

A Study in the Book of Romans

11

Romans 4:1-25

Key Verse

“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God. What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

In this lesson, we will focus in on **Romans 4**, which holds a significant place in Paul’s letter, since in this chapter Paul shows that the Gospel is not something new but in fact has its roots deeply embedded in the Old Testament.

The Test-Case of Abraham

As living proof that the gift of righteousness is extended to those who have faith, Paul uses the account of Abraham. The Jews looked upon him as the founder of their race. We see his significance to the Jews in the following scriptures:

Read Isaiah 51:1-2
Read Matthew 3:9
Read John 8:39

So Paul takes the man the Jews looked up to as their great example in life and shows how he was declared righteous before God, not because of his works but because of his faith.

Paul had declared in **3:21** that the Jewish Scriptures all testified to this gift of righteousness which comes from God *apart from the Law*. Now, in Abraham, he

Introduction

The Gospel’s Three Revelations

The Gospel’s Three Answers

The Gospel’s Answer to Israel

The Gospel in Action

Conclusion

reveals his perfect example, and shows that the Gospel is not a new teaching but had been promised by God from the foundation of the Jewish faith.

The Faith of Abraham

Read Romans 4:1-4

In this passage, Paul quotes **Genesis 15:6**:

“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”

What was the object of Abraham’s faith (for as we have already seen, the important issue is *what* we put our faith *in*)? If we put together the clues that are given to us throughout Scripture, we can begin to understand the faith of Abraham.

- The Lord had just confirmed his promise that through his coming son, Abraham would have descendants as numerous as the sand and the stars (**Genesis 15:4-5**).
- The Lord had told him that he would be the father of many nations – that through his seed all people would be blessed (**Genesis 12:2-3**).
- **Galatians 3** tells us that the Gospel was announced in advance to Abraham (**verse 8**), that the “seed” promised to Abraham was in fact Jesus (**verse 16**); and that those in Christ are Abraham’s seed and heirs of his Promise (**verse 29**).
- Abraham willingly offered Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord, believing that God would raise him up in order to fulfill his promise (**Hebrews 11:17-19; Genesis 22:1-18**). This was a picture of the sacrifice and resurrection of *the* Seed of Abraham who was to come – Jesus Christ.
- **Hebrews 11:8-10** reveals that Abraham had his faith set on an eternal City built by God.
- **Hebrews 12:22** tells us that that City is the Church. **Revelation 21:2,9-10** also shows us that the Bride of Christ and the City are one and the same, while **Ephesians 5:25-27** once again identifies the Bride of Christ with the Church, which was brought about by the sacrifice of Jesus upon the Cross.

Thus from the Scriptures we can understand the faith by which Abraham received righteousness from God. In believing God’s promise concerning his son, Isaac, Abraham was believing that through Isaac would come the nation of Israel, and through Israel would come the “Seed” – the Savior, Jesus Christ – and through Christ would come the eternal City of righteous people, drawn from many nations (**Revelation 5:9; 7:9-10**) of which Abraham longed to be a part. His faith was in the Christ who would come, and the work that Christ would accomplish for him – and for all of us!

Read John 8:56

The Wonder of Grace

Read Romans 4:4-8

The Lord had told Abraham: “I am your very great reward” (**Genesis 15:1**). If Abraham had been declared righteous by God on the basis of his own achievements, it would have meant that God would have been *obliged* to reward him – or, in other words, God would have been in Abraham’s debt. But as the Lord declared in **Job 41:11**:

“Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me.”

How could it be possible for any man – especially sinful man – to *earn* such a relationship? But the wonder of God’s grace is that righteousness, and thereby relationship with God, is a free gift to those who trust in God alone to pardon their sins. All boasting then is in God!

Read Galatians 6:14

Read Psalm 34:2

Read Ephesians 2:9

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Paul then goes on to show that Abraham is not an isolated case in Old Testament history. David, Israel’s greatest king, acknowledged his guilt before God, but rejoiced in this same free gift of righteousness.

Read Psalm 32:1-2

In **Romans 4**, Paul has chosen two of the greatest saints in Israel’s history as his examples. If anyone could have been justified by his own works, surely it would have been Abraham or David! But Paul shows that they found righteousness with God through faith in his grace. Abraham shows us the *way* of justification – faith, not works. David shows us the *results* of justification – forgiveness, not judgment.

The Father of all Believers

Read Romans 4:9-12

As if hearing the Jews respond, “Ah, but Abraham was circumcised and through his obedience to the rite of circumcision he earned his relationship with God!”, Paul brings his answer. The rite of circumcision was given to Abraham about 14 years *after* he was declared righteous by God (see **Genesis 17**). Circumcision acted as an outward sign of the righteousness he had already received, in the same way that water baptism does for us today.

Read Colossians 2:11-12

God’s promise to Abraham – “I have made you a father of many nations” (**Genesis 17:5**) – was given to Abraham *before* he was circumcised. He is not the father of all those who have been circumcised, as the Jews believed. Rather he is

the father of all those who have the same *faith* he had. He is the father of the uncircumcised (Gentiles) *who believe as he did*, and he is the father of the circumcised (Jews) *who believe as he did*.

Read Ephesians 2:11-22

The Promise by Faith

Read Romans 4:13-17

When God gave his promise to Abraham, it was not on the basis that Abraham had fulfilled, or should fulfill, the Law (since the Law hadn't even been given then), but because Abraham *believed* God.

