

How was Abraham saved?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I said, today we come to chapter 4 of Romans, and we're going to look at the whole chapter together, but we can read again verses 13 to 16, because these verses, in many ways, sum up what it's all about.

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be the heir of the world did not come through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is not the adherence of the law who are to be heir, faith is now, and the promise is void.

For the law brings wrath, but where there's no law, there's no transgression. That's why it depends on faith in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring, not only to the adherent of the law, but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.

Now, Romans 4 is a very important chapter, and in some ways it's a complicated chapter, but I hope that as we look through it together today, we'll see how it all fits in together with Paul's great message that he is proclaiming in this letter.

As we've been saying, the great theme that Paul is emphasising in Romans is the gospel. He's explaining how the good news of Jesus Christ works.

[1 : 2 5] He is telling us how it is that we can be saved. And as I said when we were reading, at the end of chapter 3, Paul lays down three words that lie at the very heart of the gospel.

He says, we hold that one is justified by faith, apart from works of the law. That phrase, justification by faith, is what lies at the very heart of the Christian gospel.

We are not saved by our works. We do not earn favour with God. God does not declare us righteous because of what we do.

He declares us righteous, that's what justified means. He declares us righteous by faith. We are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

That's the heart of the gospel because Jesus died because of what he has done, because he has secured redemption. We are saved not through what we earn, but because God graciously gives it to us.

[2 : 4 1] That's the gospel message and that's what's proclaimed in the New Testament era and in the days that have brought us up to this point in time.

As I said, that immediately raises the question, what about the Old Testament? Is justification by faith a new thing? Is the New Testament erasing the Old Testament?

Does justification by faith originate with Paul and the letter to the Romans and the other letter that he wrote in the New Testament?

These are really, really important questions to ask because sometimes people can think to themselves that in the Old Testament you are saved by works, but in the New Testament you're saved by faith.

Sometimes people think that the Old Testament means law and the New Testament means grace. Some people even think that the New Testament is correcting the Old Testament.

- [3 : 46] Is that true? And have you ever thought like that? Well, let's imagine that we're asking Paul the question, is justification by faith a new thing?
- Is it cancelling out the Old Testament? That's the question we want to have in our minds because that's the question that Paul is answering in chapter 4.
- Is justification by faith a new thing? So that's what Paul is telling us and immediately refers to arguably the two biggest names in the Old Testament, Abraham and David.
- And in particular, he focuses on Abraham. So basically he's saying, well, justification by faith, how does this apply to Abraham? How did it work in the Old Testament?
- What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he is something to boast about, but not before God. For what does his scripture say?
- [4 : 50] Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift, but as his due. And to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.
- Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from the law, blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered.
- Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin. Paul is saying, okay, how was Abraham justified?
- How was he declared righteous? Was it by faith or was it by works? And the answer is clear. Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.
- Paul is saying Abraham was counted righteous not because of his works, but because of his faith. And to reinforce the point, he talks about David and he quotes from Psalm 32, which says exactly the same thing, God counts us righteous, justifies us apart from our works.
- [6 : 06] So Paul's point is absolutely clear. He said justification is not a new thing. It's not a novelty. In fact, the outstanding example of justification by faith is none other than Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel, the central figure of the Old Testament, the one with whom God originally made his covenant.
- Now, I just want to pause here and note something really, really important. Here Paul is dealing with a question regarding Christianity is justification a new thing.
- And as he deals with that question, we have to ask ourselves, what does he do in order to answer that question? Well look at verse three.
- Paul asked that question, I'll go back one, sorry, I shouldn't have looked at you. Look at verse three. I should have highlighted this. Verse three says, for what does the scripture say?
- And there's a lesson that we need to write on all of our parts. You've got a question about Christianity. What do you do? You ask that question. What does scripture say?
- [7 : 23] That's the principle that must govern everything that we do as a church and everything that we do as individuals. What matters is not what people say.
- It's not what do people say, it's what does scripture say. That has to be a governing principle for every day of 2018 in every area of our lives.
- We always want to be asking that question. What does the Bible say? What does scripture say? It applies to everything in terms of theology. What should we believe as Christians? Well we have to ask ourselves, what does scripture say?
- And that's a really, really important thing because often we can think things that sound great and sound plausible but they're not scriptural.

An example of that is something that I have heard many, many times throughout my life and something that I myself have said many, many times.

[8 : 33] And that is that the church is the house of God. And so you look at the building here and you say that's God's house.

