

Abraham Believed God

Romans

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Let us turn in the book of Romans to Romans chapter 4 and we read the whole chapter. Romans chapter 4. Let us hear God's word.

1 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." 4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. 5 And to the one who does not work but trusts in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, 6 just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: 7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; 8 blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." 9 Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. 10 How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. 11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, 12 and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. 13 For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. 16 That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring--not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham,

who is the father of us all, 17 as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"--in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18 In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. 20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." 23 But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Amen. As we continue our study of Paul's letter to the Romans, we come this evening to the fourth chapter. I want to look at the whole of this chapter this evening to take as our theme words found in verse 3, "Abraham believed God." Abraham believed God. One of the most depressing remarks I've read in a commentary for a long time comes in a commentary on this chapter. The writer begins by saying, "This chapter has little interest and no importance for us." He is, of course, tragically, disastrously wrong. But why does he say that? Why does he even think that? Because I suppose it's about the Old Testament and the people and the salvation of the Old Testament, and his conclusion is, because it's to do with then, it has little or nothing to say to us now. He is, of course, wrong. Paul couldn't make it clearer than he does in verses 23 and 24, "the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also." This is a most valuable chapter in Romans. It's about Old Testament salvation and it's valuable because Old Testament believers were saved in exactly the same way as we are, and more than that, they can teach us a great deal about saving faith. When our children are small we give them picture books, and in the pictures they learn about realities that their minds couldn't otherwise easily grasp. In the Old Testament we have a series of pictures of saving faith and as we look at these pictures, as we look at these people, we learn much more of what faith in Christ means.

Now, we're attempting a lot this evening; this is quite a lengthy chapter and Paul's argument is condensed and it's complex in places and I'm not even going to begin to try exhaustively to explain the chapter. What I want to do is simply put before you a skeleton this evening of Paul's argument so that you can grasp the bare bones, as it were, of what he is saying, his main points, his outline, and then you can go back and read the chapter yourself and things will fall into place for you and you'll see where the detailed teaching of the chapter fits in. Paul's Jewish readers would have been listening with mounting concern to what he has been saying, whether they were Christians or not. Some of his remarks have been very disturbing to them. For example, chapter 3, verse 21, "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law." And to them, the law was precious. It was sweeter than honey. It was more precious than fine gold. It was their

great treasure and they would have said, "Well, Paul, are you against the law? Are you doing away with the law?" He asks the question in verse 31 of chapter 3, "Do we then overthrow the law by faith? Is this some completely new message that you're bringing in, Paul, that cancels out the last two thousand years and all that God has been doing with us?" And they would have been suspicious and they would have been wary and in his wisdom, Paul proposes a very satisfactory approach. Verse 1, "What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?" Why don't we go back to our father, our ancestor, the founder, as it were, of the Jewish people? Why don't we walk in the footsteps of Abraham? How did Abraham get right with God? And if we can learn that and follow that, then this cannot be anti-Jewish. This cannot be against any of God's dealings or God's covenant or God's purposes. If we walk in the footsteps of Abraham, then we're sure that we're walking in the paths of our forefathers, the prophets.

Paul, in this chapter, first corrects three mistakes and then he explains at the end more of what he means and that's what we're going to be doing this evening. Abraham believed God. Abraham was saved by faith. Abraham was saved by the gospel of grace, says Paul, which I am preaching. First of all, verses 1 to 8: faith not works. Faith not works. How do we get right with God? Our immediate response, our instinctive natural response is we get right with God by doing good and being good, and if we're very careful as those of you who are parents have doubtless found out, it's perilously easy to teach our children something that is really wrong. "Be a good boy and God will love you. Be a good girl and you'll go to heaven." We don't put it as crassly and as foolishly like that, but that's the message sometimes that we're getting across to our children. The rabbis taught this about Abraham, they said Abraham was a supremely righteous man, holy Abraham, godly Abraham, and Abraham was accepted because of his holiness and his righteousness, and Paul recognizes that if this is true, it would invalidate, it would cancel out what he said in chapter 3 verse 27, what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.