Read again Genesis 15:5-6

Paul's definition of the Promise – “that [Abraham] should be heir of the world” (4:13) – is not an actual quotation from the Old Testament, but an interpretation of all the promises given to Abraham, that “all the nations of the world” (**Genesis 18:18; 22:18**) and “all the peoples on earth” (**Genesis 12:3**) would be blessed through him and that he would be “the father of many nations” (**Genesis 17:4**). Thus, in truth, the peoples of the earth would be given to Abraham for an inheritance.

Read Psalm 2:7-8

In this prophetic psalm, the Father is speaking to his Son, Jesus. He declares:

“Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.”

Indeed, the Lord Jesus has done exactly that. He has asked his Father for the nations as his inheritance, and that request has been granted (note **Daniel 7:13; Philippians 2:9-11**). In Christ, the promises to Abraham have been fulfilled!

Why It Can't Be By Law

Read Romans 4:14-15

In these two verses, Paul presents a strong case for why righteousness simply cannot be by Law.

It makes faith have no value

Hebrews 11:6 tells us:

“...without faith it is impossible to please God...”

The Lord has placed tremendous importance on faith, and for good reason. When he created man, he gave him dominion over the whole earth and everything in it to enjoy. Out of this abundance, Adam and Eve were told there was only one tree they were not allowed to eat of – the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

They had been given dominion over everything, but that one tree represented God's dominion over them (**Genesis 1:26-30; 2:8-17; 3:1-19**).

The moment they ate of the fruit of that tree, they stepped out of *God-dependence* into *independence*. The Law cannot restore this lost virtue to man, because it still expresses self-dependence and self-reliance. The whole point of the Law is that you must *do* something in order to receive something from God.

It is only *faith* that restores this virtue of God-dependence to man again. The very essence of faith is total dependence on God in the midst of all opposing circumstances. If by just obeying the rules of the Law we could obtain the Promise, this valuable attribute of faith would be inoperative.

Another valuable aspect of faith is that it has to do with *relationship*. You can obey all the rules laid down by someone without even knowing him personally and certainly without necessarily loving him. But to have *faith* in him – to put your whole life into his hands – there has to be not just a personal knowledge of that person, but a real love for him. In the same way, relationship with God (the core of God's plan for man) is not necessary to the Law, but is the essential attribute of faith.

It makes the Promise worthless

Paul had spent much time up to this point proving that it is not possible for man to fully obey all the Law. He now follows his logic through. If God had stipulated that it was through obeying the Law that we would inherit the Promise, and if it is impossible for sinful man to obey the Law, then it means that the Promise would never be fulfilled! It would be worthless.

Because of sin, all that man inherits through the Law is *God's anger!* In fact, the only time that man doesn't break the Law is *if there is no Law to break!* What Paul is saying is that, rather than obtaining the Promise through the Law, the Law actually *destroys all hope of receiving it!*

Why Faith Is So Vital

Read Romans 4:16-17

Paul now gives us three reasons why faith is so vital to God's plan of salvation.

That it might be by grace

If faith expresses total dependence on God, this means that it leaves God to do the work on our behalf. In other words, faith releases the *grace* of God. In turn, it is the Lord who then receives all the glory for what is accomplished. Grace eliminates all the boasting of man.

That the Promise might be assured

Faith guarantees the receiving of the Promise, for faith is based upon our trust that God will fulfill the Promise he has given.

That it might be to all

The Law limited the Promise to the Jews, but faith makes it available to all mankind. Everyone can believe, regardless of racial, educational or economic background. The *choice* of faith in God for the Promise is open to all and is dependent on two things and two things alone:

- The free grace of God
- The same faith as Abraham

Thus Paul has laid before us two ways:

- **Law** – which results in *transgression* which results in *God's anger* which results in *no fulfillment of the Promise*
- **Faith** – which results in *grace* which results in *righteousness* which results in *fulfillment of the Promise*

Abraham's Promise is the same promise given to us. Like Abraham, we too are looking for an eternal city, and this Promise has been given to us by none other than the Lord Jesus himself (**John 14:1-3**). And guess what! Abraham's Promise comes through Abraham's way – faith! Those who have the same faith as Abraham inherit the same Promise.

What is True Faith?

Read Romans 4:18-25

Abraham is given to us as the perfect example of true faith in operation. The quality of faith which God is looking for in us is seen in living reality in his life, and the same principles that operated then still apply to us today (see **4:22-25**).

- Abraham faced adverse circumstances (**4:18**)
- Abraham was honest about it (**4:19**)
- Abraham believed the promise of God (**4:20**)
- Abraham was sure about God (**4:21**)

Thus, as we analyze Abraham's faith, we find his trust was in three aspects of God's nature:

God's Word

Abraham believed God's Word (**4:20**). But this was not all. We all know that promises are easy to make but not everyone keeps them! So Abraham's trust of God's Word was in a second attribute...

God's Character

Abraham believed God was faithful to his Word! As **Hebrews 11:11** describes it, Abraham "considered him faithful who had made the promise." But Abraham's faith was in still yet another aspect of God's nature...

God's Power

God not only has the character backing his promise, but he also has the power to fulfill it (4:21).

In **Romans 4**, Paul has provided a solid case for his assertion that the Gospel message is neither new, nor divorced from Old Testament history, but can be found in the call of Abraham in the very first book of the Bible.

In the first four chapters of his letter, Paul has slowly built his case for the Gospel, showing the three principal revelations that Scripture declares:

- The Revelation of God
- The Revelation of Man
- The Revelation of Righteousness

In **Romans 5**, Paul will embark on the next stage of his teaching, showing the three great answers provided by the Gospel:

- The Gospel's Answer to Sins
- The Gospel's Answer to Self
- The Gospel's Answer to the Law