

Romans 4

We've been in Romans the past month. We learned in chapters 1-2 that we are sinners; that we cannot save ourselves. We learned last week from the first part of chapter 3 that we are much more wicked than we want to believe.

But then, in chapter 3, we see this shift happen. Though we are guilty sinners, God has made a way for us to be justified (made right with God) through faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul says in chapter 3 that all of the OT law and prophets attest to that. (And these Jewish believers would be thinking, "You better back it up.")

So in chapter 4 he says, "Okay, let's talk about Abraham."

Abraham is the most important figure in Jewish history. And Paul looks at his life and recounts how Abraham was righteous before God. Why? Because he believed God.

And the word "faith" in Hebrew is "Amen!" He said "amen" to God.

God said, "Do this! Put your trust in me." And Abraham said, "Okay."

So what is faith? It's saying, "God I hear you! I'll go where you want me to go. Amen!"

God, "You said it, I believe it, that settles it."

Verse 3 – "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Verses 1-5

Abraham is the most esteemed figure to the Jews, and to many Jews, God picked him way back in Genesis because at the time he was the most righteous man on the planet.

Many Jews believed, "God looked for a man – and there he was – he was righteous. He earned God's favor, and he deserved it."

But Paul explains that Abraham achieved righteousness in a totally different way (going all the way back to Genesis 15:6).

Here's the thing - Abraham was a good man – but he wasn't a perfect man by any means. (And if you think that the Bible is a collection of perfect men and women – you'll be disappointed).

For example, there's one incident in the life of Abraham – he's passing through another country with his wife, Sarah (who is an attractive woman- and the king there was going to take his wife, and here's what Abraham did – he decided to lie and say to the king that his wife was his sister.

Abraham was a good man – but he wasn't a perfect man. He struggled with sin like you and me.

So was he justified before a perfect God by his works? And the answer is – not at all.

But here's what he did do: when God said, "Take your family, leave your home and go to a place you do not know (which was nothing but desert all the way) – Abraham packed everything up – and he went.

So what did Abraham do? When God said, "Trust me" – you'll understand as you go, Abraham said, "Amen."

Here's the thing: Abraham didn't just believe IN God? He BELIEVED GOD!

And when God said, "I'm going to make you into a great nation – trust me, you're going to have a son," what makes it interesting is that he and Sarah had no children of their own. Abraham is 86, and his wife is barren.

To have a child at that age was impossible in human terms. But what did Abraham say? Amen!

And because Abraham believed God – God credited to him righteousness.

Abraham didn't do anything to earn righteousness – he simply said “Amen” by faith. And he WENT when God said “go” – and he BELIEVED when God said “you will have a son.”

(Now, all of that points to this beautiful thing the Bible calls “grace.”)

What grace means is – we are given something by God that we do not deserve.

And why do we get grace? Because we deserve it? NO – we receive grace because GOD IS GOOD.

(And if Abraham – or any of us – could earn our right standing before God – it would cease to be grace.) Right?

That's what verse 4 is saying. If you've worked all week and your boss gives you your paycheck, you don't say, “How thoughtful! Such a nice gift. How considerate.” NO – YOU EARNED IT!

But that's not how God's forgiveness works. We were given grace, not because we've earned it, but because we trust in Him. (Think about it – if someone deeply wounds you and you forgive – forgiveness is not earned – it's voluntarily given. And when we do that, we are being more like Jesus that virtually anything we could ever do).

Verse 6

So here's the thing - Abraham is the father of the Jews.

David was the greatest king of the Jews.

David was a man after God's own heart. He was an amazing man – killed Goliath, conquered the Philistines, established Jerusalem as the city of God.

And yet for all his greatness, he had a glaring moment of disobedience when he took Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, for his own and subsequently arranged for her husband, Uriah, to go to the front of the battleline to be killed.

For an entire year, David kept the secret in his heart. Until one day his friend, the prophet Nathan, confronted David with his sin. And David confessed before God, “I have sinned.”

He makes no excuses. He admits expresses the exact nature of his sin. He writes Psalm 32 in response, which includes these words (**vs. 7-8**):

In that, David says two amazing things:

1. When we confess our sins, God forgives (literally, he releases us from the debt of punishment) – and
2. God credits to us righteousness in the place of our transgressions when we come to him in faith. (He blots out our sin when we come before him with a penitent heart; he doesn't count our sin against us).

A preacher friend of mine said, When you say “Amen” to God's offer of salvation, “he takes the Son's righteousness and puts it on the credit side of your ledger and erases the debt side with blood.” (Atchley, sermon on Genesis 15).

Isn't that wonderful – that our sins aren't counted against us?

You know, it's God's nature to do that – but not so easy for us. We have this habit of adding sins up – a man gets mad at his wife, and says, “You remember, you did this and this and this.” And we sometimes do that with each other.

But not God. His first move is to love, not to punish.

David confessed his sins, and God gave him righteousness instead – simple, unearned favor.

NEXT PART:

Here's the backstory - the big issue in the first century church was this issue of circumcision. It was a sign to Jews that they had entered into a special relationship with God – and covenant with him – which made them distinct from any other nation.

When a Hebrew male was born, he was circumcised on the 8th day as a sign of being set apart.

(Here's the thing: most of the Jews saw circumcision as the mark of salvation).

With that in mind, verses 9-12

So circumcision was important for the Jews, but what Paul wants us to see is – Abraham was counted righteous BEFORE circumcision was even instituted. (In fact, he was counted righteous in Genesis 15, but we don't see him circumcised until some 14 years later in Genesis 17).

(Which might be one of the greatest miracles of the Bible, right? That a 99-year-old man got circumcised willingly). That's a lot of faith.

But his point is: whatever he did, he did by faith.

