

~Script: Pastor Frank Johnson~

Romans: Good News for the World
The Crisis of Saving Faith
Romans 4

~Take a first look~

I. AT SOME POINT IN OUR LIVES, GOD WILL FACE US WITH HIMSELF. What will we do? Perhaps we will think that we must make ourselves good enough to be acceptable to Him. If we truly believe that we can make ourselves good enough to be accepted by God, we will become smug and self-righteous. We will also be self-deceived. If we truly believe that we must make ourselves good enough to be acceptable to God and that we cannot do it, we will be in despair. Where will that lead us? It may bring us to the point where we fall on our faces and cry out to God for mercy. And that's not such a bad place to be.

II. **“Robert Louis Stevenson was the writer in a previous century whose masterpieces *Treasure Island, Kidnapped, and The Strange Case of Dr. Jeckel and Mr. Hyde* are still read widely.** In the later years of his life Robert Louis Stevenson was a man of deep and profound faith. It was not always like that, however. Like many young people he rebelled against his upbringing. He was raised in Scotland in a very strict Calvinist home. As a college student he quickly shed his rigid upbringing, which he called ‘the deadliest gag and wet blanket that can be laid on a man,’ and adopted a thoroughly Bohemian lifestyle. He called himself a ‘youthful atheist.’

“As he became older, however, he began to have ‘doubts about his doubts.’ He came to see that for all its claim to wisdom, the world had no satisfying answers to the deepest questions of life. Later Robert Louis Stevenson would write, ‘There is a God who is manifest for those who care to look for him.’ Still later he would describe his own religious outlook as a ‘cast iron faith.’”¹

What happened to change Robert Louis Stevenson from a self-described “youthful atheist” to a man with a “cast iron faith”? God confronted His life. He will do that with us, as well. Religion will never be enough in itself. Religion has been described as the human hand reaching upward for God. It emphasizes the externals of human effort. This always comes short if by itself. It is a good thing Stevenson rejected it, so that He might find God Himself. *We must have God Himself, or our souls will never be satisfied. We just cannot do it ourselves. We must put our faith in what God Himself has said and done.* This is what Paul argues in Romans 4, as he argues for The Crisis of True Faith.

III. When I was a younger man and I heard someone speak, I always wanted to look at their notes. Maybe that is why I print my script for you! I was curious about how they organized their thoughts (or, in some cases, *if* they organized their thoughts). In chapter 4 of Romans, we have the logical outline of a message that surely Paul had delivered before. Verses 1-2 are the introduction where he raises the questions he intends to answer, verse 3 is the text from his Bible (our Old Testament), and verses 4-25 develop the theme in four points. Paul is preaching about the discovery by Abraham of the faith-principle. The first section, verses 4-8, develops the contrast between works-based salvation, which was inadequate, and faith-based salvation. Verses 9-12 ask the question, “Is this just for the Jewish people, or is it for everyone?” Verses 13-17 show that this salvation by faith did not come through the law, but rather by God’s grace

¹ Taken from *Bible Illustrator*.

received by faith. And verses 18-25 demonstrate the practical aspects of the faith that Abraham had. Let's take a closer look at this theme with a more personal focus.

~Take a closer look at Romans 4, beginning with vv. 1-8~

I. SAVING FAITH IS CONTRARY TO SALVATION BY WORKS. vv. 1-8

1. *Abraham's experience is an important Old Testament example of the faith-principle.* [vv. 1-3] Paul's text was Genesis 15:6. In that passage, God had repeated His earlier promise that Abraham would have a son and that this son of promise would be the beginning of a great race of people, his descendants. It was *by faith* that Abraham received this promise. He simply "believed God," putting His trust in God's promise. He had already found that there was nothing he could do to bring about that promise.

2. *The contrast between a works-based salvation and a faith-based salvation is clear:*

a. Salvation based on works is simply receiving one's expected and just wages. If we could earn salvation, it would be the reward of our labor. We would deserve it.

b. Salvation based on faith is the receiving of a gift. The very principle of faith is that we cannot earn salvation, and we do not deserve it. Rather, we put our trust in Jesus based on His merit and grace.

