

Going to Heaven . . . Old Testament Style

Sola Fide: Justification By Faith Alone – Part IV

Romans 3:25-26

Introduction – How was the Old Testament believer saved?

Has the definition of salvation always been the same, since the beginning of time? Is it “justification by faith” for believers in the New Testament time, and “justification by works, or circumcision, or Levitical dietary laws, or adherence to the system of Judaism” in the Old Testament time? How was an Old Testament person saved? How were they granted forgiveness? How did an Old Testament believer go to paradise?

Abraham never asked Jesus into his heart, nor did Moses or Joshua. None of the prophets ever got down on their knees and said, “Father, right now I know I’m a sinner and I place my faith in Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to save me and forgive me of my sins.”

They never prayed anything like that. So, you might say, “But I thought that’s what you had to do to go to heaven!”

How did an Old Testament person, who lived before the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, find forgiveness. Did they not need forgiveness? Did God change the rules for certain Old Testament saints? Did He play favorites?

How was Abraham called “the friend of God”?

Have you ever wondered how Abraham could be called, according to James, chapter 2, verse 23b, “. . . the friend of God”? How does a lying coward become the friend of God? He was a man who put his own wife’s virtue at risk, “up for grabs,” by making her tell everyone she was not his wife, but only his sister. Then, when kings saw her and wanted her, since she was beautiful, they would not kill Abraham to get her.

According to Genesis, chapter 12, Pharaoh himself spotted Sarah and added her to his harem. God later, plagued the house of Pharaoh to protect Sarah.

What kind of husband would do that to his wife, and not once, but twice?! Genesis, chapter 20, records, that Abraham again made his wife tell the same half-truth to protect Abraham’s skin. They were literally half brother and half sister, but Sarah was also forced to tell everyone that she was unmarried. A king, named Abimelech, spotted Sarah and took her to be part of his harem, while giving Abraham a large variety of gifts. God came to Abimelech in a dream and said, in verse 3b, “. . . you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married.”

I would think by now, Sarah would have had enough of Abraham. What kind of husband would risk his wife’s life do a thing like that? Yet, God called Abraham his friend.

How was Jacob called the “prince of God”?

And, what about Jacob? How does a deceiving, manipulating, compromising, self-centered man get a name change, according to Genesis, chapter 32, verse 28, to “Israel,” which means, “prince of God”. Is that someone whom God would consider a prince? Is that how a prince of God acts? Furthermore, how does a man like Jacob get into heaven?

How was Moses the great leader of Israel and the dispenser of the Law?

What about Moses? Moses was the great leader of Israel and the dispenser of the Law. How in the world does God place in Moses’ bloodstained hands the tablets of Law that read, according to Exodus, chapter 20, verse 13, “You shall not murder”?! What kind of God would allow a hypocrite to deliver the message of truth?

How was David called “a man after God’s own heart”?

Consider David, as well. He did perhaps, some of the most repulsive sins among those recorded in the Old Testament. He committed adultery, and then, after he discovered that the woman was pregnant, he ordered his general to abandon the woman’s husband during heavy fighting, so that he was easily killed. He then brought the dead soldier’s wife into his palace, went through the charade of marriage, and announced that they had a baby on the way. Yet, according to Acts, chapter 13, verse 22b, God calls David, “. . . a man after [God’s own] heart . . .”.

Is there salvation without the forgiveness of sins?

How do you call murderers, adulterers, deceivers, and liars, the friends, servants, and kindred spirits of God?

Donald Grey Barnhouse asks the honest question,
*If God is holy, these Old Testament men should be separated from God forever. Would not a holy God dirty Himself in holding such sinful men to His bosom in love?*ⁱ

How did an Old Testament man or woman, who lived and died prior to the cross of Jesus Christ, find cleansing and forgiveness? You might say, “Through animal sacrifices, right?”

Listen to the writer of Hebrews, who writes in chapter 10, verses 1 through 4, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,

For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

The Greek verb for “take away,” is “aphaireo” (αφαιρεω), and could be translated, “to permanently remove”. So, verse 4 could be rendered, “For it is impossible for animal sacrifices to completely remove sins.”

Since that is true, it would mean that it was impossible for any Old Testament believer to go to heaven, as none of their sins were completely or permanently removed. Their sins were certainly covered by the repetitive sacrifices, but not removed.

John was given a tour of heaven and, in the book of Revelation, recorded what he saw. He described the throne of God and the winged creatures who hover about it. These creatures, as he tells us in chapter 4, verse 8b, are continually chanting,

. . . Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.

No one fellowships around that throne who is dirtied with lingering sin.

Then, John further describes the citizens of heaven as those who have been washed clean and pure. He even states in chapter 21, verse 7, that no unclean person can ever inhabit the holy city.

Unless God changed the rules, there is no way that a sinful person, even if they happened to be Abraham, Jacob, Moses, or David, could ever hope to live forever with a holy God, when they have never had their sins removed.

