

By Faith Alone

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Preacher: Dave Bott

- [0 : 00] Well, it's been a sobering week, hasn't it, in world news, Australian news. Capped off with the sudden death of Shane Warne.
- Like I remember that ball that just landed outside off stump, like almost off the crease and then came back and hit leg stump. And some of you have no idea what I'm talking about, but it's almost impossible what he did.
- And death is awful, but when it comes as a shock, it's just got that extra sting, doesn't it? And people were paying tribute to him. Daniel Andrews, you've probably heard.
- They've already going to name a grandstand at the MCG in his honour. As he now stands before the Lord of heaven and earth, I wonder what the Lord will say about his life.
- More to the point this morning, are you ready to stand before the Lord? God's word to us today in Romans 4 is going to give us a rock-solid place to stand so that you do not have to fear that day.
- [1 : 29] In a sense, you can look forward to it. Did you notice, as Romans 4 was being read, how often the phrase counted, justify, occurred?
- This passage is about justification. It pictures God as judge, and we either stand before him as innocent or guilty.
- That's what this passage is about. Either we're in right standing before God or we're not. To count is a word used for the Old Testament sacrifices.
- When the sacrifices offered, it was counted to the person. So the question is, what will God count to your life that will contribute to the final verdict of your life?
- Because as God revealed his glory to Moses up on Mount Sinai, one of the things that is part of God's glory is that he says this, he will by no means clear the guilty.
- [2 : 44] He will not clear the guilty. And here's the scandal of Christianity. Verse 5 of chapter 4 has a shocking description of God.
- It says, God, him who justifies the ungodly. How is that possible?
- How is righteousness counted to an ungodly person? And as we heard last week, the good news of the gospel, the scandal is resolved. For God to be just and the justifier of the one with faith in Jesus is that he himself bore the wrath.
- He absorbed it himself, setting us free. It's the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly.
- His faith is counted as righteousness. Does that sound right to you? I know we're kind of used to hearing that if you've grown up in evangelical churches, but isn't that encouraging moral laziness?
- [3 : 53] We're talking about it at Bible study. The one who doesn't work, the one who just morally religious isn't working.
- It's not that person, but the person who believes. Maybe if someone is on death row and they've got... Maybe God might lower the bar and go, OK, there's nothing else you can do.

You're about to be executed. But maybe I'll lower the bar. Just have faith in me. We might think, OK, God's being generous. One last chance. But what about someone who's got...

Someone like Abraham, who's got a life full of good deeds? Like, Jews saw him as the example of fulfilling the law, of being obedient to God, walking in faith.

Muslims looked to him as the father who surrendered to the will of God. What about him? This passage seems to be saying, nothing of good he did counts to his righteousness.

[4 : 54] Just his faith. Can it really only be by faith and faith alone that someone is saved and counted righteous?

We should really care about this question. We will stand before the Lord one day. Your life depends on this. Can you be sure that it's faith that God wants from you?

Faith alone. Paul pauses in chapter 4 to help us understand what faith is and help us to have confidence that faith alone really is what God wants from us.

And who better to look at than Abraham? So Paul draws five main conclusions that we're going to look at anyway from one verse in the story of Abraham's life.

Genesis 15, verse 6. Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. So the first thing, as Marty helpfully brought out in the kids' talk, the first thing Paul draws out of this verse in verses 1 to 8 is the principle.

[6 : 10] When God justifies a person, he doesn't take into account anything that person has done or ever will do. So Genesis 15, verse 6, it is the first time the word believe is used in the Bible and it's connected to being counted as righteousness, as righteous.

Even Abraham had nothing to boast about in himself because nothing, it wasn't his own making. The righteousness comes by faith.

So the principle explains verse 4 and 5. Now the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. So Marty's already brought this out but I'm just going to throw another small illustration out there.

Imagine your dad, maybe back in the day, asked you to wash his car, he'll give you 20 bucks. All right? Good deal. But you've got to do it properly.

20 bucks, wash the car and you finish washing the car, you do your best job and later that night, no 20 bucks. It just so happens to be your birthday the next day and inside the birthday card, lo and behold, is 20 bucks and he goes, happy birthday.

[7 : 27] Would you consider that a gift? I wouldn't. Like, you owe me that, where's my gift? There is no gift. It's only what I'm rightly owed, thank you very much, Dad.

You agree to that. If a person was to do any work, religious or otherwise, to earn their acceptance with God, God owes you. You've earned it.

It would be a payment, not a gift. You'd have something to boast in. By the strength of my own flesh, I did that.

