

ROMANS

4:1-25

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Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 26th February 2023 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Galatians 3:1-29

It's time for our Sunday school to begin, and similarly we're about to get into our Bible study this morning in here, and as we saw last week it really is a Bible study for Paul referenced other parts of the Bible 10 times in 1 chapter, and he'll quote other parts at least 4 times in the chapter we'll study this morning (and that all contributes to the total of around 60 times Paul quotes other parts of the Bible in this letter to the Romans). And that's a good reminder to us to get to know our Bibles better.

But before we get going, **let's pray.**

Introduction

This is our 5th week studying the book of Romans, and we have got as far as chapter four, which we'll study this morning. As a quick reminder of the overall structure of this letter;

Chapter overview of Romans

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- **Chapters 1-8:** Christian doctrine
 - Sin (1-3), Salvation (4-5), Sanctification (6-8)

- **Chapters 9-11:** Israel
 - Israel - Past (9), Present (10), Future (11)
- **Chapters 12-16:** Practical Christian living
 - Practical Christianity

In chapters 1-8 Paul writes about Christian doctrine - that is; what we believe. Chapters 9, 10 and 11 deal with Israel - past, present and future. Then the final 5 chapters are very practical, teaching us much about how we should live as Christians, in light of what we believe.

So this book is full of treasure. And we've been looking closely at some of that over the past few weeks...

Following the apostle Paul's introduction & welcome in chapter one, we saw him declare how he wasn't ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God to salvation for *everyone* who believes. But how does that work? What is the gospel? What indeed is this good news? (which is what the word *gospel* means). Well, again, this is what Paul sets out in the first half of this 16 chapter letter. But he doesn't *start* with the good news - in fact, quite the opposite, in that he starts with the bad news. And that's because the good news only makes sense in light of the bad news. Because if we were all basically good, there would be no need for Jesus to die in our place.

But, as Paul so clearly sets out in the first 3 chapters, none of us are good. First, he deals with the unrighteous man, listing at least 26 ways in which mankind has disobeyed, offended and sinned against God. Then, in chapter 2, he turns his attention to the self-righteous man, who looks down on those sinning, saying or thinking "I'd never act like that", yet in fact is a hypocrite who also sins against God.

Having concluded the self-righteous man is no better than the unrighteous man, he then spends much of chapter three underlining how we are *all* in the same boat. That is, *none* of us have lived according to God's standards; and God's law, rather than help us, has actually left us condemned - it's *very purpose* being to show that we are all guilty before a just and holy God.

However, at the end of that third chapter, Paul starts revealing the good news - that we are not justified by our own works, but simply by faith in the completed work of Christ, who died on the cross in our place, and rose again that we may have newness of life. In this great exchange, God not only saw justice was done (showing Himself to be just), but also justified us by stepping into the dock on our behalf to pay the fine that we could not pay.

But then, if our salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone (which it is), that has implications. First, there's no place for boasting - that's how Paul ended the last chapter. And second, it means that our works don't contribute to our salvation. And Paul continues addressing both those thoughts in chapter four.

Overview of chapter four

Looking at this chapter then, we can break it down into these parts:

Overview of chapter four

- v1-8 - We are justified by faith
- v9-15 - Faith predates the law

- v16-25 - Faith is in Jesus' resurrection

The first 8 verses underline that we are justified by faith, and faith alone - using Abraham and David as examples. Verses 9-15 return to Abraham as an example, showing how he was justified by faith way before the law was ever given to his descendants. Then from verse 16 to the end, we see how Abraham's faith in God's work was counted as righteousness, as a shadow or preview of how we also would be and *are indeed* saved by faith in what God has done for us through Jesus' death and resurrection.

Chapter four

So then, as we begin this chapter, we see it starts by asking the question "What then shall we say..." which really is saying "given what we have just read in chapter 3, let us now consider this..."

Let's read the opening 2 verses...

Romans 4:1-2

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

That is, what did Abraham accomplish through natural human effort? Of course, if he was justified by the good things he did, he had something to boast about to *us* (because he certainly did good works - such as rescuing his nephew, Lot). But these good works don't allow boasting before *God*, for *keeping the law* doesn't qualify us for blessing from those we are accountable to. The next time you see a police officer, try boasting to them that you've kept the law - and see if they applaud or reward you! They won't of course, because keeping the law is what is expected of us.

So the answer is, Abraham accomplished nothing through his own works - for while he had done good works, he had also disobeyed God in going to Egypt, and lying about Sarah (twice) - and later would take matters into his own hands in having a child with Hagar. So how then was he justified? Well, Paul points us to the very best place to answer this question - the Bible. And we could so easily miss this important principle, that when we are trying to understand the Bible we should *always* check what else the Bible has to say about that subject. And Paul writes...

Romans 4:3

For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness."

