

But . . . Now!

Sola Fide: Justification By Faith Alone – Part I

Romans 3:21-22

Introduction

I will never forget standing in a beautiful park in the city of Geneva, Switzerland. The park was known as Reformation Park, although many people who lived in the city had forgotten what it represented and why it was preserved. My wife and I had decided we wanted to see this park because it commemorated the lives and ministries of reformers; such as, John Calvin, who pastored near that park, Martin Luther, and Zwingli. We asked the hotel clerk how to get to the park, but he had never heard of it. We caught a taxi and tried to explain what we wanted to see.

“Reformation Park,” we said in the best French we knew how to speak.

“Ah,” he said, “Reformation?”

“Yes, that’s it.”

We were off and moments later, we pulled up to Reformation Mall. So, we tried again, “Calvin, Luther . . . Reformation.”

He scratched his head, looked at his map of tourist spots, and said, “Ah.”

We were off again and this time, he pulled up to the gate of an old park. This was it.

We walked into the park and soon saw the memorial. There was a wall that was around fifty feet high, with statues carved into stone that stood nearly as high as the wall. There were statues of John Calvin, Martin Luther, Zwingli, Beza, and other men who brought the church out of the dark ages by telling the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Chiseled into the stone of that wall were the Latin

words, which, when translated, meant, “After the darkness . . . light!”

The Darkness of Sin Has Been Portrayed

One of the key doctrines that had been all but lost by the corrupt Roman church was resurrected. It was fanned into flame and indeed, ended a period of darkness in church history. It was the doctrine of “Sola Fide”. It would be this doctrine that would birth the Protestant Church and, to this very day, separate false religion from the truth.

“Sola Fide” means, “faith alone,” and it refers to the issue of justification. It answers the questions, “How can a person be right with God? How can a person know whether or not they are going to heaven? By what right do they claim entrance into heaven?”

Martin Luther wrote, in the mid-1500’s,

Sola Fide is the article with and by which the church stands . . . without which it falls. The doctrine of justification is the master and prince over all doctrines; it raises up our conscience before God. Without this article the world is utter death and darkness.¹

John Calvin wrote,

Unless you understand the doctrine of justification, you have no foundation on which your salvation can be laid.

J. I. Packer illustrated the importance of Sola Fide this way,

*The doctrine of justification by faith is like Atlas; it bears a world on its shoulders . . . the entire knowledge of saving grace. And when Atlas falls down, everything that rested on his shoulders comes crashing down too.*ⁱⁱ

Is it any wonder then, that the next paragraph in our study of Romans, chapter 3, where the apostle Paul explains the doctrine of justification, is considered to be so incredibly important?

One man called this paragraph the center and heart of the whole book of Romans. Another evangelical scholar went even further by saying that this was the most important theological segment of the entire New Testament. Still another dared to suggest that this paragraph may be the most important single paragraph ever written.

How could such claims be made? Why would pastors and theologians, like Barnhouse and McClain, write that, if they had to choose a few verses from the entire Bible to have a copy of, they would choose these verses?

Could it be because these verses reveal the Atlas of our faith; the right we have to heaven; the basis for our life and hope in Christ; the satisfaction of our sin before a holy God; the key that unlocks eternal paradise? Ladies and gentlemen, this paragraph explains, “Sola Fide”.

Paul begins with an incredible choice of words. Look at Romans, chapter 3, verse 21, which begins with the words,

But now . . .

We could spend our entire discussion here! But, we will not!

What a difference that little contrastive conjunction “but,” makes in life. What a difference it reveals in communication. For example:

- How many parents have heard their children say, “I was planning on doing my homework, but . . .”?
- How many husbands have heard their wives say, “I was really driving very carefully, but . . .”?
- How many guys have heard a girl say, “I like you a lot and you’re really nice, but . . .”?
- How many have heard their boss say, “I really like that idea, but . . .”?
- Have many have heard a prospective employer say, “I liked everything about your resume, but . . .”?