But if we are accepted by God because of what we do, then we can boast and we have a right to boast. Verse 2, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about." What says Paul in verse 3, "what does the scripture say?" Not the rabbis. The scripture. Abraham believed God. Full stop. And that was counted to him as righteousness, his faith. He's going back to Genesis 15. Abraham is growing old. He is childless and God comes to this aging, childless man and he promises him a miracle baby. What does Abraham do? He believes. He believes that God can do something for him that he could never do for himself. He believes that by his word, God can bring life from the dead. He believes that God can give a child who will be a blessing to many and he's right with God through his faith in God's promise.

When Paul takes up this word "counted or credited" might be a better translation, it's a word from accountancy. It means to put down opposite someone's name, to put down to one's account. There are two ways of doing something, of having something rather. There are two ways of having something. You can work for it, you can earn it, that's one way. He mentions it in verse 4, "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift, but as his due." If you work, and at the end of the week you get your pay packet, You don't take it home and say, "Do you know what happened today? My employer gave

me money." You sit down and you write a thank you letter and you say, "I want to express my gratitude for your amazing kindness in this gift that you've given me. It's outstandingly generous of you. I appreciate it very much." Not at all. You worked for it. You worked for it. You earned it. You don't owe him any thanks. That's your right. That's your due. You don't owe anything to anybody. He owes you. The other way of receiving something is by receiving it as a gift. Verse 5, "the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted," is reckoned, is credited, "as righteousness," and this was Abraham's position. He didn't work for it, it was given to him, it was counted to him, it was credited to him.

But says an objector, Abraham was an upright man so surely his good life made a contribution. All rights, says Paul. Let's turn for a moment to another famous Israelite, to David, Israel's greatest king. Was he an upright man? No. He was an adulterer and a murderer. Here's a leader of Israel who was truly ungodly and yet, what does he say? He too is rejoicing in full, free forgiveness. Verse 6, "David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works." David knows that his sin should be counted against him, but it isn't counted. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin. His sin isn't counted. He has thrown himself on God's mercy from the black depths of sin and he's right with God, not because of what he's done, but because of what God has done. And he knows now that salvation is not a debt that God pays to good people, it's a free gift that he gives to bad people.

That's Paul's first point in these first eight verses. Salvation through faith not works. Then secondly, verses 9 to 12: faith not sacraments. Faith not sacrament. Some people believe that they're saved by baptism or by Communion or by Mass or whatever name they give to it and that's not a new idea. We should listen, we should read between the lines here and listen to the Jewish objector whom Paul's dealing with and this objector would say, "Well, wait a minute, Paul. All that you're saying applies only to the circumcised, only to the covenant people." This sacrament, this circumcision has brought them into a special relationship with God and because they have been circumcised and because they've been brought into this relationship with God, he forgives them freely. But it's because of the sacrament. It's because of the sacrament. The Jews of the first century placed tremendous emphasis on circumcision. They believed in circumcisonal regeneration. One rabbi of the period wrote this, "No Israelite man who is circumcised will go down to Gehinnom; everyone who is circumcised will be saved and must be saved. That's how salvation comes. Paul asks and answers a vital question in verses 9 and 10, "Is this blessing then only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised." Abraham was declared righteous with God 14 years before he was circumcised. Abraham was a Gentile when he was declared righteous before God.

Far from proving justification by works or by sacrament, circumcision is God's seal on justification by faith. Verse 11, "He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised," while he was a Gentile. He was saved as a Gentile. "The purpose," Paul says in verse 11, "was to make

him the father of all who believe without being circumcised." Here's Paul's apology for the Gentile mission, his validation of the Gentile mission. Abraham is the father of Gentile believers. What matters is not whether we've received the same sacrament as Abraham, but that we share the same faith as Abraham. He is, says Paul, the father of believers before he's the father of the Jews. It's faith, not sacraments.

