



Scotts Hill Baptist Church

ROMANS • IF BLESSINGS COME, THEY COME BY FAITH ALONE • ROMANS 4:1–25 •

10/22/2023

MAIN POINT

Faith alone allows us to be counted righteous just like it was the condition for Abraham's righteousness. It brings the blessing of justification, community, and the calling to take that hope to the nations.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Have you ever known anyone who liked to brag about their accomplishments? Have you ever been guilty of bragging about your own?

Why do we sometimes feel the need to brag about ourselves?

What is it about being boastful that we do not like in others? How does grace exclude boasting?

No one likes to hear someone bragging. When we boast, we exalt ourselves over others. When we brag, we give words to our pride, and the more space we give to our own pride, the less space we have for others. Bragging is annoying because it doesn't allow any admiration for the accomplishments of others. Boasting is a demand for attention. Bragging is selfish. Paul teaches us that in the gospel, we are not given any room to brag. There is no way to laud ourselves in how great we are because first the law teaches that we aren't so great and second the gospel is a gift not given on personal merit. The bad news about us is that we can never earn salvation because we all break the law of God, and the gospel excludes boasting in ourselves because we didn't earn salvation anyway. The gospel is a gift to be believed, not a wage that can be earned.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ROMANS 4:1-8.

What do you remember about Abraham's story? What elements of his life remind you that he was a person just like us? How does Abraham's story exclude him from bragging?

What exactly did Abraham believe that led God to credit him with righteousness?

When God came to Abraham in Genesis 15 and promised that he and Sarah would have a son, Abraham believed and God counted him as a righteous man. We know that the seed that was promised was not simply Isaac, but the promise looked forward to the one through whom "all the nations of the earth" would be blessed (Gen. 22:18). Jesus said that in this promise, "Abraham was overjoyed that he would see My day; he saw it and rejoiced" (John 8:56). Abraham believed that God would send the Messiah, though he did not know when. Because of this faith, God credited Abraham with righteousness.

If we were to keep every law of God, would God then owe us salvation? Who has ever kept all of the law?

How can God declare the ungodly to be righteous without being unjust or lying?

God does not simply declare someone righteous that is not. He credits faith to people as righteousness when that faith is placed in Jesus as their atoning sacrifice. Verses 6-8 reference Psalm 32:1-2. King David understood this declared righteousness because of the sacrificial system that foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah (Lev. 1:4). Jesus Christ is our sacrificial lamb. This is why John the Baptist exclaimed, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ROMANS 4:9-19.

Why is it important to point out that Abraham was credited with faith before he was circumcised? What does it mean for Abraham to be the father of those who are not circumcised?

If the promise of salvation comes through law, why is faith made empty?

Why does the law produce only wrath? What are the implications for us?

The reason that Paul points out that Abraham received the promise before he was circumcised is to demonstrate that the promise could not be based on Abraham's works. In other words, God was pleased when Abraham believed, and Abraham's belief was demonstrated in his obedience. We are Abraham's children because we believe in the promises of God for salvation as Abraham did. It does not matter if we are Jew or Gentile, only that we believe in Jesus who came as the fulfillment to the promise to Abraham. Abraham's obedience was not because he wanted to earn the promise, he already had it! Rather, Abraham's faithful work flowed from his joy in receiving the promise. Abraham's children do not obey to merit salvation, they obey because of the joy of having salvation.

What had God promised Abraham? Why did there appear to be no hope that the promise would be fulfilled?

What did Abraham do anyway?

God had promised Abraham and his wife, Sarah, a son, even though the couple were both well beyond normal childbearing years. Paul stated that Abraham put his faith in God, who gives life to the dead and calls things into existence that do not exist. This is the essence of faith—trusting in God as One who can and will do what He promises, even when we cannot see the possibility and know we could never accomplish the promise ourselves. When everything in his experience told Abraham that his child bearing days were over, he believed God could command a great miracle and give him a son through whom the promise would be fully realized.

How have you experienced the wonderful power of God operating in your life to make possible what appears impossible?

How do these experiences remind you that God is a God of grace? How do they bolster your faith?

| HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ROMANS 4:20-25.

How did Abraham respond to God as a result of his faith (v. 20)? What is the lesson for us?

Aware of the daunting challenge to the fulfillment of God's promise, Abraham did not waver in unbelief. His faith did not erode but instead grew stronger. This kind of faith

takes on the character of obedience. After having shown the work of faith in the life of Abraham, Paul applied it to his readers. He brought the discussion forward in time to stress that the same possibility of righteousness by faith was there for his readers. Just as Abraham's faith in God was credited as righteousness, even so all who put their faith in Jesus Christ would receive right standing with God and the forgiveness of sins.

