

4 Undoing unfaithfulness (Romans 4–5)

In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul explained how the nations went their own way, failing to recognize and live under God's authority (Romans 1). Even the nation that entered into covenant relationship with the LORD was unfaithful (Romans 2). Israel ended up under the nations—ruled by sin and death instead of the LORD.

But human *unfaithfulness* did not nullify God's *faithfulness*. In Christ we saw *God-doing-right* by a world that did not do right by God. In the *faithfulness* of Jesus Christ, God is setting the world *right*. Everyone (Jew or gentile) who gives him their *faith[fulness]* is set *right* by God, empowered to do *right[eousness]*.

The gospel in Romans 3 asks us to respond to God as he responded to us:

- Out of *faith[fulness]* to his earthly realm, God did *right* by us (providing Christ),
- Out of *faith[fulness]* to him we are set *right* and do *right*.

Is that how you understand the gospel, the good news of how God saves the world in Christ? Traditionally this is called "justification by faith." We're emphasizing that faith is the focus, with justification following: it's out of *faith[fulness]* that we are set *right* (justified) and consequently do *right*. That's how God saves the world.

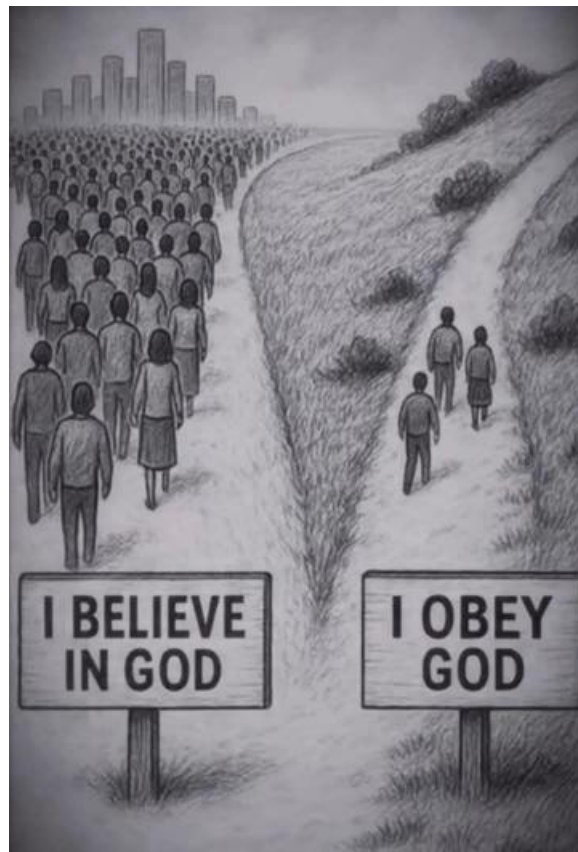
Questions or comments?

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This is not what Paul means by faith. He expects "obedience from faith[fulness]" (Romans 1:5; 16:26).

Now we need to speed up, covering two chapters tonight. Romans 4–5 present the case that this is what God had always planned for his nation and the nations:

- The Jewish story started with God calling Abraham, and out of *faith[fulness]* to God, Abraham was declared *right* and did *right* (Romans 4).
- The nations come from a man who, out of *unfaithfulness* to God brought death on us all. The new Human (Jesus) undoes what Adam did: out of *faith[fulness]* to God he was raised out of death (vindicated, justified), doing *right* by the world in sharing his resurrection life with us (Romans 5).

Ready to begin Romans 4?

4.1 Abraham was faithful, so he did right (Romans 4)

Abraham's faith[fulness] is remarkable. While nations were going their own way and using war to build kingdoms that tried to take over God's world (Genesis 10–11), Abraham heard God calling him to leave the region of the Babel-builders, to go to a place where God would establish a different kind of nation (Genesis 12:1-3).

Romans 4:1-5 (NIV)

¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.

³ What does Scripture say?

“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” [Genesis 15:6]

⁴ Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

People often serve God for reward. Many people view the gods as a means to gain prosperity, protection, and well-being. We do our religious duty to gain the approval of the gods and avoid their disapproval. Then we're disappointed when bad things happen. Has God abandoned me? Didn't I do enough to earn God's approval?

But Abraham didn't serve God for the reward he would gain. He left everything for something that he'd never see: a nation representing God in the world. God saw his faith[fulness] and responded, “Good on you, Abraham! You're doing right!”

Remember the connection between *faith[fulness]* and *right[eousness]*? Human unfaithfulness did not nullify God's faithfulness (3:3). Out of his faithfulness, our heavenly sovereign did right by the world in giving us Messiah Jesus (3:21-22). God's gospel calls us to *faith[fulness]* to his Christ, so we're *set right* and *do right* (3:26).

