

Abraham: Model of Faith for All

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening as well. My name is Mark, and it's my pleasure to welcome you as well, to add my welcome to Helen's. It's a strange sort of day, isn't it, to have the announcements from the Premier just after 3 o'clock or 2.30. And I just wanted to say that we hope that next Sunday we'll still be able to come to you, that's our intention anyway, to come to you through this live stream. But we'll let you know more details during the week, particularly our regulars, through our normal emails and various channels, Facebook and that.

It will depend on what more he says about working arrangements and all that tomorrow, and then we might have to hear from the diocese as well. So do bear with us. But I just want to say as well that if all these announcements are making you anxious or fearful, then please reach out to me, reach out to some of your leaders, talk to them, and see how we can help you, pray with you. And if you do know people that might be in need over this next six-week period because they are really locked in without people able to care for them practically, then again, please let us know. We'd love to be able to help them, particularly if they are around this area and we're able to reach out to them.

Okay, I hope you got your Bibles open to Romans chapter 4. That's where we're going to look at today, continuing in our series in Romans. We hate it when people change the rules on us halfway, don't we? So take the games of Uno or Mahjong. I've got a picture of those things on the slide.

There are variations in the rules to those games, aren't there? So with Uno, for example, whether you can stack the plus two and the plus four cards all together, or with Mahjong, how you score the wins, how you use those special tiles, do they count towards making your prize or the winnings bigger?

And we hate it, don't we, when people don't tell you the rules or they change the rules on you mid-game. And, you know, they only do it so that you can't win.

[2 : 1 5] And then you only find out at that point when you're just about to, you know, place the last card or whatever, the last tile. It's so unfair, isn't it? And we hate it. And so tonight, on the surface, that seems to be a similar problem with the gospel.

It looks like God has changed the rules on the Jews. Paul has declared that righteousness is now apart from the law. But that's not what the Jews had thought all this time.

Did God change the rules on them? Because if He did, that's a serious charge. Sure, God can do what He likes as God.

But if He can just change the rules anytime He feels like it, then what stops Him from doing it again with the gospel? Paul's gospel, where justification is now by faith, what's to say God won't change His mind again?

And so it's an important question, isn't it? And Paul has to show that, no, actually, God hasn't changed His mind. That as I alluded to last week, that was God's plan all along.

[3 : 2 6] So remember the question that we finished with last week in chapter 3 and verse 31, which I've got on the slide. Paul asks, Do we then nullify the law by this faith?

His answer, Not at all. Rather, we uphold the law. Paul knows he has to tackle this question, doesn't he? His gospel has to work for the Jews, because that's what God had planned for them along.

God has always to be faithful. And the gospel and the law has to somehow sit side by side, part of God's plan from the very beginning.

Because if it doesn't work for the Jews, then it won't work for anyone. Paul's gospel has to work firstly for the Jews, and then for the Gentiles, as he says.

And so with that challenge in mind, Paul now unveils his defense in chapter 4. So enter Abraham, the model of faith for both Jews and Gentiles.

[4 : 32] So verse 1, Paul turns first to the Jews. 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. So Paul's saying to his fellow Jews, look at our forefathers. Look at our forefathers, sorry.

Did Abraham have anything to boast about? No, because he wasn't justified by works. Rather, Paul quotes from that reading in Genesis that we saw earlier.

Abraham believed in the Lord, Abraham believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness. What that means is that his righteousness was a gift.

[5 : 35] That's what credited implies. It's not a wage for work done. So verse 4, on the next night, 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. This faith, Paul argues, that Abraham had then, wasn't related to work.

Rather, point one, the credited righteousness is a gift. All Abraham did was believe in God. He trusted in Him, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

Paul then says that this shouldn't be a surprise to the Jews, because to be made righteous requires that our sins be forgiven by God. It requires God to justify, that is, make right, the ungodly.

And so Paul goes on. Guess what? That's also in the Scriptures. You know about this. And so he now adds, Remember our great King David? He wrote a psalm about the blessedness of sins forgiven.

