

ABRAHAM'S FAITH AND OURS

Romans 4:1-25

Key Verses: 4:23-24

“The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness--for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.”

In the last passage, Paul taught us that the righteousness of God is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe (3:22). This is attested to by the Scriptures (3:21). Paul realized that his precise presentation of the gospel needed to be illustrated by example. So in chapter 4 he introduces the faith of Abraham and David. Through them, Paul clarifies what it means to be justified by faith. Being justified by faith is nothing new, but is consistent with how God worked in the Old Testament. As God credited Abraham with righteousness, so he credits anyone who believes in Jesus.

The key words of this chapter are **“credit”** and **“righteousness,”** which are frequently repeated, often together (4:3,5,6,9,11,13,22,24). We are very familiar with the word **“credit”**: “credit card,” “credit score,” “school credit.” Having good credit is very important for us. If we lose credit, it is hard to live in this society. This concept of “credit” is very related to our works. If we study hard, we get a lot of school credits. If we are responsible financial managers we gain a good credit score. However, when Paul uses the word **“credit”** in this passage, it has a different meaning. It is not given based on our performance, but solely by grace. It is not given by a school or some human agency, but by God the Creator. To receive credit from God the Creator is the most serious matter for us all. It determines our eternal destiny, as well as how we live in this world. Do you want credit from God? Let's learn how we can receive it.

In chapter 4, Paul illustrates how Abraham and David were justified. It was by faith, not by works (1-8), not circumcision (9-12), or the law (13-17a). Then he describes Abraham's faith specifically and how he bore fruit (17b-22). Paul concludes that Abraham's faith is the same as ours (23-25).

First, Abraham and David were justified by faith, not by works (1-8). Verse 1 says, **“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?”** Abraham was the

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patriarch of the nation Israel. The Jews boasted about the fact that they were Abraham's descendants (Jn 8:33). It seems that they misunderstood the basis of his righteousness as coming from works, not faith. So they thought he had something to boast about, and by association, they did too. If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he could boast - but not before God (2). People love to boast about what they have done. In the course of conversation, this boasting naturally comes out, in relation to their children and grandchildren, career, social status, bank account, house, car, cat or dog. For example, "My dog is better than yours!" For religious people it may take the form of boasting about their prayer, service, Bible knowledge, Bible students, meeting attendance, and the like. This boasting comes from self-righteousness, which is deeply rooted in our pride.

Paul wanted them to come back to the Bible. The Scripture is the final authority to settle arguments. He asked, "**What does Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'**" (3). This is a quote of Genesis 15:6. We need to understand how this happened. Abraham had been living in the promised land for ten years and was deeply frustrated because he had not received what he expected from God - an heir. So he complained to God and threatened to make his servant his heir. At that moment, God took him outside and said, "**Look up at the sky and count the stars - if indeed you can count them.**" The stars were too numerous to count. Then God said, "**So shall your offspring be.**" What? It sounded like complete nonsense. It seemed like a joke, which would elicit the response, "Are you kidding me?" Abraham just wanted one child, not millions and millions. God's promise was too big to believe. How did Abraham respond? Surprisingly, "**Abraham believed God.**" He couldn't understand it, but he believed it. His faith was beyond reason and experience. His faith was in the person of God. He believed that God is faithful, truthful, powerful, loving, good and trustworthy. He believed that because God said so, it would happen. This faith pleased God. So God gave him great credit, "Excellent! A+! You are righteous!" Abraham did not work at all; he did not achieve something; he did nothing deserving of this blessing. Rather, he made many mistakes. However, when he just believed God, he was credited with righteousness.

The word "**credit**" in this passage comes from a financial context. It signifies to put something in someone's account. For example, when Paul

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wrote to Philemon about his debtor Onesimus, he said: **“If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me”** (Phm 18). There are two ways of receiving credit: as wages, or as a gift. In verses 4-5, Paul gives the example of workers. When a person works, their wages are not credited to them as a gift, but as an obligation. In the same way if a person is justified by works, it is not grace; it is wages given as the reward of works. However, if a person who does not work is given credit, it is given only by grace. Which do you prefer? The wages given as a result of works, or credit given as a gift?