So if he was declared righteous before his circumcision, what does that make Abraham?

It made him a Gentile before his circumcision, and a Jew after.

AND SO ABRAHAM IS A MAN OF FAITH FOR ALL MEN EVERYWHERE.

So how does that connect with us? We have tendencies today to do what the Jewish Christians of Romans were doing:

If I go through the right ceremony, if I responded to this altar call, if I go to the "right" church which believes all the "right" things – that grants me my righteousness. "I'm good!" (Which is living under a false illusion).

But Abraham shows us a different way:

The things he did in his life – leaving his country for a land he did not know, believing that he would have a son – later offering his son Isaac on the altar because "he reasoned that God could raise him from the dead" –

ALL OF IT DEFIED LOGIC – Abraham had no idea how it would all play out, BUT HE SAID: Amen, Lord. I trust you.

And so here's the measure of faith: **When you don't understand why, will you submit and apply?**

(And if we were to compare – as we already have – circumcision with baptism, here's what I think we can safely say:

Daniel said, "Faith is the car that drives everything else. **Faith is what gives baptism it's significance. You bring your faith to the water. Without faith, you're just getting wet.**"

So if you truly have received grace, whatever God asks of you, you'll say, "Amen!"

And one other thing: Verse 12 – God's favor rests on the one that followed in the footsteps of Abraham.

Which means simply this: works do not save us. What we do know is: true faith shows itself in obedience.

Someone said: you can do good and not have faith, but you cannot have faith and not do good.

James 2:22-24

²²You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

It's like if I said, "The building is on fire," those who got up, got their kids, and went out into the parking lot believe what I said – that the building is on fire.

Those who pulled out their phone and played Monopoly Go with smoke rolling out of the ceiling – may say "I believe you!" NO YOU DON'T. Right?

And so this is faith – if the Bible tells you to do something, you do it. (The Bible says, “forgive.” “Well, I’m not forgiving him.” The question is – do you really have faith? Do you really believe God when he said, “If you don’t forgive your brother, God won’t forgive you.”

So, if you’re a believe, you’ll look like a believer.

And so what makes us believers, recipients of God’s grace, is when we say “Amen to God.” Because you say so, “I will. It may take some time. It may not be easy But I’ll trust you, Lord!”

Next section:

So in the last section, Paul puts circumcision in the right perspective, and then he turns his attention to law keeping.

13-17

Now – here’s his point – just like circumcision came 14 years after Abraham was justified by faith, the law was given to Moses some 500 years after Abraham.

And for those who said, “I’m saved because I believe the right things – I KNOW mentally what’s right and what’s wrong,” Paul says – wait a minute.

Verse 15 – the law actually brings wrath. (What does that mean?)

Just because you know you shouldn’t tell a lie, doesn’t keep you from telling a lie. It just tells you you’re lying when you tell a lie.

The law can’t REMOVE sin, it can only REVEAL sin. And so if you’re feeling prideful that you’re such a good rule keeper – you need to know – if you break the law at any point, you’re a law breaker. (That keeps us from becoming self-appointed judges of other people; it keeps us humble).

We don’t put our faith in ourselves – we put our faith in God.

Last part (once more with Abraham):

18-25

So how does this play out? Abraham sees his body “as good as dead.” Sarah’s womb is “dead.” (death permeates this passage). And the point is – there is no earthly hope.

There’s no way this almost 100 year old couple is going to have a son. Right?

But – Abraham and Sarah believed – and God called Isaac into existence.

Listen – God looks at us. We were dead in our sins, dead in our hangups, dead in our habits.

But when we put our faith in Him, God comes along and speaks hope and a future over us.

Here’s Abraham – here’s Sarah – 86 years old. She’s never had a child before. She’s never had a pregnancy before.

But she believed God – and she takes off to Walgreens to get a pregnancy test. And guess what? It was positive. And they have Isaac.

We serve the God of the impossible, right?

Take these words to heart today (who needs to hear it?)

Abraham was “fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.”

Do you? If you do – that’s what faith is all about.

And so as we wrap up – I want to say a word about our church!

All along the way, we have trusted God to answer our prayers, and open doors we could not open.

When we started 7 years ago with a group of 10 people praying, “God use us – open doors as you see fit – lead us by your Holy Spirit.” And God did.

And when it came time for a larger place to meet, we prayed, “Lord, open doors.” And God did.

And when we prayed for an additional minister to our staff – God opened doors that we could not open – and God was faithful.

And now – God has put a new open door before us. And the question is – will we be willing to walk in faith and trust Him?

Faith – is trust – it's not knowing all the answers. (If Moses had to see it first, he never would have crossed the Red Sea. If the children of Israel had waited for answer they never would have crossed the Jordan). If the children of Israel didn't trust in their God – they never would have marched 7 days around the city of Jericho and see the walls come crumbling down.

The people said, "You guys are crazy. This will never work! And the people of the city said, "You guys are out of your mind. That's no way to win a war – marching around a city with an Ark – blowing trumpets instead of wielding bows and arrows and swords. And God said – do it for 7 days, and trust me.

And they did – and they didn't understand it all – and by the world's logic it didn't make sense – and on the seventy day – the walls came crumbling down!

Listen men and woman – we are called to walk by faith, and not by sight. I see it in the testimonials this morning.

We serve a God who:

. . . calls into being things that were not" (Romans 4:17).

I hear it in the text that Amy Green sent me the day before her surgery:

I just wanted you to know that I got it wrong a lot of times in my life, but one thing I know - I have witnessed the healing power of prayer for me and my family. I have experienced an amazing support and lasting friendships first hand. I'm blessed beyond measure. Gratitude and thankfulness fill my heart.

What is that? Like Abraham, "against all hope, Abraham in hope believed." That's faith.