

Romans 4:1-25: Abraham Prefigures Paul's Gospel of Faith

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[0 : 00] to meet their teachers just outside the sanctuary back this way. Again, the scripture passage is Romans chapter 4, the entirety of the passage, verses 1 through 25.

Would you please stand with me for the reading of God's word? What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift, but as his due. And to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works. Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.

[1 : 05] Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin. Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

The purpose was to make him the father of all who believed without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well. And to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised, but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring, not only to the adherent of the law, but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.

[2 : 29] As it is written, I have made you the father of many nations, in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, so shall your offspring be. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead, since he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

No distress made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith, and as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

That is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness. But the words, it was counted to him, were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him, who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses, and raised for our justification.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. In ancient times, long before postage stamps were required or in use, it was the recipients of letters who always were the ones responsible to pay the courier for delivery.

[4 : 13] With the advent of postage stamps, however, things changed. The system of payment now worked in reverse.

The recipient received the letter free of charge. The old system of payment was now done.

Obligatory fees, things of that nature, and taxes were null, void. Interestingly, and it wouldn't surprise us, I'm sure, people have made a disciplined study of this transition period to postage stamps.

No doubt an elite bunch, and maybe even a student or two of them here at the university. Far fewer in number are they than the common stamp collector who might be among us.

The field of study regarding the transition to postage stamps actually goes by a name. Philately, which is the joining together of two words in the Greek, from *philos* or *phileo*, or this idea of loving something, and then *telos*, this idea of free from, or free from being encumbered by taxes.

[5 : 45] And so it's a wonderful word. And for us who live in an era when prepaid postage is a given, why you should appreciate this every day you gather your mail.

Everyone likes the fact that letters arrive at their doorstep free of charge, exempt from all fees, fees, or even regarding your station in life.

Now, why do I open with this obscure discipline of study on the transition to postage? I think behind it provides a good analogy for where we are in the argument of Paul as we approach Romans 4.

Paul is quite aware, on account of what he has argued at the end of chapter 3, that many of his readers might be feeling that the old ways of acquiring a right relationship with God have changed.

Before Christ, they might reason, the recipients of a final declaration of righteousness went only to a select few, namely the Jews, who while being elect, nevertheless had a role to play in paying for their letter of right standing by law keeping.

[7 : 12] After Christ, though, it would appear, things now work in reverse. The obligatory fees and taxes are now set aside. Our right standing with God has been paid in advance, in advance of that day of wrath, entirely by God's own Son.

And that is to be received by faith, and therefore, it comes absolutely free from all law keeping. The concluding question of chapter 3, I encourage you to take a look at it, hints that this is in the mind of the reader at this point in his argument.

Where, then, is boasting? But then the second question, who is all this available to, Paul? And then finally, this third question, does this thing you were explaining to us overthrow law?

Do away with the old way? Because you've given us something new. Faith. Let me paraphrase it. Paul, you've been preaching for three chapters now.

We're a bit weary. But let me see if I have this right. Your gospel of faith over law has the same impact that postage stamps had for us all.

[8 : 43] They are both indications that the way of doing things has changed. The old ways of a recipient making payment are nullified. A new way has been put in its place, one that has passed on the entire cost to the sender, not the receiver.

Do I hear you right, Paul? To which, Paul, at the end of chapter 3, hurriedly responds, no! By no means. On the contrary. You're not hearing me right. In fact, the new way of doing things actually strengthens, not nullifies, the old.

To which Paul's audience, like any audience today, shakes their head with, huh? How is that, Paul? It looks like it nullifies it to me.

You've told us that a righteousness from God now gets all the work done, and it is apart from the law. How can that word, then, strengthen law rather than nullify it?

[9 : 58] At this point, then, Paul must, not by a one-line reaction, but by careful reasoning, prove his point.

How does his gospel, received by faith, strengthen all the words that came prior to the coming of Christ rather than make them void?

