

The Gospel of God
Part 5
Romans 4
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Let me read to you from Romans Chapter 4. We have been looking into the book of Romans for a number of weeks. And I am going to read from Verse 1. It comes in the middle of Paul talking about the fact that Christ has addressed and satisfied the justice of God, and on the basis of that, a man or woman may be justified by faith.

And then in Chapter 4 he illustrates what that means by talking about Abraham, and he says in Verse 1:

“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.

“Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.

“However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

Down to Verse 16:

“Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

“As it is written: ‘I have made you a father of many nations.’ He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

“Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’

“Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah’s womb was also dead.

“Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised.

“This is why it was credited to him as righteousness.

“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.

“He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”

Any first-time reader of the New Testament, if they were to observe very carefully the recurring themes as they read it through, would realize very quickly that a key component in the whole message is that we need to exercise faith.

They will discover that the New Testament tells us that we are cleansed by faith, we are justified by faith, we are saved by faith. And then having become a Christian on the grounds of faith, we are to walk by faith, we are to live by faith, we are sanctified by faith, we fight the fight of faith, we take the shield of faith, we overcome the world by faith, we ask in faith, we have access to God by faith, we draw near in full assurance of faith. Without faith it is impossible to please God. Whatever is not of faith is sin.

These are just some of the references in the New Testament to this word faith.

But the question is what is meant by this? What actually does it mean to exercise faith? How does it operate?

Well here in Romans 4 Paul is writing about how the work of Jesus Christ for us becomes operational and experiential in us.

And he uses the example of Abraham to illustrate that as Abraham was justified by faith (whatever that means), that we also are justified by faith. That as God’s righteousness was credited to Abraham – not on the basis of any deserving nature within himself, but as a gift – so God’s righteousness (that is, our standing before God) is credited to us, not on the basis of any performance within ourselves.

We have already seen in these early chapters of Romans that the key theme that reoccurs in the book is the righteousness of God, the moral character of God. Forty-four times that word is used in this letter.

But having introduced that wonderful theme, he then talks about the wrath of God and how the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven and it is being revealed in God handing people over to the natural end result of their own willful disobedience (and we talked about that).

But that is not the sole nature of His wrath; it is also that there is going to come a day of judgement when men and women will stand before God accountable for everything that they have been. That’s in Chapter 2 and 3.

And when you get to the middle of Chapter 3, it is easy to become very depressed and very discouraged because Paul affirms there is no one righteous, that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. There is no one who seeks God. There is no one who does what is good.

You think, man alive, this is a terrible situation being described here. And having gone to the – if you like – the blackest hole in the middle of Chapter 3, he then says in Verse 21,

“But now a righteousness from God...has been made known.”

And we looked at this last time where he talks about the fact that Jesus Christ, on the cross, addressed and fully satisfied the judgement of God, that in place of judgement being experienced by you and me, we are in total contrast, declared justified, meaning the demands of the law were fully met in Jesus Christ so that you and I can be made free.

Now that is a wonderful truth. It is in some senses a legal transaction that has taken place. The justice of God has been addressed and satisfied. And the word justified is a legal term.

But this is something far more than simply a legal transaction. This has to become experiential in our lives. And it becomes experiential on the basis of faith, which is what Romans 4 is telling us from the example of Abraham.

Now I want to look at two aspects with you this morning. I want to look in the first 16 verses at righteousness as a legal transaction, so we're absolutely clear about that.

And then from Verse 17 to 25 I want to look at righteousness as a living transformation. It's not just my standing before God that has changed but my experience of God and my experience of life is changed as well.

Let's talk then first of all about righteousness as a legal transaction. And Paul presents this in these verses as an instantaneous change of position that takes place at a particular moment in a person's life.

Look at what he says about Abraham in Verse 3:

“What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”

There you are. The whole transaction is done. He believed God and the response: it was credited to him as righteousness - as simple and as instantaneous as that.

