

Faith ALONE

Romans 3:21-31

11 October 2020 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: How can we be right with God?

Big Idea: We lose the good news unless faith alone is the means of our salvation.

Introduction

In August 1519, a man named Ulrich Zwingli is on holidays when he gets a message.

It's news from the city of Zürich, where he's been the pastor for only a few months.

There's been another outbreak of the Black Death (which had been around for centuries) and Zürich has been declared a hotspot.

Typically, people who could afford to would flee the city to avoid the plague. But not Zwingli.

He leaves his safe, little holiday village and hurries back to minister to the people God's placed in his care.

Over the next few weeks, Zwingli and his brother get sick.

This is the beginning of a months-long fight for their very lives.

Ulrich would eventually recover, though there are times it's a pretty close-run thing.

Sadly, his brother, along with one third of the city's population aren't as fortunate.

To put that in perspective, that meant not you, not you, but you. Not you, not you, but you.

During this time, as his body fights against this infection, he writes a hymn about his experience.

It's called *Pestlied* or The Plague Song.

{DP} It's a hymn that's largely been forgotten, but if you Google it, you'll find that for some reason there are suddenly a lot of hits from 2020.

Help, Lord God, help in this trouble! I think death is at the door.

Stand before me, Christ, for you have overcome him.

*To you I cry: If it is your will, take out the dart that wounds me,
nor lets me have an hour's rest or repose.*

Will you, however, that death take me in the midst of my days, so let it be.

Do what you will, nothing shall be too much for me.

Your vessel am I, to make or break altogether.

It sounds better in German.

Zwingli's hymn never became one of the "great hymns of the faith", but it is a great hymn OF faith.

Life was hard in the sixteenth century and they knew the value of life and the reality of death.

Did you catch that he was okay with his fate being in God's hands whether he survived the illness or not?

He echoes the words of Paul in Philippians 1:21:

Philippians 1:21 NIV11 ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Zwingli had complete trust and reliance on God.

Perhaps it's true that when you live in a world without antibiotics and without PPE, there's nothing else that you can do.

All you CAN do is have faith in God.

Though we've seen this year that in much the same circumstances, many people still refuse to put their faith in God.

Most Australians would prefer to live in denial rather than face the reality of eternity.

{DP} Zwingli explains where he's put his trust there in the second line.

He has faith in Christ. He trusts Christ. That's his hope.

Why? Because Jesus is the one who's defeated death.

He's the only one who can help in his trouble.

Outline

{DP} Staring death in the face causes us to ask the big questions about life and being.

The biggest question of all is, "How can you be right with God?"

Every other question – from "Why are we here?" to "Where are we headed?" – comes back to this question.

We use the word JUSTIFICATION to describe being right with God.

'Justification' is one of those words we use in church a little bit differently to the way it's often used in the rest of life.

A justification can mean an excuse, a rationalisation of what you've done.

Justification in the sense I'm using it today is all about how unholy people can be right with a holy God.

Justification is a declaration that we are just and right, based on the work of Christ.

As our country gets increasingly invaded with foreign marketing campaigns, 31st October is becoming known as Halloween.

If you'd like to know what I REALLY think about that, you can ask me later!

More importantly, though, it's also known as Reformation Day.

That's the day (according to his successor) that Martin Luther nailed his 95 propositions to the door of Wittenberg Castle.

The Protestant Reformation was like a whole new beginning for the church.

Out of the darkness came light because it was the beginning of a massive change in people's understanding of how we're made right with God.

It's not going too far to say that the true gospel was rediscovered at that time.

The truth that was rediscovered is that we're justified by faith alone.

{DP} Today, we're going to start a new series called 'Alone'.

Each week, we'll cover a key concept about how we're justified, made right with God, that was rediscovered in the Reformation.

Sometimes they're called the five solas because 'sola' is the Latin word for 'alone' or 'only.'

They describe what the Reformers discovered, even though this summary itself didn't come until a generation or two later.

We are justified by...

Sola gratia – by grace alone

Solo Christo – on the basis of Christ alone

Sola fide – through the means of faith alone

Soli Deo gloria – to the ultimate glory of God alone

Sola Scriptura – as taught with the final and decisive authority of Scripture alone.

You might be thinking that this's all a little bit confusing.

How can we say that we're saved by any of these things alone when there are five of them?

Shouldn't there just be one, if it's alone?

I think it becomes clearer when we add on some explanations of what this means.

{DP} We are justified by...