And then thirdly, in verses 13 to 16, it's faith, not law. It's faith, not law. This is the third approach to being right with God, possessing his word, having his word, knowing his law, and Paul here argues that law and grace simply can't go together in this sense. Verse 13, God gave Abraham a promise that he would be heir of the world and he made that promise when he believed and this was 430 years before the law was given. So you can't make salvation dependent on the law. The promise was given over 400 years before the law was given. If you make a promise, you can't later on add some condition on which the promise depends. A father can't say to his son, "I'll buy you a bicycle for Christmas," and then in December say, "Well, I'm not going to give you the bicycle because you didn't pass your exams." Well, you didn't say anything about exams. You made me a promise and if you bring in a condition, then the promise is worthless. He didn't need to make the promise. He could just have waited till the exams.

So Paul says in verse 14, "if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void," Genesis 15 doesn't mean anything. He believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness. That's meaningless, that's empty, if it's the law is the deciding factor. In fact, says Paul, if the law decides whether we become right with God or not, no one ever will, "For," he says in verse 15, "the law brings wrath." That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed.

The way of law is the way of despair. The way of faith is the way of certainty. I wonder, have I lost you? Remember the argument, Abraham believed God and Paul spells it out, faith not works, faith not sacraments, faith not law, but now in the end of the chapter, he wants to teach us more about what true faith is like, so that you and I will know if we have true faith, and so from verses 17 to 25, he moves on to characteristics of saving faith. He is the father of us all, verse 16. Abraham is the father of us all and if he's our father, our faith should be like his faith and true saving faith will be like Abraham's faith. Now what can we learn about Abraham's faith? Paul mentions, and I mention them very briefly, five things. First of all, his faith was God-centered. God-centered, verses 17 and 21. It's not so much our faith that's important, it's the object of our faith. It's not so much that we believe, it's the one in whom we believe. And so Paul talks about the father of many nations in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist. This is the God we believe in. The God who spoke into the emptiness and nothingness and said, "Let there be light and there was light." The God who called a whole universe into being by his word.

Can God change you? Can God make you a new person? Can God give life to the dead? Well, this is the God we believe in. This is the God we're called to trust. The God who gives life to the dead. The God who calls into existence the things that do not exist. We can trust this God. And when we put our faith in this great Almighty, all-powerful, all-

loving God, we're resting on a solid foundation. It's not just faith as such, it's faith in God, and God is able to do it and willing to do it, Paul says, of Abraham in verse 21, that he was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. God promises that if you believe in Jesus, he will forgive you all your sins. Is he able to do that? God promises that he will make you a new person. Is God able to do that? God promises that he will keep you through all the difficulties of life. He promises that. Is he able to do that? God promises that he will bring you safely to heaven. Is he able to do that? Of course he is able to do that. Of course he is able to do that. The first mark here of Abraham's faith is that it is God-based, it is God-centered and I trust God, says Abraham, to do what he has promised to do. Is your faith that faith?

Secondly, there's a supernatural element to Abraham's faith. Verse 18, "In hope he believed against hope." He believed against hope. He believed in the impossible to our eyes. He didn't think that the universe was a closed system, that you could rule out the miraculous, the supernatural. He believed that God can come into the world that he has made and that God can act in the world that he has sustained and God can do what we can't imagine, what we can't explain, what we can't expound in any way. A man and woman that age can't have children. That's impossible. They're long past the age where it is physically possible. "I don't care," said Abraham. "I believe in God and God can do what seems impossible." That's saving faith. God can do what seems impossible.

