

A Paternity Suit

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[0 : 00] Thanks, Brenton. Let's pray together, friends. Lord God, have mercy on us now. May we see you and live by faith alone.

We ask in Christ's name. Amen. Friends, have you ever been offered a bridge for sale? Would you like to buy one? I'm selling one tonight.

It's not a bad one. It's in a northern city from here, overlooking a nice bay. They call it the Sydney Harbour, but you can name it after yourself.

It has good income from tolls, lovely views. The only catch is I don't want you to tell anyone that I'm selling it to you until you've put the full payment into my Swiss bank account.

Or have you heard this one? I work for a very rich man, says the polite and long-winded email from a stranger. Why me?

[1 : 02] I'm a butler in the house of a corrupt government official who has died leaving a fortune of \$24 million in cash. I would like to smuggle it out of this country and donate it to a Christian ministry, and I've chosen yours.

I look forward to hearing from you. Please reply to a different email address to this one. Have you got those emails about the advance fee fraud? I'm proud of the fact that I'm a cynic.

I'm proud of that. I think if something sounds too good to be true, then it probably is too good to be true. There's no such thing as a free lunch.

We have a right to be cynical when someone tries to sell us bridges. But the Book of Romans has put us in a tricky situation tonight.

In fact, this whole series has left us in an awkward position. Paul has given us his gospel, and he said unequivocally that salvation is a gift.

[2 : 10] Salvation is free, given through faith, through trusting in God's promises, given through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

His sacrifice has propitiated, turned aside, the wrath of God. The net effect of Paul's gospel is that we can be righteous, and God can be righteous and make us righteous, all by faith.

There's no room in Paul's gospel for self-boasting. It's a freebie. Now, I've got two problems with Paul's gospel, and I hope that you share them. The first, the small problem is, if the gospel is free, then it makes it very hard for me to keep up the barriers that separate me as a good, well-dressed, neat person from the rest of the grungy world, from my religious space, to the rest of the kind of pagans out there.

If salvation is free, what if somebody ungodly wants it? What if somebody walks in that door who has a mohawk, or has tattoos, or barracks for Richmond?

What would we do? That's a small problem with the free salvation. The big problem is, do we really want to bank everything on grace?

[3 : 37] Paul has said, unequivocally, that we will face judgment, and God's judgment is just, and God gets angry at sin. So do we really want to bank everything on our day of judgment on Jesus?

Do we want to bet the house on it? Everyone I look at around me in the world, every religion, every other worldview, they're banking a lot on self-effort, on self-improvement, on moral point scoring, trying to please God, having something in yourself to boast on the day of judgment.

Everyone is doing that. In fact, I even think some of us, some Christians I know, maybe people in this room, who claim to believe in the gospel of faith alone, actually show in their life, they don't believe that.

In their life, they're actually hedging their bets. They say we're saved by faith, but they think what God really wants is the Ten Commandments really obeyed today.

Or what God really wants is Christians helping the poor in a certain way. Or what God wants is for us to evangelize a certain number of people. Or God wants us to sing the right songs, or read the right books.

[5 : 01] Or maybe it's a straight cash donations, direct debit. That's what God really wants. For many of us, I think grace is a theoretical truth, but not a lived out reality.

And, well, it's a big risk. It's a big risk to bank everything on Jesus. So tonight, as we wrestle with Paul, we want to say to him, Paul, if you want us to bank everything on grace alone, that I want to see some good evidence.

I want to see some biblical proof. And not just some obscure stuff. I want some clear, irrefutable evidence that salvation is by faith alone and grace alone.

And Paul says, okay, let's have a look at Abraham. Abraham's not an insignificant person in God's plan of salvation.

And so Paul begins by saying, what are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about, but not before God.

[6 : 14] You see, if you read Genesis closely, Abraham was a bit of a rat bag. He was a moral failure in many ways. He was scared of people trying to kill him to get his wife.

So he said, my wife's my sister. He slept with his servant to have a child because he didn't quite trust in God's promise at that point. And before he met God, I presume Abraham was completely pagan.

But, here's the great but. Genesis 15, 6. Paul says, what does the scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Abraham believed God. It was reckoned to him as righteousness. Abraham's righteousness was not his own goodness. It was not his own efforts and strength to obey God.

