

Romans 4:1-17

Abraham justified by faith

Imagine a man before a judge who has been given the choice of paying \$100 or serving 90 days in jail.

The man doesn't have any money, but does have an invalid wife and five hungry children at home who are depending on him and him alone.

He tells such a heartrending story that the courtroom spectators are moved with pity and take up a collection to help pay the man's fine.

Although it is unlike him, even the judge chips in.

Altogether they raise \$99.95.

Even though they are only five cents short, the judge declares that the entire \$100 must be paid, and orders the bailiff to take the man to jail.

He dejectedly walks out of the courtroom, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets...where he finds—A five-cent piece!

Elated, he rushes back into the courtroom and slaps the five cents on the bar before the judge, declaring "I'm free, I'm free!"

In his mind, what saved him"? The \$99.95, or the five cents?

If you or I did anything to merit our salvation, we would be forever boasting about it in heaven.

The fact is that we could do nothing, so Jesus paid it all.

The good book tells us "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift from God – not by works, so that no-one can boast." (Eph 2:8-9)

I recently heard about a senior policeman who was driven to come to the Lord as a result of all the horrific crime scenes he had attended in the course of his duty.

After retirement, he took up as one of his ministries making timber crosses – as he was good with his hands.

He would give these lovingly crafted crosses to various people, as the Spirit led, who were moving toward giving their life to the Lord.

It just so happens that our own John Barrett recently received one of these crosses as a token of appreciation of a shared ministry.

I have the cross here. And although you may not be able to see it there is an inscription on the cross.

It reads "Paid in full"

And this is the basis of today's New Testament reading for from Romans Chapter 4 verses 1–17.

The Apostle Paul uses the example of the patriarch Abraham to make his point that as Christians we are justified by faith.

That is, God treats us as if we had never sinned, and this is appropriated by faith, by believing, not by any good thing we may do.

I want to briefly mention four things about Abraham's faith. But before I do V1 of Chapter 4 demands we go back a couple of steps a give this chapter just a little bit of context.

Have a look at chapter 4 v1. You can find it on page ??? in the pew bibles.

Paul says "What then shall we say that Abraham, the forefather of us Jews, discovered in this matter?"

Discovered in what matter?

Well in brief, in chapters 1, 2 and 3, of Romans, Paul establishes that God demands righteousness. And that Gentiles, even with out the law, stand condemned before God.

More than that, Jews with the law also stand condemned. Indeed the summary statement is "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Both Jew and Gentile.

"Therefore no-one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law." (Rom 3:20)

Paul goes on to establish that there is a righteousness, but apart from the law and this righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.

So what did Abraham discover in this matter? The four things.

1. **Abraham's faith was apart from works.**

If Abraham was justified because of what he did he would have good reason to boast.

If you do the work, the wages paid to you aren't a gift. They're due to you.

But the facts of the matter as recorded in Genesis Chapter 15, reveal that in the context of an almost unbelievable promise from God, Abram Believed.

God promised Abram offspring that would outnumber the stars in the sky.

Yet he was then still childless.

But he believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

2. **Abraham's faith was apart from circumcision.**

At what stage did Abram believe. In Genesis chapter 15 Abram exercised his faith and believed God.

In Genesis Chapter 17 we find Abram at the age of 99 receiving from God his new name Abraham and then the covenant of circumcision as a sign.

Abraham received the sign of circumcision that was a seal of the righteousness of faith he had while uncircumcised.

So Abraham can be the father of both the circumcised and uncircumcised.

The point Paul is making here is justification did not come to Abraham by faith plus circumcision. Rather, by faith alone with circumcision as a sign.

3. Abraham's faith was apart from the law.

If it were possible for Abraham and his descendants to keep the law and gain righteousness this way, and thus access the promise and blessing of countless offspring, then faith is of no value.

But that is an impossibility because Paul insists the law brings only wrath.

Justification for Abraham was not by faith plus keeping the law, it was by faith alone with the law only revealing sin.

4. Abraham's faith was in God.

Abraham wasn't trusting in his ability to do good works, nor was he trusting in the sign of circumcision, neither was he trusting in his ability to keep the law.

Abraham simply believed God. He put his faith in God.

So to summarise;

Justification did not come to Abraham by faith plus circumcision.

Abraham's acceptance by God on the basis of faith preceded his circumcision.

Justification was not by faith plus keeping the law.

Justification was by faith alone.

Alarm bells need to start ringing in our minds the instant we come across those who want to burden us down with countless number of faith plus this or faith plus that options.

It may be faith plus tongues. It may be faith plus attendance. It may be faith plus miracles. It may be faith plus tradition. It may be faith plus sacrament.

And there is nothing wrong with any of these things in themselves so long as they are not seen as prerequisites to salvation.

The apostle Paul makes his point. As with Abraham, we are justified by faith alone.

But this justifying faith isn't without consequence. It makes a difference. It has an impact, it changes the very way we live.

Look at Abraham years later, as in an act of obedience he goes up the mountain to sacrifice his only son.

Isaac is Abraham's only hope of receiving the fulfillment of God's promise to him of countless offspring.

We know the story. Just in the nick of time, as Abraham is about to slay his son, the angel of the Lord intervenes and Abraham looks up and sees a ram caught in the thicket.

Abraham offers up the ram as a burnt offering in place of his son.

Although he didn't sacrifice his son, he passed the test. He put his faith into action.

And this is why James in his letter to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations, looking at the very same incident with Abraham and Isaac concludes, "Faith without deeds is dead" (Jas 2:26)

Indeed James understands that faith, and the deeds that issue forth from that faith, are so closely related, so closely tied together, you can not have one without the other.

Show me your faith without deeds, says James, and I will show you my faith by what I do. (Jas 2:18)

Appealing to the Abraham Isaac story, James goes so far to say "You see people are justified by what they do and not by faith alone" (Jas 2:24)

There is no easy resolution to this tension. But today's gospel reading may well shed a little more light.

An expert law keeper, the Pharisee Nicodemus, comes under the cover of darkness to speak with Jesus.

Nicodemus pays Jesus the compliment of calling him Rabbi – teacher. He goes on to acknowledge that Jesus must be from God because of the signs he is doing.

Then Jesus comes out with the answer to the question Nicodemus never asked. No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again.

Poor old Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus and interprets him as saying he must have a second natural birth.

So Jesus comes at it from a slightly different angle. No one will enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and of the Spirit.

Nicodemus continues to struggle with the concept and Jesus gives him a hard time about it, "And you are Israel's teacher and you don't understand these things?"

Jesus takes one further step and reveals his true identity by likening himself, as the Son of Man, to the snake being lifted up in the desert by Moses.

And I am reading from John 3:14 & 15 "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that anyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

The concluding comment by the writer of the gospel summarises the message well. For God so loved the world he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

With Abraham, Christians are justified by faith alone. If ours is a genuine faith, may we show our faith by what we do.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen