

Faith in Christ Alone (Romans 4:1-25)

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[0 : 00] Just before we invite Angel to come up and read Romans chapter 4, which we'll hear from Glenn preached, I just want to remind you we are in in-flight mode, as it were. So if you can, put your phones into in-flight mode, and we're just going to continue listening to the Holy Spirit as we hear from God's Word.

So if you don't have a Bible, please come to the back. I can help you find one. And if you are more of the visual kinesthetic type, come and grab an activity pack and join in the coloring and the listening and the thinking together.

Let's do theologies together, and let's hear from God's Word. Angel, would you come and bless us with the reading of God's Word? What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?

If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about, but not before God. What does Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Now to the one who works. Wages are not credited as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work, but trusts God, who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

[1 : 12] David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the one whose sin in the Lord will never count against them. Is this blessedness only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness.

Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised or before? It was not after, but before. And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

So then he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is then also the father of the circumcised, who not only are circumcised, but also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath.

[2 : 34] For where there is no law, there is no transgression. Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who have the faith of Abraham.

He is the father of us all, as it is written, I have made you a father of many nations. He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed, the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

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. Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body wasn't as good as dead, since he was about a hundred years old, and that Sarah's womb was also dead.

Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

This is why it was credited to him as righteousness. The words it was credited to him was written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness, for us who believe in him, who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

[3 : 55] He was delivered over to death for our sins, and was raised to life for our justification. And that is the word of God. Amen. Thank you for that reading.

I realize it's very ambitious, taking on a whole chapter of Romans in one message, but I promise you we will work through it together.

But just by way of introduction, I just want to tell you a little bit more about my faith journey and my family. Earlier this year, I actually completed a te reo course.

And so as part of this course, I needed to prepare a pepiha. Familiar with a pepiha? A few heads nodding. So this basically speaks to where I've come from and who I am, and my whakapapa or my ancestry.

And one of the things that I wanted to do in my pepiha was to mention my grandmother. So if we can put the first PowerPoint up there.

[5 : 12] It's a picture of my grandmother there. And she is an example of someone who loved and faithfully served God for her whole life.

And in fact, my grandmother stands in a long line of believers in Christ, and it literally goes back generation after generation after generation.

Someone in our extended family looked right back into our history. And so I'm very privileged to have this incredible Christian heritage. And, you know, the thing is, though, that my grandmother's faith and my mother's faith, as wonderful as that was, it didn't give me some kind of special status before God.

I still needed to make my own choice to put my faith in Christ. And as I mentioned earlier in the interview, when I was eight years old, I went along to this children's Bible crusade camp, and I gave my heart to Jesus.

But let me tell you honestly, that as good as that was, I distinctly recall having this feeling of this kind of deep sense of guilt and shame, even at eight years old.

[6 : 26] Somehow I felt like I wasn't fully acceptable to God. I felt like I still needed to do something to earn God's acceptance, to earn God's approval.

I didn't fully appreciate God's grace at that time. And so began a journey of wrestling with the relationship between grace and good works in my life, a relationship that influences how we relate to God and how we live out our faith.

And so I want to look through that lens this afternoon by looking at Romans chapter four. Now this chapter forms part of Paul's larger teaching about the gospel.

And if we go right back to Romans chapter one, in verse 16, it's a gospel that Paul says he's not ashamed of because it is the power of God to bring salvation to everyone who believes.

It's the power of God. I'm not ashamed of the gospel. Let us never be ashamed of the gospel. It is an incredible gospel that Paul lays out, you know, right through from chapter one and particularly into chapter eight.

[7 : 40] And right now, we're going to have a look at chapter four. So I won't read this again as we have already read it out, but it is up there on the screen to just refresh your memory.

But as we start this chapter in verses one to four, one of the first questions I had when I started looking at this is why is Paul using Abraham as an example?

Now last month, as we've just mentioned in the interview, I visited Israel for the first time. And I spent two weeks, as I said, visiting all the holy sites and the places where Jesus walked and lived and ministered and ultimately died.

And it was an incredible time. One of the things that I learned as we prepared to go to Israel is that the Israeli mindset, the Israeli way of thinking, it's concerned with relationships, it's concerned with stories.

Value is placed on family and on community over the individual. And you know, people with an Eastern mindset, they actually face the past, which is known, and they walk backwards into the future.

[8 : 55] All right? Whereas a lot of people from the Western mindset, we like to walk forwards into the future and not think so much about our past. But for the Israeli people, it's very important to them to understand their history.

And they bring their history and their family and all their connections into the presence because that has shaped them as a people. And believe me, they have a very long, long history that covers thousands of years.

And so when laying out his gospel, Paul looks right back to Abraham, who is seen as the forefather of the Jewish people. You know, the nation of Israel can chase their phakapapa right back to Abraham, and he is held in really high esteem for the Jewish people.