His righteousness was something that God credited to him when he believed what God promised him. It happened one night.

[7 : 20] Abraham was sitting back on his porch complaining to God because he thought, God, I'm old. How is my wife going to have a child? And God said to him, look up at the sky, count the stars if you can, so shall your offspring be.

And Abraham believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness. So Abraham's righteousness was something that was given to him, declared to him by God when he had faith. Martin Luther called this an alien righteousness. I love that phrase, an alien righteousness. That is, it wasn't from within Abraham, it was external to him.

It was declared to him from God. It was his status changed before God when God justified him, reckoned him to be righteous. Not unlike we, in our era of eBay, we love to buy and sell and the key thing in eBay is to make sure they credit your account before you send the goods.

And I feel very bad when I credit someone else's account. I think, are they going to send me that? And that's what God does, but it's a one-way transaction. Abraham just believes God and he's credited with righteousness, with everything for salvation.

[8 : 49] The Christian gospel, which is Abraham's gospel, is actually not about a second chance offer. It's not about us getting a clean slate so we can try again.

It's actually about God giving us all that we need for salvation through the declaration that we are righteous. You are in Christ. All that Christ has is yours.

Salvation is a free gift. A gift to Abraham. A gift to us. A gift through Jesus' perfect life. A gift through Jesus' death and resurrection in our place.

Paul wants to hammer the point, he says, with an illustration. Someone who works, their wages are not reckoned as a gift, but as something due.

My first full-time job in the computer industry, I was hanging for my first paycheck and it wasn't a check. It was credited to my account.

[9 : 49] And I went to the ATM and it was like, at one stage I had very little money and then in an electronic instant, I had more money than I'd have seen in that account.

It had been credited. But I didn't say, I better write my employer a nice thank you card for this gift. It wasn't a gift. It was owed to me.

I was proud of it. It was mine. I even took someone to lunch down on Ligon Street and I just, no expense spared. I said, you want garlic bread? You can have garlic bread.

You know? I was so proud of myself that I had earned this money. But, Paul says, the one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. Salvation is not recompense for hard work. We trust God like Abraham did even when we are ungodly, which I think Abraham was, and we receive the gift of salvation by faith alone. [10:58] Not faith and works, but faith alone that saves. Who are we? We're ungodly. What do we do? We trust God who justifies the ungodly.

What does God do? He credits us with righteousness. In the 16th century, in the Reformation, the world was changed. And the slogan of the Reformation were the five solas. Let me tell you them. Faith alone, Christ alone. You should know these. Faith alone, Christ alone, grace alone, scripture alone, and I'm not going to tell you what the last one was until the end of the sermon.

And you've got now until then to figure it out. So faith alone, Christ alone, grace alone, and scripture alone. And that message of grace changed the world. It changed the world. And by the way, by faith, I don't mean it's some magical, innate quality in us or it's some kind of work. Faith is just empty hands to God saying, rescue me.

[12:03] I believe you. It's that simple. It just means trust. Paul says, so there's your example. There's your proof. Abraham. Do you want another example?

What about David? David says, Psalm 32, well, David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness, irrespective of works.

Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin. That's the blessing that David experienced as well. He needed it in his life. He was ungodly. Salvation is a blessing that God gives irrespective of our good works. where our sins are forgiven and covered and we are credited with righteousness. One of the other great discoveries or rediscoveries of the Reformation was this question of, is salvation a pronouncement or a process? And many said that salvation was a process that you worked toward.

[13:08] But the Reformers, Luther, Calvin, taught, rightly, biblically, that salvation is a pronouncement that God makes. He declares us to be righteous. The Christian life is a process but the way we receive salvation is a pronouncement by grace through faith in Christ.

But then, it's so funny because the human heart hates this message. We want to work our way to God and Paul can hear his readers already objecting and they're saying, but what about circumcision?

You know, you can't just quote Psalm 32, that's for the circumcised. Isn't Abraham all about circumcision? He was the first one and it all started with him. Paul says, well, verse 9, is this blessedness then pronounced only on the circumcised or also on the uncircumcised?

We say, faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it reckoned to him? Now, here's the clue. Was it before or after he was circumcised?

It was not after. It was before he was circumcised. So, Paul says, chronologically, it has nothing to do with circumcision. He was justified.

