had been converted by Paul but who had changed their beliefs and accepted a more Jewish-based understanding, in which they would keep some elements of the law as well as believing in Jesus. Paul wrote to them in very strong language indeed, challenging them in these terms:

*“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – **not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ**. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: **If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed** ... For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is **not man’s gospel**. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:6-12).*

For Paul there was only one gospel: only one message about the purpose of God. Anything else was hopeless because it was man-made – “man’s gospel”. He knew only one way to obtain God’s favour for, as he explained elsewhere:

*“I ... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. **There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all**” (Ephesians 4:1-6).*

Paul mentions seven things we must understand if we want to be right with God. These all concern the **ONE FAITH**:

- 1 **One Body** – one true Christian community;
- 2 **One Spirit** – one Divine power;
- 3 **One True Hope** – all other hopes and aspirations are delusions;
- 4 **One Lord Jesus Christ**;
- 5 **One True and saving Faith**;
- 6 **One Baptism** – by immersion undertaken after understanding the one faith;
- 7 **One God and Father of all** – who is supreme and sovereign.

❖ **Belief and Baptism**

That “*one faith*” is the faith the apostles preached and it necessitates a proper understanding of those things that have been revealed by God, as we are finding out. God requires belief and baptism. Paul writes about both those things in chapters 4 to 6 of the Letter to the Romans, so we will see in more detail what they involved. These two go together as the New Testament demonstrates very clearly:

*“And he (Jesus) said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. **Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned**” (Mark 16:15,16);*




*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching** them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19,20);*

*“When they **believed** Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were **baptized**, both men and women. Even Simon himself **believed**, and after being **baptized** he continued with Philip” (Acts 8:12,13);*

*“And many of the Corinthians **hearing** Paul **believed** and were **baptized**” (Acts 18:8).*

What they heard and then believed is what the New Testament is all about. They heard and believed the gospel, which comprises “*good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ*”. We will learn more about both those aspects of God’s good news as our investigation proceeds.

Things to Read

-  The Acts of the Apostles gives us an insight into First Century Christianity.
-  Read some more of the Bible Talks that were being given – in Acts chapters 3 and 17. See how different the approach is when the first audience is Jewish and the second is Gentile.
-  Read about the baptism of a man who had become familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures and who came to understand that he needed to be baptised (Acts 8:26-40).

Questions to Answer

- 10.1 Jesus was once asked whether few or many would be saved. What do you think his answer teaches us? (Luke 13:23-27; Matthew 7:13-14; 19:16-26)
- 10.2 A very good living man named Cornelius wanted to be saved from sin. What was he required to do, or was his good living good enough for God? (Acts 10:34-48)