

Through Faith (Romans 4)

In Romans chapter 3, Paul ended the chapter by asking if we can now boast of our relationship and right standing with God. Paul replies that we cannot boast in ourselves because "we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law (v. 28)." My salvation is a work of God, I cannot boast in it; it is God's work in me. We boast in the cross of Christ alone.

In 3:21 Paul stated,

But now God has shown us a different way of being right in his sight--not by obeying the law but by the way promised in the Scriptures long ago (being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets). (NLT)

In chapter 4, Paul is now going to develop this statement and explain what he meant in verse 31, as well.

Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law. (3:31, NLT)

He will elaborate on each of his points in verses 27-31 of chapter 3. Even more, he is adding to what is already a mountain of evidence in his argument for salvation by grace through faith and not works (Eph. 2:8-9), that started all the way back in chapter 1.

In verses 1-3 of chapter 4, Paul starts out by asking what the Jewish patriarch, the founder of the nation of Israel, experienced in his own life concerning this question of how a person is made right with God. If Abraham was accepted by God because of his works, his good deeds, Paul reasons, than he would have had a right to boast in himself, about how holy and righteous and great he was. But, Paul tells us,

from God's point of view Abraham had no basis at all for pride. For the Scriptures tell us, "Abraham believed God, so God declared him to be righteous." (NLT)

Verse 3 is a quotation of Genesis 15:6, where God tells us through Moses, the writer of Genesis, that Abraham was accepted by God through his faith in God. Many Jews incorrectly assumed that Abraham was right with God because of his many good works. But, there is nothing to boast of in our own nature.

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. (Romans 7:18, NIV)

Our old nature is condemned to the cross (to death).

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Galatians 2:20, NKJV)

For our perishable earthly bodies must be transformed into heavenly bodies that will never die. (1 Corinthians 15:53, NLT)

Abraham's works were the fruit of a relationship that was already established with God. The fruit was proof of God accepting him by faith.

Now the LORD had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3, NKJV)

So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him... (Genesis 12:4a)

If Abraham had not believed God's promises, than he would have never obeyed God and set out for the promised land.

Faith itself is not a work. The act of faith is not what made Abraham right in God's eyes. God freely counts Abraham as right because of Abraham's belief and full trust in God and His word. The Mosaic Law, which came through Moses 430 years after Abraham, failed to bring righteousness because it depended on man's obedience. Our human nature (the flesh) is weak. Because of our human weakness and failures, the principle of righteousness by faith is the only way to keep our relationship with God constant. The law did not fail, man did. The law was not intended to bring man righteousness, because all are found guilty before the law. If our relationship with God is dependent on our success, we are doomed. The only way our salvation could be sure and secure is if it depends on God's faithfulness.

If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself. (2 Timothy 2:13, NKJV)

When people work, their wages are not a gift. Workers earn what they receive. But people are declared righteous because of their faith, not because of their work. (Romans 4:4-5, NLT)

If salvation were by works, than God would "owe" us. In a "works-rewards" relationship, wages are a legal obligation for the employer. But my relationship with God is based on a gift, because I could not earn right standing with God. According to Ephesians 2:8, even my faith itself is God-given.

Although we cannot be saved by our works, true faith produces fruit in our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. Knowing the love of God, having true faith in God "sparks a tremendous response in man."¹ The believer's works are a response to God's love, His grace and mercy. In God's eyes, that love of God and love for God is the only acceptable motivator for service to God (1 Cor. 13:3). The work-reward system

¹ Chuck Smith, The Gospel According to Grace, p. 48

is earthly, not spiritual. Rewards do not motivate a heart enough to give one's life to/for Christ. The only acceptable service to God is that motivated by the love of God in our hearts. Good works do not give us any better standing with God and are not a way to be more right with Him. Good works are simply the response to the free gift of righteousness that He has given us through faith in Christ, by the work of redemption completed by Jesus on the cross.

Now, in verses 6-8, Paul refers to Psalm 32:1-2, written by David about 1,000 years after Abraham, 500 years after Moses and about 1,000 years before Paul.