[6 : 50] So verse 6, 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. This is from Psalm 32, if you're wondering. But here again is another piece of evidence that God's always been in the business of justifying without works.

So this idea that people could do good works to earn righteousness before God was never true. It certainly didn't apply to Abraham, as Scripture clearly shows, both in Genesis, but then also in Psalms.

Well, a Jew then might ask, What about circumcision? That was a mark of their standing before God. Perhaps God justified them because they were circumcised.

Well, no, because Paul now says in verse 9, 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.

[8 : 01] He didn't work for it. It was given to him as a gift. Well, Paul asks now, Under what circumstances was it credited? After he was circumcised or before?

It was not after, but before. And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the 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. Paul here is asking a chicken and egg question.

Which came first, righteousness or circumcision? And to the surprise of the Jews, the answer is righteousness. Circumcision was only given after as a sign or a seal of the righteousness that comes by faith.

The Jews should know this. Abraham was credited with righteousness before circumcision, not after. And if you read Genesis, that actually came many years after, not immediately even.

[9 : 09] And so the point then is, circumcision is only a sign, not a precondition of righteousness. It's like your university degree.

Turning up at your graduation to receive it is the sign you've passed. It's not the condition for passing, is it? No. To pass, you actually have to do all your coursework, hand in your assignments, pass your exams.

And you know, some of us can't be bothered to turn up, you know, for three hours, sit through a three-hour ceremony just to have our ten seconds of fame, and so we don't bother turning up. Are we still a graduate, even if we don't bother turning up?

Yeah, we are. The ceremony, the giving of the certificate, is merely a sign that you've passed or graduated. It's not a condition for you to become one, is it?

So likewise, circumcision is the sign that Abraham was already righteous. It didn't make him one. And so this opens the door, as we will soon see, for the uncircumcised to be saved.

[10 : 14] But for those who are circumcised, Paul now says in verse 12, that, you know, it's okay, there's nothing wrong with being circumcised, provided it is preceded by faith, just like Abraham.

And so he says, he's then also the father of the circumcised, who not only are circumcised, but who also follow the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Abraham is your father, if you're a Jew, not because you share in his circumcision or share circumcision with him, but rather because you share his faith.

So we've seen so far that work doesn't matter, but faith. Secondly, circumcision is not important, but faith. And now thirdly, Paul says that the law doesn't matter, but faith.

For again, if Abraham was righteous before circumcision, then how much more so in relation to the law, which came even later. Instead, Paul again comes back to this point, faith is what counts.

[11 : 20] Because God's blessing is given as a promise. You obey the law, but you believe by faith in a promise. And so verse 13, it was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be the 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. And where there is no law, there is no transgression.

Now here Paul adds the importance of the object of faith. And so we read that statement of faith. It's not just having faith, but what you have faith in.

And so reading that affirmation of faith is about saying what we have faith in and not just about the fact that we have faith. And for Abraham, what he had faith in was God's promise.

That's why, as Paul has already said, you cannot work for it. You see, when God says to Abraham, I will bless you by giving you offspring and a rich inheritance, Abraham cannot reply, sure God, how much do I owe you for that?

[12 : 35] What do I need to pay to get that? No, Abraham's only response was to say, I believe you God. Further, when God made the promise, there was no mention of the law, was there?

Of having to keep it in order for God to uphold His promise. In fact, the law wasn't given until much later through Moses afterwards.

And the Lord giving Moses the law many, many years later did not nullify the promise nor Abraham's faith earlier, many hundreds of years before that.

God was always going to be faithful to His promise. Nothing the Jews did afterwards, whether they obeyed the law or not, would nullify God's promise to Abraham.

So, for the Jews, for any Jew now to depend on the law for righteousness would make God's promise to Abraham and his offspring useless. That's what Paul is trying to say.

[13 : 39] because it doesn't matter how much faith they would have, they would be looking to the law to justify them. And last week, we found out, didn't we, that if anyone looked to the law, then they would realize that they would fall short of God's glory.