You go up on the hill and you look down at the church and you see the building and you say that is the house of God. Is that correct? No.

It is absolutely not correct. It's not biblical because the Bible does not say that the church building is the house of God.

The Bible says that the temple is the house of God. And so in the Old Testament the temple was a building in the middle of Jerusalem.

In the New Testament what is the temple? You. The people of God are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

[9 : 32] So who's the house of God? The building? No. The people. And so it's the church in the sense of the people, not in the sense of the building.

Theologically we always have to ask what does the Bible say? In terms of worship, how should we worship? The answer is what does the Bible say? We don't decide how we worship. We let the Bible teach us how we should worship.

In terms of discipleship, what should our priorities be? Again, what does the Bible say? What does scripture say? That has to be a question. In terms of ethics, is something right or wrong?

Again we must ask what does scripture say? And we must ensure that our minds are shaped by scripture.

And this is really important because all too often our minds are shaped by the world and our minds are shaped by culture and our minds are also often shaped by fear of what people might say.

[10 : 31] And that's a very dangerous thing because it raises the risk of picking and choosing which parts of the Bible we want to believe and of placing some parts of the Bible as more important than others.

Now we automatically think, I'd never do that. And I think to myself, I would never do that. I would never choose one part of the Bible over the other. I would never create a kind of selective hierarchy as to what matters.

But if I examine myself, I have to realise that I do do it. And here's an example. Here's a list of six sins.

Orgy, sexual immorality, sensuality, drunkenness, quarrelling, jealousy. Six sins, I won't go into any details because you know exactly what all of these mean.

The world would say that none of these are particularly bad. And if you watch Telly, watch a film or whatever, you'll see all of that stuff quite freely, quite openly.

[11 : 37] The world would say none of them are particularly bad. Our local culture here would probably have a problem with the first three in particular.

Some people would maybe have a problem with the fourth, but other people are quite comfortable with the fourth. But first three, culturally, we would be cautious of.

In a church context, we would be horrified at the first four. If any of the first four happened right here, right now, we would be horrified.

But the last two, well, maybe we would excuse these things or not be as horrified. But what does scripture say?

Well, here's a verse from Lated Enrollments. Paul says, let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy.

[12 : 42] So here's our test. Is two Christians quarrelling as serious as two Christians getting drunk together?

What does scripture say? Scripture draws absolutely no distinction between any of these six sins.

And so we have to always ask what Paul asked, what does scripture say? That needs to be our rule too. And inevitably for many of us, for me, that means changing the way I think and having a different perspective.

We don't want to be shaped by the world. We don't want to be shaped by culture. We don't want to be shaped by fear of people. We want to be shaped by the Bible.

Paul is making it clear that we must look to the Bible and see what it says. And in terms of the question of justification, he is saying that justification is not new.

[13 : 56] It goes all the way back to Abraham himself. Then he goes on to the next step of the discussion, which again is a really important point. He says that Abraham's example applies both to Jews and Gentiles.

People thought that Jews thought that Abraham was their father. He was the one who was in many ways the founder of their nation. And the privileges that belong to Abraham belong to the Jews, not to other people.

But Paul says no. He says, is this blessing then only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised? In other words, for Jews or non-Jews. But we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteous.

How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he'd been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was 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. And to make him the father of the circumcised, who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

[15 : 07] What is Paul saying here? Well, circumcision was the definitive sign of being a Jew. And again and again in the New Testament people struggled with the question, can you be saved if you're not circumcised?

That's what Paul is saying at the start. Is this blessing for the circumcised as well as the uncircumcised? And Paul gives an outstanding answer. He says that Abraham was saved before he was circumcised.

So Abraham was saved as an uncircumcised person. Circumcision was the seal that came afterwards. And Paul is making a very simple but important point that it is not whether you are circumcised or not that matters.

It's not whether you're a Jew, a Gentile or not. What matters is faith and Abraham is your example in that regard. That's why it says he's the father of all who believe, Jew or Gentile.

And if you go back to the story of Abraham, you'll see that that makes perfect sense because Abraham was never intended to be a blessing just to the Jewish people. But rather it was in him that all nations of the world would be blessed.

[16 : 21] Now again, I want to pause here because Paul is giving us a really good lesson on how to read the Bible here. Because when Paul looks at Abraham's life as recorded in scripture, he doesn't just look at the big picture.

He is looking at specific details. And in this case, he looks at the chronology of events. He says was it before or after? So there's a tiny detail before or after.