What should be the focus of our faith (vv. 24-25)?

How would you sum up the gospel from verses 23-25?

Abraham believed in Jesus. We know this because Jesus said, "Your father Abraham was overjoyed that he would see My day; he saw it and rejoiced" (John 8:56). Abraham knew that God promised that the Messiah would come through his family, and this caused Abraham to rejoice. This is the faith that is credited to Abraham as righteousness, and it is this exact faith that all of Abraham's children have to this day. We believe the good news that God has sent His Son Jesus to save us from our sins.

The incredible news of the gospel is that, even though we are all law-breakers and deserve death, Jesus took our punishment on the cross. When God raised Jesus from the dead, it demonstrated that God accepted His offering on our behalf. Because Jesus is risen from the dead, those who believe the gospel will be justified in the sight of God. The good news is so good that it is hard to believe, but it is gloriously true!

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How does believing the gospel free us from worrying about whether or not God will accept us as His children?

How freeing is it to know that we will be judged by Christ's works and not our own? What will look differently in your life this week if you truly embrace that change?

This passage demonstrates that the gospel is for all people, whether they are Jew or Gentile. Can you think of anyone you might share the gospel with who needs to be free from the punishment of the law?

PRAYER

Close with a time of group prayer. Thank the Lord that He has given us Jesus to be our Savior, and that we can be counted among Abraham's children because of Jesus' love for us. Ask the Father to teach us to love grace more and more that we might learn to be more gracious to others. Finally, ask the Father to help us share the good news freely, even as it was freely shared with us.

COMMENTARY

| ROMANS 4:1-25

4:1-3. The most influential voice in Judaism was the voice of "father Abraham," so Paul suggests to his readers that they poll the patriarch on the matter of faith: What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter [the matter of faith versus works]? The testimony of the founder of the faith would have far-reaching importance.

Acknowledging Abraham's rightful place in Israel's Hall of Fame, Jesus himself pictured the patriarch as the one who received a poor beggar in paradise when he died (Luke 16:22) and who rebuked the rich man who cried out from hell for mercy (Luke 16:25). All persons considered, Abraham's experience with God would be the perfect illustration for Paul to use with the believers in Rome. The Jewish believers would be obligated to yield to Abraham's precedent-setting example because he was the father of their previous faith. And the Gentile believers would have no reason not to yield to his authority. Though not physical descendants of Abraham, they clearly would be aware of his role in the development of the Jewish-Christian faith that Paul was writing about.

Though he does not use the same words here, Paul told the Galatian believers in his letter to them that God "announced the gospel in advance to Abraham" (Gal. 3:8). Paul makes the same argument in Romans 4 (absent the use of the word gospel) to prove that the gospel he is preaching is the same gospel that Abraham received (in Gen. 12:3) and believed: all people on earth will be blessed through Abraham's faithfulness to God.

In verse 2 Paul says that Abraham could have boasted if he had been declared righteous for his works—but not boasted before God. Paul's point (which he had already made in Rom. 2:10-18) is that God justifies no one on the basis of works because no one's works are righteous—period. The implication is that only by faith could Abraham have been justified by God. And what does the Scripture say? Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 to prove that Abraham was counted as righteous when he believed God. Simple faith resulted in righteousness being credited to Abraham. Nearly two millennia after Abraham, Paul tells

the Romans that righteousness comes the same way for them and for all who hear the gospel—including us, who read his letter nearly four millennia after Abraham. God is indeed the same “yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).

4:4-5. The line of demarcation between wages and gifts is work. When one works, he or she gets what is deserved—wages come as an obligation. When one does not work, there is no obligation to be given anything. Anything that is received originates in grace and is delivered as a gift. Such is righteousness from God. Man’s work has been faulty (unrighteous); therefore, there is no obligation to be “paid” with a wage—credited as righteousness. If we are credited with righteousness, it is only because we have believed God’s assessment of our situation and his promises and received righteousness as a gift.

4:6-8. If Abraham, the father of Israel, sets the precedent for this early in the Book of Genesis, David, the king of Israel, later confirms it in the psalms. Note Paul’s words in verse 5: “God who justifies the wicked.” We do not normally think of the wicked when we first think of David, Israel’s shepherd-king. But do not miss Paul’s point: for the first two chapters of Romans he discusses the wicked in detail, and now is going to give us an example of a wicked person who was justified by faith. But David? David who defeated Goliath, who honored a demonized king Saul, who kept his promises to Jonathan, who danced and worshiped before the Lord, who wrote Israel’s greatest hymns?

