

The Faith of Abraham



SABBATH—OCTOBER 28

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Genesis 15:6; 2 Samuel 11, 12; Romans 3:20, 31; Romans 4:1–17.

MEMORY VERSE: “So do we destroy the law by following the way of faith? No! Faith causes us to be what the law truly wants” (Romans 3:31, ICB).



Abraham could not be saved by his own works or by obeying the law. Instead, he had to be saved by grace [God's loving-favor]. And so does everyone else.

IN ROMANS 4 Paul explains that we are saved by faith alone. This truth is at the heart of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was a time when people in the 1500s began to “wake up” to Bible truths. These people wanted to make the Catholic Church better. The changes they made led to the start of the Protestant churches. The Reformation began 500 years ago this week.

In Romans 4, Paul uses Abraham as an example of someone who is holy. But even Abraham needed to be saved by grace. Grace is God's gift of mercy, forgiveness, and power over sin. Abraham could not be saved by his own works or by obeying the law. Instead, Abraham had to be saved by grace. So does everyone else.

In Romans 4, Paul lists three major parts of God's plan to save us: (1) the promise of grace; (2) our answer to that promise; and (3) God's announcement that everyone who believes in Jesus is made right with Him.

Paul proves that our being saved is by faith alone. As proof of this truth, Paul points to Genesis 15:6. Here, in one of the earliest pages of the Bible, we find the teaching about how we are made right with God by faith alone.

THE LAW (Romans 3:31)

In Romans 3:31, Paul makes it very clear that faith does not put an end to God's law. Not even these Jews in Old Testament times who obeyed the whole law were saved by that law. The religion of the Old Testament always has been the same as that of the New Testament. Both Testaments teach us that we are saved by the gift of God's loving-favor.

How does Romans 4:1–8 show that in the Old Testament our being saved also came by faith alone?

The story in Genesis 15 shows that in God's eyes Abraham was made right with God. Why? Because Abraham "believed God" (Romans 4:3, NIV). So, we see that the Old Testament also teaches about righteousness by faith. Righteousness by faith is God's power to make people right with Him. Jesus offers this saving power to everyone who will accept it by faith. And this gift includes the power to obey the law. As we have learned, righteousness means to obey the law. So, the idea that faith somehow "destroy[s] the law" is false (Romans 3:31, ICB).

"Destroy" comes from the Greek word *katargeo*. It means to cause something to lose all value. But the Old Testament does not teach that faith destroys the law. Instead, the Old Testament teaches we are saved by God's loving-favor. God's loving-favor is taught everywhere in the Old Testament. We see the truth about God's loving-favor in the animals used in the Jewish plan of worship. The use of these animals taught sinners they were saved by the death of a substitute.

What else but God's loving-favor can explain how God forgave David after his sin against Bathsheba? Clearly, David's obedience to the law did not save him. After all, David broke so many laws. What if David had to trust in the law to save him? Then David would not have been saved at all.

Paul points to David as an example of justification by faith. Justification by faith is the teaching that we are made right with God by faith. God forgave David. And God's forgiving David shows us God's loving-favor in action.

What hope can you take from David's story (2 Samuel 11, 12; Psalm 51)? What does David's story teach us about how we should forgive people who fall into sin?



Righteousness by faith is God's power to make us right with Him. Jesus offers this saving power to everyone who accepts it by faith. This gift includes the power to obey the law.

PUNISHMENT OR MERCY? (Romans 4:6–8)



“The sinner must take hold of Jesus’ power. This power will make the sinner right with God.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, page 215, adapted.

In Romans 4, Paul talks about our connection to God. First, let us discuss what our connection to God is *not* about. Think about the example of people who believe they must earn God’s loving-favor. These people feel they must live holy lives first before God will accept them. They would, of course, trust in their own works to save them. Often, we are in danger of making self too important in our religious experience. That is the last thing we need.

But we will be safe if we understand that our being made right with God is a gift. We did nothing to earn this gift. We are not worthy of it. This truth makes it easier to fill our minds with thoughts of God’s mercy instead of with self. In the end, who is going to show the love of God? People who are full of self? Or people who fill their minds with thoughts of God?

What does Paul say in Romans 4:6–8 about the truth that God makes us right with Him by faith?

