

By Faith Alone in God

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Date: 12 August 2012

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- [0 : 0 0] Well friends, while you remain standing, I'll pray. Father, we thank you for your work in your world. We thank you for this great passage we're going to look at today.
- We pray that we might be reminded of great truths of the gospel as we reflect on it. And Father, we pray that you'd be at work in us by your spirit to draw us into the likeness of Christ and to draw a right response to him.
- We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well friends, today we're going to look at Romans chapter 4. However, let me say before we start that in order to understand Romans 4, you really do need to remember the story of Abraham and understand it.
- Now, as you know, Abraham is the first great hero of the Bible. He's the first one who is given an extended portrayal in Scripture. And his story begins in Genesis 12.
- And there in the first three verses of the chapter, God gives Abraham three great promises. He says he will give him a land. He will make him into a great nation.
- [1 : 0 5] That is, he will give him children. And if he will bless him and he'll make him a blessing for the entire world. Now, of those three great promises, it is the middle one on which the story of Abraham focuses.
- That is, it focuses on whether and how God will grant Abraham that gift of children. And today, we're going to look at this question from the perspective of one passage in particular, Genesis 15.
- You see, Genesis 15 is quoted a number of times in the New Testament. And one of them occurs within our passage today, that is within Romans 4. So I want you to look with me in your Bibles to Genesis chapter 15.
- Now, if you're looking at the Bibles that are in your pews, it's page 10. Now, let me give you some background. Genesis chapter 14, Abraham has been at war with some foreign overlords.
- And as it turns out, he is spectacularly, if not miraculously successful. However, it does seem to me that the whole incident has thrust upon him some fear.
- [2 : 1 1] It has worried him. And so God comes to him in chapter 15, verse 1, and God speaks a word of comfort to him. And I want you to look at it in your Bibles with me.
- After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision. Do not be afraid, Abraham or Abram. I am your shield and your reward shall be very great.
- Now, you don't have to be Einstein to see that these words are very clear to Abraham. God is saying categorically, I'm going to look after you. I'm going to reward you.
- You have absolutely nothing to fear. And let me tell you, Abraham, I think, is not terribly impressed with this. And so he openly questions God.
- He protests against God's word and God's promise. And he's very frank in his objection. Look at verse 2. He says this. But Abraham said, O Lord God, what will you give me?
- [3 : 0 9] For I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus. Now, when you think about this, you can see what he's saying. Can't you?

I might paraphrase it this way. Lord God, you have promised that you will make me a great nation. Well, you know, to be a great nation, you've got to start somewhere, don't you?

You've got to at least have one child or two. But not me. I haven't got none. At the moment, I have no child. And the person who will inherit my estate, this great land that you've been promising that you will give me, well, is an adopted slave boy.

God, I am childless. And then, in case God hadn't got the point, Abraham pushes it home in verse 3. Look at what he has to say. He says this. You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born to my house will be my heir.

Now, if he was frank in the first sentence, he is brutally blunt in the second. Notice the stress of his words. It's quite striking. He says, you have given me no offspring, so a servant in my household will be my heir.

[4 : 17] Yeah, the implication is clear, isn't it? God has promised, but God has not lived up to his word. That is, God does not appear to be doing anything.

He's all into promising, but not into doing. The third section of our passage, God responds, and he responds in two ways. First, he gives a word, and you can see that word in verse 4.

In verse 4, he says this. This man shall not be your heir. No one but your very own issue shall be your heir.

The words are clear. They, too, are categorical, aren't they? God is saying, I'm sticking by my first word on this subject. I'm going to keep my word. And then God does something else.

God gives a sign. And you can see that in verse 5. He takes Abraham outside his tent, and he tells Abraham, look up into the star, will you? Count them, if you can indeed count them.

[5 : 14] Now, I need to tell you a bit about this. Those of you who have been into the outback of Australia on a cloudless night will know something about what Abraham must have seen. Once you get away from the city lights here, and you go out into the outback, and you look up, I've seen it.

We camp lots of times out in the outback. It is absolutely spectacular. When there's no cloud in the sky, the skies are just full of silver dots.

Overwhelmingly full. And that is what Abraham must have seen. And God says, so shall your offspring be.