King David spoke of this, describing the happiness of an undeserving sinner who is declared to be righteous: "Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight. Yes, what joy for those whose sin is no longer counted against them by the Lord." (Romans 4:6-8, NLT)

David's understanding of the forgiveness of sins lines up perfectly with Paul's description of justification as a free gift/act of God. Paul's argument is not based on the act of reckoning by good works, but is centered on God's act in not reckoning our sins against us. For David, God had removed his sin out of sight and was no longer counting it against him. David was not just referring to himself because he says "what joy for *those*" and "*whose* sins are removed." David's words may as well be Paul's, as they both clearly confirm that all can be made right with God in this same way. And no wonder they agree perfectly, for there is but one Author of the Bible. The Holy Spirit spoke through Moses, David and Paul to communicate this same message of salvation by grace through faith alone.

Paul has now given us a secondary "source" in chapter four by quoting David, and this was a common Jewish homiletical practice. We now have the account of Abraham from the Pentateuch ("the Law", the first five books of the Bible written by Moses), and we have also the quotation from Habakkuk in "the prophets" (back in Romans 1:17), and finally now David from "the writings". Paul quotes from all three main divisions of the Hebrew Bible to give his Jewish brothers and sisters a thoroughly "biblical" argument.

We also notice that the verb used for account/impute/reckon is the same verb used to describe this act of God toward both Abraham and David. God does the same thing for both David and Abraham, and for the same reason, namely their faith in Him. And that's why Paul uses these two examples here together. They work perfectly together with his argument and really give us a firm biblical foundation for the argument of justification by faith and not by works. Luther found it in Paul, but Paul found it in Moses, David and Habakkuk, and lived out all throughout his Bible!

This truth cannot be spoken of too often. Not only is our sin removed but it is not counted against us! It is no longer counted against us; past, present and future.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. (1 John 1:9 & 2:1, NKJV)

Paul then asks if this blessing is only for those of Jewish heritage. To answer the question, Paul points us back to Abraham's life as an example. We have been saying he was declared righteous by God because of his faith. But how, and when? Was he declared righteous only after he had been circumcised, or was it before he was circumcised? The answer is that God accepted him first, and then he was circumcised later! The circumcision ceremony (which was in obedience to God) was a sign that Abraham already had faith and that God had already accepted him and declared him to be righteous- even before he was circumcised. The good work came after Abraham's acceptance by faith. So, Abraham is the spiritual father of those who have faith even if they have not been circumcised. They are made right with God by faith. (Romans 4:9-11)

For most Hebrews, circumcision was the most important ritual that a man could experience. In the opinion of many, God would not accept an uncircumcised man.

But, in Genesis 15, Moses tells us that Abraham was counted right in God's sight because of his faith. Then, 14 years later, recorded in Genesis 17, is the command of God for Abraham and all of his descendants to be circumcised.

This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. (Genesis 17:10-11, NKJV)

Abraham is the spiritual father of those made right with God by faith, whether circumcised Jews or uncircumcised Gentiles. (v. 12)

He is the type, the foreshadow who prefigures the person who is made right with God by grace through faith. Noah and Moses are two other examples of persons of great faith, saved by God because of their faith in Him.

Okay, so what is all this circumcision stuff about, right? I know my son gets a real kick out of it every time I mention it. Firstly, it was a medical procedure that was protective of God's people. God was looking out for their health and safety. Secondly, it was something that God used as a sign that they were His people, much like water baptism is today for Christians, which symbolizes our death to sin and our being raised to resurrection life by faith in Christ's death and resurrection. Circumcision symbolized the cutting away of the old, sinful nature (the flesh), and the walking in newness of life by the Spirit of God- by faith. This is what God wants for all of His people. It is interesting that even though we are not called to be circumcised as a sign anymore, we are all

called to walk by the Spirit and not by the flesh (our own strength). We are to count the old, sinful nature as dead (cut away), and to walk in the newness of life in the Spirit.

