

Salvation * Romans 4

March 13, 2022 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

There's a very important question at the heart of our passage for today – how do we get right with God?

If you think back to last week, Romans 1-2-3 tell us that sin separates us from God. When we put lesser things before God, we do wrong by Him, and we've all put lesser things before God. We've all sinned.

And that means that we all face God's judgment against sin. When we worship and serve created things, rather than the Creator who loves us (and we all do it) we face God's judgment against sin. And so this question is very important for our current and eternal well-being.

We've all wronged God, so how do we get right with Him?

For a lot of my life, I thought that the answer was to do good deeds and be a good person to make it up to Him. I thought that if I could just get across that moral threshold of being 'good enough' for God, then I would make myself right with God and then I'd be saved from sin and judgment.

The problem though was that every time I did something right, it wasn't too long before I did something wrong. It was like a one step forward, two steps back situation and besides, how good is good enough for God when you've told Him to mind His own business and let you live your life?

Maybe you can relate to that. Maybe you've come from a family or culture where you constantly have to prove your worth and that has carried over into your relationship with God. Maybe you've come from a Catholic background, or other strict religious situation that says that we can earn our salvation by the things that we do.

And by no means is this a modern phenomenon. For sure, the people who originally received this letter would have known what I'm talking about. All the Jewish people in Rome when they received Paul's letter had this religious heritage where it APPEARED that you had to make yourself right with God by the things that you do.

Paul though has already told us in Romans 3 that that's not the case. Yes, all have sinned, but it's also true that all can be saved, justified, made right with God, through faith in Jesus who died to make us right with God. As it says in 3:22 This righteousness (this being right with God that delivers us from wrath) from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. (Rom 3:22 NIV).

Salvation is by faith alone.

Now that's such an incredible message that it bears repeating. We don't earn God's favour, we receive it by grace. It's almost one of those too-good-to-be-true things, and so Paul is going to spend the rest of chapter 4 backing up this incredible claim that we are made right with God, not by what we do, but by faith in Him.

And to make that case, Paul is going to use two case studies from Jewish history and one illustration to show us that we don't earn God's favour, we receive it by faith.

So let's look at those together – two case studies and an illustration – and we'll start with the first one – Abraham's experience – to show that salvation is by faith alone.

Join me at Romans 4, verse 1. Now if you look back a few verses in chapter 3, you'll see that Paul has just been talking about how we are justified freely through the grace of God (24), how righteousness comes through faith to all who believe (22). And then he says 4:1 -

NIV Romans 4:1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter?

2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about--but not before God [nobody can boast before God]..

3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Paul is doing something very clever here. He knows that there will be people in Rome who have grown up with the idea that doing good deeds and keeping the Ten Commandments is what will make you right with God. They have this whole history that would appear to teach salvation by works and so Paul says 'well, look. Let's go right back to the very beginning.' If you ever get lost, you need to go back to where you started and get your bearings and then bring that knowledge forward into the present. And so Paul goes back to the very beginning of the Jewish faith. And that's Abraham.

Remember Genesis 12? God says to Abraham, 'leave your country, your people and your father's house and go where I tell you; and I will make you into a great nation, with great fame and I will ultimately bless the world through you.' That's where it all began for the Jewish people.

And then Paul says – 'What was Abraham's experience? Abraham was our father, a model for us all. At the end of this chapter, he's going to say that what was written about Abraham was written for our benefit too, so that we could learn from his experience. Did God make Abraham right with Him on the basis of his good deeds?' No! God made Abraham right with Him on the basis of His belief. "Abraham believed God, (Abraham trusted God and acted as if to say 'God knows what He's doing here') and it was credited to him as righteousness." And good thing too, because in our Bible Talk Tuesdays, we've seen Abraham do some pretty boneheaded things. He's a sinner, just like the rest of us.

And yet Paul points out, that Abraham was saved by faith and not by works. He quotes Genesis 15:6 where it says that 'Abraham believed God and on the basis of that belief, God made Abraham right with Him.' And since he was right with God, he would then escape God's judgment against sin, which means that Abraham was saved by faith and faith alone.

If you go down to verse 18, Paul elaborates on this a little – verse 18 he says - 18 Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (ie. that he would have many children).

19 Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead--since he was about a hundred years old--and that Sarah's womb was also dead.

20 Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,

21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

22 This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness."

Abraham's belief made Him right with God because he was not relying on himself but on the God who is good. He was convinced that God would do what He had promised to do – He had the power to do what He had promised to do - namely to bless the world through him – and so God counted Abraham right with Him on the basis of his faith. Not his own ability or capacity for good. Abraham was made right with God by trusting God. Abraham's experience shows us that salvation is by faith alone.

Now having unpacked Abraham's experience of being made right with God by faith, Paul moves on to another giant in Jewish history to make a similar point. If anybody knew the contours of sin and grace, it was King David, and so Paul says, let's look at HIS experience to see what we can learn about salvation and faith. Case study number 2 – King David. Verse 6 –

6 David says the same thing [about salvation] when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

7 "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

8 Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him." (Rom 4:6-8 NIV).