And yet it makes all the difference to Paul's argument. So he is looking at specific details in scripture. And we must be the same. We must read the Bible slowly, carefully and thoughtfully.

Because when it comes to the Bible, detail matters. And it's a good example of that in these chapters that we've gone through in Romans.

In chapters 2, 3 and 4 of Romans, Paul's great point is that we are justified by faith apart from works of the law. Paul is clearly stating that all the law does is show us our sin.

[17 : 26] It does not save us. No one can boast in the law. No one can be justified. Nobody can be justified through the law. We are justified apart from the law. So in many ways, Paul makes the law look bad.

And therefore it will be very easy to come to the conclusion that we don't need the law. And people often think like that. People often think, well, I'm a Christian. I'm saved.

I'm forgiven. God knows my heart. It doesn't really matter what I do. I don't need to worry about the Ten Commandments. I don't need to worry about God's law because that's not how I'm saved. I'm saved by faith.

But look at the little thing that Paul says at the end of chapter 3. He says, do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means.

On the contrary, we uphold the law. And there's a tiny little detail that says that the law still has a vital place in our lives as Christians.

[18 : 28] And Paul actually explains that in more detail in chapter 6 and chapter 7, which we'll come to, I'm sure, in the coming weeks. The point that he makes there is that we don't keep the law in order to be saved, but we keep it because we are saved.

And that means that the attitude, oh, well, I'm saved. I can do what I like, is absolutely unacceptable because the detail of Scripture is telling us that we must bear God's law in mind.

So detail matters. So Paul is saying that we're justified by faith. He's saying that Abraham serves as a model to all nations, Jew and Gentile. And then he goes on to explain how the gospel worked in the life of Abraham.

And we're going to go through this together and just see how it all fits together. So how did the gospel work in Abraham's life? Well, let's see what Paul says.

First of all, he says that Abraham's justification, his salvation, is grounded on God's promise. So there's that key phrase at the start.

[19 : 40] It's all grounded on a promise made to Abraham. That's what God did with Abraham. He came to him, he made him a promise. And we call that promise a covenant.

You read through Genesis 12 to 22, it gets reinforced again and again. We can read, for example, in Genesis 17, 3, then Abraham fell in his face and God said, behold, my covenant is with you and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

God makes a covenant with Abraham and with his descendants. And at the heart of that was the promise, I will be your God and you will be my people. So it's all based on a promise.

Paul then says, that promise is not based on the law. And the reason for that is that the law would make the promise void.

If it is the adherence of the law, who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. Paul is basically saying that if God's promise to us is based on us earning it through keeping the law, we're going to ruin the promise because we are just trying to earn it as a wage rather than as a blessing.

[20 : 52] And ultimately, all we're going to do is disqualify ourselves because we will only end up breaking the law. For example, imagine I said to you, I'm going to buy you all dinner tomorrow.

And we all went up to Forty North for a lovely meal. And I said, I promise I'll buy you dinner. And then when we got there and ate our meal and then said, OK, now it's time for you all to pay.

My promise will be null and void because the blessing of that dinner will be coming through your works, not through my generosity. Doesn't depend on works, doesn't depend on what we do.

It depends on the promise of God. And that makes us ask the question, OK, if it's all about God's promise, what is God's promise based on?

What's the promise all about? Well, verse 16 tells us that is why it depends on faith in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring.

[21 : 57] Paul is saying the promise does not depend on works. It depends on faith. And the reason for that is that the promise may rest on grace. Now, those three words there are incredibly important.

It's telling us that God does not give us salvation as a reward. It's not something that we earn. It is a gift. And Paul has highlighted that earlier in the chapter.

He says to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift, but as his wages. In other words, if you're going to work your way back up to God, whatever you get from God is simply going to be your wages because you've earned it.

But Paul is saying that the gospel is not about earning. It's not about wages. It's not about works. It is all about a gift. It rests on grace.

And that's because our justification is all a result of what God has done. Abraham received it by faith in God's promise to be gracious to him, and we receive it in exactly the same way.

[23 : 08] Back to chapter four. That's why it depends on faith in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring, not only to the adherents of the law, but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.

So the way that Abraham was saved is the way that we are saved. We share the same promise. We share the same faith. But the remarkable thing about Abraham was that in Abraham's lifetime, God's promise looked like an utter impossibility.

God had come to Abraham, an old man with a barren wife, and he said, you are going to have descendants like the stars in the sky. And it looked impossible, totally impossible.