“But” is a conjunction that can make all the difference in the world! I just gave a number of examples of bad differences. What about the good differences? Let me give some examples:

- When the doctor says, “I was afraid at first, when you described your symptoms, that this was a serious problem, but . . .”.
- When the coach says, “Listen, I didn’t think we had room on the team for you, but . . .”.
- When you hear this good one, “When I first met you, I didn’t think you were all that special, but . . .”.
- When you can say, “We’ve been struggling without a job for nearly a year, but . . .”.
- When you can say, “We were told we could never have children, but . . .”.
- When you can say, “The doctors said we shouldn’t expect our child to live, but . . .”.
- When you can say, “My parents have always resisted the gospel message, but . . .”.
- When you can say, “Most of my life I ran from God, but . . .”.
- When you hear this really wonderful, insightful, spiritually mature one, “It makes me really mad when you forget our anniversary, and Valentine’s Day, and Mother’s Day, but . . . I love you anyway!”

I just thought I would toss that last one in there to help some of you guys!

What a wonderful word. What a life changing, perspective altering, hope giving word.

Paul used the word often, as did David also.

- Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers, in chapter 2, verses 12 through 13,
*remember that you were . . . separate from Christ . . . having no hope and without God in the world . . . **But** now in Christ Jesus you . . . have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*
- Paul preached, in Acts, chapter 13, verses 29 and 30,
*When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. **But**, God raised Him from the dead*

- David said, in Psalm, chapter 3, verses 2 through 3a,

Many are saying of my soul, "There is no deliverance for him in God." But You, O Lord, are a shield about me . . .

What comes after that little conjunction can make all the difference in the world.

When the late Charles Evans Hughes served as Secretary of State, he attended a Pan-American Conference. He instructed his translator to make sure he kept up as well as he could with the translation of the Spanish or Portuguese. Then he said to his interpreter, "Listen, while a running translation is important, I want you to make sure that you give me every word after the speaker says, "but," because what follows "but" is what he really wanted to say."ⁱⁱⁱ

For nearly three entire chapters of Romans, the apostle Paul has revealed the darkness of sin, the depth of human depravity, the righteous judgment of God on the whole world, and the hopelessness of mankind to ever find God, please God, or be related to God. He has revealed that no one is justified, no one is righteous, no one is acceptable, no one is suitable, no one is good enough, no one can ever hope to live with God in eternal bliss. He ended verses 20 and 21 with the ultimate portrayal of sinful mankind as silent before a holy God with no excuse, no defense, no explanation, and no hope – only dark despair.

BUT NOW . . .!

This is the conjunction of Romans, chapter 6, verse 23,

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the conjunction of John, chapter 9, verse 25, when the man who was born blind was brought before the Jewish leaders to give an account of how he had received his sight. The leaders were upset that Jesus had gained such notoriety for performing this miracle. They interrogated the man, and even called his parents to validate that this was indeed their son who had been born blind. Finally, they said to him, "Listen, we know this Jesus is a sinner, how could He give you sight like this?"

He replied, "Whether He is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know, I was blind, but now I see!" (NIV)

This is the incredible revelation of justification in Romans, chapter 3. The truth of our hope swings on

the hinge of that little conjunction. Paul says, in effect, "Listen, everything I've said about sin and mankind and hopelessness and judgment is true, but now . . .!"

After the darkness . . . light!

The darkness of sin has been portrayed, but now .

The Deliverance of Salvation is Pronounced

The deliverance of salvation is pronounced.

Paul writes, in Romans, chapter 3, verse 21,

But now apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been manifested . . .

When Paul writes, "But now apart from the Law . . .", he is saying, "This salvation that I'm about to describe, has nothing to do with the keeping of the Law."

The Greek word that is translated "apart from," is a very strong word in the Greek language. In this verse, it could be translated, ". . . absolutely apart from the Law . . .". It is the same word that is used in Hebrews, chapter 4, verse 15, where we learn that Jesus Christ was,

. . . tempted in all things as we are, yet without [apart from] sin.