That's how Abraham responded when God first birthed the project that would bring God's Messiah to the Jewish people and the nations. And that's how the kingdom of God functioned in Old Testament times according to its anointed king:

Romans 4:6-8 (NIV)

⁶ David says the same thing when he speaks of the **blessedness** of the one to whom God credits **righteousness apart from works**:

⁷ “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

⁸ Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.” [Psalm 32:1-2]

There is a **blessedness** in living under God's rule. It's not a blessedness you earn by doing right. It's the blessedness that flows out of a faithful relationship: out of faith[fulness] to us God did right by us (providing Jesus), so out of faith[fulness] to the Messiah we respond by doing right by him. In that blessed relationship, God does not keep a record of our wrongs; it's all about our loyalty (faith) to his Son.

So who is this *blessedness* for? When the Davidic King reigned as God's "christ" (his anointed), a foreign ruler (Queen of Sheba) could recognize it:

1 Kings 10:8-9 (NIV)

⁸ "How **happy** your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! ⁹ Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness."

The blessing of God's reign was the whole point of the Abraham project:

"All the peoples of the earth will be **blessed** through you" (Genesis 12:3).

So Paul asked how far the *blessedness* of God's faithful love and justice extends. Is it only for the circumcised (the Jewish nation)? Or is the blessing of God's reign in Christ promised to the uncircumcised (the people of all nations) as well?

Romans 4:9-10 (NIV)

⁹ Is this **blessedness** only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's **faith** was credited to him as **righteousness**. ¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!

In Genesis 17, God gave Abraham circumcision as the sign of the covenant nation. But God had already declared that Abraham was *right[eous]* as a consequence of his *faith[fulness]* (Genesis 15:6). And God had already promised to extend the *blessing* of his sovereign authority to the nations (Genesis 12:3).

Abraham did not gain God's approval by being circumcised. He already had God's approval because he'd given God his loyalty (faith). God is now doing the same thing for the people who'd never been circumcised (people of other nations). God recognizes gentiles as *right* with him purely on the basis of giving their allegiance (*faith[fulness]*) to God's Anointed. God has never called them to be circumcised.

The recipients of the promise to Abraham form a new global nation in Christ, not defined by the Torah's requirements for Israel, but defined by loyalty to Christ:

Romans 4:9-25 (NIV)

¹¹ And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. ¹² And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

¹³ It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." [Genesis 17:5] He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

¹⁸ Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." [Genesis 15:5] ¹⁹ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. ²⁰ Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

²² This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." [Genesis 15:6]

²³ The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, ²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

²⁵ He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Faith[fulness] toward Christ—not Torah compliance—defines the people of God. Michael Bird (from Ridley College in Melbourne) puts it like this:

Abraham's faith proves that justification is by faith and not by works of the law, nor is it restricted to people of the law. In this way, Paul is able to drive a wedge between Israel's election and Israel's law, and instead redraws election around faith in Christ, with Abraham the case in point.¹⁴

Your thoughts on Romans 4?

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¹⁴ Michael F. Bird, *Romans*, Story of God Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 139.

4.2 How Jesus sets the world right (Romans 5)

Jesus' faithfulness sets us right (5:1-5)

Zoom out in space and time, and see the transformation God is bringing to the earth:

Romans 5:1-2 (NIV)

¹ Therefore, since we have been **justified** through **faith**, we have **peace** with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,
² through whom we have gained **access** by **faith** into this **grace** in which we now **stand**. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

Verse 1:

- Humanity is set right with God (*justified*)
- through giving our loyalty (*faith[fulness]*)
- to God's anointed ruler (*our Lord Jesus Christ*).
- Consequently, we—the community that trusts God's Messiah—are no longer at war with God (*we have peace with God*).

Verse 2:

- God's *grace* is his generosity, and what he gave us is his *Messiah* as our *Lord*. Through him, we've **gained access to God's grace**, by giving him our loyalty (*faith[fulness]*).
- We who recognize his Christ as our Lord now **stand** in restored relationship to God, as King and kingdom.
- So, in a world where humans have fallen short of our vocation to image God (3:23), the community in Messiah's leadership **boasts in the hope of reflecting the glory of God** so the people of earth can see God.

But if we lose the cosmic scope of what God is doing and make it all about me, there's a danger of sliding into triumphalism, substituting a "prosperity gospel" that's all about my health, my wealth, my victories over my problems.

