

Getting Right with God

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[0 : 00] Well, we've been journeying as a church over the last number of weeks through the story of Abraham, and we've been looking at it through the perspective of Moses back in the record that we have in Genesis.

This morning, we're going to be looking at it from a different perspective. We're going to be looking at it through the lens of the Apostle Paul as he wrote in his letter to the church at Rome.

Now, some of you may be wondering, why are we jumping forward into the New Testament? And so I just want to give a brief explanation as to why. The best way to understand anything in the Bible, any passage, is to look at it and read it within its literary context, to understand what's said there in that passage and in the surrounding area.

But it's also important that we set things in the wider context of the whole Bible and look at the story of Abraham in light of the whole. How does his story fit into the larger story of what God is doing in our world?

And so we want to take some time in the next couple of weeks to jump back and forth a little bit between the Old Testament account of Abraham and the New Testament to see what's said by the New Testament authors about Abraham.

[1 : 30] Abraham. And why do we do this? One of the things that is a burden on my heart or weighs heavily on my heart as someone who preaches and teaches, there are passages in the Word of God that say that those who preach and teach will be judged more strictly.

There are passages that encourage those of us who do to watch what we teach very closely. Because if we veer off and begin teaching things that are not true or not accurate from the Word of God, then we become dangerous to our hearers.

And so with that weight, as part of my process to prepare to preach or teach, I have very intentionally included consulting with good commentaries on the passages that I look at.

So these commentaries, basically the guys who write these, they'll look at what all the other people have said about that particular passage in all the other commentaries and bring all that together.

And I think of it as a safeguard. It's a way to check for me, is what I'm seeing in this passage what you guys in the larger church community around the world are seeing?

[2 : 50] Because it's totally possible for me to, by myself, misinterpret or misimply or get the wrong idea from a passage. And so I want to check and see, is the larger church community as a whole also seeing that here?

Now, as good as these books are, these commentaries are the writings of men about the Bible. Sometimes, I wonder though, if we have failed to appreciate just what we have in the New Testament writings.

And here's where I'm going with this. The writers of the New Testament and even Jesus himself have a lot to say about the Old Testament, about what happened there, what was written there.

And so, the writings of the New Testament are not just like these books, the words of men. They are the words of men, but they have their source in God and come to us through his spirit as the inspired word of God.

They're authoritative. And so, when we look at the New Testament and what it says about those old stories, like the stories of Abraham, it's like we are reading the ultimate commentary on what happened back in the Old Testament.

[4 : 12] And the one example that I'll point to is with Jesus. Jesus had many run-ins with the religious leaders of his day. And on one of those encounters, this is what he said to the religious leaders.

He said, You guys study the scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very scriptures that testify about me.

Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. One of the things that I take from that is that it is entirely possible for us to diligently study the Old Testament scriptures and yet come to wrong conclusions, to get it wrong, to miss the whole point of what they're saying.

And Jesus was known for being someone who corrected people's wrong ideas about the Old Testament. He talked about how their ideas of who the Messiah would be were wrong and what the Messiah would do were off.

He corrected people's view on the law and how it applies to our lives on things like marriage and divorce and a number of other things to name a few.

[5 : 31] And so, and really this kind of makes sense, doesn't it? I mean, who better to tell us how to interpret and apply the Old Testament than the Son of God himself?

And so, as we look back into the Old Testament, we want to do so with the lens, with the comments, with the teaching that Jesus himself gives us about what happened back there.

He is the commentary, the commentator on those old writings that never fails, that gets it right every time. Not only he, but the apostles as well who wrote under the inspiration of the Spirit and what they said about what was written in the Old Testament, it too has the same kind of weight.

It's part of the ultimate commentary to give us confidence, to point us in the right direction so that when we look at these Old Testament scriptures, we don't end up coming to all these weird and wonky ideas and conclusions of what it means and how it applies to our lives.

And so, that's why for the next number of weeks we're going to be going back and forth a little between the old and the new. We want to understand the story through the lens that God has given us in the New Testament through his Son and through the apostles.

[6 : 54] So this morning, we're in Romans chapter 4. If you have your Bible with you, please open it up to Romans chapter 4. Paul has a lot to say here in Romans chapter 4 about the story of Abraham.