And he's going to have to actually preach a sermon. I mean, that's what chapter 4 is. Think of it like a sermon. And you'll notice that Paul, like any good preacher, he takes off on this Scripture verse you'll see in chapter 4 of Genesis 15 about the reckoning of Abraham coming according to faith in his introduction.

And then he's going to land, he's going to come all the way back to that very quote in verse 22. There's going to be a great symmetry to his message. And he's going to prove that a right relationship with God has always been grounded in faith, not law, and that being right related, rightly related to God by faith was from the beginning something God intended for all people, not merely a select two, a few.

So those two ideas always by faith intended for all people are the takeaways of his message.

[11 : 39] Now I know you walk out of here on Sundays and if you were to leave on Monday morning and say, what did the preacher preach about? You're looking for the takeaway. Well, the takeaway of Paul's sermon here are those two ideas always by faith for all people from the very beginning.

So let's see how he goes about doing it. If he's right, then there's no more important place for him to go than to take the reader back to the very beginning and to the book of Genesis and to the very person that his readers would look to as the father of God's family.

He takes you all the way back to Abraham. Take a look at verses 1 through 3. What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather, according to the flesh?

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

righteousness. Now, just a couple of observations. In these verses, these questions in verses 1 almost serve as his introduction.

[12 : 59] He's a decent preacher. He asks a question that will resonate with his audience. And there's a bit of ambiguity in his question, isn't there? I mean, when you read it first time off, you're not quite sure what to make of our forefather, are you?

Does he refer to our forefather meaning all Christians or merely the Jews? He doesn't really say. He also doesn't make much sense or he doesn't elaborate on what he means according to the flesh.

But it's piqued their interest. They're asking, he is asking the introductory question of his message, what does Abraham gain in regard to righteousness according to the flesh?

What did he find? And he launches in, if he was justified or made right by his works, then he would have something to boast about.

I love the comma, but not before God. As if he's to say, Abraham's never so foolish just to think he would have something to boast about before God. And after that introduction, there's the reading of his text.

[14 : 15] There's the scripture reading for that day in church. Verse 3, for what does the scripture say? And he turned them all to Genesis 15. Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

So he's underway. He's preaching. Verse 1, a question that teased their interest. Verse 2, an answer that countered their thinking.

Verse 3, the reading and the exegesis of a scripture text that from his vantage point argues the very point he wants to make. Which is what? That it has always been by faith.

I'm not undoing the law when I introduce faith. faith. It's always been by faith. For Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

His righteousness was credited to his side of the ledger not based on anything he did but based on his trust in God's word.

[15 : 25] For God had said to him, Abraham, come outside! Look at the night sky! Do you see all the stars? Evidently not in a city.

I'll make your descendants as numerous as the stars! And Abraham believed God. He took him at his word.

He trusted him. And that was credited to him as righteousness. So we're beginning to see what faith means in Romans.

There are three aspects to it. It's cognitive, certainly. There's something in the mind he's cognitively aware that he's going to believe this about God. But there's something that he's relying upon.

He's trusting. He's depending upon God. And his faith is manifested in his life and in his behavior. That's what faith is. It's the combination of the cognitive, the emotional, and the behavioral.

[16 : 33] Those aspects come together in Abraham. He believes God. Not just with his mind. But he's going to rest his entire life on it. And he's going to live his life out in that belief.

Belief, trust, faith has always been that according to Paul which mediates a relationship with God.

Now like any good preacher what does he do? He tries to illustrate it. Look at verses 4 and 5. It's an analogy that illustrates his conclusion. Verses 4 and 5.

Now to the one who works his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly his faith is counted as righteousness.

It's an illustration that proves his point. If you're a laborer and you want your due your due is gained by your very work.

[17 : 42] However, if you are merely trusting in God to make you righteous well that is completely a gift. And notice he does it even for those who are ungodly.

One of the great things in all the Bible is that God makes right the ungodly. How? How do we go from being all under his wrath to all having the capacity to be set right through Christ but through our adherence to his work by faith.