Yes, David. Just as with Abraham, Paul is choosing another of Israel’s most beloved (the meaning of “David” in Hebrew) forefathers to show that not even those in the Hall of Fame have enough works to justify them before God. If anyone sinned seriously, David did. But if anyone had enough works in his righteousness account to offset his sin and receive righteousness as an obligation, David did as well (that is, if sort-of-righteous was God’s standard, which it is not). Apparently, God credited righteousness to David (Rom. 4:6) because his transgressions are forgiven, his sins are covered, and the Lord will never count against him anything he had done. But on what basis? We know it was apart from works, because the only thing David did was to agree with God (exercise faith) about what he had done and how he must be forgiven—as a gift of God’s grace.

Abraham and David—from the mouth of two witnesses (and Paul makes three; see Deut. 17:6; 19:15; Matt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19; Heb. 10:28) comes the fact that, under the old covenant and the new covenant, man is justified only one way before God: by faith.

4:9-10. It might seem that God’s blessing was only for the circumcised since David’s psalm (Ps 32) was written by a Jew for the Jewish people. Paul returned to his key text in Gen 15:6

and showed that the crediting of righteousness to Abraham took place when he was uncircumcised, so God's blessing is also for Gentiles who believe.

4:11. Circumcision was a sign and a seal. It marked out a man as part of the nation of Israel. It was also to be a seal of the righteousness a man had received by faith. The timing of Abraham's circumcision enabled him to be the spiritual father and model for justification by faith to both circumcised Jews and uncircumcised Gentiles.

4:12. Abraham was the physical father of the Hebrew nation, but his greatest legacy was his example of faith. Jews and Gentiles alike can follow in the footsteps of Abraham's faith.

4:13-15. It is clear from Paul's next comments that not only does faith take priority over circumcision, but faith takes priority over law as well. Circumcision was instituted only fourteen years after Abraham was declared righteous, whereas 430 years (Gal. 3:17) had passed before the law was instituted. The law did not replace the promise. The promise in Genesis 12:3 specifies that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." In that sense, God gave Abraham a promise of a "blessed world"—a world that through Abraham's innumerable seed would become a heritage of blessing for him. Second, Abraham's descendants (plural) are likewise to be viewed in the singular, as Paul says in Galatians 3:16,19: " 'And to your seed,' meaning one person, who is Christ." Therefore, the messianic implications of the promise are clear when Christ is seen as the Seed of Abraham. Christ will indeed exercise universal rule over the earth in the future, and in that way fulfill the promise to Abraham universally. Finally, the spiritual ramifications of those who are Abraham's children by faith "inheriting the earth," and reigning with Christ, are clear (Matt. 5:5; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 5:10; 20:4,6; 22:5).

Paul means here that if a promise is made on the basis of law, it would never be fulfilled. Why? Because law reveals transgression, and transgression demands the wrath of God. The first time Abraham or one of his descendants sinned (if the "promise" was based on law), God's wrath would be unleashed and the benefits of the promise would be retracted. But where the inheritance of the world is based on promise instead of law, there is no transgression. That does not mean there is no sin; it simply means that there is no transgression being watched for as a basis for annulling the blessings of the promise. But what then does God do with the sins of those to whom the promise is made? How can He fulfill the promise even if those to whom the promise is made continue to fail?

4:16-17. Paul's answer is the overall theme of the Bible: the promise will be fulfilled by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). In fact, the only way that God could guarantee that Abraham and his descendants would become a great nation, that Abraham's name would

be great in the earth, that he would be a blessing, that those who bless him and his descendants would qualify to be blessed, and that all the peoples on earth would be blessed by God (Gen. 12:1-3) was for God, by His grace, to promise that it would happen. Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—both to those who are Abraham's physical descendants and believe, and to those who are his descendants by faith. As God continues to forgive, by His grace, the failures of Abraham and his descendants, the promise remains in effect. When God told Abraham that he had made him "a father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5), that was a guarantee that the promise was a promise to be fulfilled by grace through faith.

What kind of faith did it take for Abraham to hear that promise from God and believe, at his and Sarah's age, that nations would one day come from his descendants? He had to believe that God was one who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. In that way, Abraham foreshadowed the New Testament definition of faith: "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (Heb. 11:1). Abraham had to be "fully persuaded" (Rom. 4:21).

Paul makes reference here to the deadness of Abraham's and Sarah's reproductive abilities. The God who gives life to dead things and calls into existence that which is not was the God who was speaking to Abraham. The God who, *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), created the heavens and the earth by speaking them into existence was the God who was speaking to Abraham. It is one thing to hear the accounts of creation as they were passed along by Noah and his sons after the flood, and to be amazed at what creation must have been like. But now Abraham was being challenged to let God do His creative work in him and his wife. This was different. All his life, Abraham had hoped for a son, and he finally reached a point where he was sure it would not happen. He had never seen his own progeny, and was probably certain that he would never see it. But now, he was being asked to hope again and to see for the first time. He was being asked to believe God.