By grace alone... not anything we can earn

On the basis of Christ alone... not any other mediator

Through the means of faith alone... nothing we accomplish

To the ultimate glory of God alone... not for our praise

as taught with the final and decisive authority of Scripture alone... not man's wisdom.

The first Reformers gave their lives to these ideas.

At some times, it meant people were willing to be burnt at the stake for these truths and others have been willing to silence them by taking their lives because this is so important.

There will be conflict if we preach that this is how we're justified because this is absolutely essential to the Christian faith.

{DP} Today, we're going to be looking at *sola fide* or "faith alone".

We are justified – made right with God – by faith alone.

We'll be looking at some awesome verses from Romans chapter 3.

I kind of feel like it's in the spirit of the Reformation for you to have a Bible (or a device with the Bible on it) open if you've got one handy.

This passages uses the word 'faith' eight times in verses 21-31 and then Paul goes on to talk about faith more in chapter 4.

{DP} **We lose the good news unless faith alone is the means of our salvation.**

- We are doomed without faith
- We have a sacrifice to put faith in
- We are justified by faith
- We live by faith

These four points aren't equal in size.

We'll spend less time on the first two points and most of our time on the last two.

We are doomed without faith

Stepping into Romans 3 is a bit like walking into a room when a movie is partway through.

The book of Romans was a letter written by the apostle Paul to the people in Rome.

Verse 21 begins with the words, "But now..."

Those words are important because they tell us that something else came before.

These verses are a new phase in the argument he's making.

We've missed the introduction and the first part of the story which is where he's unpacked the problem.

From 1:18 through to chapter 3:20, Paul's been making the argument that no one is right with God.

He summaries his argument in verse 23 of our passage when he says that every single person has sinned.

Romans 3:23 NIV11 ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

There's no distinction, verse 22, every single human being is in exactly the same boat.

It doesn't matter whether you're religious or not.

It doesn't matter what country you come from – Morocco, Norway, Oman, Paraguay, Qatar or even Australia.

Everyone has sinned.

Because every one of us have sinned, none of us are right with God.

Perhaps this's totally new to you.

This might be the first time anyone's ever told you that God isn't happy with you.

Many of us think that our sin doesn't matter all that much.

Sure, I'm not perfect, but then again, who is?

After all, I'm not a really bad person. I'm not a drug dealer or a serial killer.

God's definition of a good person and ours often aren't the same.

Just one sin is enough to separate us from God.

A holy God can't have ANYTHING to do with sin.

If you think about your life, do you really think you've never done anything wrong?

Occasionally, you find a person thinks that they've never done anything wrong, but most of us are honest enough with ourselves to know that we've cheated, lied or stolen at some point.

God has a problem with us because we've got a problem with him.

Sin is us having a problem with God.

Sin is thinking that God's way of doing things stinks and that we can do much better ourselves.

Sin is doing bad things because we want to rebel against God and doing things the way he says.

Because we've all sinned, none of us are righteous.

His argument comes to a head in verse 10:

Romans 3:10–11 NIV11 ¹⁰ As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one;
¹¹ there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.

Others of us know very well that we're sinners.

We're burdened and weighed down with our sin.

We think that there couldn't ever possibly be an escape from what we've done.

We live with the shame and hide in the shadows, living in fear.

Our strategy is to hope that no one will ever find out.

Whether we don't think we're a sinner or we try to cover our sin up, one day it will come out.

A holy God won't, he can't, let sin go on forever unpunished.

One day he will stand in judgment of us.

If God is just and I am not just, and I have to face His just judgment, how can I possibly stand?

If I know my failures, how can an unjust person survive the final judgment of a just and holy God?

We need answers to these questions.

I'll give you a hint now.

Although we're all guilty, the good news is that God doesn't leave us in the hopeless position we've made for ourselves.

Part of the answer is faith.

Because without faith, you can't be righteous, you can't please God.

Hebrews 11:6 NIV11 ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

As sinners, without faith we are doomed.

We have a sacrifice to put faith in

How can we be right with God, then?

Is it even possible?

We often think that the problem is out there and the solution is in here.

We think that other people or circumstances are the problem and we're the solution.

The Bible tells us that's completely around the wrong way.

The problem is in here and the solution is out there.

That brings us back to the “but now” in verse 21.

Now, the righteousness of God’s been made known.

Paul’s been arguing that our UNrighteousness has been shown.

God’s shown HIS righteousness to the world by providing a solution to our UNrighteousness.

Our sin needs to be paid for, otherwise God wouldn’t be just.