The God of Israel is the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. So when Paul mentions Abraham for his Jewish audience, Abraham's whole story comes right into their thinking as if it just happened yesterday.

The story we read about in Genesis chapter 12, and let me refresh your memory. God makes a covenant with Abraham. Abraham, this binding agreement between God and Abraham that defines their relationship.

[10 : 17] And God calls Abraham, do you remember the story? To leave his country and his people and go to a land that he will show him. And do you remember what God's promises are to Abraham?

Does anyone want to help me out here? What are God's promises to Abraham? Abraham. Lots of descendants.

He will make him into a great nation and he will bless him and he will be a blessing to all the people on the earth. But you know, Paul is not just speaking to a Jewish audience.

He's also speaking to a Gentile audience. All those who are not Jews. And Paul chooses Abraham as an example because he is also relevant to the Gentiles.

He was actually a Gentile when God called him and made the covenant with him. And in a spiritual sense, Abraham was also the father of the Gentiles who believe in God.

[11 : 19] But let's return briefly to the story. Abraham obeyed God and he went to the land. But you know, as time passes, he still remained childless.

And then in Genesis 15, we read that he has this vision where God again affirms to him that he will have a son and he takes him outside and he tells him to count the stars.

and he says to him, so shall your offspring be. Have you ever been outside on a dark night and seen how many stars there are in the sky?

There's just too many to count, right? And this is God's way of affirming the promise to Abraham. His descendants will be too many to count. And you know, this is even more remarkable knowing that at this stage he was a very old man and his wife Sarah was well past childbearing age.

But you know, despite the circumstances, in Genesis 15 verse 6, it says that Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

[12 : 32] The very same verse that Paul quotes in Romans chapter 4 verse 3. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Let's just unpack this verse for a moment. What does Paul mean when he says that Abraham believed God? Well, you know, I think it includes belief or this mental assent in God's existence, of course, but it is far more than this.

It is particularly where Abraham believed in God's specific promise that he would have a child and make him into a great nation. It was belief and confidence that despite the circumstances I've just talked about with Abraham being an old man and his wife being beyond childbearing age, that God would do what seems impossible.

God would do what he said he would do. And as Paul says later in Romans 4.21, Abraham was fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

God is able, God is more than able to do what he has promised. Despite the circumstances, despite what is humanly possible, God would enable a way for him to have a child and would make him into a great nation.

[13 : 56] And you know, we know now that this promise ultimately is referring to Jesus. You know, Paul says in Galatians 3.16 that the promises that were spoken to Abraham and to his seed, you know, it says, Scripture does not say unto his seeds meaning people, but to your seed meaning one person who is Christ.

God's promise to Abraham actually anticipates Jesus as the final fulfillment of that promise because it's through the line of Abraham's son Isaac that eventually Jesus comes many, many generations and centuries later.

I mean, I don't know about you, but it's something that I find incredible that God had the foresight to set this all up, that he calls Abraham and he gives him this promise that he's going to make him into a great nation and then many, many centuries later it is fulfilled ultimately through Jesus.

Our God is just an incredible God, an amazing God. And so God credited Abraham's belief in that promise as righteousness.

Now we know, as I've said before, that Abraham was a Gentile, he came from a pagan nation that worshipped other gods, and look, he was an ungodly man when God called him.

[15 : 24] There was nothing special about him. There was nothing that made him deserving of God calling him. But when he believed that God would keep his promise, God in his goodness, God in his generosity, and God in his grace said, in my sight, things are now right between us.

This is what righteousness means. Things are right between you and I. It doesn't matter, you know, what you've done in your past life up until this point of time.

Right now, things are right between us. Another way to say this is that he grants Abraham a status before him that hasn't been earned.

It hasn't been deserved. All Abraham did was believe that God would keep his promise. It's not based on who he is, it's not based on who he's done.

He's only righteous in this covenantal relationship with God. And as we will see as we go through this chapter, this righteousness is not based, as I said, on works or anything that Abraham has done.

[16 : 33] It's not based on circumcision, and it's not based on keeping the Mosaic law. First of all, it's not based on works.

In verse 2, Paul says that if, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, then he would have something to boast about. Right? But not before God.

Paul wants to counter any interpretation of Scripture by the Jews, and again, they knew this story well, and they had their own interpretation of Abraham's story.

And they said that it was because of Abraham's works that he was made righteous. It was because of his obedience and going to the land that God had showed him that he was made righteousness.

But as Paul makes clear in verse 4, when someone works, they expect to be paid. Do you all expect to be paid? When you work, or do you just like working for free?

[17 : 38] Does anyone like working for free? No? No takers there? Of course not. When we work, we expect to be paid. It is an obligation of our employer to pay us for our work.

It's not a gift. However, for anyone who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited to them as righteousness.

