

ROAMING THROUGH ROMANS

“But What about Abraham?”

Romans 4:1-15

Open your Bibles to Romans Chapter 4. We are going to look at the first 15 verses of the chapter this time. Let's begin by reading our text. Paul writes:

¹What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has *something* to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” ⁴Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

⁵But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, ⁶just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

⁷“Blessed *are those* whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
And whose sins are covered;

⁸Blessed *is the* man to whom the LORD *shall not impute sin.*”

⁹Does this blessedness then *come* upon the circumcised *only*, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. ¹⁰How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. ¹¹And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which *he had while still* uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, ¹²and the father of circumcision to those who not only *are* of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham *had while still* uncircumcised.

¹³For the promise that he would be the heir of the world *was* not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴For if those who are of the law *are* heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, ¹⁵because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law *there is* no transgression.

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Last time we learned all about God's work of redemption. Because there is nothing man can do to pay the wages for his sin, God did something wonderful. He sent His Son, Jesus, to make propitiation, or payment, in man's place. Our Lord Jesus Christ willingly went to the cross, shed His blood, and paid man's debt.

No longer was it necessary for the high priest of Israel to go into the Holy of Holies and put blood of the sacrifice on the mercy seat. Jesus became that mercy seat as His shed blood was poured out once and for all. So now, all one has to do to be saved is to believe that Jesus did this for them, on their behalf.

Remember when Paul and Silas got thrown in the Philippian jail?

An earthquake rocked the place, and all the cell doors sprung open. The prison warden, figuring that all the prisoners had escaped, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. He was responsible for all those prisoners. But Paul called up with a loud voice saying, **"Do yourself no harm, for we are all here."** So the jailer ran down to see if this was true. Then he brought Paul and Silas out and asked, **"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"** Here was their answer (Acts 16:31):

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."

Paul did not tell him to become more righteous.

He didn't tell him to clean up his act.

He didn't tell him to keep a set of rules or regulations.

He didn't even tell him to go to church.

He told that jailer, who had probably never even heard the Gospel before, to simply believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. He told him to believe and receive.

And that is the message Paul is going to convey here in Romans 4. The words, **"faith"** and **"believe,"** are used 15 times in this chapter. It is the Bible's great chapter on salvation *by grace through faith alone*, apart from your behavior. And the lessons Paul teaches us here are very important.

Men have trouble understanding the simplicity of the Gospel. They think there has to be some kind of catch. They believe ... that they have to *do something*. And none more so than the Jews.

The believers (mostly Jewish) in Rome who were listening to Paul's message would wonder how this squared with their history. So Paul turns to the pages of the Bible to prove his point. Once again he anticipates the questions they would have. And he uses as his example the father of the nation of Israel — Abraham. Look at verse one:

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What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?

Abraham was the most revered figure in Jewish history. So much so that the rabbis exaggerated his virtue. They taught that God chose him because he was the most righteous man on earth. The Jewish book of Jubilees claims that “*Abraham was perfect in all his deeds...*” That is, unless you count lying to Pharaoh about who his wife was!

And exactly what was it that Abram was doing there in Egypt?

Doubting God.

But to the Jew, Abraham was saved by all his good works, and there were many. He did, in fact, pick up and leave Ur of the Chaldees and his pagan roots to follow a God he could not see. Although he made a pit stop in Haran and took his nephew Lot along when he was told to get away from his family. He also took his son Isaac, upon prompting from the Lord, and was willing to sacrifice him on Mount Moriah. But before this, he took his wife’s Egyptian slave and fathered a child by her; because he couldn’t wait upon the Lord.

No matter what the Jews thought, Abraham was just a sinner. He was found, “**according to the flesh,**” just like you and me. Look at verse 2:

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has *something* to boast about, but not before God.

If any of the good deeds Abraham did could justify him, he would have something to boast about. Or, to put it more bluntly, the Jews would have something to boast about. But he didn’t, just as Paul told us in verse 27 of chapter 3 and in Ephesians 2. There will be no boasting in heaven. Neither leaving Ur nor heading up the mountain saved Abraham.

So what did?

The Bible tells us. Look at verse 3:

For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

This is a quote from Genesis 15. You can turn there for a moment if you like. In chapter 14, Abraham had just scored a great victory by rescuing Lot and his family from the hands of invading kings. But then at the beginning of chapter 15, the Lord comes to him in a vision. Look what Abraham does (verses 1-3):

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¹After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”

This should have been enough. However, instead of a “but God” moment we get...

²But Abram... said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³Then Abram said, “Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!”

So, instead of asking God what came next, Abram asks Him a “why” question. He wonders why God has given him no heir. Basically, Abram is pouting. He is afraid that when he dies, all of his wealth will be inherited by his servant. Like so many of us, he only trusts God so far. But God had a plan. Eliezer would not be the heir. Look at verse 4:

And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.”

This has to be exactly what Abram wanted to hear. He will have an heir, a son, to carry on his name. But God’s promises are exceedingly abundantly more than we can ask for. Look at verse 5:

Then He brought him outside and said, “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

Not only did God make Abram the father of a son. He made him the father of a nation. A very important nation. Listen to how Pastor Sandy Adams describes this moment:

At Abram’s greatest point of deficiency, God shows him His sufficiency.

You ever been there?

Quite often it is at this point in someone’s life that they come to their knees before God. Abram did. Look at verse 6:

And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

This is Abram’s moment of faith. He believes God and, in return, God accounts to him HIS righteousness.

Isn’t this what we talked about in depth last time?

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Faith activated grace, and made Abraham right with God. He gained God's approval, not by some great act on his part. He simply believed on a great promise from God's heart. And here is why I think this is important.

Who would come from the descendents of Abraham?

Jesus would.

Abram's faith caused him to look forward to the cross, whether he knew it at the moment or not.

Back to Romans 4.

This word "**accounted**" is important for us to understand. Your version of the Bible might say "**reckoned**" or "**imputed**." It is a banking term, borrowed from bookkeepers. It means to "place on one's account" or "make an entry in a ledger."

Before Genesis 15:6, if you looked at Abraham's spiritual ledger sheet, it would have been filled up with the record of his sins. But the moment he believed God, his sins were put over on the account of Jesus. And the righteousness of Jesus was put on Abraham's account. Thus Abraham was saved. He was justified while he was yet ungodly, having no righteousness of his own to offer God.

This has taken place over and over throughout time, whether the person was looking forward to or back on the cross. And just to prove it, Paul offers up an illustration from everyday life. Look at verse 4:

Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

Many people in history have worked hard to build themselves a wonderful life. They have earned their wages and expected to be paid for them. But this is debt, and not grace. Whoever they worked for owed them their wages.

What wages does God owe us?

What have we earned?

The wages of sin — death.

Grace stands opposite to this principle of works.

Even if we have done some good things, salvation by works makes God our debtor. In works-thinking, God owes us blessing (salvation) because of our good works. But God is no man's debtor. God is never forced to give. He gives grace freely.

This word *grace* is so important to our understanding of what God has done for us. Kenneth Weust explains grace like this in his Romans commentary:

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Signified in classical authors a favor done out of the spontaneous generosity of the heart without any expectation or return. Of course, this favor was always done to one's friend, never to an enemy...But when charis comes into the New Testament, it takes an infinite leap forward, for the favor God did at Calvary was for those who hated Him.

Think about that for a moment.

Later in Romans Paul is going to tell us that while we were still sinners, Jesus died for us. That is grace. And we cannot earn that. Look at verse 5:

But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,

Think about it this way:

At the moment of salvation, a lot of wonderful things happen. And you did do something for this. But I thought you just said...

Jesus tells us what you did in John 6:29. He said:

“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”

The moment you believed in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation, God not only cancels your debt of sin. He also makes an automatic deposit of all of heaven's resources into your account. Julie always uses this acronym for *grace*:

**God's
Riches
At
Christ's
Expense**

How awesome is that! Sandy Adams puts it this way:

There will be no “Hallelu-mes” in heaven, only “Hallelu-jah's!!”

God gets all the glory. We get the grace. I'll take it!

So here is the conclusion we can come to in regard to father Abraham:

He had no personal righteousness before he was saved.

While he was yet ungodly, God justified him.

But how extensive is this justification, Paul's readers might have been thinking.

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It may be freely given. But we certainly have to *do something* to maintain this righteousness.

May it never be!

Paul puts this kind of thinking aside by quoting Psalm 32 and using King David as an illustration. Look at verses 6-8:

⁶just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

**⁷“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
And whose sins are covered;**

⁸Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.”

David, even as a justified man, went on to sin wickedly. He committed adultery. Then he committed murder. And last of all, he was a hypocrite. But, he was saved.

Psalm 32 comes on the heels of David’s sin with Bathsheba. When he wrote this, he had nothing to present to God. He was at the bottom of the barrel, spiritually. All he could do was cry out for mercy. In Psalm 51 he cries out to the Lord, “**Restore to me the joy of your salvation.**” He had lost his joy but not his justification. Warren Wiersbe says:

Once we are justified, our record contains Christ’s perfect righteousness and can never again contain our sins. Christians do sin, and these sins need to be forgiven if we are to have fellowship with God, but these sins are not held against us. God does keep a record of our works, so that He might reward us when Jesus comes; but He is not keeping a record of our sins.

This is the “**blessedness**” both David and Paul are talking about. Our “**lawless deeds**” are forgiven. Our “**sins**” are covered by the blood. And the Lord does not “**impute**” sin onto us.

But be careful that you understand something clearly here.

We are talking about what the Bible says. You are fully justified the moment you believe in Jesus Christ. You don’t start on a path to some mere possibility of final justification if you maintain a personal righteousness. If that were the case David, would not be in heaven right now. Actually, no one would.

Just as we cannot earn salvation, we also cannot maintain it.

Why?

Because we all continue to sin.

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And the truth is, we cannot see into the courtroom of heaven to see who God has justified. You can only see the results of justification in the behavior of men on earth. What you are in Jesus Christ will be seen in what you are before men.

Habitual sinners prove they have never been justified.

Such was not the case with David. First of all, David knew what he had done was wrong. Then he cried out to the Lord and asked for His forgiveness. And his relationship with God was renewed.