How did an Old Testament believer ever go to paradise? What is the answer to that question?

Salvation – For Old and New Testament Believers

The answer is found, believe it or not, in Romans, chapter 3. You might be thinking,

“Stephen, you think the answer to everything is in Romans, chapter 3!”

Well, look at Romans, chapter 3. We will begin with verses 23 through 25.

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed

In other words, the cross of Christ was a demonstration of God’s righteousness. The demonstration was needed because God could have been viewed as unrighteous, or partial and inconsistent. Why? Because He had not treated the Old Testament believers with justice. Their sins had not been removed, and yet, they were God’s friends. In fact, paradise was a place known as, “Abraham’s bosom”. How did Abraham get there?!

There is no salvation without the forgiveness of sins

Notice the word that is translated “passed over,” in verse 25b, which says,

. . . because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed

The phrase “. . . the sins previously committed,” is referring to sins that were committed prior to the cross of Christ. The phrase “passed over,” is the word “paresis” in the Greek, which refers to, “the temporary passing by or the temporary withholding” of judgment against sin for a certain period of time.

Did God do that? Yes. After Adam and Eve sinned, He could have meted out full justice for their sin and condemned them to die immediately. Instead, He covered them with what? He covered them with the skins of animals, thus instituting the principle of substitutionary death to cover over sin. That pointed the way to a coming Substitute, who would shed His blood and give His life as sinful mankind’s substitute.

In the book of Leviticus, Moses formalizes God’s instructions on atonement and animal sacrifice for the purpose of temporarily covering over sin. Because animals do not share man’s nature, they are not immortal beings and they do not have the will to rebel against or to worship God. They are not spiritual beings, which means, among other things,

that when they die, they no longer exist; they are not immortal souls. However, because they do not share human nature, they are sinless. That is, they do not have the conscious thought of rebelling against God and violating his standard. They have never read the Bible and do not act in any way other than what their instincts allow. That horse, cow, dog, cat, whale, or giraffe lives their one life, always following their instincts, unless you train them to act otherwise; such as, training them to use that little box in the laundry room or to wait until you let them outside to go in the neighbor’s yard, which is by far the most convenient.

The principle of atonement and animal sacrifice was simply that a sinless animal was judged, as it were, in the place of sinful humans.

You may remember that God’s system of atonement for sin for the Old Testament believer, revolved around the ark of the covenant. It was a box that was a yard long and was covered with gold. Inside the box were a number of things, the most significant of which were perhaps, the tablets of stone upon which God had inscribed the Ten Commandments. The covering of the box was called the “mercy seat,” and in fact, those are the very words that Paul uses in Romans, chapter 3, to refer to Jesus Christ.

Now, once a year, the high priest killed a bull and a goat, took the blood into the holy of holies, or the inner room of the tabernacle, and sprinkled the blood on the cover of the ark. And God, in effect, came down and viewed the Law, which had been broken by everyone, but saw the tablets of stone, as it were, through the shed blood of the sinless animal. God was then, temporarily satisfied that, while His people had sinned, they had put their faith in His acceptance of a sinless sacrifice on their behalf.

Something still had to be done though, as this was a temporary covering, not a permanent solution. Remember Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 4,

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to [permanently remove] sins.

Forgiveness of sins is through Jesus Christ alone

So, how did the Old Testament believer experience full and final forgiveness during his lifetime? He did not! Not until the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, were the sins of the Old Testament believer permanently atoned for.

That means the Old Testament believer was literally, saved on credit. In fact, one author wrote, “If Christ had not died on the cross to pay the penalty

for their sin, they would have had to be brought out of heaven and sent to hell.”

The full and final payment for sin was the Messiah. He summarized, finalized, fulfilled, confirmed, and completed the system of substitutionary atonement. It could be understood in this way:

- Old Testament saints went to heaven by faith in the forgiveness that was yet to come.
- New Testament saints go to heaven by faith in the forgiveness that has come.

In that light, the plan of salvation has never changed. It is faith in the death of someone, or something sinless, for someone who is sinful.

The Old Testament believer knew the dying animal was his substitute, so that he could avoid judgment and live. In fact, in David’s classic song of confession, recorded in Psalm, chapter 51, he wrote,

Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

What did he mean by, “Purify me with hyssop . . .”? You need to understand that hyssop was the plant that the priests used to dip into the blood of the sacrifice in order to sprinkle its blood on the mercy seat. In other words, David was pleading for forgiveness on the basis of being cleansed by the blood of God’s appointed sacrifice. That is how David was saved, by placing his faith in God’s appointed sacrifice.

The Old Testament believer knew the dying animal was his substitute, so that he could avoid judgment and live. The New Testament believer knows that the dying Lamb of God is the final substitute, so that all who believe can avoid judgment and live forever. Let me say it another way:

- For the Old Testament believer, the sinless animal foretold redemption.
- For all believers, the sinless Savior fulfilled redemption.