Now of course that is not the whole story. There are 25 verses to go yet in which he explains how this works out in the process of living. And it is important to know that.

But it is important to know that it has a beginning, a moment when a man, a woman, a boy or girl recognizes that my standing before God has changed from what it was ten minutes ago to something totally different on the basis of my response to the work of Christ.

Let me explain the situation that he is using as an illustration.

God had taken Abraham from a place called Ur of the Chaldeans, which is down in present day Iraq. He had taken him across to Canaan, which is present day Israel.

On the way they got stuck in a place called Haran where they got bogged down for a while. And when Abraham eventually got to Canaan, he was 75 years of age. His wife who was with him was 65 years of age; her name was Sarah.

They had no children. And it explains to us in Genesis the reason for that is because Sarah was barren.

When they got there, God took Abraham out one night and said, "Look up into the sky. How many stars can you see? I am going to give you as many descendants as the stars you see in the sky. I am going to give you a son. From that son will come a nation and from that nation the seed of Abraham will come, a Messiah who is going to bless, the means of blessing the whole world."

God told that to Abraham and when He did, it says Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

What God told Abraham was something which was humanly impossible. Not only was his wife barren but she is now 65. She is long past the menopause. All her possible childbearing days are over and past. They have been married for donkey's years, they have no children.

God speaks of what seems to be a ridiculously impossible situation, and Abraham's response is to say, "I believe You."

And on the grounds of that - he believed God - it was credited to him as righteousness.

When it says he believed God, what it means is this: Abraham said, "God said it; God will do it. I can contribute nothing really - my wife cannot - because we are past the normal ages. God will do it."

Well after that encounter he went home with a skip in his 75-year old step, all excited. "We are going to have a baby, and the reason I know that is because God said it. And when God says something, He will do it. I trust Him."

And Abraham's focus is not on, "Well how are we going to manage this? Sarah is barren, you know, we are old anyway."

But his focus is on God entirely, what God has said, what God has promised. His focus is exclusively, absolutely, entirely, 100%, this is God's business.

Now this is the grounds on which a man, a woman, is justified before God. When God speaks about our standing before Him as righteous, we know that is a ridiculously impossible thing.

How do we know that? Because just look at the last seven days. Look at the kind of things we battled with. Look at the things we struggled with. Look at the temptations that come into our minds. Look at our histories. How is God going to declare that?

Well, on the basis of His word, and all Abraham had was His word, this is not going to be something earned or deserved, but received as a gift.

And Paul explained this further by saying in Verse 4,

“When a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.

“However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

So what he is saying is that when a man works his wages are not considered a gift. That would be the height of insult, wouldn't it?

If a man has worked hard for a day or for a week or for a month, at the end of the day or the week or the month, his boss comes to him and says, “Hey, I would like to give you a gift” and he gives him the money that he has earned, he would say, “This is not a gift. You are insulting me by calling this a gift. This is an obligation that you have.”

But says Paul, if a man has done nothing, he has done no work, he has made no contribution and there are no obligations between them, and then the boss comes and gives him some money, it is a gift – unearned, undeserved and unwarranted.

And Paul is saying, don't ever get the idea that salvation is a little bit of what God does, a little bit of what I do and somehow, you know, God weighs it in the balances and says, “Yes, I think you deserve this. I am going to give this to you.”

No. You don't earn it. You cannot earn it. You simply say, “You said it; You will do it” as Abraham had done.

Then he goes on, if you read in Verse 10-12 that Abraham was not justified because of his circumcision. That is, in obedience to what God had told him to do.

Nor in Verse 13-15 was he justified because he had kept the law.

But as Verse 16 says,

“The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace.”

In other words, God initiates this. It is by grace. We receive it, for it is by faith.

And our role is simply the role of receiving it.

And I will tell you why this is important. A lot of us get discouraged, sometimes get depressed about our salvation, because we are always looking inside to find whether we really deserve this and whether we are worthy of this or not. And when we look inside to find our worthiness, we discover we are constantly faced with our unworthiness and we get discouraged.