That is, your kids, their kids, their kids after them will be as numerous as the stars in the sky in number. If you can count them, you'll be able to count your kids.

Now, this is a very important exercise. You see, the very person who made the stars and put them in the sky is making the promise about kids. This is God, the star maker.

[6 : 20] And if he can make stars, then what is it for him to be making children for a childless barren couple? He's God, the star maker, the child giver, the nation maker.

And that brings us to the fourth section of this little passage. Verse six tells us that Abraham believed God. In other words, what does that mean? It means he saw the sign, he heard the word and he said, yeah, OK, that's for me.

He heard God's word. He saw God's sign. He trusted the God who stood behind them. He accepted God's word and sign. In effect, he's saying, look, up until this moment, I measured reality by what I could see.

And you know what I saw? Well, I saw myself. I saw my wife. I saw our increasing ages. I saw our childless state. And I regarded that as being reality for me. We weren't going to have kids and we weren't going to be a great nation.

But not now. Not now. You see, I'm going to measure reality by the word of you, the known promise maker. I've heard your word, seen your sign. I'm going to trust them and say they're dependable.

[7 : 23] I'm going to trust you and say you're dependable. Now let's look at the second half of verse six. The second half of verse six, the writer makes, in my view, one of the most incredible statements about God in the whole of scripture.

It is a statement about God that undergirds the Christian view of God and how we are to relate to God. I don't think it would be an understatement to say that if you can understand this verse, then you are going to and able to understand the guts of Christian faith.

Look at what the writer says. Chapter 15, verse six, second half. And the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

I could paraphrase it like this. God is in effect saying to Abraham, Abraham, you've seen my sign. You've heard my word. You've accepted it. You've therefore put your trust in me and in my word.

Well, Abraham, I think that's enough for me. That is taking me at my word is what I require of you. Believing in my word is what I require for a person to be rightly related to me.

[8 : 32] Now, I need to explain this just a little more. You see, the Bible's picture of us is that we are created beings. God made us. He made us with a purpose that is to live in right relationship with him.

Living in right relationship with God is what the Bible calls righteousness. Now, if that's so, then the next question is this, isn't it? How can a person be righteous?

How can a person live in right relationship with God? How do they get into right relationship with God? How do they maintain right relationship with God? And at this point, I think the Bible is clear and categorical.

That is, it says you are righteous when you adopt a proper relationship with God, when you rightly relate to him. And according to God in this passage, you do this when you trust him, when you hear his word, when you depend upon that word, when you line up your life by that word.

You are righteous when you are righteous when you measure reality and your future in terms of God's word. Now, we've done our groundwork. Now, we can turn to Romans chapter 4.

[9 : 41] So, if you want to do that at this point, then perhaps what you might do is look at the outlines in front of you and you'll see we've got Romans 4 printed there from the NIV. Now, let's remember where we are in Romans.

First 17 verses of Romans are introductory for Paul. He sort of outlines where he's going and what he's on about and who he is. Verses 16 and 17, he presents his thesis, which he will pursue throughout the whole book.

Then in Romans 1.18 to 3.20, he talks about the human dilemma and he surveys all the main people groups of the world and he systematically reveals that they are without excuse before God.

That is, God is our creator. Every person on earth should know this. But all of us have refused that knowledge. Some had more information than others, but nevertheless, all of us have refused that knowledge.

All of us have lived independently instead of dependently. We are therefore, as Paul puts it, all under sin. We all stand under the anger of God.

[10 : 47] That is the human situation as God sees it. Now, then in Romans 3.21 to 31, Paul presents God's solution for the human situation.

He tells us how God has acted in his world. He has sent Jesus into his world. He has put Jesus forward, he says, as a sacrifice of atonement.

He has offered the death of Jesus to be a death for our sin. The free gift of forgiveness is available, he says, to all who wish to receive it.

There is no distinction. It doesn't matter whether you're Jew or Gentile. All who receive this will be forgiven of all sins committed. They will be, in the language of Paul, justified.

In the legal language of the first century world, they will be justified. By the way, I wonder if you remember from last week just what justification is about.

[11 : 48] Justification is declaring someone to be in a right relationship with someone else. In this case, justification is God's declaration that someone is righteous in his sight.