You owe me. And we've already seen verse 5, God's righteousness as a gift comes simply by trusting God's promise.

It wasn't after Abraham defeated his enemies and rescued Lot. It wasn't when he was circumcised. It wasn't when he was obedient, offering up Isaac. It was way before then that Abraham is counted as righteous, simply by hearing God's promise and believing.

[8 : 36] And Paul probably brings in David, a psalm of David, to give a second witness from Scripture to underscore the point that this really is what God wants from us, faith alone.

In fact, it's crucial that he doesn't count what you do towards your final verdict or you'd be stuffed.

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will never count his sin. These are the words of David who after the scandal with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, there's a bigger scandal.

God says to him after that, the law, he should have died. And he says, you will not die. There's the scandal. There's a bigger scandal. How can God say that to him?

The first reason we can be sure God only wants faith is that God will only relate to you on the basis of gift, not payment.

[9 : 55] God won't be in debt to anyone. From him, through him, to him are all things. What can you give to God that he owes you? Zilch.

Nothing. God owes you nothing except judgment. Righteousness is a totally free gift.

He doesn't count what you do and thank God for that. He will only relate to you on the basis of his free gift, not payment.

So you can be sure it's by faith. The second reason we have that we can be sure it's by faith is in verses 9 to 12 where the word circumcision appears a bazillion times and you might get lost in it but I think the point is fairly clear.

And there's an enormous effect that this has. It's speaking, it's really important, this paragraph. It speaks to us if we're not Jews.

[11 : 02] A Jewish person would refer to circumcision as a shorthand way of saying that they are the children of the promise, they're the children of Abraham.

They live under God's law, they're heirs of God's promise of blessing, of inheriting the world. But who are the descendants of Abraham who inherit this promise?

So Paul notes, he argues from the fact that Abraham is justified by faith, the rabbis thought, 29 years before he was circumcised.

Way before he was circumcised, he was counted righteous. The Jews thought circumcision was a sign that pointed forward to the law.

Whereas Paul says no, circumcision was a sign that pointed back to the righteousness he already had by faith. So my wedding ring signifies being married.

[12 : 05] But putting on a ring didn't make me married. It was the promises, it was the covenant that was entered into through the promises. The ring just symbolises it. So, Abraham Abraham is the father of all those who follow in his footsteps in the faith that he had.

Whether Jews who had faith and they expressed that faith by keeping the law, but it was the faith that counted them as descendants of Abraham. Or whether non-Jews who just had the faith of Abraham.

That is who is part of the spiritual family. That is who inherits the promise. I think we can sometimes think of the Old Testament as like, God set up the law, okay, obey the law in order to be right with me, and that kind of failed.

So, let's try Jesus instead. Let's lower the bar to faith. That's not the story of the Bible. It has always been faith. Abraham all the way through.

Being right with God has always been by faith, and that's why we can be sure that faith is what God wants. So, what's the big deal about being a child of Abraham?

[13 : 27] I've got the song that Father Abraham and many sons, I don't know if you know it, and then you do this weird kind of dancing thing. I think it's kind of ironic that you're so exhausted by being a child of Abraham when the fact is he wasn't justified by works, he's justified by faith.

But anyway, that's beside the point. Who cares if you're a son of Abraham or not? Verse 11 is why it is so important to you. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of righteousness he had by faith while still uncircumcised.

The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised so that righteousness would be counted to them as well.

If you want righteousness counted to you, you need to be a child of Abraham and walk in the footsteps of his faith. God has always given his promise through faith.

The third reason you can be sure God wants faith alone to be right with him verses 13 to 16, the promise didn't come through the law. Jews thought of Abraham that it was his obedience that secured the blessings of God, the blessings in the promise.

[14 : 46] So a child of Abraham needs to keep the law like Abraham did. But what would happen if God's promises came good by both believing and keeping the law? Verse 14 tells us what would happen.

If it is the adherence of the law who would be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. So what's that saying? Being void.

That word is used in 1 Corinthians 15 verse 14. Faith is in vain, is void, if Christ has not been raised from the dead.

It's basically saying it won't come good. It will fail if it's based on the law as well as faith. Why is that?

Verse 15. Because the law can't give you righteousness. What it can give you is wrath. The strange phrase where there is no law there is no transgression.

[15 : 53] Sometimes I'm driving along and I just don't know that it's a school zone and I'm going 20km over the limit. Now that's bad.

That's dangerous. But what's way worse is if I see those flashing signs saying 40 slow down and I still choose to transgress and go 60.