So, circumcision was the sign, the seal for the Israelites, God's special people. And today Christians have water baptism and the taking of the Lord's supper as signs, seals of the righteousness by faith that we have in and through our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul said that the Holy Spirit is the true seal; the sign, the deposit and the guarantee of our redemption/salvation. I believe this is the real sign and seal for the church; all those who have received Jesus as their Lord and Savior have received His Holy Spirit indwelling their hearts. The true fulfillment of a sign is the presence of God Himself and our relationship with Him.

For example, a wedding ring is a sign of marriage. But it only represents the real relationship that is between the man and the woman. The ring itself is just a metal band. Its importance is what it stands for, what it means. The metal itself is not what should be important. It is just the sign of the relationship. Baptism and eating the Lord's supper do not make us right with God, they are only the outward signs of our love for the Lord. Circumcision, too, was the outward sign. But, obviously this didn't make the Israelites "right" with God, otherwise none of the women would be saved! And Abraham was saved before he was circumcised. So, it is by grace, through faith alone. It isn't about the sign, it is about what it symbolizes and the actual relationship it seals.

In verse 13, Paul refers to God's promise to Abraham and concludes that it was given by grace and received by the relationship with God that comes by faith, not by doing good works or keeping the law. Abraham lived 430 years before the law, so his righteousness had to be imputed apart from the law. The promise did not come through the law because the law did not exist! The promise was to give the whole earth to Abraham and his descendants. This promise would be accomplished by one of Abraham's descendants, the Messiah/Christ. Paul tells us that, in Genesis, when Moses speaks of Abraham's descendant (singular), he is referring to the Messiah, Jesus. But, when he refers to descendants (plural), he is referring to either the physical offspring of Abraham, Israel, or the spiritual offspring, which would include all people that have the same faith in God as Abraham.

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed." So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham. (Galatians 3:8-9, NKJV)

Jesus said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." (John 8:56, NKJV)

And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and now all the promises God gave to him belong to you. So you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:29 & 26, NLT)

The children of God will be glorified as Christ was glorified, we are co-heirs of God with Christ and we will inherit the whole world and universe that God created (1 Cor. 3:21-23, Eph. 3:6, Rom. 8:17, Tts. 3:7).

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. (Romans 8:29-30, NKJV)

Now, in verses 14-15, Paul says that if you believe that God's promise to Abraham is for those who obey God's law and think they are "good enough" in God's sight, than you are saying that there is no need for faith, that it is useless. In that case, the promise of God is then meaningless. The law brings punishment on those who try to obey it. The only way to avoid breaking the law is to have no law to break! The whole basis of the promise would be nullified if obedience was added to it later.

This is what I am trying to say: The agreement God made with Abraham could not be canceled 430 years later when God gave the law to Moses. God would be breaking his promise. (Galatians 3:17, NLT)

The promise was given as a gift and received by faith. If God was making it dependent on people keeping the law, the promise would have no purpose, and further more it could never be accomplished because all people fail to keep the law perfectly. That is why Paul says that the only way to not break the law is if there is no law! The law brings the judgment of God. Where there is no law, there is no breaking of the law. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, He is the end of the law for all who believe (Rom. 10:1-5).

But those who depend on the law to make them right with God are under His curse, for the Scriptures say, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all these commands that are written in God's Book of the Law." (Galatians 3:10, NLT)

Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When He was hung on the cross, He took upon Himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." Through the work of Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing He promised to Abraham, and we now receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:13-14, NLT)

(At this point in the study, the reader may want to read Galatians, chapters 3-5. Paul speaks quite a bit about these same issues and the two passages really compliment each other, each offering "commentary" that illuminates the other.)

So, if the inheritance promised was given based on one's ability to keep God's law perfectly, than no one would ever inherit it and God's promise would mean nothing.

That's why faith is the key! God's promise is given to us as a free gift. And we are certain to receive it, whether or not we follow Jewish customs, if we have faith like Abraham's. For Abraham is the father of all who believe. That is what the Scriptures mean when God told him, "I have made you the father of many nations." This happened because Abraham believed in the God who brings the dead back to life and who brings into existence what didn't exist before. (Romans 4:16-17, NLT)

The promise is by grace so that it is certain. It doesn't depend on my faithfulness to God, but His faithfulness to me. Righteousness dependent on our works could never be sure because of human weakness and failure. God wants us to have confidence and certainty, and if we are relying on Him, we will have that confidence. This brings to mind my "life verse":

He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6)

And again, this is why we are saved by faith and not by works, so that it might be a matter of grace², and it applies to all of us, no matter what we've done or not done, no matter our race, intelligence, gender or economic condition. We are all the children of Abraham, he is the "father of many nations," in that we from all nations who have received Christ, have the same faith in our hearts as he had, when we place our faith in Jesus Christ.

And we will all receive God's promised inheritance in God through faith in Jesus. God is our Father, and we like Abraham, are His children through faith. Abraham believed in the God who brings the dead back to life. Only God can do that. He is the Creator, the Giver of Life. Abraham and Sarah were too old to have children, it was humanly impossible- they were both around 100 years old! The parts of their bodies needed to have a child were dead, and yet God promised Abraham a son, and millions of descendants, with complete surety. He brought into existence that which did not exist. If God says it, it's sure. God's word is so precious to us, it is our life. His very word is available to us in the Bible, His sure word. We have confidence because we are resting in His promises and not in human strength, which always lets us down.

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, All glory to him, who alone is God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Yes, glory, majesty, power, and authority belong to him, in the beginning, now, and forevermore. Amen. (Jude 1:24-25, NLT)

When God promised Abraham that he would become the father of many nations, Abraham believed Him. God had also said, "Your descendants will be as numerous as the stars," even though such a promise seemed utterly impossible!

² William Hendriksen, Romans (NTC), p. 156

And Abraham's faith did not weaken, even though he knew that he was too old to be a father at the age of one hundred and that Sarah, his wife, had never been able to have children.

Abraham never wavered in believing God's promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger, and in this he brought glory to God.

He was absolutely convinced that God was able to do anything he promised.
(Romans 4:18-21, NLT)

Abraham did not focus on the problem, the fact that it was not humanly possible for he and Sarah to have children, let alone descendants. Abraham had faith. He focused on the Maker of all things and believed God's word. Our job is to believe and trust. With God, all things are possible and He works out all things for good, for those that love Him. We have God's guarantee of victory and we can rest in that promise.

By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude- innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore. (Hebrews 11:11-12, NKJV)

Can God do what He promised? Is He able to accomplish it? The Eternal and Almighty is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. (Ephesians 3:20-21, NKJV)

And because of Abraham's faith, God declared him to be righteous.

Now this wonderful truth--that God declared him to be righteous--wasn't just for Abraham's benefit.

It was for us, too, assuring us that God will also declare us to be righteous if we believe in God, who brought Jesus our Lord back from the dead.

He was handed over to die because of our sins, and he was raised from the dead to make us right with God. (Romans 4:22-25, NLT)

Abraham's story is vital for us to know intimately today. His life is the perfect picture of God's grace toward man and man's right standing with God through faith. If we have put our faith in Jesus Christ, we are part of Abraham's family, we are children of God like Abraham and all those throughout history who have put their hope and trust in the Lord. We are those who have been graciously counted as righteous by the Lord, even though we have done nothing and never will be able to do anything to be worthy of God's family. We have simply received His unspeakably merciful and incomprehensible free gift.

Now Abraham did not waver in his faith, but he did struggle. Take some time to read through the life of Abraham in Genesis chapters 12-25. You will be encouraged to see that he was a person who had failures, he struggled and he also had his victories in the Lord. God strengthened Abraham even when he did struggle, and that is why the Scripture says he never wavered in his faith. God got Him through those tough times, through those failures of faith and action, and he will get you through them, as well. We are part of his family by faith, not works. So, if we mess up, we still go right to our loving, Heavenly Father and seek His restoration, His love and His empowerment to get back up and keep on going by His Spirit. Abraham was saved by grace through faith, and he lived his life by grace through faith. May we seek our Heavenly Father always and learn to rely on Him completely in all things.