Now, Paul knows that, look, if what he's said in Romans chapter 3 is going to really hold any weight, then it won't be, and if it's really from God, it won't be new.

That is, you'll have seen it before. It wouldn't be that God just came up with this late in the day. No, you will have seen it elsewhere. It will fit into God's plan throughout history. It will fit into God's plans and purposes as revealed through Abraham.

And for this reason, he then turns to Abraham, and for a whole chapter, he talks about Abraham. He takes Abraham as a sort of case study or a test case.

If his thesis is right, it will match with Abraham. And he particularly focuses on the passage we looked at, Genesis 15. He quotes Genesis 15 at the beginning in verse 4, and he quotes it at the end in verse 22.

[12 : 55] Let's see what he has to say. Now, have a look in your outlines there at verses 2 and 3. Paul makes clear that Abraham has no basis for boasting before God because of his works.

That is, he has no basis for boasting on the basis of what he has done. After all, Scripture makes clear, think of Genesis 15, that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works.

He was right with God. We saw that in chapter 15 on the basis of his faith in God. Abraham had done nothing to accept God's declaration that he was righteous in Genesis 15.

He hadn't kept laws because they weren't any given. He had just trusted God. He'd taken God at his word. In other words, Abraham was not justified by what he did.

He was justified as a free gift of grace from God. Now, Paul backs this up with some common sense and some other thoughts from Scripture.

[14 : 01] Look at verses 4 to 8. Paul uses the language of credit. Now, you can understand what he's saying here. If you're a worker, you accumulate obligations from your employer, don't you?

That is, you work, your employer is obliged to pay you. Now, but God freely credits righteousness to Abraham.

It's not something that Abraham has earned, which means he hasn't worked. It's something that is given. He humbly accepts God's gift. Now, that humble acceptance of a gift, of God's gift, is called faith.

Faith, says Paul, is counted as righteousness. And he reflects Genesis 15. And what happens with Abraham is exactly what happens elsewhere in the Old Testament.

And he goes on to explain this. He mentions David, where David talks of exactly the same thing. David speaks of forgiveness and of God not counting sin against him.

[15 : 02] So, this is the first thing we see in Abraham. So, first thing in Abraham. Abraham is not justified by what he did. He is not made right with God.

He is not declared right with God by what he did. But he's justified because of his faith in God. Now, turn to verses 9 to 12 with me.

Paul pushes the argument a bit further. He makes the point that Abraham had not been circumcised at this point. Let me just give you a chronology. Chapter 12, he's given a promise by God.

Chapter 15, these things happen and a covenant is made with God. Chapter 17, he's circumcised and all the males of his family with him.

You see, it comes a number of years later that he's circumcised. So, Abraham is justified. He's declared right with God before he had the mark of being a Jew.

[15 : 59] God considered him righteous without circumcision. Look at verses 11 and 12. Paul makes the point that Abraham is therefore the father of both Jews and non-Jews.

That is, he's the father of people who believe without being circumcised. And he's the father of people who are circumcised but believe just like Abraham did before he was circumcised.

Abraham, therefore, is a great uniting figure. He unites all believers whether Jew or not Jew. So, that's the second thing we see in Abraham concerning the means of justification.

Abraham was not justified because he was circumcised and had the marks of a Jew. He was justified because he had faith in God. Now, let's look at 13 to 22.

We've got to move through this quite quickly because I want to show you the application of it. Paul returns to God's promise to Abraham in Genesis. And in verse 13, he observes that the promise from God didn't come because Abraham was a man who kept Old Testament law.

[17 : 04] Now, those of you who know your Bibles well, chapter 12, promise. Chapter 15, this declaration and covenant. Chapter 17, circumcision.

Now, tell me, when does the law come? Book of Exodus, doesn't it? A lot, lot longer. Abraham's dead and buried by this stage.

Law comes later. So, law does not, cannot secure the promise. All it can do is show up how short of God's standards people fall.

In that sense, it can only stir up God's wrath at our shortcomings, can't it? His anger. And that's what verse 15 says. So, that means if you and I are to have any future in terms of relationship with God, we've got to go.

It's got to be by faith, doesn't it? That's what verse 16 says. Faith turns to God's grace. This is the only hope we have for relationship with God.