That's the rebellion's "gospel." It proclaims our power. Jesus took the powerless path to overturn the powers that had taken God's world. He was rejected because of those who wanted to keep their power. He suffered and died, trusting the Father to raise him up. Anyone who tells you "Jesus suffered so we don't have to" has not understood the gospel that calls us to take up our cross and follow the Messiah on the road he took. All who follow the Messiah in a world where people are still in rebellion against God will suffer for the same reasons he did:

Romans 5:3-5 (NIV)

³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that **suffering** produces perseverance; ⁴ **perseverance**, character; and **character**, hope. ⁵ And **hope** does not put us to shame, because



Source: <https://visibleearth.nasa.gov/images/56600/seawifs-sunny-day-in-europe/566021>

God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

We boast in the hope of the glory of God (verse 2) by laying our lives down as Jesus did, by extending grace to selfish people as God did. Every time a selfish person takes advantage of us, our suffering is an opportunity to show them the heart of God who kept faithfully *persevering* with a world that was doing wrong by him (out of unfaithfulness to him).

So it's your *glory* to *suffer* for doing good! That's how God's faithful *perseverance* is developed in us. It's how God's *character* is formed in us. And God's faithful character in us is the *hope* of the world.

This *hope* is what God will ultimately achieve in Christ. As Abraham discovered, this is a multi-millennia project, a hope fulfilled over thousands of years. But that doesn't mean that we, in our own lifetime, are put to shame while we're waiting for something way in the future.

Right now, in the present, we're experiencing the transforming life that giving our faith[fulness] to the Messiah produces: *God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us* (verse 5). We are the present reality of the Christ transforming the world: the love God has given to us in the Messiah, flowing through us by his Holy Spirit. The indwelling Holy Spirit changes everything for us now, and transforms everything into Christ's leadership in the age to come.

Does that make it worthwhile following Messiah Jesus now, even when we suffer because others are still living for themselves?

Romans 5:6-8 (NIV)

⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.

⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Why did Jesus die? It's common today to think of Jesus dying for *me*, for the list of sins I've committed. While that is a tiny part of the story, the context in Romans is a bigger, global story. The "we" is all humanity, gentile and Jew, who've been unfaithful to God (Romans 1–3). As a result of this rebellion against God, we're enslaved to the powers of Sin and Death (6:17-18). That's why *we were still powerless until the Messiah died for the ungodly* (verse 6). Paul used the word *ungodly* in 1:18 to refer to the peoples of the earth who failed to recognize and live under God's authority.

Imagine how Caesar would react if he sent his son to a rebellious city to make peace, and they killed him. Instant destruction! The city would cease to exist. "Reduce it to a ploughed field" was Emperor Hadrian's instructions regarding Jerusalem in AD 133.

But that's not the kind of ruler God is. While we were still *sinners*—rebels resisting God's authority—God demonstrates his character (*his love for us* earthly creatures) by giving us his Messiah who died *because of our sins*, i.e. our rebellion against God's authority (verse 8).

If you're familiar with Custer's last stand (the battle of Little Bighorn), you might appreciate Tom Wright's comment:

Jesus was thus taking upon himself the direct consequences, in the political and in the theological realm alike, of the failure and sin of Israel. He was dying, quite literally, for their sins. (I once saw a bumper-sticker beside an Indian reserve on the shores of the Ottawa river to the west of Montreal, declaring that 'Custer died for your sins'. That was making a very similar point.) ... Jesus was taking upon himself the direct result of the ways in which God's people had failed in their vocation.¹⁵

God's response was not to crucify the rebels. God's response was to raise up his Messiah, calling on the rebels (sinners) to give him our (faith[fulness]). Astoundingly, *in his blood*—the assassination of the Messiah—we are set right (*justified*) with God, and therefore rescued from God's just anger at the murder of his Son:

Romans 5:9 (NIV)

⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!

Justification is so much more than just a court declaration. It's being *set right* with God as our heavenly sovereign through the Messiah, so it's the reconciled relationship of King and kingdom, a people living the rescue (*saved through his life*), empowered to serve him through the Holy Spirit who forms the resurrected life of the Messiah in us. Our lives in submission to God's Messiah are therefore our boast that this is how God sets the world right:

Romans 5:10-11 (NIV)

¹⁰ For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! ¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Undoing Adam's rebellion (5:12-21)

The rest of Chapter 5 contrasts what Jesus has done with how it all went wrong in the beginning. God crowned humans with his glory, representing God's dominion over creation (Genesis 1:26-28). But by taking the knowledge of good and evil into our own hands so as to be gods in our own right (Genesis 3:5), we disconnected ourselves and creation from our true Sovereign, introducing the powers of Sin and Death. With his faithfulness to his Father, Jesus has undone what Adam did: setting us right, and restoring creation to God's authority.