But before we get to that, we first have to note that what he says comes in the context of a larger message, a larger point that he's making. And thank you, Charles, for focusing our attention on chapter 3 and some of what was there.

This is kind of the context of what Paul is saying here in chapter 4. His whole aim in this letter to the Romans is to set forth the gospel clearly so that the people that are in the church in Rome would understand the good news of Jesus.

This church is a mixed church. It's got Jewish believers and Gentile believers in it. And so he's also bringing everything together in a way that they would understand how that applies to them with their different backgrounds.

He spent the first three chapters as Charles kind of led us through a little bit, focusing and proclaiming on the truth that the just wrath of God is coming upon our world because of our sin.

[8 : 21] As we heard this morning, no one is righteous. No one is exempt from this. He takes great pains to say, even if you're Jewish and have observed the law as best you can, you are not exempt from this.

Jew and Gentile, all of us, the verse we've all heard, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, says Paul. And then as we heard, read already, he breaks in with the good news.

But now, there is a righteousness from God that can be given to us, that we can receive from God by faith. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Romans 3.23, and all are justified, all are made right with God freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

And we just talked about and reflected on how Jesus became that sacrifice that we needed. So that Paul can say in verse 22 of chapter 3, this righteousness, this right standing with God is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile.

There's no difference. And so then he comes down to verse 27 and he says, where then is boasting? It's excluded. Verse 28, for we maintain that a person is justified, they're made right with God by faith, apart from works of the law.

[10 : 00] Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too. Since there is only one God who will justify, who will make right with himself the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith, Jew and Gentile.

His main point here is that there is no ground for bragging or for boasting to others that you somehow got a right standing with God through your own good works, through your own observing of the law.

because a right standing with God is something that God gives as a gift to those who simply believe, who have faith in Jesus Christ, his son.

And that's his main point as we come into chapter 4 that he is trying to make clear drawing on the story of Abraham. Both Jew and Gentile are made right with God by faith, by believing the gospel of Jesus and not by works, not by ritual, not by anything else, by faith alone.

So chapter 4 starting in verse 1. What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? In this whole matter of getting right with God, what did Abraham discover?

[11 : 31] Verse 2. 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. And so even with Abraham, our great forefather of the faith, he was not made right with God on the basis of works.

He was made right with God on the basis of faith. And so he has no reason to boast. You remember from the story, Abraham blew it many times.

He sinned. He was a sinner just like the rest of us. He was a worshiper of other gods back in Ur of the Chaldeans when God called him.

That's not the basis of why he's in favor with God. He came into this right standing with God by faith. And Paul, he reminds us of that place in the Old Testament in Genesis where that's stated very clearly.

[12 : 41] What does the scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. For those of you who were here on that Sunday, God took Abraham out and pointed him up to the sky.

He said, look at the stars. As innumerable as the stars are, if you could count them, so shall your offspring be beyond numbering. And then right after that, it says, Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

He took the Lord's word at face value and trusted that God would actually bring that about for him and his offspring. and God credited it to him as righteousness.

He counted him as having a right standing with himself even though in actuality he didn't. He was a sinner just like the rest of us. And so that's Paul's main point here.

Abraham was made right with God on the basis of his believing, his faith. Not on the basis of what he did and it's the same for you and I. We are made right with God on the basis not of what we do but on the basis of our believing the good news of Jesus Christ.

[14 : 02] Paul goes on in verse 4 to help us really understand this and clarify it. 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.

Paul says you want to talk about work? This is how it works with work. When you go to work you earn wages and your wages are given to you.

They're deposited into your bank account not as a gift but as what you are owed from your employer in return for your work. They're an obligation but that's not how it works when it comes to getting right with God.

In fact, it's almost the opposite says Paul. When it comes to getting right with God God gives righteousness a right standing with himself to those who believe and yet do not work.

[15 : 23] It's a gift. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God their faith is credited as righteousness.

It's not something you can earn. You can't earn a right standing with God. It's something you receive as a gift on the basis of belief and faith.

Trust. I love the way that Paul describes God here. He is who trusts but trusts God who justifies the ungodly. He is the God who is in the business of making right with himself the ungodly.