Where does it say that? In Genesis chapter 15:

Genesis 15:6

And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

So Abraham believed. That's it. Not through works, or by completing lots of steps. Not by doing something spiritual or sacrificial. But just believing. And it was accounted to him for righteousness. Paul will say later in this chapter that this wasn't written for his sake alone, but for ours - as we're counted as righteous the same way - that is by faith, and not by works.

Paul continues, writing of the man who works...

Romans 4:4

Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

That is, if you could earn your salvation, God would owe it to you, and it would no longer be by grace. Picture this: you've done a week or a month's work, and your boss comes to you and says - here you are, here are your wages as a gift to you. You'd say "what?! I earned my wages, they're not a gift!". And you'd be right.

So then, the moment we think we have somehow earned our salvation, or did anything to contribute to it, we change the gift of God's grace into something that we deserve, and therefore it's no longer grace. To believe that we can contribute to grace is a foolish mistake, and to teach that is wrong, and totally unbiblical. Sadly though, the *are* those who teach that.

I was once visiting another church for a friend's baptism, and the minister of that church who was teaching said that different people effectively reach different levels, and if we considered a scale of 100 then some criminals who are in prison might be at about 10, some of us might be doing pretty well - maybe 50 or 60 - and then some individuals like Mother Teresa might be around 90 - but wherever we are, Jesus makes up the rest.

At this point me and my brother (who was also there) turned and looked at each other in horror. Because what the minister had done was state that our works are partially sufficient for our salvation. And as we read last week 'there is none good, no not one'. We must avoid foolish and unbiblical teaching such as that. Grace is either entirely grace, or it is not grace at all. God is no man's debtor. After all, we don't sing "I paid for some, some to me God owes" but "Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe".

Having written of the man who works, Paul now writes of the man who believes:

Romans 4:5

But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,

So faith doesn't *earn* righteousness either. But rather, God looks on us as righteous because of our faith in what *He* has done. That means there is not even merit in *believing*. When Abraham believed God, he did the one thing that a man can do without doing anything! Abraham's faith was not so much an act, but an attitude. His heart was turned completely away from himself to God, believing God would accomplish what He had promised.

Likewise for us, it is not any kind of grand faith we might have that saves us, but rather simple faith in the great thing Christ has done for us. *That* is saving faith, not faith in our faith, but in Jesus.

Now, having used Abraham as an example of one who had faith before the law, Paul now uses David as an example of someone who had faith subsequent to the giving of the law. He writes...

Romans 4:6-8

just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin."

We find this comes from Psalm 32, one of David's Psalms:

Psalm 32:1-2

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit.

The word blessed here, implies the idea of one who is happy. Why? Because their sin is forgiven, covered, and whose sin is not laid at their account. Not because of works *they* have done, are doing or will do - for that would never make up for their wrong - but entirely because of what God has done.

I'm reminded of the hymn we sing...

*My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought
My sin, not in part, but the whole
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul
It is well with my soul*

Although David lived under the law, he couldn't be saved by it. And therefore we see David describe the blessing, that God puts *not our sin*, but His righteousness on our account.

But, given that both Abraham and David were both circumcised Jews, that gives rise to Paul's next question:

Romans 4:9

Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness.

In other words, *is salvation for the Jews only, or for the Gentiles (the non-Jews) also?* Paul asks a further question:

Romans 4:10

How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised.

So, the point Paul is making here is that Abraham was *not* circumcised at the time God saw him as righteous. So, it was not through Abraham's works - that is, his circumcision - but rather through Abraham's faith that he was seen as righteous. We read on...

Romans 4:11-12

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.

Circumcision was a sign of separation, that followed (some 24 years later) the faith Abraham showed in God before he was circumcised, that he would be the father of non-Jews that believe in that they would also be seen as righteous through their faith in God, and also the father of Jews, his physical descendants, but specifically father of those who also had faith in God, of which their circumcision would be a sign. Paul gives additional clarity to this in Galatians chapter 3, which we read earlier, saying:

Galatians 3:7

Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.

And here in Romans, Paul is of course building what he had earlier written in chapter 2:

Romans 2:28-29

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Therefore, Abraham was the father of both Jews and non-Jews who believe. Circumcision did not confer righteousness. It confirmed righteousness. Just like baptism doesn't save you, but is to follow your salvation as a sign of it.

Paul continues...

Romans 4:13

For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

That is, circumcision was never the requirement for what God had promised to Abraham, but rather - faith. And again, this is just like baptism is an outward sign of the inward change - that is the promise that God has shown to us. To suggest either of these are requirement for salvation is wrong.

For the Jew, that didn't mean that God did not want them to be circumcised - indeed he commanded them to do this as a sign of their separation from the world around them. And likewise for us, this doesn't mean that we shouldn't be baptised - indeed it is something that as Christians God commands us to do.

So given that the promise was to be through faith, Paul concludes:

Romans 4:14-15

For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.

If we earned God's promise by keeping the law, then we would not need faith. And if not by faith, then we don't need a promise. But keeping the law doesn't bring salvation, it brings judgement - for, as we've seen, there is none that has done good - that is what the law shows us.