[14:24] His faith was reckoned as righteousness before he was circumcised. So, you might say, well, why did he have to get circumcised? Paul says, verse 11, he received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith when he was uncircumcised.

So, the circumcision was a sign and seal of the gift of righteousness. Another word for it is imputed righteousness, our declaration that God says you are righteous.

In fact, it's not unlike our sacraments today. They're a sign and a seal of God's promise for our benefit, for our assurance. Now, Paul's one of those people that once you get him going, you can't stop him and he kind of just unleashes now in Romans 4 and he goes from the defensive to the offensive and he starts to get more feral, he gets more on the attack.

So, he says, verse 11, continuing, the purpose was to make Abraham the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised, that's controversial, and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them and likewise to make him the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but also who follow the example of faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised. what Paul's saying now, this is getting aggressive, he's saying, Abraham is actually the father of those whose salvation is by faith.

[16:09] Is Abraham the great father of Judaism? To Paul, Paul says, no. He is the model of salvation by faith in Christ alone.

the whole point of Abraham getting saved before he was circumcised was to show the world that we could come to God and know him through the Messiah without being circumcised, without becoming an adherent of the law.

Right now, as we speak, around the world there are three major world religions all claiming Abraham as their forefather. What does Paul say?

He says, those who believe in the gospel of credited righteousness given through the death and resurrection of Jesus, they're the ones who are the spiritual children of Abraham.

If you get Abraham, it won't lead you to rabbinic Judaism, it won't lead you to the five pillars of Islam, the works that you must do to get to God. If you understand Abraham, it will lead to faith in Jesus Christ.

[17:23] Paul says, verse 13, the promise that Abraham had that he would inherit the world, it didn't come through law, it didn't come through doing good works, it came through the righteousness of faith.

God just looked up to Abraham and said, hey, look at the stars in the sky, count them, that's as many children you're going to have. And Abraham said, okay.

And it was credited to him as righteousness. If the adherents of the law are to be the heirs, then faith is null, the promise is void.

The law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation. Law doing, doing good works as a means to salvation or as a means to secure your salvation before God will only bring wrath.

You can't play the game of good works and grace at the same time. You need to be in the grace alone game, the imputed righteousness game, the Jesus propitiating the wrath of God.

[18:32] It's like you can't play rugby and netball. In rugby, you get the ball and you run with it and you just, people get in your way, you hit them. But in netball, you're not even allowed to run when you've got the ball. It's a silly sport, really.

But they're two different sports. That's my point. And when it comes to our salvation, it's by grace, not by works. Now, here's the trick that some people will try and get around this.

They say, some Jews have argued this in the first century. I think some Roman Catholics argue this. I think some pious evangelicals argue this.

They say, entry is by grace, but once you're in the covenant, the rules change and you must do good works to stay in. And Paul's answer is no.

No way. Everything Paul's talking about tonight is about what do you boast in? What do you depend on every day before God?

[19:35] What do you glory in? What do you live by? What drives you as a Christian? What do you do when you feel guilty? What do you do with that? Where do you take it?

Paul shows us in Abraham's life now what it means to live by faith. And it's an amazing, verse 16 on, it's just this amazing, glowing story of how Abraham was driven by faith, not by pulling up his own bootstraps.

Verse 16, 17, for this reason it depends on faith in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham.

For he's the father of all of us. As it is written, I've made you the father of many nations. He's our father. Shouldn't be in brackets by the way, it's a key point, it's not a tangential thing, in the presence of God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

The reason that faith works, pardon the pun, is because of the God that you trust in. When you're law-driven, you focus on yourself. How am I performing?

[20:54] How am I going? But when you're faith-driven, it forces you to think about who is the God I'm trusting? And in Abraham's life, it meant trusting the God who gives life to the dead, who calls into existence the things that do not exist.

It was hard for him to believe that his 100-year-old wife would have a baby. That was hard. And so faith forced him to know and trust and relate to and love the God who made the promise.

In the end, Abraham's faith made him glorify God, made him boast in God, hoping against hope. He believed that he would become the father of many nations.

According to what was said, so numerous shall your descendants be. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead, for he was 100 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 as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised.