Sinners like you like me like Abraham. This is the good news. You don't have to earn it. In fact it's those who do not try to earn it but simply trust that God will give it as a gift who receive this right standing with God.

Paul goes on to say that David King David he saw and recognized that this is how it was with God. He wrote in the Psalms blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven.

[16:41] Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them. This wasn't just a thing that God did with Abraham. This was something that thousands of years later David recognized too that God was in the business of blessing people of forgiving them of their sins of not counting against them the wrong things that they had done.

Paul then goes on to ask the question when it comes to this wonderful gift of being made right with God on the basis of faith who is this gift for?

Verse 9 is this blessedness only for the circumcised for the Jew or also for the uncircumcised for the Gentile?

We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Paul's going to make the case here that this gift of righteousness of being made right with God is for both Jew and Gentile and how is he going to make this case? He's going to make it based on the story of Abraham. He says look at Abraham's life. At what point, in what situation did he get a right standing with God?

[18:13] Was it after he was circumcised or was it before? It was not after but before.

says Paul and he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. It wasn't based on the ritual of circumcision that Abraham was made right with God because circumcision hadn't even entered the picture yet.

It was based on faith while he was still uncircumcised. And so what's the implications of this? Paul actually lays it out for us in verse 11.

So then Abraham 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 who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

[19:31] So Abraham came into this right standing with God. He got right with God even before circumcision this kind of ritual that God gave entered the picture.

His faith in the promise of God was credited to him as righteousness as a right standing with God and in the same way those of us who are circumcised or uncircumcised Jew or Gentile receive it a right standing with God.

Let these words sink in. Abraham is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised. And I think the way Paul is using circumcision here is to refer to who are not Jewish.

Of course it was practiced in other places but this is primarily what he means. Abraham is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised.

Do you hear what the Lord is saying there? Maybe a way to say it differently. All who believe but have not been circumcised are the children of Abraham.

[20:52] He is their father. But it's not just them and Paul is going to go on and talk about what this means for those of us who are uncircumcised Gentiles.

It's not just for them it's also for the Jewish people too. Verse 12 He is also the father of the circumcised but notice the condition that he puts there the qualification.

He is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

So circumcision on its own is not enough. They have to have that if they're Jewish they will and they have to have the faith that Abraham had just as he did to be considered Abraham's children for him to be considered their father.

It's for both Jew and Gentile this gift of being made right with God and it's not on the basis of this ritual.

[22:07] It's not on the basis of lineage or descent or race. It's on the basis of faith for Jew or Gentile. Paul goes on in verse 13.

He says 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 faith for if those who depend on the law are heirs faith means nothing and the promise is worthless because the law brings wrath.

Here again Paul makes the case as he just did. It's not based on the ritual. It's not based on doing certain rituals. It's not based on the law.

It's not based on doing good works or not doing bad things that we get a right standing with God and receive what he has promised. The law had not even been given yet to Abraham. He didn't fully understand what God's standard of right and wrong was. And yet he was considered righteous, counted righteous by God.

[23 : 24] As a side note, Paul says, if it was based on the law, it would be hopeless. He's already argued that in the book. We've already failed to live up to God's righteous standard.

If it was based on that, all we'd be looking forward to is wrath. God the law brings wrath. We wouldn't receive what we've been promised if it was conditioned upon our obedience because we would fail.

It's not through the law. It's not through works. As we noted back in Genesis in the story of Abraham, this promise, this statement that Abraham was credited righteousness to him.

He got a right standing with God. That came before he was ever given anything to do by God in connection with this covenant. Why?

God did it that way on purpose. And Paul tells us what that purpose is in the next verse. Therefore, the promise comes by faith so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring.

[24 : 51] The promise comes by faith so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring. If it was based on works, we'd be in trouble.

we wouldn't get what was promised. We would fail the test. But God didn't do it that way and he didn't do it on purpose.

He wanted it to be by grace. He wanted us to get a right standing with him, Abraham, Isaac, those of us who later will believe as a gift, an unearned, undeserved gift of grace.

And he did it that way also so that it would be guaranteed because if we had to continue to measure up and somehow earn and live rightly enough to get what was promised, there'd be no guarantee, there'd be no certainty that we would actually get it because what if we blow it?