“The sinner must come in faith to Jesus. The sinner must take hold of Jesus’ power. Then God will make the sinner right with Him. Jesus came to this earth to make a way for the sinner to lay his sins on Jesus and to be pardoned. Jesus’ holy life is added to the sinner’s life record. Then the forgiven sinner becomes a member of the royal family in heaven.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, page 215, adapted.

Paul explains that being saved by faith is not just for the Jews. It is also for the Gentiles. The Gentiles are non-Jews (Romans 4:9–12). Abraham himself was not Jewish. Abraham came from people who were pagans (Joshua 24:2). Pagans were people who believed in many gods. So, there were no Jews before Abraham’s time. Also, Abraham was made right with God (Genesis 15:6) *before* he was circumcised. To be circumcised means that the extra skin at the end of the male sex organ is cut off. Abraham became the father of people who were not circumcised and people who were. For Paul, Abraham is a powerful example of the truth that God’s plan to save sinners is for everyone. In the same way, Jesus’ death was for all people (Hebrews 2:9).

What does the Cross tell us about how much every human is worth in God’s eyes?

THE PROMISE (Romans 4:14–17)

On this day, 500 years ago, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Beliefs to the door of the Wittenberg Church in Germany. How interesting that the topic for today also gets right to the heart of what it means for us to be saved by faith.

In Romans 4:13, Paul gives us his teaching about righteousness by faith. This teaching explains that God makes us right with Him by our faith. This teaching also means that God gives us power to obey His law. Paul wants to build his teaching on the Old Testament. So, Paul uses Abraham as his example. All Jews accepted Abraham as their father. We already learned that Abraham was made right with God. But Abraham was not saved because he obeyed the “law.” Instead, Abraham believed God’s promise (Romans 4:13). So, God accepted Abraham. Then God worked in Abraham to save humans. What a powerful example of how God’s loving-favor works!

Read Romans 4:14–17 and Galatians 3:7–9. Paul continues in these verses to show that the teaching that we are saved by faith is very important in the Old Testament. How does Paul do that?

It is important to remember who Paul was writing to. Paul writes to Jewish believers. They respected Old Testament law. Many of them believed that they were saved because of how well they obeyed the law. But the Old Testament does not teach this idea.

Paul wants to correct the thinking of these Jewish believers. So, Paul argues that Abraham did not earn God’s promises by obeying the law. Instead, God gave His promises to Abraham when Abraham believed God. God gave His promises to Abraham even before He gave the law to Moses at Mount Sinai. In Abraham’s day, the books of Moses had not been written. And there was no Jewish plan of worship. So, it is clear. The only way Abraham could have gotten God’s promises was by believing in them.

Paul says that our trying to earn God’s promises by obedience to the law makes faith useless. Those words are strong. But the idea that Paul wants us to understand is that faith saves. And the law shows us our guilt. So, it is useless for us to try to be saved by the very thing that shows us our guilt. Everyone has broken the law. So, we all need what Abraham needed: we need Jesus’ saving power.



Righteousness by faith is the teaching that God makes us right with Him by faith and that He gives us power to obey His law.

LAW AND FAITH (Galatians 3:21–23)

Paul showed that God’s promise to Abraham proved that we are saved by God’s loving-favor. We are not saved by the law. So, the Jews would need to stop trusting in their works to save them. Instead, the Jews needed to accept the promise God made to Abraham. This promise came true when Jesus came to earth in a human body. What is true for the Jews in Paul’s day is true for Christians today. Our “good” works cannot make us right with God.

“All false religions are built on the idea that humans can save themselves by their own works. People who believe this false teaching have no power over sin.”
—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pages 35, 36, adapted.
What do these words from *The Desire of Ages* mean?

As shown by Paul in Galatians 3:21–23, how should we understand the connection between law and faith?



The law shows us our sin. And so, we are “locked up” by our guilt. But Jesus frees us from the prison of guilt and sin.

What if there had been a law that could give life to the person who obeyed it? Then God’s law would have been the law to do that. But Paul says that no law can give life. Not even God’s. Why? Because everyone is guilty of breaking the law. And so, no one can be made right with God by obedience.