A—Have we put our trust in God's promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ?

L—"When John Paton was translating the Bible for a South Seas island tribe, he discovered that they had no word for trust or faith. One day a native who had been running hard came into the missionary's house, flopped himself in a large chair and said, 'It's good to rest my whole weight on this chair.'

"That's it," said Paton. 'I'll translate faith as "resting one's whole weight on God."'"² Abraham came to rest the whole weight of his hope on the promise of God. Have we done the same? We must give up our foolish trust in our own achievements, intelligence, or goodness and trust in Christ alone.

II. SAVING FAITH BRINGS SALVATION TO ALL PEOPLE. vv. 9-12

1. *The critical contrast in Paul's time was between those who were circumcised and those who were not.* It took God a long time and a lot of effort to convince stubborn minds that His truth applied fully and equally to all people, whether of Jewish background or not. Circumcision was the physical symbol of being "in" with God in Paul's time. It was not enough.

2. *Abraham had exercised faith before he was circumcised.* Indeed, in Abraham's case, the sign of circumcision came fourteen years after it was said of him, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness"! Circumcision was a symbolic seal of what was already there in the relationship between God and Abraham.

A—No outward symbol can replace the inward reality of true faith.

² Bible Illustrator.

I—There is a parallel need to recognize baptism in the same light. Baptism is a symbolic seal of the faith that must already be there in the human heart. We must not trust in such things as baptism, or in church attendance, or in our parent’s faith. These are good—they all reflect a measure of obedience in the Christian life—but they can never replace and must never replace one’s personal trust in Jesus Christ.

3. *Saving faith brings a standing of righteousness before God.* It is there for all people, regardless of background, regardless of race or ethnic heritage. When we put our trust in Jesus, we are pronounced righteous before God. Faith brings us into a right standing with our Maker, and it is the primary factor of unity between professing Christians.

A—Have you seen the genuine unity that God has given us with other Christians lived out?

I—It was 1949 and the Southern Baptist Convention was meeting in Oklahoma City. R.G. Lee, renowned pastor, presided over the meeting. Dr. **E.W. Perry**, a noted black Baptist pastor and vice-president of the National Baptist Convention, had just preached a moving sermon. Dr. Lee came to the podium at its end and took Dr. Perry’s hand. He said, “I want this convention to witness a parable in black and white, written in red. Over sixty years ago, you were born in a log cabin in Mississippi. I, too, was born in a log cabin in South Carolina. You and I have been placed in the high positions we occupy by the vote of confidence of our people. But the same Christ who saved you is the Christ who saved me, and both of us have been washed in the precious blood of the Lamb. This is the parable in black and white written in red.”³

III. SAVING FAITH PLACES GOD’S LAW IN ITS PROPER POSITION IN SALVATION HISTORY. vv. 13-17

1. *Note the sequence of Abraham’s experience:*

a. God made the *promise* and called Abraham to follow Him as an act of grace.
v. 16. Abraham had yet to demonstrate a life lived in full obedience to the call of God, when God promised that he would be the “father of many nations.”

b. Abraham put his faith in God’s promise, a promise made generations before the law was given through Moses.

c. Abraham’s faith was put on the ledger as righteousness. It was this profound trust in God’s promise that brought Him into a right relationship with the Judge of the cosmos, let off before the court of heaven.

2. *The lesson is clear: the law cannot save.* The law, says Paul, “brings wrath,” because it can only show us the right way and where we have taken the wrong way; it has no power to keep us on the road.

A—Those who focus on the law—and emphasize obedience over faith—will always be frustrated and never assured of their acceptance by God.

³ From *Proclaim*, April, 1991.

I—You see, the law is like a *mirror with a bright light behind it*. A mirror has no power to change a facial deformity. It has no power to take off the dirt and grime that might be revealed in the mirror. In fact, it will make a dirty or marred face seem even worse, because it will bring it to light. It takes a skilled surgeon to correct a facial deformity. In the same way, the law cannot change a sinful heart, but the Wounded Surgeon can. Remember those lines from T. S. Eliot from *The Four Quartets*:

“The Wounded Surgeon plies the steel
that questions the distempered part;
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel
The sharp compassion of the healer’s art
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.”