But this has nothing to do with your worthiness – nothing to do with that.

You know sometimes people say Christians are so self-righteous, they are so pleased with themselves.

But you could not be further from the truth because a genuine Christian is only a Christian on the grounds that he knows his own unrighteousness, or her own unrighteousness – our failure, our sin. And we come in honesty and we confess it.

It is the self-righteous who don't need Christ. So actually the reason why a person is not a believer is because they are self-righteous. It is not the believer who is self-righteous.

And when someone who purports to be a Christian parades this kind of self-righteousness, they haven't begun to understand the Christian life. They have just adopted a Christian religion.

It is on the basis of our brokenness and our failure.

And in Romans 3 Paul talks about the fact that all our sin was placed on Christ, so that in Chapter 4 he can talk about all Christ's righteousness has been placed on us.

Let me illustrate that. If this yellow package in my hand represents the righteousness of Jesus Christ and this purple package in my left hand represents the sinfulness of human beings, of you and of me, what happened in Romans Chapter 3, when Jesus Christ addressed and satisfied the judgement of God, was that all of my sin was placed on Him. And when the Father looked at the Son, He saw Him covered in my sin.

All the sinfulness of human beings was attributed to Christ. He who knew no sin was made to be sin for us.

That's Romans Chapter 3.

In Romans Chapter 4 you have the reverse effect where all the righteousness of Christ was placed upon me. So God, looking at me, sees not me but sees Christ, sees His righteousness. And this is now my standing before God as once Christ, on the cross; His standing before God was that He was a sinner. Not His own sin, but yours and mine.

And this is the legal transaction made possible by the cross that makes possible and effective your justification and my justification. “God, I don’t deserve this at all. This is by grace – that is, You initiated it. It is by faith – that is, I receive it.” And both have to take place.

We have to consciously, deliberately say “Thank You Lord Jesus. I confess my need to You.” And He comes by His Holy Spirit to live within your life.

But our relationship with God is more than just a legal one where, okay I am declared righteous.

And so my second point to look at is as righteousness as a living transformation – not just a legal transaction, but a living transformation that is taking place.

Let me read you Verse 17 (Romans 4):

“As it is written: ‘I have made you a father of many nations.’”

(That was the bit that Abraham believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness at that point.)

Then he goes on to say that,

“He” (Abraham) “is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.”

Now why does Paul write this, that the God he trusts is

“the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.”

Well I will tell you why. When Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness, he was out at night, God speaking to him on his own. But he then had to come home and tell his wife Sarah.

God didn’t tell Sarah; Abraham had to tell Sarah. This is momentous news for a woman to get, you know.

And the Bible is not complimentary about either one of them. It says in Verse 19 here about Abraham that his body was as good as dead. So he wasn’t healthy. He was good as dead.

And then it says,

“and that Sarah’s womb was also dead.”

In Genesis 18 it says about Sarah that she was worn out. (I don’t know why because she had no kids, but she was worn out. I don’t know what she had been doing – a lot of potato picking or something.)

I would love to have been a fly on the wall when Abraham came home. Here's Sarah all worn out lying down there somewhere and Abraham comes in as good as dead.

"Sarah, God spoke to me."

"Really? I'm glad you are having your devotions. What did He say to you?"

"He is going to give us something."

"What is He going to give us?"

"You will never guess. He is going to give us a baby."

And do you know the remarkable thing? She believed him!

I don't think my wife would believe me in similar circumstances. I think she would want a second opinion at least.

But she believed him and she probably started painting the room or whatever women do when they get that information, and waited.

Abraham would say, "How are you feeling Sarah? Are you putting on weight at all? No? Have you been sick in the mornings? No?"

Three months go by; six months go by. "Are you sure you are not putting on any weight? Are you not eating funny combinations like bananas and onions at the same time? No?"

Nine months go by. "There should be a baby somewhere close. Well, come on Sarah, are you sure nothing is going on?"