You might wonder why God can’t just say, “I absolve you of the debt.”

The thing is that wouldn’t be just.

We all know how painful it is when justice isn’t done.

My kids often tell me in no uncertain terms when they feel like they’ve been unjustly treated.

The victim suffers all over again when justice isn’t served

Businesses often offer credit to customers so that they’ll keep shopping with them.

If you do that, you take a risk because there are some accounts that won’t ever be paid.

When someone doesn’t pay their bills, someone still has to pay, don’t they?

The debt doesn’t just disappear only to have the money appear in your account.

The business has to pay the debt that they couldn’t recover from their customer.

We can pay the debt ourselves.

But the result of that isn’t being right with God, it’s being separated from him for eternity.

The only way we can pay for the debt is with our lives.

But God’s shown HIS righteousness by providing another option.

That’s for God to pay the debt himself.

For a long time, God restrained himself from calling in the debt that people owed.

Everyone in the Old Testament who sinned, God waited from making final judgment.

Until the time when he himself provided payment for the debt.

God did this by sending his son, Jesus.

Verse 25:

Romans 3:25 NIV11 ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood

Jesus stepped in, on our behalf, to do what we could never do for ourselves.

He took the penalty of our sin on himself so that we could go free.

God himself took the price of our debt by being a substitute for us.

He became a sacrifice of atonement by shedding his blood.

And the result is that we don't have to pay the bill because he has.

The charges can be dropped and we can be set free.

God imputes Jesus' righteousness to us.

He sees us and counts as righteous because of what Jesus has done.

We can be declared righteous, not because of what we've done but because of what Jesus has done.

God's completely just in doing this because the debt has been paid and hasn't just vanished.

He's paid the debt.

This makes God just in punishing sin and the justifier by taking the penalty for sin, verse 26.

As the old hymn says, it's the victim paying for the crime.

The only way that we can be right with God is because of Jesus paying the penalty of our sin for us.

We are justified by faith

That still doesn't tell us how sinners like you and I can be justified.

The answer is scattered all through the passage – it's there in verses 22, 25 and 26.

It's by faith.

Faith is the means by which the righteousness of Christ is given to us.

George Michael told us, "I gotta have faith."

Faith's a bit of a tricky idea because the way faith's typically used in everyday life is quite different from how the Bible uses it.

Faith's often used to refer to religious mumbo-jumbo.

If you haven't been around church for very long, or perhaps at all, then faith probably means something like superstition.

Faith can be used to describe believing in the irrational, in fact, in something that we know NOT to be true.

It's what you fall back on when you've run out of all of the rational, logical arguments.

What is faith as the Bible uses it?

Real faith believes truth, not just stuff that's made up.

Christian faith believes that what the Bible says is true.

It means trusting the apostles and those who were there.

Paul invited the Corinthians to check out the facts about the resurrection with eyewitnesses for themselves.

If it's not true, he says, then there's no point.

That's the point that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 15 where he says:

1 Corinthians 15:14 NIV11 ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

Faith's more than just knowing facts about Jesus.

Faith doesn't even just believe that the facts are true, it agrees with the facts.

Someone can tell me that my house is on fire.

Then I know, but it doesn't mean that I have faith.

I need to agree with them that the house is on fire.

Even agreeing with them isn't enough though.

But unless I rely on that truth and get out onto the street, I'm going to be in trouble.

James tells us that even demons have good doctrine – they know the right stuff and believe it.

But they don't actually place their trust in it.

In the Bible, faith can be replaced by words like trust.

To have faith is to trust.

It's more than that, though, because it includes the idea of dependence.

I think it's better to use the word 'rely'.

Faith is reliance.

The story goes that a missionary was translating the Bible and was trying to work out how to explain the word for faith.

The local people didn't seem to have this idea in their language.

Then, one day, a man walked in when he was sitting at his desk.

The missionary asked the man what he was doing.

The man replied that he was writing.

So, the missionary raised his arms and feet off the ground and asked what he was doing now.

The man said that he was leaning on the chair.

That's what Christian faith is – it's leaning all your weight on Christ.

I can believe that something's true without personal commitment, but true faith is willing to put your whole life in his hands.

Not just a belief in facts, but personal trust in Jesus to save me.

It's believing that Jesus has forgiven your sins and given you eternal life.

The closest thing we get to a definition of faith in the Bible is Hebrews 11:1:

Hebrews 11:1 NIV11 ¹ Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

If you look up with me at verse 22, you'll see that righteousness is for all who believe.