Isn't that worse? I think that's what's going on here. The law can't produce righteousness. It says here's what it is to be righteous and all Jews have transgressed that law and so the wrath is even greater.

Here's the positive news. Verse 16. That is why it depends on faith in order that the promise may rest on grace not works and be guaranteed to all his offspring.

for the promise to take effect if it required your obedience frankly you would stuff it up. It would fail. I would stuff it up.

[17 : 08] But it doesn't rest on our obedience. It rests on his grace. And if God is committed to keeping his promise it can't fail.

It is guaranteed. If God is determined to freely give his promise the inheritance is guaranteed to each person who believes.

Righteousness is by faith alone so it depends on God's grace alone and so the promise is guaranteed. At this point I think Paul gives us a picture of what faith is.

What is the faith of Abraham then? What is this faith we're to share in? I think we get three lovely phrases and we get a picture of what faith is.

One of the lovely phrases is verse 18. In hope Abraham believed against hope. So we'll come back to that.

[18 : 14] Then we've got verse 21. Fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. So there's two sides to faith.

There's what you don't put your faith in and what you do put your faith in. When Abraham looked at the evidence and just used common sense, if you want to use common sense, he saw his own body which was as good as dead.

Sorry for anyone who's approaching 100. being about 100 years old, how's he going to produce an heir? How's Sarah going to produce an heir when she's approaching 90?

The deadness of her womb. All he could see with his eyes said that it was not possible to have an heir. I think maybe more than just a biological impossibility, I wonder if they consider themselves under the curse of God.

I'm not sure. So looking at just evidence and common sense, there's no hope. But when you consider God staring up into the night sky that the Lord created all this out of nothing, if the Lord of heaven and earth says that something is and will be, it's as good as if it all exists.

[19 : 39] this. And here's that third description of faith, verse 17. God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

That is the object of our faith. The God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. against all hope in human reason and common sense, he looked at who God is, what God promised, and he took God at his word.

And so Paul, in verses 23 to 25, he connects it to all Christian faith, all Christians. Paul says that what was written about Abraham wasn't just written for his sake, it was written for our sake so that we would hear it.

So that we would know for sure, God is speaking to you and me. Jesus was the one to make good the promises to Abraham, to bless all the families of the world.

So Abraham believed the God who promised, we believe the God who fulfilled that promise in Jesus Christ, to bless the world. To believe the promise in the gospel is the same faith as Abraham's.

[21 : 03] It requires you to believe that God brings life out of death, that God will justify the ungodly, those who deserve death are given life, that it is all God's doing, trusting that God took the initiative, it is what he does that matters, that he offered up, delivered up his only son for our trespasses, to never count what we do against us, and then raised him for our justification.

The resurrection declares loudly to the whole world that Jesus is right with God, he is righteous. If you want to be righteous, you need to be bound up in him, and the way to do that is faith, faith alone.

If you want to be right with God as Jesus is, you need to be attached to Jesus, you need to be hidden in Jesus. So how can we be sure that faith is what God wants?

As we look at Abraham, because he doesn't count against us the sin we do, he only will give us righteousness as a free gift. It's always been by faith through all history, and the promise is guaranteed, it can't fail because it doesn't depend on obedience, it depends on his grace.

So I'd like to ask two questions, in case there's a few barriers in your mind, having heard all this. Perhaps the most looming question is how do I have faith then?

[22 : 49] How do I have it? I think at this point, our language in Christian circles isn't all too helpful when we say making a decision to follow Christ.

Your willpower doesn't produce faith. You can't muster it up. Even faith is a gift of God.

If you think of Abraham when he heard the promise, if you're watching him, the moment God declared him righteous, what would you see him do to express faith?

He's just staring up into the sky. You wouldn't see anything. God saw his heart. What produced the faith is what I'm getting at.

Did he do anything? All we would hear is God's word to him, so shall your offspring be. It was those words that produced the faith in Abraham.

[23 : 53] So I'm indebted to the ex-principal at Moore College, John Woodhouse, who spoke at our camp just before COVID, wasn't it? I can't believe COVID has been wrapped around with church camp, either side.

Just a gift of God to us. He's helped me, he's clarified in my mind at least, where faith comes from.

So here's what he says. Where there is the word of God and faith in God because of that word, there is the totality of Christianity.

That is Christianity. The Christian life of faith in both Old and New Testaments and in the experience of believers down the centuries and across the world, is brought into being and nourished and brought to maturity by God's word.

I just find that incredibly helpful. You don't produce the faith, it's the word of God that produces faith in you. Faith is hearing and receiving what God says.