Indeed, if there were no speed limits, then you wouldn't be breaking the law if you drive at 80mph through town, right? It might not be a good idea, but it is only when the law exists that that it becomes illegal.

Romans 4:16

Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all

This is a big deal. First, *if* the only way for us to be justified was through the keeping of the law, we would be in a very precarious position - for we read in James chapter 2:

James 2:10

For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.

Paul, noting the madness of desiring it were by the keeping of the law writes to the Galatians:

Galatians 4:21

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law?

For as we know, none of us *have* kept the law. So isn't it good that God's promise, our salvation through Christ, is indeed by faith! If it were by works, we'd always be wondering if we had done enough, or worrying that we would make a mistake at any moment that would disqualify us. But because it is by faith, we are not playing a game of spiritual snakes and ladders, where we continually try and progress yet any moment could end up losing. The promise is sure to us.

But second, here in Romans, Paul is saying that because the promise was by faith, it was given to *all* - not only to the Jews to whom the law was given. Because it is by grace, salvation can be for anyone. Anyone.

Let's read again from verse 16, as it continues right into the next two verses where Paul first quotes from **Genesis 17:5...**

Romans 4:16-18

Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (as it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations") in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be."

So first, Paul notes that God said to Abraham "*I have*" *past tense* "made you a father of many nations". From Abraham's perspective, nothing had taken place yet. But God, who is outside of time, saw it as done. And Abraham believed that through faith.

Second, Paul quotes from Genesis 15, speaking of his physical descendants - the Jewish people:

Genesis 15:5

Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

Again, Abraham believed by faith that God was able to do what He promised. But how was that going to be possible? You see, at this time Abraham was old, his wife, Sarah, was old too, and they were not able to have children - she was barren. But Abraham did not consider his impossible situation impossible for God - and believed Him.

And God used that bleak situation for His glory and our good. Barrenness, and difficulties in conceiving are really hard things to go through! Siân and I know - we wrestled with this for a year after our miscarriages. And it can take you to some pretty dark depths. Only a year in our case - around the point NHS might help, and certainly at the point we were starting to seek medical help. It was a tough insight to what many struggle with. Because there are couples who struggle for much longer, and those who *never* have this hope answered. Why does God allow this? Well, it can be that God wants to use it for your good. But also, He may well want to use it for others good.

And in the case of Abraham and Sarah, God used the example of Abraham's faith in God's promise to explain that we all need faith in what God has promised, specifically in Jesus death and resurrection to pay for sin and to justify us - that's where Paul is going with this. And using Abraham as an example he writes:

Romans 4:19

And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb.

Abraham didn't look at his own situation, his own abilities or strengths - but at God's ability and strength. Neither are we to look to our own ability, especially in regard to God saving us - but solely at what God has accomplished for us, and is able to accomplish in us.

Continuing on...

Romans 4:20-22

He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness."

It wouldn't be until 25 years later that Abraham and Sarah would have Isaac born to them, but Abraham believed God was able to do that which He promised. He was full of confidence that God was bound to do what He said He would. And he was declared righteous, not because of anything other than he simply took God at his Word.

Paul concludes this chapter, writing:

Romans 4:23-25

Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offences, and was raised because of our justification.

So this was written for you. That in the same way that Abraham had faith in God, that He was able to to perform what He promised, which was something Abraham could never have performed, so you would have faith in God's ability AND actions, knowing that there was nothing you could do to save yourself.

That is the kind of faith that God is calling you to, and all men to. That you would believe in Him - that He sent His only Son to die in your place, to pay for your sin, and that having done that He rose from the dead so that your sins might be forgiven, and that He might justify you - that you would be seen by Him just as you had never sinned.

Let me put it plainly: God justifies those who believe in the death and resurrection of Christ.

And it is critical that you believe both, for Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

That which God promised, He did. Do you believe that? Salvation is free, but it is not automatic. Like Abraham, you need to believe God at His Word. If you do, God will also see you as righteous - not because of anything you've done, but because of everything He has done. That's the good news of the gospel. And Paul will tell us more about it in the coming chapters of this incredible letter.

Conclusion

Each chapter of this letter could warrant a series of studies, as they are so rich in insight and instruction. But let's not forget that it is one single coherent letter. Chapter four is built on chapters one, two and three. And next week as we start chapter 5, we'll begin with the word *therefore*. Which means what Paul will say there, is based on what we read here. I encourage you, as always, to read ahead before next Sunday - that's why I post a note in our WhatsApp group each week, so we all know the passages that we'll be studying that weekend, so we can read ahead and letting the Word sink into us.

Application questions

How do we apply what we have read this week? Here's some questions that may help:

- Are you trying to earn your salvation by your works, or are you saved by faith?
- Do you take God at His Word? Do you believe all He says?
- How might God use your trials for your good, or the benefit of others?

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