But God’s promise to save us by faith frees everyone from sin who believes. This promise was shown more fully in Jesus. Jesus showed that faith frees everyone who believes from being “locked up” by the law (Galatians 3:23, NIV). What does being “locked up” by the law mean? Paul uses this word picture to explain how the law acts the same as a prison guard. The law shows us our sin. And so, we are “locked up” by our guilt. We are sentenced to death. But God’s promise to save us by faith in Jesus frees us from the prison of guilt, sin, and death. Our belief in Jesus frees us from having to earn God’s loving-favor by obeying the law. The law also becomes a heavy load when it is taught without mercy. The law also becomes a heavy load when it is taught without showing people they need faith in God’s power to win the war over sin. So, we must have God’s loving-favor. Or we cannot be free from the guilt of breaking the law or from sin’s power.

THE LAW AND SIN (1 John 2:3–6)

Some people believe that God’s loving-favor frees us from the need to obey the law. People who believe this idea use the same Bible verses again and again to prove their teaching. But this teaching is false.

What do 1 John 2:3–6; 1 John 3:4; and Romans 3:20 tell us about the connection between law and sin?

Now, what if God’s loving-favor really did make the law “useless” (Romans 3:31, NIV)? Then we must ask, “Why do lying, murder, and stealing continue to be wrong?” If God’s law has been changed, then the meaning of sin must be changed too. Or if God’s law had been destroyed, then there would be no more sin either. Who believes there is no sin? (Read 1 John 1:7–10 and James 1:14, 15.)

The New Testament tells us about the law and the Good News. The law shows us what sin is. The Good News points to the only thing that can heal us from sin. And that is Jesus’ death and His return to life. So, if there really were no law, then that would mean there was no sin. And then we would need to ask, “What are we saved from?” The answer shows that the law helps us understand what the Good News was meant to do in our lives. And the law can do that only because we must continue to obey it.

But there are other people who say the Cross made the law useless. What a strange idea! After all, Jesus had to die because we broke the law. His death on the cross shows us that the law cannot be changed or thrown out. God did not change the law or throw it out before Jesus died on the Cross. So, why would God throw the law out or change the law after the cross? Why not just get rid of the law after Adam and Eve sinned? Then God could have saved humans from having to suffer the legal penalty that comes with breaking the law. That way, Jesus never needed to die. But Jesus’ death shows us that God did not throw out the law or change it. Any change to the law should have taken place before, not after, the Cross. Finally, what if the law could have been changed so that we would not need to obey it? Then that plan would have been a better way to solve the sin problem than nailing Jesus to the cross.

Why must we continue to obey God’s law?



The law shows us what sin is. The Good News points to the only thing that heals us. Jesus’ death and His coming back to life.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “In Romans 4:4, Paul explains the meaning of Genesis 15:4–6. Paul wants to prove from Genesis that our being made right with God is by faith. We are not made right with God by our obedience to the law. Paul explains Genesis 15:6: ‘ “God accepted Abraham because he believed. So his faith made him right with God” ’ [NIRV]. These words show us that God accepts sinners by His loving-favor and not because of their works.”—Martin Luther, *Commentary [Explanation] on Romans*, page 82, adapted.

“Satan knows he will win if he can get humans to put value on their own good works. Then Satan can defeat them. Satan leads humans to give into the desire to sin. Satan tries to make humans his slaves. He traps them in sin. Satan acts the same as a wild animal that hunts down and catches other animals for food. Our only hope against Satan is the blood of Jesus. Jesus is the Lamb of God. We must ask God by faith to put the blood of Jesus on the doorframes of our hearts. It is the only way for us to be safe from Satan’s tricks.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 3, 1889, adapted. (Note: “the blood of Jesus on the doorframes of our hearts” is a word picture from the Old Testament. It shows how the Lamb of God was the only hope for the children of Israel on the night when God freed them from Egypt. On that night, Moses commanded the children of Israel to put the blood of a lamb on the top and sides of the doorframes of their homes. The blood was a symbol. It pointed to Jesus’ saving power. The destroying angel would pass over the homes marked with blood. All who were in those houses would be safe.)



“We must ask God by faith to put the blood of Jesus on the doorframes of our hearts.”—Ellen G. White, *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 3, 1889, adapted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Why is it important to understand that we are saved by faith alone? What false teachings and dangers does that truth protect us from?
- ② The law does not save us. But why must we obey the law?
- ③ The Protestant Reformation was a time of big religious change the 1500s. Its most important question was: “How are we saved?” What are the differences between Catholics and Protestants on this idea?