In other words, Jesus Christ had absolutely nothing in His life that was sinful. He was totally "apart from" sin.

Paul is describing justification as being, ". . . apart from the Law . . .". Justification has absolutely nothing to do with keeping the Law.

That is why a person who believes he is going to heaven because he has been a pretty good person is deceived on two counts. He is deceived on one count, because he actually has not kept the Law and just won't admit it and thus, has deceived himself. He is also deceived on another count, simply because he does not realize that justification has nothing to do with being good.

It is not the righteousness of man that Paul says brings salvation, it is the righteousness of God. Man has nothing to offer God, but his sin. God has everything to give man, beginning with His righteousness.

Now Paul says, "This isn't really something new! This message of the gospel is as old as Moses."

Continue in verse 21 to see what he says next,

... being witnessed by the Law ...

In other words, the truth of the gospel appeared in the Law, or the Pentateuch. The Law, or “nomos” in the Greek, is a reference, I believe, to the Law of Moses, or the Books of Moses. This is the Pentateuch, the Books of the Law, which includes the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Now, where was the gospel revealed? How about in Genesis, chapter 22? Look at that passage.

Abraham was told by God to take his only son Isaac and go to the mountain ridge called Moriah. There he was to prepare to offer Isaac as a sacrifice to God. We are told, in the text, that God did this to test Abraham’s faith in His promise to bring from Isaac a great nation. Look at verses 7 through 9.

Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” And he said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.” Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there, and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

Remember that Abraham was an old man by this time. Isaac, however, allowed Abraham to tie him on top of the altar. I believe that Isaac probably climbed onto the altar himself. I doubt Abraham would have been able to lift his thirty year old son. By the way, would you note the submission of the son to his father, even unto death. What a picture of Jesus Christ, who became obedient to the will of His Father, even unto death, as Philippians, chapter 2, verse 8, tells us.

Continue in Genesis, chapter 22, to verses 10 through 13.

Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and

Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son.

Then, the prophetic announcement is in the next verse. Look at verse 14.

Abraham called the name of that place, [Jehovah-jireh, which is translated] The Lord Will Provide, as it is said to this day, “In the mount of the Lord it will be provided.”

This is in the future tense. It is the prophetic announcement of Abraham, who says, “One day God will provide the Lamb. He didn’t here, He provided a ram. He will one day provide a Lamb for the burnt offerings.”

In John, chapter 1, verse 29, John the Baptist saw Jesus Christ coming toward him. Do you remember what he said? He said,

... Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

In other words, “He’s here! God’s Lamb is about to be provided for the sins of the world.”

Would you notice also, that Abraham specifically prophesied, as well, that God would not only provide a Lamb, but, in verse 14 of Genesis, chapter 22, again, that,

... In the mount of the Lord it will be provided.

Mount Moriah was really nothing more than a ridge of small hills and yet, incredibly significant hills. On Mount Moriah, Solomon would later build the temple where the glory of God would descend. Later still, it would be destroyed. And, just a stone’s throw from the temple, a city would be built and inhabited off and on by Abraham’s descendants – a city called Jerusalem. By the time of Jesus Christ, the ridge nearest the city was no longer referred to as Moriah, but instead had been given a slang Aramaic expression because of the way it was shaped. It was then called Golgotha, meaning, “Place of a Skull” (Matthew 27:33).

Abraham’s prophecy would come true. The very place where Isaac was a picture of Christ, willing to be offered as a burnt offering for sin, on that same ridge, and I believe the very same spot, several thousand years later, Jesus Christ would hang from the cross, as the burnt offering given up as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

The prophetic gospel of Abraham indeed came true. God provided, on that mount, the Lamb.

Paul goes on to say that the gospel, otherwise known as the righteousness of God, was not only witnessed in the Law, but also by the Prophets.

For example, the prophet and king, David. In Psalm, chapter 22, David prophesied of Christ's crucifixion, when he wrote with inspired precision, in verse 14,

I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within me.