You know, you can't do anything to earn God's righteousness. Doing good works, whatever they are, giving money to those in need, your service in the church.

These are important and good things but they can't make you right with God. You're only made right with God by grace.

grace. It's a free gift. It's a gift that you receive through faith. Paul affirms this with an example from David from Psalm 32 and I love this scripture.

[18 : 47] David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them. Isn't that an incredible verse? Isn't that a verse full of so much promise?

We are blessed that our sins are forgiven. We are blessed that the Lord does not count our sins against us. isn't this an incredible gospel that we are so privileged to receive?

We're not saved by works. We're also not saved by circumcision.

Paul makes it clear that being circumcised also does not make a person righteous. Again, we won't read through all the scriptures.

[19 : 55] We've already done that this morning but this afternoon. But Paul again here is speaking to the Jews and again they look back on Abraham's story and they believe that being circumcised this outward sign, this outward ritual, you know, on the eighth day they would circumcise a child.

Very, very painful kind of experience apparently. And they believe that that made a person right with God. But in this passage, verses 9-12, Paul refutes this.

Do you know, Abraham was not circumcised when God made the promise to him, the promise of land and making him into a great nation. Circumcision was only commanded by God about 13 years after that promise was given.

circumcision was simply this external sign of Abraham's faith, the faith that was credited to him as righteousness before he was circumcised.

Therefore, wonderfully, the Gentiles, all those who are not circumcised, can be included with God's people. And this was made clear at the council in Jerusalem.

[21 : 20] Again, as we remember in Acts chapter 15, believers in Christ at that time were being told that unless they were circumcised, they cannot be saved.

Paul refutes this and he says, no, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved. And so he persuaded the council that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised in order to be made right with God.

I'm very grateful for that. The good news of the gospel is that righteousness is not attained by any external act or practice that we do.

It is the free gift of God received by faith. Righteousness, our right standing before God is not received by good words or by circumcision.

It's also not received by obeying the law. As it says in verse 13 and 14, it was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world but through the righteousness that comes by faith.

[22 : 34] For those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law, there is no transgression.

No, it was not through the law that Abraham received the promise. No, the promise came before the law was given. Abraham was not made right with God through upholding the law, you know, such as the Ten Commandments or any of the other 613 commandments that are found in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament.

These laws were written about 400 years after God gave Abraham the promise. Do you know, when I was in Israel, I saw firsthand the links that the Orthodox Jews went to, to ensure they kept the law.

And particularly the Sabbath laws, you know, the fourth commandment that you shall keep the Sabbath and you shall not work on the Sabbath. Now, in Israel, they call it Shabbat.

It begins at sundown on a Friday evening and goes to sundown on a Saturday evening. And they have very, very specific definitions of work is to ensure they do not work on the Sabbath and break the Sabbath law.

[23 : 59] So they prepare all the food beforehand because preparing food is work. They can only walk a certain distance because beyond that is work.

Okay? So they actually have sort of like even markers and stuff in the streets in their local community that they can kind of walk up to the end of the street and back or whatever it is, but no further than that because that would be work.

Now, if they are very strict, they won't use electricity because somehow electricity is work in their definition. Do you know, in the hotel that we were staying in, we weren't allowed to push the button on the coffee machine because it was work.

And yet we could make an instant coffee because that wasn't work. They even have Shabbat lifts, okay, a special setting on the lift that it will stop at every single floor in the building so they don't have to press the button in the lift for the floor they want to stop at because that is deemed to be work.

Now, of course, this is their interpretation, right, of the fourth commandment. And we might think that this seems ridiculous to us, right? It just seems pedantic and extreme, but for the Orthodox Jews, they are very serious about this.

[25 : 24] They are very earnest because this is how they seek to be righteous before God, by obeying the law down to the minutest detail. But sadly, even this most strict observance of the Mosaic law does not give them sufficient righteousness before God.

God. And sadly, they do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah. And they do not live under his grace, but they live under this needing to fulfill this law in order to seek righteousness before God.

But, you know, the law was never the means for righteousness. For Paul, the purpose of the law, it reveals God's standards yes, it defines sin, it shows us the seriousness of our sin.

And it does result in God's wrath and judgment because it reveals our failure no matter how hard we try to meet God's standard. And it shows us our need for a Savior.

It shows us our need for Jesus. God's standard. It says, the only basis to be made right with God is to receive this righteousness by faith as a free gift.

[26 : 52] And Paul affirms this beautifully again in verses 16 to 22, which I encourage you to read again in your own time if you want to do further study.

But I just want to pick it up from verse 23. The words, it was credited to him, that is Abraham, were written not for him alone, but for also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness.

For us who believe in him, who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, he was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. The good news is that the words, it was credited to him, were not just written for Abraham, but for us.

Every single one of us who are in this room here this evening. In the same way that God credited righteousness to Abraham, God will credit righteousness to us.