[18 : 07] Abraham had no hope of having children, but he believed that God was a promise giver, a creator and a star maker. And he became the father of all believers, the father of all nations.

So, that's what verse 17 means. This is the third thing we see about justification. Abraham was not justified because he kept Old Testament law. He was justified because of his trust in God.

Now, 18 to 22, we're moving quite quickly. Stick with me because we're getting to the crunch point. The Abraham we read about in Genesis 15 was an old man. And God came to him.

God graciously gave him a promise. And Abraham could have focused on the fact that he and his wife were past childbearing age and childrearing age, but he didn't.

He decided a much safer bet was to trust God and his promise. He was fully persuaded that God's word was faithful and God would live up to it. And as verse 18 says, against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations.

[19 : 16] Verse 20 says, he didn't waver in unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in faith, gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what was promised.

Friends, this is what God was looking for. And God saw in Abraham what he looks for in every one of us. He saw Abraham's acceptance of him and his word.

And he said, you see that? That's what I'm after. That's what I require. Look at verse 22. God saw Abraham's unwavering belief and he credited it to him as righteousness.

It's just the next thing we see. Abraham was not justified. It was not justified because he put faith in what he could see, but because he put faith in God, even though he could not see.

So verses 23 to 25. Paul says that God's words to Abraham were not just for him. Can you see it there? 23 to 25. The words it was credited to him were written not for him alone, but also for us, whom God will credit righteousness for us who believe in him, who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered over to death for our sins, raised to life for our justification.

[20 : 40] Friends, can you hear it? This is magnificent. God's words to Abraham in Genesis 15, 6 are words for us as well. You see, we too have a word from God.

It is a word about Jesus. It is also a word from God that can, who can not only, a God who can not only make stars, but also raise Jesus from the dead. It's a word about Jesus whom God says was delivered over to death for our sins, raised for our justification.

If we are united with Christ by faith, we'll be united with him in his resurrection. Friends, these are incredibly revolutionary words.

And because of this, I need to stress them because I need you to go home today fully understanding them. So, let's flesh it out in a slightly different way. What Abraham does in Genesis 15 is that he becomes a model of what it means to be Christian.

And he's a model because he does what Christians do. That is, he listens to God, he takes God at his word. Now, I reckon for most of us that sounds pretty easy. We think, oh yeah, listen to God, take God at his word, I do that.

[21 : 53] But let me tell you, let's get into the situation of Abraham a bit more. It is far from easy because let me illustrate. Here is Abraham. What does it mean for Abraham to trust God at this point?

Well, there's two forces at work in him. Let me try and illustrate them this way. Here is the one side. On the one side, there is the force of Abraham's own physical being. Physically, he is getting on.

He is an old man. His wife is an old woman. And when Abraham looks at himself and looks at his wife, he can't help being realistic.

No, we'll pass it. Okay, we'll pass being parents. That's cold, physical, hard reality. You know, that's it. On the other side, so there's one side of the scales, if I can put it this way.

On the other side, there's the force of God's word. God comes to him and he says, Abraham, you're going to be a dad. You're going to have kids. Your kids are going to be this great nation.

[22 : 58] Now, physical reality says that word of God can never be realized. Now, what Abraham does, I think, if I can illustrate it this way, is that he weighs these two forces up on the scales.

Okay, here's on the one side. He places what he could see with his eyes, touch with his hands. On the other side, he places what he heard from the God of all the earth.

And he considered, hmm, which one's more weighty? Which one has more weight for me? And he looks not at himself or his wife, but at the word of God, which says something absolutely incredible.

And he considered the word of God weighs more. He put his faith in that. And he said, I am going to put more weight in God's promise than my physical reality.

I wonder if you can see how he's a model Christian. Let me try and explain. You see, when we look at us, we have two forces at work in us too, don't we? Let me try and put it to you this way. On the one side here is the force of God's being and our being.

[24 : 11] What is God like? Well, God is holy and righteous and unjust. And what are we like over this side? So here is us.

Sorry, we'll flip back to here. Here is God who is holy and just. What are we like? We are unholy, unrighteous, unjust.

We are people who live and think and act and feel independently from God. Aren't we? We know that there is nothing in us that deserves relationship with God, our maker.

We know that intimately. We know that from within our own being. When we are entirely honest with us, we know this is our reality. This is our spiritual reality.