Now look what he does in verse 6. In the tradition of the rabbis the preachers of his day there would not have merely been one scripture reading for the day.

there would have been at least two scripture readings and the message would have wedded these readings together. And so while he has turned their attention in verse 3 to Genesis 15 he now turns their attention away from Abraham and Genesis to David and the Psalms as a supporting text for his argument.

Which has the point that it has always been by faith. Verse 6 Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works.

[19 : 11] And then he quotes from the Psalms Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.

What a wonderful thing. The choice of David is strategic. Abraham was considered the father of God's faith family.

David was the finest in this line of fulfillment of God's family. So to be a child of Abraham and David was to really be within the family of God.

You were a child of God if you were in the line of Abraham and David the father and the finest in fulfillment until Christ.

And so he moves to David intentionally and David himself was praying after his sin Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.

[20 : 19] Will not reckon it to him. This is an amazing portrait of the Old Testament. David had sinned with Bathsheba and then against Bathsheba's husband and then was accountable for not only adultery but for murder.

And when David was confronted with his sin he poured his soul out to God asking for forgiveness. And what it says here is that God would not count his sin against him.

How so? Just because God liked David and tried to turn a blind eye to all of that? No. Because David, like Abraham, was a prefiguring of the individual who would rest in the gospel and in what God does in Christ.

There's no forgiveness without the gospel. There's no forgiveness without the cross. There's no justice in the world if God does not mete out his justice at Calvary.

And so this Old Testament literature is, according to Paul, chapter 1, verse 2, a pre-proclaiming of the message that finds its fulfillment in Christ.

[21 : 48] Christ. What's the point he's made? This far into his sermon? A right relationship with God has always been by faith.

In fact, you are strengthening all of that literature when you act in faith, faith is what made them right with God.

Now, how do we apply this? Today, people are either rebelling against God, they have no interest in being right with Him, or they're trying to relate to God via some religion or set of rules.

Perhaps you yourself are sitting here today and wondering, how do I get right with God? Do I just need to get on with the right things?

Paul says, no. No one will be made right with God by performing works that are commensurate in some way with godly behavior, for we have all sinned and already lack our ability to stand in His presence.

[23 : 10] No, we are made right with God through faith in that what He did through Jesus' death satisfies payment for my sin and puts me in a right relationship with Him.

In other words, the gospel is freeing. Now the problem is you go to so many churches today that are Protestant and even further defined as evangelical and what you're hearing is this hoisting of imperatives upon the congregation so that Christianity is being reduced to what you need to go out of here and do.

Do. Get after it. Be holy. Do the right thing. without the gospel, there's no capacity for that.

God has done it all in Christ and you receive it by reliance upon it. That is so freeing.

your relationship with God is to be completely resting in faith that everything He did in and through Jesus is sufficient for your walking into His presence.

[24 : 37] You don't have to do a thing. And faith isn't some first work. Paul says that you were saved by grace through faith and this is not of yourselves.

Even it is a gift of God. It's always been by faith. Paul has demonstrated that by turning our attention to both Abraham and to David.

But I told you his sermon was doing something else. Not only always through faith but for all people. Which is where he turns his attention.

Look how he asks another set of questions beginning in verse 9. Again, like a good speaker, his sermon takes a turn and he regathers the listeners that he lost in the first part by asking a set of questions that will tease their interest but not merely to reiterate the point he's already made but to throw his argument into a second direction.

Look at verses 9 and following and following is this blessing then only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

[25 : 56] How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after but before he was circumcised.

What a wonderful argument. He begins to take the direction here that circumcision which had been the sign of entrance into the law keeping family of God came after he was declared righteous not before and if circumcision or the law came after then how would one be made right by the law?

He had already been made right. Let me put it differently. Genesis 17 the sign of circumcision comes after Genesis 15 where he was declared righteous.

So Paul has basically completely locked up his argument at this point in his message. It's always been by faith not by law for the stamp of rightness came even before the exercising of law.