And continued in verses 16b through 18,

. . . a band of evildoers has encompassed me; they pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones. They look, they stare at me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.

This is why Paul could say that the gospel is not new, it is old. God's plan of redemption has been promised through the sacrifice of His son. The Law records it and the Prophets have preached it.

So, the darkness of sin has been portrayed and the deliverance of salvation has been pronounced.

The Deliverer of Sinners Has Been Proclaimed

Finally, the deliverer of sinners has been proclaimed.

Romans, chapter 3, verse 22, goes on to clarify, *even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe . . .*

This is the hope for mankind, Paul proclaims – it is faith in Jesus Christ.

Peter preached the same gospel of faith in Christ, when he said, in Acts, chapter 4, verse 12,

. . . there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.

The first thing you need to understand about salvation is that it is not something you provide for God, it is something God provided for you. We have broken the Law and we are without excuse. We cannot do enough good things to counterbalance the scales of our sinfulness. We are without a voice to object; we are condemned, and, in silence, we stand before a holy God.

But now . . . there is hope for the hopeless, pardon for the sinful, grace for the guilty. How? Paul answers,

. . . through faith in Jesus Christ . . .

Conclusion

We will stop at this, but first, let me tell you about a story that I read some time ago. It is a true story of an incident that occurred in a small village in Brazil.

In a little hut with a dirt floor and a red tile roof, lived Maria, a mother, with her daughter, Christina. Maria's husband had died when Christina was just an infant and she had done her best to raise her daughter. Christina was now a pretty teenaged girl and the time had come for her to seek employment to add to the income from Maria's job as a house cleaner. Maria's job provided enough to buy food and clothing, but there was barely enough to eke out an existence.

So, now it was time for Christina to find a job. But, Christina had a streak of independence in her. She often talked to her mother about fleeing the dusty little village and going to Rio de Janeiro to seek opportunities in the big city. Her mother would react in fear and tell her daughter, "The streets are cruel."

Maria knew that, if her daughter went there, she could not support herself. She knew what Christina would have to do for a living. That is why, the morning that Maria found her daughter's pallet empty, her heart broke. She knew where Christina had gone.

Maria immediately gathered her clothing and headed for the bus depot. When she arrived in Rio De Janeiro, she went to a little drug store. She took all of the money that she could possibly spare, stepped into a photograph booth, closed the curtain and took as many pictures as she could. Now, armed with her bag of clothing and a purse full of little black and white photographs, she headed for the back streets. She knew that Christina had no skills for earning money and also knew that, when pride met hunger, there was no telling what a human being would do to survive.

Maria went to bars and hotels and nightclubs – the street corners where prostitutes gathered – and looked for her daughter. Wherever she went, she would tape her picture to a wall, or a mirror, or a bulletin board. She went everywhere she possibly could. On the back of each photograph, she had written the same message. Finally, she ran out of money and photographs and had not found Christina. Tired and broken hearted, she wept as she rode the rickety old bus back to her village.

Several months later, Christina was descending the steps of a hotel and looked across the lobby to see a familiar face taped to a mirror. She recognized it. Her eyes filled with tears and her throat burned as she ran across the lobby floor and pulled the picture off the mirror. It was indeed, a picture of her mother. She stared at her mother's face for a long time and then, happened to turn the photograph over. When she did, she read the note which said, "Wherever you are, whatever you have become, I will forgive you. Please come home."

And, Christina did.

Imagine, against the dark despair of sin . . . there is the light of forgiveness.

Sinful, wretched, and hopeless, but now . . . forgiveness offered by faith in the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world.

Oh, the joy of those words, "but now . . .". Those words were put into poetic form by Mr. Newton, who never quite recovered from his conversion. He wrote,

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.

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ⁱ R. C. Sproul, Faith Alone (Baker Books, 1995), p. 67.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 69.

ⁱⁱⁱ V. Raymond Edman, But God! (Zondervan, 1962), p. 13.