What if we failed? And so God gave the promise before he even asked Abraham to do anything, before the law had come and he credited righteousness to him simply on the basis of his accepting and believing what the Lord said.

[26 : 22] The promise comes by faith so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to who? To all Abraham's offspring.

Who's that? Paul tells us, he goes on to say, 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. Now we have to be careful here because there is a wrong way to read this. we might read to all Abraham's offspring, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who have the faith, to mean that some will get a right standing with God and inherit all that's been promised on the basis of keeping the law, while others will do it by faith.

That's not what Paul means. He's already spent this whole letter making it clear. That's not the case. you cannot earn this gift. It's a gift that we don't deserve.

And so when he says not only to those of the law, who is he referring to? Those of the law refers to the Jewish people, those who received the law. Those who are not of the law are the Gentiles, those who didn't receive that, who aren't Jewish.

[27 : 48] but in both cases, it's those who have the faith of Abraham. Do you hear what the Lord is saying here?

All Abraham's offspring, not only to those of the law, but also to those who are not of the law, but have the faith of Abraham.

Jew and Gentile. Is this what Paul means? That Jew and Gentile are Abraham's children? The context seems to say that it is.

We saw that back in chapter three already. Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.

Back in verse nine, is the blessing is only for the circumcised or is it also for the uncircumcised? It's for both, he said. He is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised and also the father of those who believe and are circumcised.

[29 : 00] It's both Jew and Gentile. And that's what he's saying here. The promise comes by faith to all Abraham's offspring, those of the law and those not of the law in both cases who have faith

like Abraham did.

He is the father of us all. And here's the big confirmation that we're seeing that right. Jew and Gentile, verse 17, 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. You may recall back in the story of Abraham as we looked at it earlier that God made a promise that Abraham said, I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.

Paul is here saying that's fulfilled, not in the sense that your descendants will branch off into many nations. That's fulfilled in the sense that all who are of the faith that you have are counted as your offspring from among the nations of the world.

He is our father in the sight of God. Just as Abraham was counted righteous though he wasn't, us Gentiles who believe are counted as Abraham's children or offspring though we aren't.

[30 : 35] It's a gift of God. The promise comes to all Abraham's offspring by faith Jew and Gentile.

And what is that promise? We've been talking about it. The promise, the promise, the promise. Well Paul actually tells us what the promise is in verse 13. it was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that what?

That he would be heir of the world. Do you hear that? The promise that he would be heir of the world.

And right about now we're wondering is that a translation error? it seems as though he's talking about the promise about the land. Did he mean to say land?

The original word there is the word for world. There's a different word for land or earth. What? the promise that he would be heir of the world.

[31 : 45] If you remember when Abraham first came into the land the Lord said to your offspring I will give this land. He hadn't even come all the way into the land yet.

He hadn't even seen the whole land yet. This land. The land where you're standing right now. But then the Lord restated that promise again. He said as far as your eyes can see.

From the place where you're standing. And the promised land seems to have expanded in its scope. And then again the Lord tells him I'm going to give this land to your offspring.

To you and your offspring. And the promise is expanded again back in Genesis. Not just the land that you can see. All the way down to the river of Egypt and all the way over here to the Euphrates. what Paul is saying here by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is that there's a further expansion than that. It's the world.

[32 : 52] That's ultimately what this growing promise of expanding borders of the land was pointing to. That Abraham would inherit the world to live in.

To have as his home. To be his everlasting possession. The whole world. And if we stop and think about this it kind of makes sense.

What did God promise to Abraham? He said I will make you the father of a great nation. Then when he renewed the covenant I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.

A multitude of nations. And descendants as innumerable as the stars in the sky and the dust of the earth. How is a multitude of nations?

All these people going to fit in this tiny little parcel of land? In the boundaries that are given there in Genesis? This expanding promise of the land, Paul is under the inspiration of the Spirit telling us what this was pointing to.

[34 : 01] It was never meant to be just this little piece of land. It was always intended to grow and expand from there to the whole world. And that's precisely what Isaiah declares in his prophecy.

I'm going to do a new thing. I'm going to make a new heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells and it will be the home for you, my people.