It is only by the power of the Wounded Surgeon that the healing of our souls can take place.⁴

IV. SAVING FAITH IS PLACED IN THE POWER OF GOD. vv. 18-25

1. *Abraham believed God beyond reason.* Such a belief is not contrary to reason, it is beyond reason. It was “against all hope” (what reason could see clearly) that Abraham “*in hope ... believed.*”

A—It is true that salvation requires a “leap of faith.” Abraham leaped into the light of God’s call and promise, not into the dark void of unknowing. Have we?

I—Philip Yancey has reportedly defined faith as: “Believing in advance in something that will only seem logical when seen in reverse.”⁵ This is what Abraham did. After the fact, the only logical thing to have done was to believe God and act on His calling and promise. At the time, even his wife laughed out loud, thinking it was all a pipe-dream.

2. *Abraham’s example inspires the following in the person of faith:*

- a. His example inspires hope—This is a confident expectation based on a clear promise.
- b. His example inspires realism—This is a true assessment from a human and a divine point of view.
- c. His example inspires a new focus, not on self but on God. This is where the faith pays off. We no longer look at the human side of the assessment; we look intently at the side revealed by God.

A—Is our confident focus on God as He has revealed Himself through Jesus Christ, or is it on our own inadequacies and past failures?

I—At some point in our lives, God will confront us with the inadequacy of everything else but Himself. What will we do? **Vance Havner**, a dearly loved Baptist evangelist of yesteryear, related the story of an elderly lady who was greatly disturbed by her

⁴ The painting is by Jeannie Johnson and is entitled *Engraved*. The title is taken from Isaiah 49:16, NIV, “See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.”

⁵ *Bible Illustrator*.

many troubles. Some of them were real and some were more imaginary. Finally, she was told in a kindly way by her family, “Grandma, we’ve done all we can do for you. You’ll just have to trust God for the rest.” A look of utter despair spread over her face as she replied, “Oh, dear, has it come to that?” Havner commented, “It always comes to that, so we might as well begin with that!”⁶

When it comes to our relationship with God, it always comes down to trusting God without reservation.

I—That is what happened to Chuck Colson. After the Watergate scandal in 1973, he went to visit his friend Tom Phillips. Tom confronted Chuck with his sinful human pride. He read a section out of C.S. Lewis’s *Mere Christianity*. After leaving Tom’s home, he sat in his car. In a subsequent interview, he told what he was feeling while he broke down and wept.

“That night I was a guy trapped—overwhelmed by the stench of my own sin. Not the stuff that was in Watergate. That was child’s play. But I thought about myself, the people I had hurt, my insensitivities, my self-centeredness, my pride. Until that moment in that driveway, I had always thought that God was like any college professor who grades on a curve. I wasn’t much worse than anyone else. Actually, I was a pretty good guy, because I had given money to charity; I had helped some poor people; I defended a poor kid in the District of Columbia and gotten him off in a *pro bono* case. So, on a sliding scale, I was in fine shape.

“That night I just couldn’t escape. And what sticks in my mind to this moment is the realization that apart from Christ’s sacrifice, I couldn’t live today. I am so grateful to God for what He did in that car that night.”

“All I knew at the time was that I had come face to face with my sin; I called out to God, and I wanted to know Him in the worst way.”⁷

~Take it home (applications)~

I. WHAT ABOUT US? HAVE WE FOLLOWED THE EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM? He “believed God”—He “put his faith in God.” In what have we placed our ultimate trust? Ourselves? Our ability to manipulate circumstances and people to our own ends? These will fail us in the end. They failed Chuck Colson. They failed Abraham.

We must put our trust in Christ today!

II. WHERE DO WE BEGIN? With the ABC’s.

1. We must *admit* we have sinned.
2. We must *believe* in Jesus Christ: His death for our sins and His resurrection.
3. We must commit our lives to Him—*confess* our faith in Him through baptism, church membership, witness and service.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Jubilee*, Summer 1998, p. 8.