And for years, years after God made the promise, nothing happened. So God came to Abraham and said, you're going to have a son. And then for years, nothing happened.

But throughout all of that, Abraham trusted God. That's what Paul says. In hope, he believed against hope that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, so shall your offspring be.

[24 : 31] He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead, since he was about a hundred years old. Or when he considered the barrenness of Seder's womb, no belief made him waver concerning the promise of God.

But he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That's why his faith was counted to him as righteousness.

Abraham is a great example of faith, not of works. In fact, read Abraham's life, you'll see that it's full of major mistakes. He's not a good example in terms of works, but he is an example of faith.

But here's a question. What is it that made Abraham's faith so remarkable? What was so special about Abraham's faith? If he's the example, what was it that was so good about Abraham's faith?

Well, the answer is in verse 21. He was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

[25 : 38] That's what made Abraham's faith amazing, the fact that God was able to keep his promise. That's what faith is, relying on God.

And the whole gospel depends on faith because faith depends on God. Abraham had been promised a child through whom God's great covenant purposes will be fulfilled.

That child eventually came and through that child, a nation was built. And ultimately, through that chain of offspring, we come all the way to Jesus Christ in whom God's plan of salvation would reach their fulfillment.

And Abraham trusted God that he was able to do what he had promised. We do exactly the same thing.

We know a lot more than Abraham did about how God's plan of salvation works, but the key point is not what we know, the key point is that we trust that God is able to do it.

[26 : 38] And that's why our salvation and Abraham's salvation is exactly the same. The people in the Old Testament were saved by faith because they looked forward to the promises that God had said he would keep.

We are saved by faith, but we have the privilege of looking back and seeing the fact that God has actually kept every promise that he made.

But in all of this, there's one thing that's really, really, really important. And that's what I want to highlight as we conclude. Paul is teaching us something that we must all make sure that we understand.

Ultimately in this chapter, Paul is asking the question, how was Abraham saved? And the answer is because God was able to keep his promise.

Abraham is justified because God is able to keep his promise. In other words, salvation does not depend on us, it depends on God.

[27 : 48] And that is something that everybody has to recognize because so often we stumble with questions that begin with the words, am I?

So we ask questions like this. Am I able to be a Christian? Am I knowledgeable enough? Am I good enough?

Am I too sinful? Am I too weak? Am I too late? Am I going to be able to keep it up?

We constantly have these questions, am I? Am I? Am I? Am I? And Paul is telling us here in chapter four of Romans that the am I questions are totally irrelevant.

Absolutely irrelevant. Because the question that matters never ever begins with the words, am I? The question that matters begins with the words, is God?

[28 : 58] Is God able? Is God able to keep his promise? Is God able to save you?

Now that is the most important question you will ever ask because that is the question that determines whether you have faith or not. It is a question that determines if you are a Christian or not.

Because if you say no, then logically you don't have faith. It is incredibly logical and simple and clear.

Is God able, if you say no, then you don't have faith in God. Simple as that, it is very, very logical. If you say no, then you don't have faith.

But if you can say yes, then you are a believer. If you can say yes, God is able and I am trusting him, then that means you are a Christian.

[30 : 06] Not a question of whether you have come to the prayer meeting for long enough or whether you have gone forward or whether you have done this or whether you have done that. The am I question is irrelevant.

Is God able to keep his promise? That is the question that determines if you are a Christian.

Because saving faith never, ever depends on me. It depends on God. Abraham knew that God was able and every other believer follows his example.

That is why Paul concludes the chapter by saying that what was written about Abraham was not just for his benefit but for ours. The words that was counted to him were not written for his sake alone but for ours also.

It will be counted to us who believe in him, who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

[31 : 08] Salvation has always been about faith from the days of Abraham until now. And that is simply because salvation depends not on what we are able to do but on what God is able to do.

So is God able to save you? Two righties. The only question is do you trust him?

Let's pray. God our Father we thank you that your plan of salvation fits together so perfectly and that from the days of Abraham all the way through to the last day of the year in 2017 your promise still stands that all who trust in the name of the Lord will be saved.

And we pray O God that we would all have our trust in you, that we would not be stumbling over the question as to what we are able to do but that we like Abraham would be fully convinced that you are able to do what you've promised.

Please give us that faith that no longer depends on ourselves but that is totally reliant on you. Lord open our hearts and our minds and help us to go through every day of our lives remembering that God is able.

[32 : 41] Amen.