And so for those of us who are still looking at those borders back in Genesis and looking at modern day national Israel and waiting for them to somehow get to those borders, perhaps we've locked our sights on something far too small.

the Lord's already expanded the promise way beyond that to the world that his people, the children of Abraham, the offspring of Abraham would inherit the world.

If when Jesus returns, he gives all the children of Abraham, Jew and Gentile, all of us who believe the whole world to live in as our everlasting possession, could it not be said that he kept his promises about the smaller boundaries here and there and there in the Old Testament?

[35 : 30] Of course. Some of those who are more interested in that will have been looking into was there a point in time where Israel actually possessed the land according to those borders that were given and our best guess is we're not sure.

It looks close during the time of Solomon when he reigned as king but it depends on whether the river of Egypt is the Nile or the Wadi of Egypt.

We're not really sure. Did they ever really possess it in that fullest sense? Especially when they had in that time Solomon's kingdom was over other nations and peoples all around them that also shared the land with them that were not children of Abraham.

Perhaps we're looking in the wrong place for the fulfillment of this. Perhaps this was all along intended to be fulfilled when Jesus returns.

Paul goes on to explain a little bit of the story of Abraham.

[36 : 47] I'll just read it. I'm not going to say much on this in verse 18. He says against all hope Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations just as it has 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 so Paul just goes back and reminds us of the story that we've already looked at and we're not going to say it all again here but the gist of it is that God promised Abraham that he would receive something that was physically impossible he was old

Sarah's womb was dead menopause has already said in this is not possible and yet the Lord said I it for you Abraham from that moment on from the time he was 100 on even though he had wavered in his faith through the surrogate motherhood program with Hagar and through his sojournings down to Egypt from this point on he believed that the Lord would do exactly what he promised give him a son by Sarah as the beginning of the fulfilling of all of these greater promises says he didn't waver through unbelief he was strengthened in his faith he was fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised and this is why it was credited to him as righteousness this is the kind of faith moment through that we saw throughout Abraham's life as we've looked in Genesis for which God on the basis of that faith has given him a right standing with himself and then Paul turns and applies all of this to us he says the words verse 23 the words it was credited to him were not written 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 and that's the whole point that Paul is making here when it comes to Abraham's life it's it's a template it's an example he got a right standing with God because he believed period and it's the same for us it's the same for us we too can receive a right standing with God on the basis of belief faith in the good news of Jesus period and this is good news for us there are many in our world today who are saying if you want to be saved if you want to get right with

God you need to do this you need to do that you need to observe certain rules and regulations you need to do certain feasts and festivals rituals dietary restrictions you need to hold a membership to this institution you need to give X amount of dollars per year to this and the list goes on you need to have had certain kinds of experiences or manifestations of the spirit in your life Paul says you don't need any of that you can have a right standing with God just like Abraham did by just believing in the good news of Jesus that he has done everything that's required for you through Christ that's the good news of the gospel

Abraham had his specific promises that he believed but Paul points our attention to the gospel and to Jesus as the place where our faith should focus primarily he ends off this chapter with the statement for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead Jesus verse 25 was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification so that we could have this right standing with God that's the good news of Jesus and the wonderful thing about it is all we need to do is believe and we get that right standing with God it doesn't matter how bad you've been the wrong things that you have done you have not blown it too bad God is the God who justifies the ungodly the sinner and it's by faith and it doesn't matter how good you think you've been

[42 : 06] Paul says you you're not good enough in either case a right standing with God is offered as a gift to those who believe Jew or Gentile and finally to those of us who are Gentiles if all we got out of all of this was a right standing with God and some kind of eternal life that would be wonderful but the good news according to Paul is not just that we get those things but that we too are

considered through Jesus Christ by faith to be children of Abraham those to whom the promise made to him will come we too will inherit this new earth the world as our home as our everlasting possession when

Jesus returns along with those who are Jewish what a wonderful God we have that he is going to just pour out this gift of grace to people like us who don't deserve it let's pray Lord Jesus we thank you that you came that you bore the wrath of God for us thanks that we can be made right with you and that we don't have to do anything for it except believe we ask that you would just fill our hearts with joy over this praise and worship and help us to communicate that same message clearly in this community to our world your gift to us by grace it's in Jesus name we pray amen 50