But in our case, this happens when we believe in Jesus. Again, the ultimate fulfillment of that promise to Abraham that God would make him into a great nation and bless him and he will be a blessing to all people on the earth is fulfilled through Jesus.

[28 : 19] Abraham's faith in God, it was just simply a signpost in God's plan to redeem all of humanity. Culminating Jesus' death on the cross, paid the price for our sins and his resurrection conquering death.

When we believe that Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins, when we believe that Jesus was raised to life for our justification, when we believe that Jesus is the Lord, God credits our faith to us as righteousness.

And this is such good news. Now, I think it's really important that we understand that faith in and of itself doesn't save us.

Let me explain. Faith is simply accepting the gift that is offered to us by God. The gift of being in relationship with God through our union with Christ.

You know, because Jesus is the only one who's lived the perfect life and it's only when we are united with Christ that we receive his righteousness or right standing before God.

[29 : 33] Martin Luther called it the glorious exchange. Our sin gets credited to Jesus and his righteousness gets credited to us.

Isn't that good news? Our sin is credited to Jesus and his righteousness is credited to us. I mean, this is back to front and upside down, isn't it? Who does that?

Who takes on the sin of the world in an exchange? It gives us righteousness, right standing before God.

Think of faith like the cord on a lamp. You know, on its own, this cord can't make the lamp give light. The power to light the lamp doesn't come from the cord, it comes from the electricity when the cord is plugged into.

When we put our faith in Jesus, it's like plugging the power cord in. Jesus comes and lives in us by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit and starts this incredible process of transformation from within, out of which those good works flow.

[30 : 45] out of which we seek to live a life of holiness and service to God because of the grace we have received. As Paul beautifully states in Ephesians 2, 8 to 10, I'm sure you know this off by heart.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith and not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Like this is, this is foundational stuff for us as believers in Christ.

It is grace first, followed by works. It is not works first. We're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

I mean this is such good news. One that we can respond to with gratitude and wonder and worship. But I do wonder, do we struggle with this idea of being credited with something you didn't deserve, that you didn't earn?

[32 : 15] I don't know about you, but it took me many years to accept this truth that I'm made right with God by his unmerited, undeserved grace. And to be honest, sometimes I still struggle to accept this.

You know, it goes against everything that I'm told by society. As a child, right, if you were good, you would get a reward. Some nice food or maybe a special outing.

Maybe your parents sort of tried to bribe you into good behavior by, you know, offering you dessert or whatever it is. We are judged, we are rewarded for our performance all the way through school and in our work lives.

Even our relationships, people often only accept us for their outward appearance or for what we do for them. Everything is kind of based on, you know, who we are and what we do.

And I think in the same way, we somehow think that we need to earn God's approval through our works. We think we can only be acceptable to God if we clean ourselves up first before we come to him.

[33 : 33] But let me tell you, you can come just as you are. God invites you to come just as you are to confess your sin, to receive God's forgiveness and grace.

grace. If there's anyone here who has never, you've never put your faith in Jesus, if you know you're not right with God, I or I'm sure Pastor William or others here would love to speak with you after the service.

It would be an incredible privilege to pray with you that you might be right with God. don't leave this place tonight if you know you're not right with him.

And for everyone else, I wonder how, how do you see this relationship between grace and works? Maybe you've actually been a Christian for a number of years, but you are still in some way struggling to accept the good news of the gospel.

You're still struggling to accept grace. grace. I wanted to affirm to you that you were made right with God by faith in Christ alone.

[34 : 48] Jesus' death and resurrection are sufficient to pay the price for your sin, to bridge this gap between you and God. It's grace first, followed by works.

May your good works be an outworking of gratitude. For the incredible gift that you have received. And this isn't in my notes, but I just wonder, are there some here that perhaps you're struggling with shame and guilt?

You know, we all struggle with sin at times. And we think that when we struggle, we somehow become totally unacceptable to God. And we cannot go to Him.

And there's this sense of shame. I want to see you set free from that. God's grace is always here for you.

God's grace abounds. Receive His grace afresh. He's waiting for you to come and confess your sin and receive forgiveness.

[36 : 05] Let's pray. Amen. Lord Jesus, we thank you for your incredible sacrifice for us.

no greater love than to lay down your life. And you did this for us while we were still sinners, while we were still separated from you.

we are not deserving of your grace and forgiveness, but you freely give it to us because you long to be in relationship with us.

if there are any here, Lord, who are struggling with shame and guilt and condemnation, help them to receive your grace afresh tonight.

that they may be able to rejoice in the freedom of living under your grace. And that out of that would flow a life of gratitude and service and worship.

[37 : 20] Because it is an incredible gift that we've been given through you, Lord Jesus. Help us to cherish that gift. Thank you, Lord, for your goodness to us and your grace.

Amen.