

Rom 4:1-25
Tim Anderson 20/11/22

Last week,
we listened to Paul explaining
how Jesus' death on the cross justifies us
if we put our faith in him.

That is, how we are made 'just as if I'd never sinned'.
And after he finished explaining how we are justified,
Paul gave three consequence of the fact
that we are justified by faith, not by works.

1. We can't boast.
2. It's a level playing field.
There's no difference between Jews and Gentiles.
All must put their faith in Jesus to be saved.

3. We uphold the law by our faith.

Whereas you might have thought
that the law was based on good works,
So if God's righteousness is given through faith,
then the law is null and void.

But actually it's not like that at all.

In fact the salvation through faith that Paul has been talking about
comes from the pages of the Old Testament Law,
if you read them properly.

And so that's what Paul goes on to show in chapter 4.
He's showing that you can read
each of these three consequences of justification by faith
straight out of the pages of the Old Testament.
And to do that he turns to the example of Abraham.

4:1 "What shall we say that Abraham
our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?"
Now I find that many Christian folk
are familiar with the Old Testament stories.

So when I mention Abraham,
you might be able to tell me
that he was the one who passed off his wife as his sister
to the king of Egypt.
You might be able to tell me that it was Abraham
who was told to sacrifice his son,
and then at the last moment,
God provided a lamb for the sacrifice.
You might be able to tell me
that it was Abraham who was given the covenant of circumcision.
And you could probably tell the stories connected to Joseph and Jacob,
Adam and Eve, Noah and a host of other Old Testament characters.
What I find people are a bit rusty on,
if they ever knew,
is where all these folk fit in the big storyline of the Bible.
So let me explain that for Abraham.
Because that is pretty important.

God made the world.
And he made it good.
And he put Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden
which was paradise on earth.
But Adam and Eve disobeyed God.
So God kicked them out of the garden.
And they and their descendents spread throughout the world.
And their descendents went from bad to worse.
So much so that God sent a flood to wipe out everyone
except Noah and his family,
Because Noah was a righteous man.
But even Noah's descendents quickly turned against God.
So many generations later,
God decided to take a people for himself
from among the peoples of the world.
This people would live under God's rule,
and they would do things his way.

They would be such an example of the benefits of living God's way,
that other people would flock to join them.

This people became the people of Israel.

And they didn't live up to hope that God had for them.

And in the end they were such a failure,

that God sent his Son to fulfil his promise

to take a people for himself from among the peoples of the world.

A people who would live under God's rule

and do things his way.

And this time the people were called the Christian church.

That's the history of the Bible in 2 minutes.

Where does Abraham fit in?

When God decided to take a people for himself that first time,

the man he chose to be the nucleus of that people was Abraham.

The nation of Israel were all descended from that one man, Abraham.

So when Paul takes Abraham as an example

to prove his points about salvation by faith,

he's not just picking some random guy from the OT,

like Gideon or Samson,

he's proving his point using the man

that Jews regarded as the absolute source of their faith.

"If it was true for Abraham,

then it had better be true for us too."

That was the Jewish attitude.

To tell a Jew something about Abraham

was like telling an American something about Abraham Lincoln

or like telling a Chinese communist something about Mao.

These guys are so much on a pedestal

that they command instant respect.

So what does Paul use the example of Abraham to prove?

You'll remember that the first consequence of justification by faith

was that we can't boast.

We love to boast.

We love to tell everyone
how well our children and grandchildren are doing.
We love to show people how well we have done ourselves.
Our hearts are filled with pride.
But when it comes to salvation,
if we have been given it,
it is a gift from God.
It comes by faith not good works.
But did Abraham have anything to boast in?
Paul says,
4:2 “If in fact Abraham was justified by works,
he had something to boast about ...
What does the Scripture say?
‘Abraham believed God,
and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”
Remember that the word translated ‘believed’
is the same as ‘to have faith’.
Abraham had faith in God,
and it was credited to him as righteousness.
Abraham was justified in God’s eyes by faith not by works.
Now if you are justified not by your works by rather by faith,
then there can’t be anything to boast in.

Paul uses the example of doing a job.
When you do a job,
you expect to get paid.
If you did a job and your employer failed to pay you,
you would be understandably upset.
Every tradie has their story of the job they did
and the customer wouldn't pay up.
Have you got that story, Robbie?
The employer has to pay the agreed wage.
The employee has a right to expect it.
If our good works had earned us salvation,
then we would have a right to expect eternal life.

