

Salvation Illustrated
Text: Romans 4:1-25
Series: Book of Romans [#05]
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Theme: **With The Heart A Person Believes, Resulting In Salvation.**

Introduction

The book of Romans is about the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, which is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (1:16). In the first three chapters we have looked at what it means to be a good and faithful servant of Christ and the gospel. We have looked at the *bad news* of God's righteous wrath against all sin, and that all of us are sinners who cannot save ourselves. And then, God's solution for this bad news—"by grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8).

Now in chapter four illustrates this good news with the spotlight on Abraham, and a brief cameo appearance by King David. A good question we could ask here in light of the fact that most of the believers in the church at Rome were Gentiles is "Why Abraham?" To Jewish believers he was *Father Abraham*, the one through whom they came as a people and also their most honored hero of faith (e.g., Isaiah 51:2; John 8:39). Some, even many, Jewish people had the distorted view that Abraham became righteous through what he did, through his works. As one wrote, Abraham "was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord."¹ Another said we have to repent of sins but Abraham did not because he did not sin against God.² Some Gentile believers would have known about Abraham prior to coming to faith, and certainly all now in faith would know his central role to the Jewish nation and that Jesus Christ was the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to bless all nations through Abraham.

And King David? He was the greatest king of Israel, the man after God's own heart.

Paul is saying that if these two men, the greatest figures in Israel's history, were not, could not be saved by works but only by God's grace through faith, then that is the only way for us, for everyone.

Paul's argument here is two-pronged: first, Abraham's righteousness did not come through his own efforts, and then, Abraham's righteousness came through faith. His basic point can be summed up with what he wrote later, 10:10, "*with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness.*"

Abraham's Righteousness Did Not Come Through His Own Efforts.

Paul begins by telling us Abraham's righteousness did not come through his own efforts, specifically, it did not come through his good works. Look at the opening statement. "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if

Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God” (1-2). Abraham found, he discovered, he learned that he could not be justified before God by all the good things he did. If he had been, he certainly would have had something to boast about. But no one can boast about their relationship with God, let alone before God, just as Paul wrote emphatically back in 3:27-28.

The fact was, verse 3 says, “For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’” Turn back to the verses Paul is referring to in Genesis 15, where we will pick it up with verse 1.

“After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great.’ Abram said, ‘O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.’ Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ‘This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.’ And He took him outside and said, ‘Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.” (1-6)

Abraham had left his country a decade before in response to God’s direction, and now was 85. Here he believed, he said, in the language Moses used, “Amen” to or affirmed God’s statement that he and his wife would still have a child, followed by a countless multitude of descendants. He trusted what God told him. He believed God in his heart, at the core of his being, and God reckoned it, put it into his account, put it on his column in the ledger as righteousness. He was declared righteous by God’s grace. His faith did not earn it. His faith was the vehicle or the channel of receiving God’s gift of righteousness. If Abraham had earned his righteousness, God would not have *reckoned* or *counted* his faith as righteousness by His grace because if Abraham earned it, God would have owed it to him just as an employer owes a worker his wages.

It’s here where King David makes his cameo appearance. Look at verse 6,

“just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account’” (6-8).

King David was on the same page. God’s grace is the motivator here as God does not reckon, does not count the sins against the sinner. This is forgiveness. King David would have given a hearty “*Amen!*” to Paul’s words. And this was not a theoretical, ivory tower statement from

the King. These words Paul cites are from Psalm 32, a Psalm about David's own sin. This statement is very personal.

Abraham's righteousness, David's righteousness did not come through their good works.

Paul did not stop here. He went on to make it clear that just as Abraham was not saved by his works, neither was he saved because of his being circumcised in obedience to God's directions. Now be justified by or through circumcision might seem like a strange concept to us, but it did not sound strange to Jews in the first century; Paul begins this section with some questions. Verse 9.

“Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, ‘Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.’ How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised?” (9-10a)

As we continue in verse 10 we find Paul's first answer, “Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised” (10b). God's promise, Abraham's faith and God reckoning it as righteousness took place in Genesis chapter 15 when Abraham was 85. His circumcision took place later when Abraham was 99 years old, as recorded in chapter 17. There God restated His promises to Abraham and told him circumcision would be “the sign of the covenant between Me and you” (11). So, Abraham was justified before he was circumcised. He circumcision did not justify him. And if not him, it does not justify anyone else. This also makes it clear, especially in those days of the first century, that one did not have to become Jewish in order to be one of God's people.