Paul is quoting here Psalm 32 and if you flip over to Psalm 32, you will see that there is no reference whatsoever to David earning salvation. You know David; you know how prone he was to wandering from God and yet his instinct was never to try to work it off and make things right in his own strength. Psalm 32:5, David says –

5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

That was David's response to his own sin. Not to try to work it off, but to admit it to God and trust himself fully to Him. David actually uses three different words for sin – it's like he's confessing the full breadth of his sinfulness, just how short he falls from the glory of God, and

his only hope is to entrust himself to the mercy of God. And what does God do? He forgives his sin. He saves him from wrath. God makes David right with Him on the basis of his faith.

That is why David is so overwhelmed by the grace of God that he practically sings ‘Blessed are those whose sins are forgiven, whose transgressions are not held against them but forgotten forever.’

The psalm actually ends like this - 10 Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.’

There’s no talk here about earning salvation – Paul points to David’s experience and says ‘look, it was all by faith. The LORD’s unfailing love surrounded David because David TRUSTED him.’ David was saved by faith and not by works.

Abraham was saved by faith, David was saved by faith; those two case studies show us that salvation by faith has always been the way of salvation when it comes to the LORD. We don’t earn salvation, we freely receive it by faith in the God who redeems.

Now having made that point through Abraham and David, Paul reinforces it by way of an illustration. Verse 4, Paul uses our experience of earning wages and receiving gifts as a way to talk about how God makes us right with Him. Look at what Paul says in verse 4 –

4 Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.

That just makes sense. If you work for eight hours, then your boss is obligated to pay you back for those eight hours of work. You have earned that money – it is owed to you because you have worked for it.

5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

What’s the unspoken point that Paul is making here? Salvation is not a paycheque to be earned but a gift to be received by faith! Abraham did not work hard enough to receive his salvation; David did not earn anything from God by his works. And yet God extended grace to both men as a gift to be received by faith.

If we could work long enough and hard enough to pay back our rebellion, then God would owe us salvation as our pay, but we can’t work long enough and hard enough. Our hearts are just too tied up in doing what WE want to be able to seek after what God wants.

And yet God is so rich in mercy that He still chooses to save sinners as a gift. Look at the phrase in the middle of verse 5 – God justifies the wicked – not ‘God justifies those who are moral,’ not ‘God justifies those who pull up their bootstraps and earn His favour’ – ‘God justifies the wicked

who put their trust in Him.’ God helps those who CAN’T help themselves. That’s how this works.

God takes sinners, gives them grace to believe and then makes them right with Him on the basis of that faith. That is a gift, not a pay cheque. The last two verses of this chapter tell us that Jesus was delivered over to death for our sin and that God will make right any who believe in Him; that means that our salvation is not about what we do but about what Jesus did. We are saved by faith alone, as a gift that God gives that we haven’t earned.

Abraham received that gift. David received that gift. We receive that gift when we put our faith in the Son of God. Our salvation is by faith alone. We are made right with God by faith.

Now, I know that many of you know that. What do we do about it?

Let me put it to you like this – you are saved by faith, so live by faith.

Let me unpack that, one clause at a time.

First, you are saved by faith.

I spent a lot of time thinking that I had to make myself right with God. That I had to be my very moral best and make myself worthy of God and then (maybe), He’d accept me. If I could just get over that threshold of ethical perfection, then maybe God would save me. But that just made me feel worse and worse, because I never could.

Maybe you feel like that too. Maybe you’ve struggled under the weight of doing enough good deeds to outweigh the bad. Let me let you out from under that weight because that’s not what God requires.

All that God requires has been paid for at the Cross and now He gives salvation as a gift to be received by faith. Verse 25 - 25 Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. And God will credit righteousness to all who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

When you turn from sin to trust in God, you are made right with Him by faith. Full stop. Not on the basis of your works, not on the basis of your efforts. You don’t need to earn God’s favour. You don’t need to keep Him happy. He delights in you as a treasured child of God and you are right with Him, because of Him. You are not saved by works, you are saved by faith. Receive that gift.

Since you have been saved by faith, live by faith.

A lot of people, I think, think of faith as an intellectual exercise, just a series of ideas that we mentally hold on to. They might say 'if I believe the right things, it doesn't matter what I do.' And even if they wouldn't say it, they act like.

Our faith though is not in ideas, but in a person who really lived and died and rose again for our well-being. It just makes sense then that we would put our faith in Him into action and live for HIS well-being and purposes.

There's a neat little phrase in verse 12. Chapter 4, verse 12, Paul talks about 'Abraham walking in the footsteps of faith;' I think that's a great reminder for us that 'faith' is not just about belief; faith is believing and living in a way that is consistent with the God in whom we believe. Faith needs to be lived out and put into action.

In a sense, that means actively trusting the LORD. Sometimes I think we say 'oh yes, I trust in Him,' but at the first sign of trouble, we're freaking out as if He wasn't there. He is gracious, He is powerful, He is just, He is in your corner. Truly trust in Him in every situation. Count on Him in life as you do for salvation. Trust in the LORD... and...

Act for His benefit. Think about who you are, the gifts He's given you, the context He's put you in – and then work out for yourself how you can use those realities for the benefit of His Kingdom. Let your faith in Him shape the way you live. Apply your faith in all parts of your life.

We're not saved by faith to sit on our hands; we're saved by faith to extend God's grace into the world.

How can you do that on a daily basis? How can you live out God's character and grace in your own life for your coworkers and colleagues and family?

Faith is not just a mental exercise, but something you walk in, something you live out day by day.

You are saved by faith, so live by faith.

BENEDICTION

2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 - Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.