Believe is the same root word as faith.

Romans 3:22 NIV11 ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile,

That's how we get Jesus' righteousness – by believing.

The really good thing about that is that means your righteousness doesn't depend on you – how good you are, how kind you are

You don't need to believe the lie that comes from hell that you're going to lose your salvation when you fail because it's God who justifies.

Faith trusts God and shows that it's him and not yourself who saves you.

God has done it and not you and that's why you have to trust him.

Romans 3:26 NIV11 ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

It's objection time.

The first objection might be that you're thinking, "There's got to be something wrong with that since that's far too easy.

"All you've got to do is believe? Really?"

It's not easy at all because it means that we've got to rely on him alone and not on ourselves.

It takes a great deal of humility to admit that we can't and to rely on his grace.

That's not easy because we are desperate to earn our way into heaven for ourselves.

Justification by faith alone gives hope to people who haven't got it all together.

Which is actually all of us – but some of us realise it more than others.

Saving faith trusts, rests and leans on Christ.

Real faith clings to Jesus and relies on him even when there's absolutely nothing else.

Real faith puts your life in his hands.

Why does God do it this way?

This way, we see HIS righteousness:

Romans 3:25 NIV11 ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.

The gospel promises that all who come to saving faith in Jesus Christ are declared righteous in the sight of God.

To be saved from your sin, you need to willingly and freely accept Christ's sacrifice on your behalf on the cross.

We don't have faith in ourselves, we have faith in Jesus.

Faith doesn't focus on us and what we've achieved, but it focuses on Christ and what he's done for us.

As Richard Hooker, the late-sixteenth-century Anglican divine, wrote: 'God justifies the believer—not because of the worthiness of his belief, but because of Christ's worthiness who is believed.

Saying faith alone isn't really all that different from saying Christ alone.

Our boast isn't in our faith, our boast is in Jesus.

Faith means that we can't boast in ourselves, verse 28.

Faith shows that we depend on God and not on ourselves.

Having faith seems like it should be the easiest thing in the world.

But that's exactly why it's so hard.

And yet it's life changing.

While we were on holidays recently, we visited a family member who's undergoing palliative care for terminal cancer.

He's forty-four with two young kids.

Until last year he was about as fit as someone could be, doing physical work outside all through a northern Australian summer.

Visiting him was amazing.

He's not scared about what the future holds or where he's going.

He's not down, instead he's trying to make every minute count.

And by that I don't mean that he's ticking off his bucket list – he's growing in godliness.

He continues to hope for a miracle, but if he doesn't get it here on earth he knows that it's a miracle that he'll be in heaven one day.

He's like that because he's a man of faith.

His whole family's trust in Jesus is so strong.

He knows where he's going and it's not because of how good he is.

His faith is in Jesus alone.

His wife told me that people keep asking how they're doing so well.

She said that the only answer she can give is 'Jesus'.

We receive Jesus' righteousness by faith alone.

We live by faith

That's all very well and good, but how do we become righteousness?

Your faith earns you absolutely no merit before God.

God doesn't save you because he's impressed by your faith in him.

Faith is the MEANS that we RECEIVE what he's done.

God counts Jesus' righteousness to us and that's how we can be justified and yet also still sinners.

Faith isn't the basis for our justification, it's the means that we get access to Jesus' righteousness.

If I've got tickets to the footy, that doesn't mean that I've been to the game, but the tickets give me access to the game.

If I trust in Jesus by faith alone, it doesn't mean that I'm righteous, but that he COUNTS me as righteous.

We get his status by trusting in him.

In the words of John Stott, "Faith's only function is to receive what grace offers."¹

Some people might object from the Bible itself.

If you're someone who knows their Bible well, you might be thinking, "What about James 2?" and the place of works in justification?

What about James 2:24?

James 2:24 NIV11 ²⁴ You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

That sounds fairly clear, doesn't it?

And that's what the church taught.

Justificare is the Latin term which was commonly used to mean "to make righteous."

The church taught and the Roman Catholic Church still teaches that at baptism, you get a grace infusion.

That can be lost by committing a mortal sin, but regained through penance or by buying indulgences.

Only when you have enough to become pure, will you be righteous.

The whole debate with the Roman Catholic church is NOT over faith vs works.

The Roman Catholic church teaches that you need faith.

But you also need works, so they say that we're justified like this:

Faith + Works = Justification

But then some upstarts started reading the New Testament in Greek which had only recently been published.