And let me say, as well:

- For the Old Testament believer, the cross of Christ was prophecy.
- For the New Testament believer, the cross of Christ is history.

Does that mean that the Old Testament believer knew that a Redeemer, a literal person, was coming, who would ultimately, die for the sins of mankind? Absolutely. Isaiah wrote, in chapter 53, verses 5 through 7,

But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth.

Skip to verse 11,

As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities.

It was on the cross that God the Father placed on God the Son, the sins of David, Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and every other Old Testament believer, and every New Testament believer, who had placed their faith in God’s Word, and God’s coming Redeemer.

Let me say it another way:

- Old Testament saints were saved by faith in the future death of Christ.
- New Testament saints are saved by faith in the past death of Christ.

So, everyone who goes to heaven, gets there because of Jesus. There has never been and there is now, no other way to heaven.

The truth is, we are people who have lied, murdered, adulterated, and deceived; people who have been angry, selfish, petty, covetous, lustful, greedy, and proud. We will never be able to clean up our act enough to ever hear God say, “For you, I’ll change the rules.”

No. God has never changed the rules. He has never changed the plan of salvation. Abraham is not in heaven today, because God kind of liked him. Moses is not in heaven today, because he spent all those years putting up with ornery people. David is not in heaven today, because he was a talented gospel song writer. No. They, and every believer today, go to heaven because Someone died on behalf of their sins; because Someone took their punishment for them, shed His blood and died, that they could live.

The truth is, we are a lot more like David, and Moses, and Jacob, and Abraham than we thought.

We are all in need of a Substitute, who will be punished in our place, for our sin.

Now notice the point Paul makes in verse 26 of Romans, chapter 3. He says of the cross,

for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

In other words, God remains just – the penalty for sin is paid for in Christ. He did not change the penalty – eternal separation from God. But because Jesus is God the Son, an infinite being, He was able to pay the infinite price for an infinity in one moment.

That is the amazing thing! God was able to retain his justice and yet, at the same time, justify the sinner, pardon the murderer, forgive the liar, the adulterer, and the self-centered, and embrace the disobedient, who what? Verse 26b says,

. . . who has faith in Jesus.

For the Old Testament believer, all of their animal substitutes pointed toward the final Substitute, who was God incarnate, the Lamb of God, the Son of God. And, for those of us who are New Testament believers, having the benefit of history and knowing the Greek name of this Redeemer, Ιησους, when we placed our faith in His final and ultimate sacrifice, then our sins, past, present, and future were forgiven.

Here is how it works:

- The Old Testament believer looked forward to Christ through the eyes of prophecy.
- The New Testament believer looks backward to Christ through the eyes of history.

The vision, however, remains the same for both. It is a vision of a dying Substitute, who took our penalty and paid the price for our sins.

Cliff Barrows, the long time song leader of the Billy Graham crusades, tells a story about the way his children learned to appreciate the price that Jesus paid for their sins. When they were fairly young, the children had done something they had specifically been told never to do. Cliff gave his children a good

talking to and then, told them that, if they did it again, they would get a spanking.

Upon returning home, a saddened father discovered that his children had yet again, disobeyed their father. The thought of spanking them just overwhelmed him at this particular time. He wrote,

I called Bobby and Bettie Ruth into my room, took off my belt . . . they knew what was coming and were already beginning to cry. But then I took off my shirt, and with a bare back I knelt down at the bed. I handed them the belt and then told them that I was going to take their punishment for them. I made them give me ten straps each with the belt. You should have heard the crying. It was from them. They did not want to do it. But I told them the penalty had to be paid and so, through their sobs and tears, they administered the penalty. After it was over, we hugged and kissed each other. And then we knelt together and prayed.ⁱⁱ

Cliff Barrows was able to keep his standard of justice and, at the same time, allow the law breakers to go free.

Are you like Abraham – a liar and a coward? Are you like Moses – a murderer and a frequently angry person? Are you like David – adulterous and immoral? Are you like Jacob – manipulative, self-centered, and deceptive?

Because of God's justice, no sin will ever go unpunished; yet, because of God's grace, no sin is beyond forgiveness.ⁱⁱⁱ

The incredible story of the cross is not that it was just a demonstration of justice, but that it was a demonstration of grace and love. For, our holy, righteous God chose not to punish the sinner, but instead, sent His son to bend down, take off His shirt of omnipotence and splendor, and take our punishment for us.

And those of us who place our hope and faith in His Son alone, will also go to heaven. We will meet Old Testament and New Testament believers alike, who have that one thing in common – faith in the One who paid the penalty for all of our sin.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/2/2002 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Donald Grey Barnhouse, Romans Vol. 2 (Eerdmans Publishing, 1982), p. 136.

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- ⁱⁱ Ken Boa and William Kruidenier, Romans: Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, Tenn., Broadman & Holman, 2000), p. 114.
- ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur Jr., Romans (Chicago, Ill., Moody Press, 1991), p. 218.