[22 : 06] That's Abraham's life, living by faith, growing in confidence in God, growing closer to God, because you have to. You have to look forward with faith. You have to look outside of yourself to the God who's promised you.

And I think this is where, in Abraham's life, obedience came out. This is where good works actually came out in a healthy way as he lived by faith. There's a world of difference between the obedience of faith and the obedience where you're trying to credit your own account, where you're trying to give yourself some security for the day of judgment by your own works.

There's a world of difference. Abraham did not weaken in faith. He didn't waver concerning God's promise. He grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God.

He was fully convinced what God could do what he promised. The English word for confidence comes from the Latin root for faith, but it's not self-confidence, it's confidence in God.

Salvation by faith alone brings glory to God because it puts your focus on God. We can let people into this church who have mohawks or who smell or who are different to us because our confidence is in God.

[23 : 25] God's God's God. We're not threatened. We don't have to have a little kind of pious Christian club that we want to have closed boundaries to, where we form our identity and our esteem in because our hope is in the God who reckons righteousness to us, the God who sent his son to die and rise for us.

We have confidence that we can be a welcoming family of God's people. Now there's a sting in the tail in chapter 4, verse 22, Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.

How many times have I said that tonight? Paul's making it so clear. It's not by works. It's credited to us by faith. Now the words that was reckoned to him were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also, for yours also tonight.

It will be reckoned to us. Now Abraham believed in the Lord. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is pivotal for us. He who was handed over to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

[24 : 42] The advantage we have over Abraham is that we can see how God has achieved this. Abraham couldn't see. He didn't see what we see.

He didn't see the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus. He didn't see the sacrifice of atonement. He didn't see the victory, the declaration of Jesus' lordship in his resurrection.

We have the same salvation as Abraham had, but we have the concrete evidence that God can do what he promised and will do. It's an amazing promise, but it's not a scam.

It's not God selling bridges. God is not a confidence trickster. I mean, a con man is about winning people's confidence in our false way.

But because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have a factual and true basis for confidence in our God, that we are saved by faith alone, by grace alone.

[25 : 49] The genius of the gospel, the genius of God's wisdom is that in the gospel, by taking the focus off us and putting it on Jesus, by taking it off our idols and putting it on the God who raised him, God gets more glory.

God's designed the gospel that he would be glorified in it. Abraham is the forerunner by which God wants to actually turn the world around. He wants to reverse the effects of the fall.

Remember what he said in Romans 1? What's wrong with humanity? That we neither glorify God nor gave thanks to him. We exchange the truth of God for a lie.

But in the truth of the gospel, by faith alone, we glorify God. We boast in God. We give thanks to God. It's all his work from faith to faith.

And so the effects of sin are reversed and a new humanity is born. God's family. It's a great reversal. That's why there's a fifth solar to the four solars of the reformation.

[27 : 02] Have you figured it out yet? Salvation is by faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone, scripture alone, and the fifth one, to the glory of God alone.

To the glory of God alone. God is reversing the effects of sin where we fell short of the glory of God and is now glorified in the gospel of grace.

Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. This is the faith that you have when you believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus, when you put your trust in him as Lord.

You are saved. You are his. You've made it. You are declared righteous. You don't have to earn it. You don't have to earn it. You live by it. You relish it.

You glory in it. You boast in it. As Abraham did. But you don't need to hedge your bets. You don't need a backup plan for the day of judgment. You are part of God's worldwide family that began with Abraham.

[28 : 06] He's our father. You know the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Friends, let me exhort you and challenge you. Put your confidence in him. Put all your eggs in that basket.

Enjoy God. Glory and boast in him and live by those promises of salvation by grace through faith alone in Christ. Heavenly Father, we do give you our worship and honor and we give you glory and power.

We thank you that you saved us by faith alone. Thank you for pronouncing to us that we who trust in your son are declared righteousness, that his very righteousness is credited to our account.

Thank you that we have assurance that we are yours forever. help us to not weaken in faith when we feel guilty or are tempted to prop ourselves up on our own merits.

Help us not to waver concerning your promises. Help us to grow strong in our trust in you and in giving glory to you. In short, Father, help us to live by faith as our spiritual ancestor Abraham did.

[29 : 20] Help us to live by trusting in Jesus. make us even more convinced than Abraham was that you can do what you promise because we have seen you as the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

Amen. Amen.