4:18-19. In pre-flood days, Abraham and Sarah would have been considered adolescents at age 100 and 90 (Gen. 17:17). But in the day in which the Lord came to Abraham to tell him how the promise would be fulfilled, Sarah was "worn out" and Abraham was "old" (Gen. 18:12). Sarah was not worn out from childbearing, for she had never given birth. Her womb had been barren her entire life (Gen. 11:30). Paul said her womb was dead and that Abraham's body was as good as dead. Think of what it would mean for a couple approaching the century mark to be told that many nations were yet to spring forth from them when they had never had a single child together. Nevertheless, God said, So shall your offspring be. So what did the father of faith do? First, he surveyed the possibilities

and options. He faced the fact that this was not going to happen naturally. Given his and Sarah's track record for conception, and the weakness of their respective faculties, there would have to be another option. As he looked around him, there was only one other option: God would have to supernaturally cause Sarah to conceive. Next, without weakening in his faith in the face of challenging options, he committed himself to God's ability. He exercised faith. He became certain that what he could not see would one day be—not because of any strength or ability on his or Sarah's part, but because God had said it. Abraham placed his entire confidence in one thing: the word (promise) of God.

4:20-22. In spite of the odds, Abraham did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God. When we see that Abraham was strengthened in his faith, we are prone to view "wavering through unbelief" as the opposite; i.e., having weak faith instead of strong faith. But it is not that at all. Waver here is *diakrino*, which means to act as a judge, to pass judgement, to decide or determine. The point is that he did not allow unbelief to put him in a judgment mode where, like a trial judge or jury, he would weigh the evidence and make his decision. Instead, Abraham became fully persuaded that God had the power to do what He had promised. And what persuaded him? In verse 20 Paul says that Abraham was strengthened in his faith. "Was strengthened" or "grow strong" is *endunamoo*—to make powerful. Abraham became fully persuaded that God had the power to perform. In other words, Abraham's faith was empowered by contemplating God's power. The more Abraham looked at who he was and who God was, the more empowered he became that God was able to do that which He had promised.

And therein lies the secret of faith: faith is always strong or weak depending on how we perceive the object of our faith. Is the God to whom we look weak in our eyes? Then we will have weak faith. Is our God strong in our eyes? Then our faith will grow strong accordingly. There was nothing in Abraham that gave him strong faith, but there was everything in God that gave him strong faith. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." When God saw that Abraham viewed Him as a powerful God—all the way back in Genesis 15:6 where Abraham first believed God's promise—He credited that "perspective of power" (faith) to Abraham as righteousness.

4:23. Little did Moses know that when he penned Genesis 15:6, he was writing it for and about others in addition to Abraham. There was a much greater resurrection on the horizon of history than the resurrection of human reproduction in Abraham's and Sarah's bodies. But what God did for them was only a picture of what He was going to do for the entire human race. The outcome of faith would be the same—justification in God's sight—

but the demonstration of God's power would be different. In fact, the demonstration of power that God gives the world to believe in today is the greatest display of power the world has ever seen.

4:24-25. Paul says that God will credit righteousness to anyone in the world today who believes in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. This is the same exercise in faith that Abraham was asked to participate in. Abraham was asked to believe what he had never seen. We are asked to believe what many witnesses have seen and verified. It is easy to see why Abraham is a prime example of faith in Hebrews 11, and why Paul pictures him as the "father" of faith. God never disparages those who see and believe, but believing and seeing by faith somehow receives His special attention. If those who believe without seeing are blessed, what are those who see and do not believe (cf. John 6:36; 10:25-26,38)? And what of those who have not had the opportunity to believe in Paul's gospel message? Paul understood what a triumph of faith Abraham accomplished by taking God purely at His word before the fact. Now, after the fact of Christ's resurrection, people today have the opportunity to receive the same justification by faith that Abraham received.

Finally, Paul summarizes the two sides of the salvation coin: Christ was delivered over to death for our sins, but then He was raised to life for our justification. What's the difference? The sacrificial atonement for sin was accomplished through the death of Christ (Rom. 3:25), and the approval of God was manifested in the resurrection. Christ's resurrection set His death apart from all other human deaths (e.g., the two thieves who died with him but who were not resurrected). Anyone could die claiming to be a sacrifice for the sins of the world. The test would be their resurrection.