Twelve months went by. Two years went by. Three years. Five years. Eight years. Ten years. Twelve years. Fifteen years. Twenty years. Twenty-four years before God spoke to him again and twenty-five years before they had the baby.

They did have a crisis after ten years. It's in Genesis 16. They had a blazing row, Abraham and Sarah. She said to him, in effect, if I could paraphrase it, "Did you tell me ten years ago that God told you we were going to have a baby?"

"Well, yes, He did. I didn't make that up. God told me that."

"You sure it was God?"

"Yes."

"What had you been eating that night? You'd been eating too much curry or something."

“No, no, it wasn’t the curry. God told me.”

“Well, where’s the baby, Abraham?”

“Well Sarah, sorry to mention this, maybe God didn’t realize how worn out you were.”

“Listen Mr. Abraham, maybe God didn’t realize how dead you are.”

But there is no baby, so they devise a scheme. They committed themselves to bring about the will of God by their own scheming. That is always a disastrous thing to do. You let God bring about His will.

And they decided in the context of the culture of the day, “We have a maid called Hagar. She is young. She is single. She is probably fertile. Why don’t you have the baby through Hagar?”

Incidentally, Abraham and Sarah had gone to Egypt in disobedience, out of the will of God, and Hagar was an Egyptian maid they brought back with them.

Let me warn you, when you step out of the will of God you always bring back baggage. You need to clean up and clear up.

And here is Hagar and she conceives Abraham’s child and gives birth to a little boy. And they called him Ishmael.

And Abraham must have been thrilled to bits. “At last I got this little boy. Eighty-five and I am a bit old – could be his grandfather, could be his great grandfather just about. But thank You anyway.”

And Ishmael grew up and then thirteen years later when Abraham was ninety-nine God said, “Remember I spoke to you about your wife giving birth to a son?”

“Well, yes.”

“Well this time next year your wife will give birth to a son.”

“I beg Your pardon?”

“This time next year your wife will give birth to a son.”

“Well, we got him. He’s thirteen already. I mean he’s a strapping young man. Look, he’s out there playing volleyball.”

But it actually says in Genesis 21 that Sarah gave birth on the very day God had said.

Now Paul misses out that bit about Ishmael. And the fact, by the way, that when God told him at ninety-nine that he was going to have this son next year, he laughed. And then he went home and told Sarah and she laughed.

But Isaac was born.

Now Paul is very kind about Abraham. He doesn't talk about the fact that they produced Ishmael here in Romans Chapter 4. He just talks about the process that went on from the moment Abraham was declared justified to the moment that the issue over which he had believed God came to fulfillment, which was twenty-five years before he was born.

And of course that wasn't the fulfillment. The fulfillment was that beyond that there would come a family and a nation.

So how did Abraham survive for those years? And the reason why I ask that question, the reason why Paul asked that question, is because you might have come to Jesus Christ and said, "Lord, I do trust You. You died for me. You were buried for me. You were raised again from the dead and I invite You to forgive me and cleanse me on the basis of Your death and to come by Your Holy Spirit to live within me."

And you are born again of the Holy Spirit and a transaction takes place, but you wonder why in the world doesn't this work out a lot more easily than it seems to? Why aren't I seeing evidences of real change in my life when sometimes it seems such a struggle?

Well Abraham is an illustration of this. And I love it in Verse 18 where it says,

"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed."

Well how does Abraham believe in hope against all hope? Well it sounds like, you know, like this balancing thing, like a set of scales where on the one hand, you know, he is full of hope and so he's becoming confident. He wakes up in the morning, "Yeah, God made me a promise He is going to bring about and I am full of hope."

And then, you know, a year later nothing is happening, and against hope. And his hope sinks and his no hope rises.

And then he has a good day and his hope begins to rise again. And then he looks at the reality and this no hope begins to rise again.

Then he remembers what God said. "And this was the word of God to me – God said it." So his hope rises.

