

ALONE : SOLA FIDE

In this week's study, we look at 'Faith alone'. Bruce Shelley recounts the conversion of Martin Luther. Luther had made a promise to God, that he would become a monk if God saved him when he was caught in a thunderstorm. He survived that, so he entered a monastery. But even though he lived austerely and punished his body, he was still stricken with the conviction that he was a "miserable doomed sinner".

"Finally, in 1515, while pondering St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Luther came upon the words: "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith" (1:17, KJV) Here was his key to spiritual certainty: "Night and day I pondered," Luther later recalled, "until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by his faith.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn ..." ... Luther saw it clearly now. Man is saved only by his faith in the merit of Christ's sacrifice. The cross alone can remove man's sin and save him from the grasp of the devil. Luther had come to his famous doctrine of justification by faith alone."¹

READ: ROMANS 4:1-25

🗨️ What things stood out for you, from the sermon this week?

🗨️ Phil cited (part of) Martin Luther's definition of faith. What was your response to this quote?

"faith is God's work in us, that changes us and gives new birth from God. (Jn 1:13). It kills the Old Adam and makes us completely different people. It changes our hearts, our spirits, our thoughts and all our powers. It brings the Holy Spirit with it. Yes, it is a living, creative, active and powerful thing, this faith. Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It doesn't stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing. Anyone who does not do good works in this manner is an unbeliever."²

🗨️ Read James 2:14-26. What point was Phil making, about the seeming discrepancy between Paul's assertion that we are saved by grace through faith (and not by works) versus the teaching in James 2, that faith without works is dead? Is there a discrepancy or inconsistency between Rom 4 and James 2?

📌 Oswald Chambers, in *My Utmost for His Highest*, commenting on Phil 2:12-13, notes:

"In someone who has been born again, the source of the will is Almighty God. "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure." With focussed attention and great care, you have to "work out" what God "works in" you – not *work* to accomplish or earn "your own salvation", but *work it out* so you will exhibit the evidence of a life based with determined, unshakable faith on the complete and perfect redemption of the Lord."³

🗨️ Phil commented that we will always act in line with our mental map so what we do, demonstrates what we actually believe. It is not what we say or what we think we believe, but what we do and our actions, which are a reliable indicator of what we believe. Our convictions are demonstrated by our behaviour. If someone looked at your behaviour, especially through times of trouble and turmoil, do you think they would see evidence of a solid faith in God? Why? Why not?

📌 On one hand, Abraham is seen as a hero of the faith and is included in a list in Hebrews 11. However, his life story doesn't always demonstrate that. Think about the following episodes from Genesis:

- Gen 12:1-9 Pagan farmer living in Ur of the Chaldeans (think Babylon) hears voice, gets a promise of blessing and to become a great nation, follows this guidance, heads north-west to Haran, then south to Canaan, gets another promise of land, builds an altar and invokes the name of Yahweh.
- Gen 12:10-20 Heads to Egypt; but to protect himself, he passes off his wife as his sister, Pharaoh gets mysterious afflictions/ plagues after adding Sarah to his harem, so Abraham and Sarah are forcibly evicted from Egypt.

¹ Shelley, BL. (1995) *Church History in Plain Language*. 2nd Edn. Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 238-239

² <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/martin-luthers-definition-faith/>

An excerpt from "An Introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans," *Luther's German Bible of 1522 by Martin Luther, 1483-1546* Translated by Rev. Robert E. Smith from DR. MARTIN LUTHER'S VERMISCHTE DEUTSCHE SCHRIFTEN. Johann K. Irmischer, ed. Vol. 63 Erlangen: Heyder and Zimmer, 1854), pp.124-125. [EA 63:124-125]

³ Chambers, O. (1927, 1992) *My Utmost for His Highest*. Updated Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House), June 6.

- Gen 13-14: Family heads back to where they'd built the altar between Bethel and Ai, gets another promise of descendants and land, Melchizedek tells him the Lord Most High has given him victory;
- Gen 15: God again speaks and promises Abraham an heir. v6: "He believed the LORD and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness." God enters into a covenant with Abraham.
- Gen 16: Sarah convinces Abraham to impregnate her servant, as a means to get a son.
- Gen 17: God meets Abraham (now 99 yo) again, tells him to circumcise all males in his household, including offspring.
- Gen 18: three visitors arrive, announce that Sarah will fall pregnant, she laughs at the thought.
- And the story goes on ...

☞ The story of Abraham depicts a man who undulated between faith and unbelief. Sometimes he had courageous faith. Other times, we see cowardice, mistrust, scepticism and a need to create alternative solutions. What was one time where you stepped out, in courageous faith, on the basis of a conviction, and saw God provide for you? What was a different incident, where you felt that God wanted you to do something, but you lacked the courage and conviction to do that, plus later regretted your disobedience? What comfort do you get, from the story of Abraham's life and that, despite his failures, Abraham found favour with God?

☞ We see in Genesis that Abraham believed (Gen 15:6) and it is two chapters later that circumcision was required of him and his household. In Paul's time, male circumcision was seen as a symbol of being part of God's people and being an heir to the promises given to Abraham. What do we learn from Rom 4:9-12, about what male circumcision was intended to represent?

☞ Think about the words of Rom 4:16 "it (ie righteousness) depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace ... to those who share the faith of Abraham." What is Paul getting at here?

⚠ In Rom 4:17, we read "the God in whom (Abraham) believed, ... gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist". Jewish commentator, David Stern, comments that, this wasn't just about infertility issues that faced Abraham and Sarah due to extreme old age and Sarah having hit menopause and stopped menstruating. In the *'Amidah'* prayer, that was recited in the synagogue, are the words: "Who is like you, Master of mighty deeds? ... You cause death, you cause life and you cause salvation to sprout forth, so you can be trusted to cause the dead to live ...". Abraham had a figurative resurrection hope, "so far as procreation and fulfilment of God's promised descendants was concerned" but he also had a "literal resurrection faith" that was demonstrated by "his willingness to sacrifice his only son (Isaac) through whom God had said the promise would be fulfilled."⁴ Ultimately, Abraham's hope would be realised when God raised Jesus from the dead. (Rom 4:23-25)

☞ Paul writes that Abraham had got to the point where he was "hoping against hope (that) he would become "the father of many nations"" (Rom 4:18) Read the following words from Matt 19:23-26 (NRSV) below. What do they tell us about our own ability to save ourselves? What do they tell us about the ability of God? Read verse 26 – out aloud – together.

²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you: it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁶ But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

APPLICATION: In Ex 20:2-4, we find the first two of the Ten Commandments:

² I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³ you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God ...

God told the people that he had rescued them from Egypt and slavery. He had demonstrated his might and power. He had demonstrated his grace and favour to them. God commanded them to give him their total and utter allegiance. In the next breath, God told them to not try to confine him to an image or idol, which depicted God in earthly and physical form. We cannot put God 'in a box'. Yet, so often we try to 'box God in' and limit the God we worship, to a being that fits into our 'mental image' and fits our expectations. Faith is not merely 'mental assent' that Jesus died for our sins. The call to faith is also a call to fully entrust our lives to the one God, for whom all things are possible.

⁴ Stern, D.H. (1992) *Jewish New Testament Commentary. A Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament.* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications), 356.