[25 : 06] You can do lots of things. You can immerse yourself in God's word, you can surround yourself with God's people so that you're hearing God's word, you can think critically about what society says life is all about.

You can do all those things but it's the word of God itself that produces the faith. So it calls us to humbly and sincerely engage with God and take him in his word.

God's word. God's word. God's God's word. Maybe you're feeling overwhelmed by the lack of evidence of faith in your life.

You look at all the evidence, the mountain of sin just in the past week, your failings, the doubts and fears that are raging in your mind and heart, maybe the apathy, the sufferings you experience and is God judging me?

You consider your impending death, like I don't know what it is for you. you look at the evidence and you might be going, I'm not sure faith is there.

[26 : 21] But it's against all hope. Will you hope in the God who gives life to the dead? Here's how John Calvin put it.

Let us also remember that the condition of us all is the same with that of Abraham. All things around us are in opposition to the promises of God. He promises immortality.

We are surrounded by mortality and corruption. He declares that he counts us just. We are covered with sins. He testifies that he is kind to us.

Outward judgments threaten his wrath. What then is to be done? We must with closed eyes pass by ourselves and all things connected to us that nothing may hinder or prevent us from believing that God is true.

Against all the evidence of your life do you look away from yourself look at what Jesus has done for you and take God at his word when he says justify you are justified you are at peace with me I give you no wrath only grace when you look into your future all that's in your future is the hope of glory do we take him at his word against all hope in hope do we believe his word some might be fearing that you don't have enough faith to get you over the line with Abraham set up as the model of faith who didn't waver no unbelief fully convinced yikes I'm not sure I've got enough faith that doesn't seem to describe me

[28 : 22] I'm inconsistent in my faith the quality of my faith I don't know but do you remember the story of Abraham what follows chapter 15 after a decade or so still no son what does he do he sleeps with his maidservant what an idiot sorry he takes matters into his own hand trying to produce the promise by his own efforts God speaks to him again when he's almost 100 years old in chapter 17 and this time he is a promise he laughs he goes come on God just fulfill your promise through Ishmael through my efforts it's not that Abraham never doubted or that he always lived in light of the promise I think a commentator put it well in that he avoided a deep seated and permanent attitude of distrust he grew strong in faith over time he had to learn not to put confidence in himself that's the

Christian walk that's the walk we're all on living in light of the promise that's ours not in light of the evidence with our eyes his justification occurred way back remember on that starry night when he believed God's promise to him in that moment justification was sorted he was right with God it's not the strength of your faith that counts it's the strength of the one you have faith in that's the only thing that matters someone used the illustration and I'm just going to steal it I don't know who to attribute this to but if you imagine the Passover in Egypt that night when God sent the death of the firstborn son over if you imagine that night and you've got two

Israelite families and they've both sacrificed a lamb and they've painted the doorway of their house like one one of the parents might have been sleeping soundly going yeah God will keep his promise the other one might have been just up all night sweating drops I don't know if blood is appropriate to say but absolutely concerned is an understatement that their child is going to die I'm not sure if anyone got much sleep that night did all that fear count it didn't matter that doubt if there was any doubt that doesn't count what counted was they took God at his word and the sacrifice the blood that's what counted they took him in his word so the question for us is is the blood of Jesus your only hope is it painted over your life is the blood of Jesus your only hope of being right with

God and receiving blessing from God the strength of your faith doesn't matter but if you think it's the strength of Jesus what he has done that matters there's one final reason and I'm finishing on this there's one final reason in this passage that we can have confidence that it's faith alone that God wants to think in our hearts and our minds and to live in such a way that says that we don't put confidence in ourselves but in Jesus alone that we receive righteousness as a gift guaranteed by his grace even with the evidence of our lives the sin the doubt the suffering even against all that if we know we can't earn God's blessing by anything we do that's a life of humility it's a life where there is no boasting you've got nothing to boast in

I've contributed nothing not even my faith God's word produced that there is no boasting I think that can give us confidence that that that is the life of faith because God gets all the glory from beginning to end it's his doing to rely on God's promise his grace alone boast in Jesus alone he gets all the credit it's his resurrection power it's his trustworthiness it's his sovereign freedom to give freely not because he owes you it's his grace that makes the promise it's his grace that keeps the promise it's his love that offered up his son he gets all the glory by faith alone and I think that's why the life of the

[33 : 41] Christian is meant to be characterised by singing he gets the praise he gets we boast in him alone so I think we're going to sing now amazing grace he gets all the glory when we believe that our righteousness is by faith alone so why don't we sing together to do to and to do to do to do to