But yet there is this other side. On this other side is the force of God's word. We have a word, you see, or a promise from God. It's not about children.

[25 : 16] It has nothing to do with children and nationhood. Our word from God is a word about salvation. It is a word where God says, I sent my son into the world to die for you and your sinfulness and your independence.

And God's word to us is Jesus. And the Christian, what do they do? Well, they weigh those two things up. Their sinfulness. God's word.

God's holiness and righteousness and demands. God's word. God's word. Where we are in the face of God's holiness and righteousness and his demands on us sinful people. And our abject failure.

And on the other side, God's word. And the Christian is the one who hears that word of salvation. That word about Jesus. Weighs it up.

Regards it as trustworthy. And says, almost counterintuitively, against everything possible. I reckon the word of God is weightier.

[26 : 22] I reckon I'm going to believe that Jesus and his death brings me into right relationship with God. And you know the beauty of it? God responds to us as he did to Abraham.

And he says, he says to me and he says to you. He says to me, Andrew. That's good enough for me. That's what I require of you. Your acceptance of my word.

Your belief in it. Heather, that's what I require of you. Your acceptance of my word. Your belief in it. I declare you to be righteous.

Do you understand the point? God is saying to Abraham, Abraham, do you trust me? And Abraham's saying to God, yes, I do.

I'm convinced you can be trusted. And the Christian is the same. He or she says, yes, God, I'm convinced you can be trusted.

[27 : 24] I'm convinced your word about Jesus has, can and will save me and make me right with you. Now, I want to close today by asking where you are in all of this.

You see, the Bible's picture of you is that you are sinful. Three chapters of Paul is devoted to making sure you get that point. Don't believe it.

Go back and read it. You'll see he doesn't let anyone through. There's no one who gets through the sieve. There is nothing in you that deserves relationship with God.

No amount of trying to be good can help you. There is nothing in who you are. There is nothing in what you can do that can rescue you from God's anger or rescue me from God's anger.

That is spiritual reality. But friends, there is another spiritual reality. And that reality is that God has spoken his word to us in his son.

[28 : 26] And told us that he sent his son into the world to deal with our sinfulness and independence. And the Christian is the one who hears that word about salvation. Weighs it on the scales.

Regards it as trustworthy. And he says, yes. I will believe that. I believe that Jesus' death, that Jesus and his death brings me into right relationship with the God of all the earth.

And God responds. That's good enough for me. That's what I require of you. Your acceptance of my word. Your belief in it. So friends, where are you? I know there are some of you here today who have probably been coming to church all your life.

You probably think that you can, you know, some of you will think that you can be good enough or are good enough for God. Some of you will think that it's by association that you're Christian.

But friends, there's only one thing that makes a Christian. And that's hearing God's word and receiving it and saying, this is for me.

[29 : 38] So let me ask you, are you trusting Jesus and Jesus alone for your salvation? Because I tell you what, friends, if you're not, there will be no salvation for you.

But if you do, then you are declared right with the God of all the earth. Only trusting God's word about Jesus will justify you.

Only accepting God's word about Jesus will rescue you. This is the only valid means of justification. Nothing else will do.

Now, friends, there are some of you here perhaps who have not heard this before. Or some of you have heard it but not taken it on board before.

So I want to give you an opportunity to do this today. Because I'm going to pray acknowledging sinfulness, acknowledging our need for God, and expressing our trust in God through Jesus.

[30 : 46] If you've never done that before, today I want to give you the opportunity to do it. And you might like to pray along with me. So let us pray. Amen. Father, we acknowledge that you are the holy, just, righteous God who made us and who made us for you.

But we acknowledge that we have fallen short, that we have failed to live up to our own expectations, let alone yours.

We acknowledge that we can never be good enough for you. But we also have heard your word about the Lord Jesus. That is that we have heard that you have sent him into the sun to die for, you have sent your son into the world to die for sin.

And today, Father, we do again as we may have done before. If we've never done it before, we do it for the first time. We acknowledge that we receive this word from you.

Father, we thank you that as you do, that as we do, you declare us to be right with you. Please drive us out, Father, we pray that we might live lives of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, whom we have come to know and trust and who has made us right with you.

[32 : 23] Father, we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.