It is really surprising that God justifies the ungodly when they believe in Jesus. When we think of God, we are more likely to think that God will punish us for our sins. God, however, when we come to him by faith in Jesus, accepts any sinner with joy, even like the prodigal son, and makes him righteous. To those who believe in Jesus, their faith is credited to them as righteousness. God is indeed full of grace. Ephesians 2:8-9 say, **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”** Nevertheless, people still want to boast about something--even having faith. Someone may say, “My faith is greater than yours!” But we cannot boast even in our faith, for it is the gift of God.

In verses 6-8, Paul gives another example, that of David, whom God also credited with righteousness apart from works. Though David lived in the time of the law, he deeply understood what it meant to live by faith. He sang, **“Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them”** (7-8). David knew the true happiness that comes from the forgiveness of sins. David was a great king, a valiant warrior, a poet and musician. He had all the blessings that most people want. But what made his heart sing for joy was not what he had or what he had done, but the forgiveness of sins. David found this truth when he received forgiveness from God after committing the sins of adultery and murder. At first, when he tried to cover up the fact that he had sinned, he suffered from the torment of a guilty conscience and had nightmares. He said, **“When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long...Then I acknowledged my sin to you...I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin”** (Ps 32:4-5). Through this experience he realized that the most blessed person is the one whose sins are forgiven. Not only David, but anyone

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who commits sin experiences the same agony. Sin locks us up in a prison and takes away all our freedom and joy. The power of sin is so strong that no one can break it. The more we struggle to get out of it, the more we get mired in it. The only way out is to confess our sins to the Lord and have our sins forgiven. God is so gracious that if anyone confesses their sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin (1Jn 1:7,9).

Second, Abraham was not justified by circumcision, but by faith (9-12).

In verse 9a, Paul questions whether this blessedness of justification is available only for the circumcised (the Jews) or is also for the uncircumcised (the Gentiles). He answers that this blessedness applies to all who live by faith, whether circumcised or uncircumcised. In order to prove this, he explains that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness before he was circumcised. In fact, Abraham was justified at least 14 years before he was circumcised (Gen 15,17). Abraham received the sign of circumcision as the seal of the righteousness that he had by faith. A seal is the sign attesting that the content is genuine. The Jews considered physical circumcision as the evidence of salvation. Paul, however, emphasized the content, not the outward, physical sign. Galatians 5:6 says, **"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love."** Abraham was justified by faith while he was still uncircumcised so that he might be the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised (11b). He also became the father of the circumcised (12). In a word, Abraham became the father of all who walk in the footsteps of his faith.

Here, we can see that Abraham left footsteps of faith for his descendants. His life was not perfect; he made many mistakes. But he was always ready to listen to God and obey him. For instance, when he was about to make Eliezer of Damascus his heir, God said that it would not be him, but a son coming from Abraham's own body. Abraham didn't express any opposition but accepted God's will 100%. Also, when Abraham was about to appoint Ishmael as his heir, God said that the heir would not be Ishmael, but a son from Sarah's womb. Abraham trusted in God and obeyed him absolutely, without any complaint. Most notably, when God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham was ready to obey immediately by faith. Indeed, he was a

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man of obedience that comes from faith. As he lived by this faith, he left beautiful footsteps of faith. He showed us a good example.

Everyone leaves behind footprints, whether they like it or not - take carbon footprints for example. Our descendants follow our footsteps. As we listen to people's life stories, we can see how their parents influence their lives. Abusive parents may damage their children in many ways. Often, the children determine to never be like their parents. But as time passes, they can find themselves doing the same thing their parents did. In this way, a vicious cycle continues perpetually. On the other hand, many parents who lived by faith in God showed a good example to their children. Their children are now living godly lives, to be a blessing in the midst of the corruption of our times. It is indeed important what kind of footsteps we leave to our children. Another example can be found in the books of Kings. There is a contrast between David and Jeroboam. In Northern Israel, Jeroboam made golden calves in Bethel and Dan. This gave bad influence to his descendants from generation to generation.¹ On the other hand, David left footsteps of faith which his descendants imitated and followed.² Eventually, the Messiah was born in his line. May God help us to live by faith like Abraham and David so that we also may leave the footsteps of faith for our descendants.