Then Paul clarifies the true significance of circumcision. Look at verse 11,

“and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised” (11-12).

His circumcision was a sign, a symbol or seal of what had already taken place spiritually—that he had believed God and God reckoned it to him as righteousness. Paul used this term *seal* in 1 Corinthians 9 when he told those believers “you are the *seal* of my apostleship in the Lord” (2). These believers were a sign or symbol of Paul truly being an apostle. Some second century church writers used this word *seal* to refer to baptism.³ They said it is a seal or symbol of faith. Circumcision, then, did not make Abraham righteous, nor does it make anyone else righteous. No work we can do, no religious rite done to us will make us righteous.

Paul has one more argument on this: Abraham's righteousness did not come through the law. This time Paul begins with a statement of fact. Go on to verse 13.

“For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.”

Now he explains, verse 14,

“For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation” (14-15).

Paul is saying “If we become righteous *the old fashioned way* of earning it through keeping the Law, then there is no need for faith. In fact, there is no role for faith.” He reminds us again that the Law reveals our sin and God’s wrath and judgment on our sin, our need of God’s righteousness by His grace. As I said last week, just as some of us can swim faster, more consistently or farther than others but not one of us can swim from Vancouver to Hawaii, so no one can *swim* to righteousness no matter how fast, consistently or far he or she can go with good works, including keeping the Old Testament or any other Law.

Abraham’s righteousness did not come through his own efforts. Now, if you are beginning to think, “Enough already! I get it! Why does Paul keep hammering away at this?” Remember that this truth is essential to the Christian faith. *Salvation comes through faith alone*. The distortions to this truth are countless and relentless. We need to remember it, to stand in it, to rejoice in it, to live confidently in it.

Abraham’s Righteousness Came Through Faith.

Now we come to Paul’s second line of argument, that Abraham’s righteousness came through faith. Faith. Faith simply is believing. But, remember, it is not just knowing the truth nor yet just agreeing with it. It means to place your trust, your confidence in God and His gracious provision for you. It is this faith, true faith, that is the channel for, that results in righteousness.

The first thing to note about Abraham’s faith is its object. In a word, the object is God—the true, eternal, personal, sovereign God. Abraham had faith in God, the Creator, the One who, the last part of verse 17 says, “calls into being that which did not exist.” He believed in God, the One and only One who can create something out of nothing. Abraham had faith in God who makes promises and who keeps them. Look at verse 21 that tells us Abraham was “fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.”

Abraham had faith in God who gives life to the dead. Go back to verse 17 which tells us God “gives life to the dead.” Drop down to the end of verse 24 and verse 25 which tells us God “raised Jesus our Lord from the dead ... because of our justification.” Abraham had faith in God who justifies the ungodly. Go back up to verse 5. “But to the one who does not work, but who believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.” The “ungodly”—that’s us, that’s everyone apart from God.

The object of Abraham's faith was the One and only true God. Faith which is the channel to righteousness must be in God as He has revealed Himself in the Bible.

The Romans built an extensive, excellent system of roads for moving their armies, commerce and general travel. The city of Rome was at the center of the system. So the phrase, "All roads lead to Rome." We have heard that applied to faith. "All roads lead to Rome—all the religions or forms of faith lead to the same destination." And so the word universalism is used to indicate the belief that all people will be saved, that no one will bear the punishment of their sin forever in hell. Over the last few decades some in and around the church sadly have drunk deeply from the poisoned waters in the well of postmodern philosophy. They question or even reject the authoritative, universal, propositional truth of Scripture setting themselves adrift on a stormy sea of subjectivity.⁴ They hope the view of God in the Bible is correct, but they do not have any certainty.

Think of one other aspect of this. I have listened to Christian leaders being interviewed and asked the always-to-be-expected question that goes something like this, "Do you really believe that Jews, Muslims and everyone else who does not believe in Jesus is going to hell?" It is sad to hear some not only walk around the barn a few times, but around the back forty a few times in generalities and not clearly and graciously state the truth of the gospel.

All of this is so sad as well as so dangerous. God has spoken clearly and authoritatively in the Bible about who He is and how we can know Him. There is no other road, no other path to God. In the first days of the church the apostle Peter declared of Christ

"there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

His statement was based on Jesus' words in John's gospel, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (14:6).