Paul starts telling the story of the great reversal Christ achieved (verse 12), and gets sidetracked into a description of how this functioned for Jews and gentiles (verses 13-14). Then he resumes the contrast between Adam and Jesus (verses 15-17), so he can finally explain what Jesus has achieved for humanity (verses 18-21).

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (London: SPCK, 2006), 53.

Romans 5:12-14 (NIV)

¹² Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—

¹³ To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come.



Adam handed creation over to evil (Sin).

Sin (as a power) entered into the world through humanity (the Hebrew word *ā-dām*). By rejecting what our heavenly sovereign commanded, humanity handed God's world over to Sin, with the consequence that Death ruled (verse 12).

For Paul's Jewish audience, *sin* meant violating God's Torah (*the law*), so he explains that the nations were also under the power of Sin, even though they did not have the Torah and God did not hold them accountable to Torah's demands (verse 13).

The Torah also tells the story of humanity operating under the power of Death. It starts with Cain, and Lamech (Genesis 4:8, 23). Violence corrupted God's world (Genesis 6:11; 9:5-6). Warriors use the power of death to build kingdoms (Genesis 10:10). They made war to try and take the land promised to Abraham (Genesis 14). So yes: *Death reigned* over the nations, even before the Torah was given at Sinai.

Since the *Human* (*Ā-dām*) betrayed his calling, God has now given us a true human (Jesus). That's what Paul means by calling Adam *the pattern of the one to come* (verse 14). Jesus had something similar in mind when he repeatedly called himself *the son of man*. As *heir of humanity*, Jesus received the authority Adam abused. Humanity's unfaithfulness handed creation over to the power of sin, but God's messiah received the authority of heaven, and through his faithfulness handed creation back to God.

The tragedy of what the original human did is therefore undone by *the gift* God has given—the new human (Jesus) who restores creation to God's reign, renewing us as the people of God in him:

Romans 5:15-17 (NIV)

¹⁵ But **the gift** is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and **the gift** that came

by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! ¹⁶ Nor can **the gift** of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but **the gift** followed many trespasses and brought justification. ¹⁷ For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of **the gift** of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!



"The gift is not like the trespass." (Romans 5:15)

The gift of being *set right* through God's Messiah means that that we actively participate in *the reign of righteousness* since he is our king, the leader of humanity to whom we give allegiance (faith).

Adam betrayed the dominion God gave him, so all humanity has lived under sin and death. Jesus has reversed this betrayal, returning earth to God's reign for all of us:

Romans 5:18-19 (NIV)

¹⁸ Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. ¹⁹ For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

"All" here refers to the whole of humanity: gentile and Jew. The Torah helped to highlight the rebellion that was already in progress before Sinai. So, God's gift is both a human to undo Adam's rebellion and a Messiah (anointed ruler) for the people of God: one Lord for all people:

Romans 5:20-21 (NIV)

²⁰ The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, ²¹ so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Your thoughts?

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4.3 So what?

You may have heard of the doctrine of “**original sin.**” Based largely on this passage, it teaches that every human is born as a sinner because we’re the offspring of sinners going all the way back to Adam. By AD 400, Augustine (the greatest theologian of early centuries) was arguing that babies are born as sinners destined for hell, unless they are baptized. Even today, there’s an urgency in some churches to get children baptized, because baptism is understood to remove original sin.

The doctrine of “original sin” is widely accepted, in the Reformed tradition as well as Catholicism, though from early times the Eastern Orthodox tradition never viewed things this way.

But Paul was describing how we’re all born into a world that was handed over to the powers of Sin and Death long before we born. He’s not saying that every baby is an evil person even before they do anything. It’s a very different thing to say that a child was born into slavery to an evil regime than it is to say that the child is evil.

We’re already enslaved at birth because of Adam’s betrayal. As we grow up, we know what it’s like to live in that kind of world, and we participate in the evil we were born into. Hurt people hurt people.

That’s what Christ has undone, restoring us to heaven’s reign. God’s grace is revealed in giving us his Messiah. He is the expression of God’s *grace*—a keyword in this chapter (5:2, 15, 17, 20) and the next (6:1, 14, 15).

in Jewish thought, God called Abraham to undo what Adam had done. That is the trajectory Paul takes in Romas 4. Out of his faith[fulness] to God, Abraham was judged to be doing right, evident in leaving the power-centres of the Babel-builders, journeying with God to a land that would live under God instead of the other powers. Abraham’s faithful obedience launched the project that ultimately rescues the world.

What are your thoughts, meditations, and unanswered questions on Romans 4–5?
How do you understand Jesus to be the saviour of the world?

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For next time, read **Romans 6 and 7**, as we look at the emancipation (salvation) that comes through his leadership.