They would sin. Paul had said, all have fallen short of God's glory. So, the only result of looking to the law is to find yourself under God's wrath. That's why he says here, now, it produces God's wrath.

The law reveals clearly how far we have sinned. The word here, transgression, is a very specific kind of sin. It's a stepping over of a line when you know where the line is.

So, hence, without the law, there is no transgression because you're not stepping over some clear boundary. You may still sin, but you don't transgress. But when you have the law, then you knowingly transgress.

You know you've fallen short. And so, you sin knowingly. So, God gave the law, I think, in order to prove how necessary faith is.

[14 : 53] Because there's only righteousness in faith alone. You can't be righteous by obeying the law. And so, Paul really tackles all the three things that the Jews hold dearly, doesn't he?

It is not works, it is not circumcision, and it's certainly not the law. Paul says, it's only faith that matters. And the amazing thing with this plan of God is, if this is the basis for righteousness, then it's available not just for the Jews, we've now just shown how it works for the Jews, because of how it worked for Abraham.

Well, it doesn't just work for the Jews who have the law, but it works for the uncircumcised, the Gentiles, apart from the law. And so, Abraham is the model of faith for both the Jew and the Gentile.

And so, we get to verse 16, 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.

[16 : 15] Now, this idea of grace, Paul has already mentioned in chapter 3 and he'll come back to it again in chapter 5. But do you see what else Paul is saying here? You remember in chapter 1, we saw that all were under God's wrath, even the Jew who tried to keep the law, but yet sinned.

But if righteousness comes by faith apart from the law, then not only the Jews but the Gentiles can enjoy in the promise of God to Abraham. This promise that God was making to Abraham wasn't just for the Jews but it was for all who have faith.

And again, Paul reminds us that this is part of God's original promise to Abraham. For God's promise to him was that he would not just be the father of the Jews but the father of many nations.

Father, in other words, to all who have faith and therefore are inheritors of the promise. All those who believe like Abraham did are his offspring, even if they're uncircumcised because Abraham himself was likewise uncircumcised when he believed.

And so what or who are we to believe in now? Well, exactly who and what Abraham believed in, the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

[17 : 39] In other words, the nature of faith God demands of us today is much like what he asked of Abraham. And now in verses 18 to 21, Paul flashes out what this faith looks like.

He gives Abraham again as the example. So he says, 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 was 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. I don't know about you, but to me, this is such a powerful picture of what faith in God looks like.

First, there is this sober recognition of reality that his body was as good as dead and so was Sarah's womb. If anyone else had made the promise to Abraham, he would have laughed that it was scorned.

[18 : 49] But because it was God and only because it was God, then Abraham believed. Why? Because he believed God had the power to do what he promised.

And I might add as well that God had also the faithfulness to do it, even though Paul doesn't say so here. Nevertheless, if we believe God is up to his promise, then what it calls from us is unwavering faith.

Even in the face of seeming hopelessness, we hope against all hope. That's Paul's words. We keep clinging on to that promise of God as the only thing we have because it is the only thing we have.

Everything else points away from it coming to pass. But we hold on and we say, only because God promised do I believe. And as a result, God didn't simply credit Abraham with righteousness.

No, he fulfilled exactly what he promised as well. Abraham became the father of many nations. But not in the way that we expected. Not physically, just through his seed, physical seed as it were, but spiritually, by faith.

[20 : 09] And so Paul wraps up in verse 23 to 25. So how will Abraham become our spiritual father?

Well, Paul says that first from God's side, by realizing his promise to Abraham is also his promise to us. God too will credit us with righteousness if we believe in him.

So if you go back to that verse in verse 3, I want you to insert your name into that verse if you believe. Say to yourself, Mark believed in God or whatever your name is.

I know you're not Mark. I am. Mark believed in God and it was credited to him as righteousness. And then repeat that again and again.

Take it to heart because that's God's promise to all of us as well. God's promise to Abraham, Paul says, is also his promise to all of us.

