

Bible Reading Challenge 47: THE CHURCH – BY FAITH ALONE

In the early 1500s, a German monk struggled to find peace with God. It seemed he couldn't turn around without sinning! Every day, evil thoughts, undone good deeds, and sharp words piled up between himself and God—how could he ever be good enough to go to heaven? Something had to give, and happily, what gave was Martin Luther's hope in his own work. Paul's letter to the Romans, especially chapters 3 and 4, showed him that Jesus had done all the work—what Luther (and the rest of us) had to do was believe it, and go on to live our lives in gratitude to Jesus.

Luther had rediscovered the great truth of "Faith Alone." It's not our good deeds that get us to heaven, but our faith in Christ's good deeds on our behalf, including paying for our sins with his blood. I say that Luther *rediscovered* this, because it was the same issue the Apostle Paul struggled with in the earliest days of the Christian church. Remember his missionary journeys, and how practically everywhere he went he was followed by Jewish Christians who insisted that all the new Gentile believers had to be circumcised? These "judaizers" believed that in order to follow Christ, you had to also obey the Jewish law. Paul realized that if this were true, then Jesus died for nothing. If keeping the law made you good enough to pass, then what value did the blood of Christ really have? His letter to the Galatians is all about this question, and it's the strongest, most passionate letter Paul ever wrote.

We can see why—even today, most people think that getting to heaven is a matter of being "a good person": God piles up the nice things you did on one side of the scale, and the not-so-nice things on the other, and if the good outweighs the bad, you're in. No, *no*, NO!.say the Christians: we are justified by faith alone. That is, God looks at us through Christ and covers us with His goodness. That was how God looked at Abraham, thousands of years before Christ even appeared. We'll be reading a lot about Abraham this week, and also about "flesh." **Flesh**, as Paul uses that word, doesn't necessarily mean our bodies but rather our human pride. We want to think of ourselves as good, and impress others (even God!) with our goodness. "By faith alone" means that we've understood we can never be good enough to please God on our own, but He sees us "in Christ," and calls us righteous. And it gets even better: because we embrace Jesus as our only savior, God embraces *us* as His children.

Reading for this week: Acts 21:17-22:22; Philippians 3:4-9; Romans 3:21-5:1; Galatians 3-4

Further references: Jeremiah 31:31-34

Key verse: Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1

Questions to Think and Talk about:

1. Who are the real children of Abraham? Why was Abraham counted as righteous, and how did he show his faith, according to our reading in Romans and Galatians this week?
2. Why are those who put their faith in the law under a curse? (see Gal. 3:10-14)
3. If we're justified by faith alone, should we ignore the law? (see Matt. 20:39-40, John 14:15, Rom. 3:31 and Gal. 6:2 before answering.) If not, why do we keep it? What does Jer. 31:31-34 say about the law?
4. Read what Paul says about himself in Acts 22:3-5 and Phil. 3:4-9. List his accomplishments and "gold stars." What does he say about them now?
5. What's the difference between believers who lived before Jesus came and believers now? (see Gal. 3:23-4:7)
6. Galatians 4:21-30 is an allegory, like *The Pilgrim's Progress*: each character and place represents something else. Discuss what Paul means by the slave woman (Hagar), the free woman (Sarah), Ishmael and Isaac, Mt. Sinai and Jerusalem.

Activities:

- What things could you boast about in your life? Write a personal version of Phil. 3:4-9, substituting your points of pride and how you think of them now.
- Write a report to Paul as if you were a member of the Galatian church, concerned about the way the judaizers were persuading Gentile believers that they had to obey the Jewish law.
- Make a vocabulary card for **justification**.