Thirdly, in verse 19, and this is a beautiful balance of scripture, Abraham's faith is realistic. It's realistic. He's not a fool. He's not a dreamer. He's not an idealist. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead. Abraham didn't say to himself, "Well, after all, I'm still a spritely young fellow. There's many a good tune played in an old fiddle. I think I would be quite capable of having children." No, no. He looked at his body and he said, "You're as good as dead. You're an old man. You're past it." He took all that into account. He considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. He considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. It was realistic. realistic I know that I have sinned against God and I know that my sins are very great and very serious, and I know that I am weak and frail, and I know that I will fall easily, and I know that there's a devil, and I know that he tempts us and I know that he assails us, and I know that the Christian life is hard and through much tribulation we have to enter the kingdom of God, we know all that, we still believe. We still believe. It's not blind faith. It's not silly faith or rose-colored faith, that somehow we just believe in Jesus and everything will be all right. No, our eyes are open. We see the difficulty. We see the barriers. We understand the impossibilities and the hindrances. But God can surmount them. It was realistic. He considered his own body. He considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. Yes, you look at that friend of yours and you don't kid yourself, you don't deceive yourself. You say, "They're not interested in the gospel. They're really not interested. There's not an atom of interest in them. But I believe that if it's God's will, he can change them. He can work."

Fourthly, Abraham's faith was patient. It was patient. In verse 20a, "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God." You remember how that promise remained unfulfilled for long weary years. God said, "You will have a child," and year after year passed and Abraham and Sarah got older and older and the promise wasn't fulfilled and

the promise wasn't fulfilled and it became less and less likely, but Abraham didn't waver. Abraham didn't waver. God said it, God will do it. It doesn't matter how long we have to wait. God will make me perfect. I keep falling down a lot. I make all sorts of mistakes. I keep committing the same old sins over and over again and sometimes I think is anything changing? But God will make us perfect. God will carry out his purposes. Christ will overcome all his enemies. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God. And there are all sorts of things that could make us waver and make us doubt but Abraham didn't waver. He was patient and steadfast and he kept on believing.

And then, fifthly and lastly, his faith was not only God-centered, supernatural, realistic, and patient, but it was growing. Verse 20b, "but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God." As he exercised faith, his faith was strengthened. As he waited, and as he was realistic, his faith was deepened and increased and made more powerful and more vigorous. And as we continue steadfastly looking to God and waiting on God patiently with realism, facing all the difficulties, putting our trust in him as the days and the months and the years pass, our faith strengthens and strengthens and we grow ever more sure of God and ever more convinced that he will carry out his purposes.

This is the faith of Abraham, says Paul, the father of us all. My dear friends, it's a beautiful picture of how a person gets right with God. Look at this man Abraham. He knows that in himself he has no strength. He has no hope. He has no future. His life is about to end in emptiness. But God comes to him with a promise. He says, "Abraham, I will give you a future. I will give you a hope. I will give you a blessing greater than any you can imagine." This old man casts himself on the God who makes the promise and he believes him. That's us as well. We're Abraham. We're without resources in ourselves. In ourselves we have no future. We have no hope. We have no strength. And God comes to us in Christ and he makes a promise to us about all these things. We have to choose. There is no future in works. There is no future in sacraments. There is no future in law. Only in Jesus Christ is the promise of life.

Have you believed that promise for yourself? Have you believed that promise for yourself? Do you believe the God who can do the impossible? Are you living day by day through faith in the Savior, the God who justifies the ungodly, the God who gives life to the dead, the God who is able to do what he has promised? These words, says Paul, will be counted to us who believed in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Amen.

Let us bow in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you for Abraham, the friend of God and the father of the faithful. We thank you that in himself he believed. He cast himself on your promise and it was counted to him as righteousness. So we pray, O God, that out of our native poverty and deadness and emptiness, we may once and for all and then daily again and again believe you and believe your promise and think great thoughts of you, the God who calls into existence things who are not and is able to do what he has promised, and not to waver, to look at the difficulties and by faith transcend them and to keep on believing

throughout the days and the years of our lives that as our faith grows and strengthens, Christ may be more real to us until we see him face to face in your glory. We pray in his name and for his sake. Amen.