Third, righteousness comes by grace, not by the law (13-17a). In verses 13-17a, Paul deals with the matter of the law. Just as justification is not by works or circumcision, it is also not by the law. It comes through the promise which preceded the law. Verse 13 says, **“It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.”** When God made promises to Abraham and his seed, he was looking forward to the Messiah (Gal 3:16). This promise was given 430 years before the coming of the Law. Paul asserts strongly that the promise is received and inherited by faith, not by keeping the law. If those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath (14-15a). God's purpose in giving the law was not as the means of salvation, but to expose sin as sin and to condemn it. At last, law brings wrath. Where there is no law there is no transgression (15b), but this doesn't mean that there is no sin. Even before law, sin ruled over people's lives as slavemaster.

¹ 1 Kings 12:31-33; 13:34; 14:16; 15:34; 16:19,25,26; 22:52.

² 1 Kings 11:6; 15:3-5,11; 2 Kings 16:2; 18:3; 22:2.

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Law and promise are fundamentally different. Law says to people, "You shall...you shall not." But in the promise God says, "I will...I will." Law demands obedience; promise requires faith. God did not say to Abraham, "obey this law and I will bless you," but "I will bless you; believe my promise." Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace. Since it is only by God's grace, it can be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring (16a). This includes Jews and Gentiles alike, who are of the faith of Abraham. Abraham is the father of us all before God, as it is written: "**I have made you a father of many nations**" (16b-17a). God is indeed rich in grace and mercy. God knows our weakness very well and is one-sidedly gracious to us so that we may be saved only by faith in Jesus Christ.

Fourth, Abraham's faith and ours (17b-25). Abraham is the father of all who believe. What kind of faith did he have? Although faith goes beyond reason, it always has a firmly rational basis. Faith is trusting someone, and its reasonableness depends on the trusted person's reliability. It is reasonable to trust the trustworthy. And there is nobody more trustworthy than God. Abraham believed in God's almighty power. Verse 17b says, "**...in whom he believed - the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.**" He believed in God who created all things out of nothing, and who gave life to the dead. Nothing baffles us more than nothingness and death. But nothingness and death are no problem to God who is almighty.

Abraham believed in God who is faithful. Against all hope, Abraham believed in the promise, "**So shall your offspring be**" (18). He knew that his body was as good as dead, since he was about a hundred years old, and that Sarah's womb was also dead (19). Usually, when we know our situation is hard, it is easy to be discouraged, weaken in our faith and doubt God's love and power. Abraham, however, did not weaken in his faith, nor did he waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God. Rather, he was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God (20). God was glorified in the birth of Isaac, as well as in the near sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham glorified God by letting God be God, and by trusting him to be true to himself as the God of creation and the God of resurrection. He was fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised (21). He rendered glory to God by faith in his most desperate and dark situation. The darker the sky, the brighter the star; the darker Abraham's situation, the stronger and brighter was his faith. Our

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difficult situation or despairing reality cannot be the real problem. In fact, when we see the situation or problem from God's point of view, that moment can become the best opportunity to give glory to God.

By sight, Abraham's reality was hopeless. But when he looked at God by faith, he was full of hope. He believed in God who is faithful and is love. He believed that every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows (Ja 1:17). People, even if they make a sure promise, break it when their situation becomes pressing or difficult. People are not faithful. However, God is faithful. He doesn't make a pledge randomly. God never breaks his promise but keeps it absolutely, no matter the cost. Abraham believed in God who is faithful, and held on to the word of God's promise firmly. We also need the same faith Abraham had. We may have tried for many years to raise disciples without seeing the visible fruit. It is time to look at God, who is faithful, and hold on to his word of promise.

Verse 22 says, **“This is why ‘it was credited to him as righteousness.’”** Paul repeats this phrase again, but this time after describing Abraham's faith that bore fruit. When God justified Abraham, he already saw the outcome of Abraham's life. Abraham's faith was like a seed that grows and bears fruit. Faith is not static; it is dynamic. Faith is not doctrinal; it is relational. When we live by faith from first to last, our faith will bear fruit. Let's read verses 23-24. **“The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness - for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.”** Paul says that our faith is the same faith that Abraham had. The object of our faith is same God who raises the dead. But we know more specifically that he accomplished our salvation through Jesus. **“He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification”** (25). When we believe in God who raised Jesus from the dead, God credits our faith as righteousness. Let's live by faith that God credits as righteousness, following the footsteps of father Abraham. Let's leave footsteps of faith for our descendants.