Then he comes home and looks at Sarah. She is all worn out, lying on a bean bag. Her womb was dead and he's almost dead anyway. And he has no hope.

Do you ever feel like that? Do you ever feel like that about your own Christian life? You might go home on a Sunday full of hope. “I heard something from the Word of God that encouraged me – great!”

But Monday morning you are smack back down in discouragement again.

This is an issue of faith in God that Paul is talking about. So the big question is what kind of God is Abraham trusting? What is it that keeps his hope coming back, and then the realities make his no hope begin to dominate his thinking and his feeling?

Well let me read you Verse 17 – the middle of Verse 17. And he says two things there. He says,

“Abraham is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead...”

Uh-oh – hold on: “The God who gives life to the dead.”

What is Abraham’s problem? Well go two verses later to Verse 19. It says,

“Abraham’s body was as good as dead.”

Go later in the same Verse 19:

“And Sarah’s womb was also dead.”

So here’s the problem: Abraham’s body is as good as dead. Sarah’s womb is dead. They have got this incredible promise that doesn’t make sense in the light of their deadness. What kind of God is talking to us about this?

And here’s the answer: “The God who gives life to the dead.”

The very thing that is my problem God is the antithesis of.

“I am dead; my wife’s womb is dead. I’m as good as dead; her womb is dead. But what God is making this promise? What God am I trusting? It’s the God who gives life to the dead. So my confidence is not in the increasing deadness of my own body or the deadness of my wife’s womb. My confidence is in that the God I am trusting is the God who gives life to the dead. So if I am nearly dead and her womb is dead, it is irrelevant to the final outcome.”

What is relevant to the final outcome is that God who said it and the God who will do it is the God who gives life to the dead.

Death is not a problem to Him. It is where He imparts life.

That was the ground of his confidence first of all during the times of waiting when his hope was sinking and the no hope was dominating. He would say, “What God am I trusting? The God who gives life to the dead. Wow! That’s me; that’s her.”

And the second thing he says in this Verse 17, speaks of

“...the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.”

That is an interesting statement. Things that are not, He calls them as though they were. God has talked about the future and He has talked about babies and families and grandchildren and a tribe and a nation.

None of these exist. None of these look likely to exist, humanly. But God calls things that are not as “son, grandchildren, tribe, nation” as though they are.

You see we are limited by this process that we call time. Time is a linear process. It has a beginning, it moves – in fact science tells us that time did not exist before the existence of the world. Outside of the existence of the world it was timeless; in other words, eternal.

Scripture tells us that too.

And we live within a process of time but God lives in eternity, inhabits eternity. He stands outside of time.

If I had six chairs up here – the first chair represents one millennium, second chair a second millennium, third chair a third millennium, fourth millennium, fifth millennium, sixth millennium, and I had some of you – one of you sit on each of these chairs – six of you.

And over here you live in the first millennium, so you know what’s going on there. But the rest hasn’t taken place yet.

The person in the second millennium; well you know what’s gone on back in the first millennium because it’s history and history has already happened, so you can read books about it and you can hear about it and you can get stories passed down about it.

And the third millennium looks back. And the fifth millennium looks all the way back down to the first millennium.

But the third millennium has no idea what the fourth millennium is going to consist of any more than we have any idea what the 22nd Century is going to consist of, because it is future.

We only know the present and the past.

But God stands outside of time and when God looks at the first millennium and God looks at the sixth millennium or the umpteenth millennium, He sees it from beginning to end.

The only difference is that in the era of time in which you and I live, the future hasn't happened yet, but God sees it and knows it.

And so He calls into being things which are not, which is why God can give prophetic word to people throughout the Old Testament Scriptures.

They are operating here in their era and they only know what's going on, but God sees down here and says, "Listen, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, let Me give you a bit of insight. Down over there this is going to happen. Daniel, down over there, this..."