[21 : 26] For we are his offspring if we have his faith. That's really amazing, isn't it? that promise that was given all that many years ago to Abraham, God actually made that promise to us.

He had us in mind when he made it to Abraham. Well, as for our part, what God looks to is for us then to have that same faith in him, just like Abraham.

Abraham, the God who gave life to Abraham and Sarah and raised their bodies from the dead, as it were, is the same God who also raised Jesus from the dead.

The same death to life miracle God had performed on them is the same one that God performed on Jesus. And so we're called to have that same unwavering faith, the same hoping against hope, not weakening in unbelief.

And the result for us will be the same righteousness, or as Paul puts it, he was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Friends, do you know that God looks to this faith, this sort of faith, and to him, that is more precious than any of the good deeds you might do in your life.

[22 : 49] All the money you give to charity, all the kind words you've spoken to others, all the time that you go to help other people, and please don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to downplay these things, these are great things, these are good deeds, they're good things to do, and yet what God desires even more than that is our faith in him, is our faith in his word, in his promises, that unwavering, steadfast belief that he has the power to do what he has promised.

Every time we look at his word, do we believe whatever he has promised in his word, that he has the power to do what he said he would do? That is the thing that gives him most glory.

Because it shows that we believe that he is faithful. And because that says that you know and believe that the most precious thing that he has done for you, when we look into the Bible and we see that promise that he has given about his son Jesus, and we believe in that, it says that what he has done for Jesus, through Jesus, is the most precious thing that we have in our lives.

And I know that particularly in this time, given anxiety and fear, it's very easy, isn't it, to look to our fears, to look to this world and to be overwhelmed by it.

But I want to encourage you, if you find yourself being anxious, having fears overtaken, overtaking you, then look back into God's word. Now is a good time, it's always been a good time, but now is especially a good time to come back again to God's promises, not least his promise in his son, more of which we will see next week.

[24 : 41] And to again believe that God has the power to do what he has promised. Now conversely, what does wavering in faith look like?

Well, you know, it could be that we stop believing in Jesus, yes, maybe follow another religion or become an atheist, but I think wavering in faith might also look a bit like this, and that is to start turning back to works perhaps, or to the law, or to anything, to look to anything else but Jesus' death.

That is to waver in our trust in Jesus. And often I think we are tempted to do that, aren't we? Whenever we seek approval from other humans, or we chase recognition for our achievements, we are looking actually away from Jesus, aren't we?

We are looking to our own deeds to validate our goodness. And I might say even if these achievements are Christian things, you know, like how well I preach, or how much I am serving and doing things at church, if these are these things you are looking at to validate your own worth, then you are looking away from Jesus, aren't you?

You are wavering in your trust in what God has promised in Christ. I don't know about you, but for me, that is the constant pull, isn't it? Of my sinful, self-righteous self.

[26 : 11] But friends, Paul says that without God, our bodies are as good as dead. The only hope we have is that God fulfills His promise and that we have faith in His Son because of that promise.

And that is the only thing that will credit to us righteousness. Helen believed in God and it was credited to her as righteousness.

James believed in God and it was credited to Him as righteousness. Lauren believed in God and it was credited to her as righteousness.

Enoch believed in God and it was credited to Him as righteousness. I could go down name by name every one of us in our church, can't I?

But that is what we all share together, don't we? All of us believe in God and particularly His promise to us in Christ. And because of that, we are all credited with righteousness.

[27 : 25] If you are out there and you are joining us for the first time, I wonder, are you able to insert your own name into that sentence? I do pray that you can because only faith in God will be credited to you as righteousness.

Let's pray. Father, thank you that since the beginning of time, since you made the promise to Abraham, our father by faith, it is not the law or circumcision or works that earns us credit and righteousness.

Thank you that it is the gift that is made possible by Jesus' death for our sins and that you raised him to life for our justification. help us to hold with unwavering faith to your steadfast promise.

Help us not to turn to unbelief, including the unbelief that still professes faith in you but looks to other things for validation of our own goodness and righteousness.

Help us, having believed, to keep believing and to live it out by faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.