As it was, so it is. So it will be. To be righteous before God means believing in Him as He has declared Himself to be in the Bible.

The second important thing to note about Abraham's faith is its quality. Paul touches on three aspects of quality in Abraham's faith. Abraham's faith was a considered faith. Let's pick it up at verse 18.

"In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, 'So shall your descendants be.' Without becoming weak in faith he *contemplated* his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb." (18-19)

Abraham contemplated, he considered, carefully thought through all these things as he came to believe God.

Some decisions do not lead to salvation. Jesus' parable of the sower, seed and soils in Matthew 13 touches on this. Some of the sower's seed fell on rocky ground without much dirt. It sprang up quickly, but also withered away quickly in the heat without solid roots (5-6). Jesus explained the picture this way,

“The one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no firm root in himself, but is only temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away.” (20-21)

Other seeds fell among thorns which choked out the grain (7). Jesus explained this as

“the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.” (22)

We've seen this. It is sad and tragic. Faith that results in righteousness is a considered faith.

Abraham's faith also was one that believed the impossible. Go back to verse 18.

“In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, ‘So shall your descendants be.’”

His faith was not naive nor was it a blind leap. He had carefully considered his situation and God's promise. What God promised was impossible to him, but he believed that God can do the impossible.

Some stumble at God being and doing what is impossible to us. “How can God be eternal?” “How can God create something out of nothing?” “How can a holy God allow sin in the world and still be holy?” “How can God be a God of love and yet allow evil, pain and suffering?” And, although not asked as frequently, “How can God make a sinful person righteous?”

Saving faith is faith that believes God can do the impossible.

As well, Abraham's faith kept growing through experience. Notice the progression here: verse 19, “Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body.” We go on to verse 20, “with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief.” And beyond that, as verse 20 continues, Abraham “grew strong in faith, giving glory to God.” So then, verse 21 tells us he was “fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.”

Abraham's faith did not become strong and mature in an instant. His true faith grew and matured as He kept listening to, trusting and following God. A mark of true faith is that it will grow through experience, through all the good and bad times, all the easy and tough times.

D. Elton Trueblood is wrote, “Faith hears the inaudible, sees the invisible, believes the incredible, and receives the impossible. Faith is not belief without proof but trust without reservation.”⁵

Finally, think for a moment about the availability of Abraham’s faith. It is reasonable to wonder, “All of this may be true of Abraham, but ... I’m no Abraham!” Let’s look at a few verses here, beginning with verse 12, which tells us Abraham is

“the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.”

Now verse 16,

“the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.”

One more, drop down to verse 23,

“Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.” (23-25)

The message of the gospel is for all. Faith that leads to righteousness is God’s gift, is available to all.

Conclusion.

With the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness.

How should we respond to this truth? There are many ways. The one that has struck me as I have read and worked through this chapter over the last several weeks is *thankfulness*. I’m thankful for being freed from trying to climb the ladder of trying pleasing God to be accepted, be saved by Him. Thankful for being freed from struggles with failures, sins of the past and the thoughts that many people think make them too bad for God to love them and save them, that they are not and cannot be good enough to be His child. If that is where you’ve been, thank God you don’t have to be there. come to Him now, as you are.

We who know Christ, who have walked with Him by faith for some time, even a long time, also should be thankful. We have been saved by grace through faith, and should thank God that we live by grace through faith. Every day is a new opportunity to trust God, not looking back at the past, not staying locked in the bad experiences or failures of the past, but looking up to God and forward to what He can and will do as we trust Him. Thank God now, as you spend these next moments in His presence.

¹ *The Book Of The Jubilees*. Chapter xxiii.10. <<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/jub/jub50.htm>>
Accessed 03 November, 2009.

² e.g., *The Prayer of Manasseh*. <<http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/manasseh.html>>.
Accessed 03 November 2009.

³ Bauer, Walter, translated and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1957, p. 804.

⁴ e.g., Grenz, Stanley J. *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the Twenty-first Century* (Dovers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press), 1993.
Grenz, Stanley J. & John R. Franke. *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 2001.

⁵ Credited to Trueblood on:
<<http://www.streamofhealing.org/devotionals/Letting%20Faith%20Stretch%20You.pdf>>
Accessed 04 November, 2009.

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