And the implication of course is that it is for all people. Take a look at verse 11 and following. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

[27 : 26] Here's the purpose. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised so that the righteousness would be counted to them as well and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

All people not merely the circumcised the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Now why would Paul make this point?

Why does he want you to know that it's not always by faith but it's available to all people? Well if you think of his letter and work backward you could go back to chapter 1 and argue that he had a calling to all the nations.

You could go back to 1.15 where he had an obligation to the wise and to the foolish, the Jew and the Greek, the Greek and the barbarian.

You could embed in your mind that by the end of the letter he wants to be moving on to Spain and he wants to enlist their support to get this message out to all people.

[28 : 43] You could get there if you work back. If you work forward in the letter or beyond where we are into chapter 14 and 15 you might argue well that he knows that the church in Rome consists of both Jews and Gentiles and that the Gentiles had the upper hand in the way the church worked and that there were conflicts among them and so he wants them to know that all people are saved in the same way.

I'm not really sure which it matters. When we get to chapter 5 you'll see his application doesn't deal with either of those two facets. benefits. But at one level I want you to see that for Paul it's important that you know it's always been by faith and that is for all people.

That'll have impact for us. Take a look at what he does in verses 13. He's reinforcing the second half of his message and we won't spend nearly as much time on it.

We won't need to. Like a preacher though he circles back. He's made two points and now he's going to circle back and make the same two points. 13 to 15 he's going to reinforce the idea that getting right with God has always been by faith.

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherence of the law who are to be the heirs faith is null and the promise is void.

[30 : 16] For the law brings wrath but there where there is no law there is no transgression. What has he done here? He is simply reinforcing it is always by faith.

In fact if it was by law then everything is nullified. in verses 16 to 18 he reinforces the idea that it's for all people.

Read it with me. That is why it depends on faith in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring not only to the adherence of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham who is father of us all.

As it is written he brings another scripture text to bear I have made you the father of many nations in the presence of the God in whom he believed who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

In hope he believed against hope that he should become the father of many nations as he had been told so shall your offspring be.

[31 : 25] All people. And then he returns by way of conclusion to the one person with whom his sermon opened and he uses Abraham as an illustration of one who perseveres in faith.

Verses 19 he did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body which is as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God but he grew strong in his faith and he gave glory to God fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised that is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness Abraham always by faith now we opened our message with an illustration on postage stamps there was a certain kind of stamp that I think represents Abraham well it goes by the name of a forerunner a postage stamp that was a forerunner was used before a region or territory issued stamps of its own the term then included stamps of political predecessors of a country for instance stamps of the state of western

Australia are forerunners of Australia that's what Abraham is in this illustration he was a forerunner he his faith was the stamp before the gospel ever came so that when it came it was in effect and your faith likewise is the imprimatur of belief that trusts in what God has done it's always been by faith and it's available for all people what does that mean then for us well think of this congregation multi-ethnic and needing to be so no one with a leg up on another the church in Chicago would be strengthened immensely if local fellowships recognized faith in Christ death as that which draws us together as brothers and sisters and then watched us live with one another in such a way that all peoples were gathered around it that's the beauty of the gospel that's what this neighborhood needs it needs an all peoples ness to it for we live our lives equal but separate and Romans

Paul will never allow the church he doesn't come to his conclusion you'll notice in the weeks that come he doesn't at the end come and say so the Jews you go have your house church the Gentiles you go have your house church now he brings them all together through faith that is for all people what a wonderful calling for this congregation to put forward dare I use the word we might be universalist in this sense that the gospel is for all kinds of people all ethnic backgrounds the church ought to be the drawing together of the world that is situated or grounded on faith not blind faith not a faith that doesn't deal with the need for justice but that

God in Christ's death declared himself to be both just and the justifier of all who believe Holy Trinity Church congregation of Hyde Park resting in the great world class city of Chicago this is your word always by faith for all people without a leg up among us that he might receive all glory our heavenly father as we look at this message I do ask that you would encourage us as your children to live out your intention in this place for the glory of Christ we pray amen