This is how it works:

In justification, God doesn't declare you holy. He declares you righteous. He accepts you because you stand in His imputed righteousness (the righteousness of Christ). Once you are justified, God works in you to produce Godliness — *day-by-day by grace*. We are not made righteous, *just counted as righteous*.

Do you see the difference?

As we continue in Romans, we are going to better understand this. For now I am going to give us a taste of what is in store.

There are three phases (or tenses) to our salvation. They are *justification*, *sanctification*, and *glorification*.

Justification (past tense) is the act of God which gets us out of sin — legally.

Sanctification (present tense) is the process by which God gets sin out of us — actually.

Glorification (future tense) is the final product when we are freed from the penalty, power and presence of sin.

Justification is what God did for us in the beginning of our relationship with Him.

Sanctification is the work He is doing in us now to conform us into the image of His Son.

Glorification is who we will be in eternity — in our glorified heavenly bodies.

And the great thing about all three is that they come from the same source — the Lord. It is His unbelievable grace from which He imparts all of these gifts to us.

From beginning to end, salvation is a work that God does in us.

Think about how what Paul says here would shake the world he lived in. Once again, we need to put ourselves in the place of Paul's Jewish readers. This was a complete about-face from what they had been taught their whole lives.

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So little by little, Paul is showing them the truth. He has just made the case that justification is not attained or maintained by personal righteousness.

Next he is going to show that it also cannot be attained or maintained by the performance of any rite or ritual. Not even circumcision. And what he is going to say would have blown their minds. Look at verses 9-10:

⁹Does this blessedness then *come* upon the circumcised *only*, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. ¹⁰How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised.

This argument is almost too simple.

When was father Abraham circumcised?

At least 14 years *after* he believed God in Genesis 15. So circumcision had nothing to do with his justification. Abraham was saved because he believed. He was *saved by grace through faith* just like you and me.

Case closed.

And this was all part of God's plan. Look at verses 11-12:

¹¹And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which *he had while still* uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, ¹²and the father of circumcision to those who not only *are* of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham *had while still* uncircumcised.

Circumcision was supposed to be a sign, just like water baptism. You don't get dunked so you can be saved. You do it as an outward profession that you are saved. (I wish my Roman Catholic family members could understand this.) Circumcision is the same thing. It was supposed to be an outward mark of an inward faith. It was a sign that showed who the Jews belonged to.

Uncircumcised Gentiles like you and me don't have the sign. But we do have the substance. Like Abraham, we have the faith. And that makes us right with God.

So Abraham was not just the father of the Jewish nation. He is the father of all who believe. And the issue that saves all is not religion or nationality.

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It is faith.

Look at verse 13:

For the promise that he would be the heir of the world *was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.*

How long do you think it was that Abraham got saved before Moses wrote down the Ten Commandments?

About 500 years, give or take.

This shows that rules cannot save you. Not even if they are God's divinely sanctioned rules.

As we talked about last time, all the Law does is point out our sin.

God declared Abraham righteous *before* He commanded His people, the Jews, to follow the rules. In fact, God never even intended that the Jews or anyone else become right with Him in this way.

Salvation has always been by faith.

So why do we keep God's commands?

Why not just rely on God's grace and leave it at that?

Obedience to the Law in the Old Testament had to do with the behavior of a people that God chose to follow Him. Its goal was not to save them. It was so that they might secure for themselves health, happiness and practical holiness. If they were obedient, God would bless them; if they didn't, He would not bless them.

In the New Testament, God's principles and precepts do not add to your salvation. Obedience to them secures for you the peace of God, His blessings, and His power. In other words, when we walk in the Spirit, as we shall see later in the Book of Romans, we will not desire the things of the world. And we allow God to work in and through us for His good pleasure. Then we grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. That is the beauty of God's plan. Look at verses 14-15:

¹⁴For if those who are of the law *are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect,* ¹⁵*because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.*

The Law and the promise are mutually exclusive. Something cannot be purchased and given freely at the same time. One nullifies the other. If we could obtain eternal life by

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keeping God's rules, it would not be a promise we could ever be certain of. We would always fall short, because we continue in sin.

No one, as we have talked about before, can perfectly keep the Law. All it can do is reveal God's wrath against your sin. In other words, it has no power to keep you from sinning. Only God's grace can do that as we shall see next time. That is God's promise.

If you have believed on Jesus Christ, you have been justified, or saved, from the penalty of sin. Now the Lord has begun a good work in you; and if you allow Him, He will save you from the present power of sin. And the final part is that one day He will save us from the very presence of sin forever.

Trusting that God will do this is a great way to start the New Year, Amen.

Let's pray.

REVELATION SONG: HE IS COMING BACK AGAIN!

He is coming back again
He's coming back again
My Jesus He's coming back again

May be morning night or noon
I hope it's very soon
My heart tells me He's coming back again

He is coming back again
He's coming back again
My Jesus He's coming back again

May be morning night or noon
I hope it's very soon
God's Word tells me He's coming back again
MY JESUS, HE'S COMING BACK AGAIN!!!