They discovered that the Greek word, as used in the original language, means to DECLARE righteous, not MAKE righteous.

The Bible teaches that it's like this:

Faith + Nothing = Justification.

Luther and the other Reformers said, "No, we're justified by faith ALONE."

It's about faith ALONE.

The ALONE is critical.

This wasn't a minor thing.

Luther said that justification by faith alone is the article upon which the church stands or falls.

The Council of Trent – the Roman Catholic church council that responded to the Reformation stated:

"If any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof; let him be anathema."

My summary of that would be: If you believe in faith alone, you're going to hell.

James doesn't use justification the same way that Paul does.

He's talking about the kind of faith that you have.

His point is that if you have faith that doesn't produce works, then it's not real faith.

What's the place of works?

Real faith is faith that produces works.

Faith results in love and godly living.

Galatians 5:6b NIV11 The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Faith will result in turning from idolatry, concern for justice, love for people in need and dedication to God's service.

We are justified by our faith alone, but not by faith that is alone.

Only ground for justification is Jesus' imputation – that's my only hope in life or death.

Everything else that I bring to the table is nothing more than filthy rags.

If God marks iniquity, who will stand?

No one can.

But, by faith, Jesus' righteousness is imputed, but not infused.

But if we live by faith, it will produce good works.

This just isn't part of our justification.

Gospel Call

What do we do with this? How does it matter?

A Filipino pastor friend of mine has said that Anglo-Australian pastors aren't very good at gospel urgency and I think he's right.

If you don't have saving faith in Jesus, then I need to warn you today that you're on the path to destruction.

All of us are sinners and not a single one of us are righteous on our own.

But you don't have to be defined by your worst moments.

You don't need to carry the curse of your worst decisions.

What's stopping you putting your trust in Jesus today?

Why wouldn't you trust the one who's faithful and secure?

Who'll carry your burdens, share your sorrows and give rest to your soul?

Don't delay. Today is the day to put your trust in him.

Don't put it off because there's a day when it really will be too late.

Don't let fear or laziness get in your way.

If you rely on him, then his righteousness will be counted to you.

You too can be saved by faith alone because it doesn't depend on you.

Speak to God and express your trust in him.

If you don't know how to do that, I'm going to lead us in doing that now.

In a moment, I'm going to invite everyone to close their eyes.

If you would like to express your faith in Jesus, then please echo my words in your own mind and heart.

God in Heaven, I recognise that I am a sinner. I despair of my sin and the way I have rebelled against you. Thank you for sending Jesus to die on the cross to deal with sin. Please forgive me for my sin and have mercy on me. Thank you that you for counting his righteousness to me because he took the penalty for my sin. Thank you that I now get everything from you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

If that's the first time you've prayed like that, then you need to tell a friend – speak to me – because this's the beginning of a new journey in Christ.

It's the start of a new life with Jesus as Lord of your life.

James says that true faith will produce good works in your life.

Elsewhere in the Bible, we're told we're saved by repenting and believing.

Repenting is more than just feeling sorry.

It means turning from one way and heading in another.

If you are truly relying on Jesus, if you have faith in him alone, then it will change your life.

Conclusion

Justification before God is by grace alone, with no merited favour whatever;
on the basis of Christ alone, with no other sacrifice or righteousness as the foundation;
through the means of faith alone, not including any human works whatsoever;
to the end that all things lead ultimately to the glory of God alone;
as taught with final and decisive authority in the Scriptures alone.

As we stare our mortality in the face, faith makes a difference.

Our only hope is to rely on Jesus alone.

The means of justification is faith alone.

2 Corinthians 5:7 NIV11 For we live by faith, not by sight.

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World, The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 118.

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Big Question: How can we be right with God?

Big Idea: We lose the good news unless faith alone is the means of our salvation.

Discussion Questions

1. When you think about your family, friends, neighbours and co-workers, how relevant do you think the question "How do I get right with God?" is to them?
2. Why are there five 'alones' (shouldn't there be only one!)?
3. What is the argument that Paul makes in Romans 1:18-3:20? How does this connect with Romans 3:21-31?
4. Why can't God just wipe away the penalty for our sin?
5. What happens if we try to pay the debt for our sin ourselves?
6. What is faith? Is it irrational, mumbo-jumbo?
7. Does the Roman Catholic Church teach that we are justified by works without the need for faith?
8. If we're saved by faith alone, what else can't be true?
9. How can we believe in justification by faith alone if we take James 2:24 seriously?