This only difference between the past and the future is the future hasn't happened yet. But as far as God is concerned, He calls things that are not as though they were. And when God speaks of the future, He isn't guessing. He has been there. He knows. He has seen it.

And that's why when God speaks of things outside of our experience, when we read the Word of God and we read things that are to be true of Christian believers and we say, "Is that really true, can I really trust that?" He has been there. He knows it; He sees it. It just hasn't happened yet in the linear process of time that we are a part of.

And so Abraham lives with this trust in a God who brings life to the dead. The problem is he is surrounded by deadness. And a God who calls things that are not as though they were. And there is so much that God has said that is not and yet God is speaking of them as though they were. That's because He knows what I don't know.

And so that's why in Chapter 4 Verse 18 he says,

"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed."

In Verse 19:

"Without weakening in his faith..."

Verse 20:

"He did not waver through unbelief..."

(Paul is being very kind to Abraham at that point, but there is a big picture.)

"He did not waver through unbelief."

Verse 21:

"Being fully persuaded that God had the ability to do what he had promised."

And that, of course, is the issue. That is the ground on which we can be certain in this process of God working out His justification and sanctification, the things that make us Christ-like in our

lives, is that we are fully persuaded that God has the ability to do what He has promised. He initiated it; it is by grace. He promised it.

It is also by faith so I receive it. How do I receive it? I am persuaded God has the ability to do what God promised.

That's what Paul says about Abraham.

And I ask you this morning, do you – do you believe God has the ability to do what He has promised?

You know we go through life and we fail. Then we fail again, and then again, and then again and again and again – and again, and again, and again, and again and again, and again and again.

And you and I have a track record of saying, “Oh Lord, if You were to measure me by my consistency, man, I wouldn't have much of a chance.”

So what are we measured by? By our trust in the God who has the ability to do what He has promised. That's why this is not something deserved because of what I have done. It is undeserved. “Lord, I trust You, I trust You, I trust You.”

And there will be many of us here who are frustrated in our own Christian lives. But get your focus back on God Himself. Get your focus back on His Word, which we now have, not in a dialogue under the stars that Abraham had, but we have it now in this book, the Word of God, which is to you and to me, as His truth, full of His promises, full of His commitments.

And because Abraham was fully persuaded that God had the power to do what He had promised, it was credited to him as righteousness, an ongoing daily growth in righteousness and quality of living.

As I finish, is the God you trust the God who gives life to the dead? And you feel, “I am so dead in these areas.”

Is the God you trust the God who calls things that are not as though they were? So it hasn't happened yet in our experience of time, but God sees it and calls it. “I trust Him.”

Is the God you trust the God who has the power to do what He promised? This was Abraham's God.

And this justification by faith is a legal transaction. There is a moment in which we are declared right before God, but it is not only that; it has to become a living transformation. Because once you are right, as Abraham was, the ongoing day by day trusting Him, looking to Him, experiencing Him, waiting for Him, hope against hope – and it's hope that won.

And this becomes the experience of every day, which causes our standing before God, our righteousness, which is imputed to us, to become our living before God and before the world, righteousness imparted as we trust Him.

Don't worry about failing. Don't worry about the fact you have got to confess your sins. You are going to have to do that. You are not going to be perfect. But you keep your eyes on Him.

And there are those of us here this morning – some of us need to enter into that moment of saying, “Lord, I trust You.” And you are declared right with God.

Others of us; you have been a Christian for many years or maybe you are a recent one, but you need to go on saying, “Lord, I am not looking at myself because I am discouraged by that; I am looking out to You and You are committed – You are committed that I am conformed increasingly from one degree of glory to another into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. You are committed to making that true for me and I trust You.”

We are going to sing a hymn to close. It's an old song that some of you know.

*My faith has found a resting place,
Not in device nor creed;
I trust the Ever-living One,
His wounds for me will plead.*

*I need no other argument,
I need no other plea;
It is enough that Jesus died,
And that He died for me.*

Jared is going to lead us in this song as a song of response from our hearts.