We might have even had something to boast about.
“Look what a good boy I have been.
I have earned myself eternal life.”
But as verse 5 says,
“We didn’t work –
rather we trusted God who justifies the ungodly.”
Abraham wasn’t justified because he did good things,
Abraham was justified
because God made a promise to him and he believed it.
Abraham was 75 years old.
And he had no child.
No one who could inherit his estate.
God took Abraham outside,
and showed him the stars in the night sky.
If you've camped overnight in the bush,
when you get away from the lights of 21st Century civilization,
the night sky blows you away.
The stars are so bright and you can see so many of them.
Of course that’s what it looked like
when God took Abraham outside of his tent
to have a look at the night sky.
No street lights in those days.
And God said to the 75 year old –
“See those stars,
that is what your offspring will be like.”
And Abraham believed God’s promise.
That was what made him right in God’s sight.
He didn’t do anything particularly virtuous.
In fact he did some pretty dumb things,
like sleeping with his wife Sarah's maid,
with her encouragement,
because he was impatient at how slow God was
in giving him the son he promised.
But he believed God’s promise.
Abraham had no works to boast in –

just faith in God.

So Paul's first consequence of justification by faith – that there can be no boasting – is confirmed by the story of Abraham.

What about his second consequence that it's a level playing field – that Jews and Gentiles can be justified by faith in exactly the same way?

Does Abraham show us anything about that?

Indeed he does says Paul.

But first lets ask the question,

why would a Jewish person think

they should be given favourable treatment anyway?

It was because God had made a covenant with them.

The covenant went like this –

you mark yourself out as my people by circumcision and I will bless you.

So the Jewish man who was circumcised

saw himself as the recipient of a guarantee of special treatment.

He was a child of the covenant.

But Paul asks the question,

“When was Abraham justified by his faith?”

Well it was Genesis chapter 15

when God took him out of his tent and showed him the night sky

and made a promise to him about his descendents,

and Abraham was justified by his faith.

And it was many years later in Genesis chapter 17

that God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision.

Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised.

So how could a Jewish person argue

that you need to be circumcised in order to be justified?

Abraham his founding father,

the very source of his ancestry,

and the recipient of God's promises,

he was justified by faith,
without the covenant.

Faith is all that it takes.

Nothing else.

Faith alone saves us.

Abraham shows us that it is a level playing field.

If Abraham can be justified by faith when he wasn't circumcised,
then Gentiles today can be justified by faith too.

What about the third consequence of justification by faith?

We uphold the law by believing in justification by faith.

Well Abraham is written about in the Jewish law.

Genesis is part of the Torah –
the Law.

If the law itself teaches justification by faith,
then believing in justification by faith is upholding the law.

And it's not only Abraham who points to justification by faith.

Paul quotes Psalm 32

where David is talking about forgiveness
that comes from a free gift of God also.

If the Jewish people of Paul's day –

indeed Paul himself before he met Jesus on the Damascus road –
if they were teaching justification by works,

it is they who were not upholding the Law.

Faith in God's promises is the key.

Trusting the God who promises to give good gifts to his children.

That is how we are made right in his eyes.

If faith is so important,

it's worth us spending a little time thinking about what faith is.

Between verses 19-22, there is a great description of Abraham's faith.

4:19 "Without weakening in his faith,

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

What’s the opposite of faith?

Many people would tell you that the opposite of faith is being rational.
Being rational is looking at the available evidence,
and drawing the best conclusions you can based on the evidence.

Whereas faith on the other hand
is believing what you would like to be true,
even if the evidence points in the opposite direction.

We have no evidence, they say,
that there is life after death,
but you believe it on faith,
because it gives you comfort
when you think about the fact that you are going to die one day.
But actually that’s a very narrow and limited view of rationality,
and faith is quite a rational thing to have.

You see facts and evidence
are not the only reasonable things to base decisions on.
We also base decisions on the testimony of people who are trustworthy.
If Cherida comes to me and says,
“Come and look in the family room,
you’ll get a lovely surprise.”
I have no evidence that what she says to me is true.
I only have her word for it.
But my previous experience of Cherida
is that she’s a very trustworthy woman.
And I expect based on her character
that if I go into the family room,
what I will see

is children cleaning up toys by themselves without being asked,
or some similar sight that makes a mother's heart glad.

Good news that she wants to share with her husband.

I don't have any evidence,

but it's perfectly reasonable to trust Cherida.

When I trust Cherida,

I'm not being irrational.

I'm not burying my head in the sand and avoiding the fact
that I have no hard evidence

that there's a nice surprise in the family room.

I'm merely making the quite reasonable decision,

that the trustworthiness of the messenger

outweighs the lack of evidence in this case,

and so I'm being entirely rational in believing Cherida.

It's just not true that the opposite of having faith is being rational.

The same is true of Abraham, isn't it?

He didn't avoid reality.

What does it say?

He faced the fact that his body was as good as dead.

He faced the fact that Sarah's womb was also dead.

Abraham faced the facts.

And he decided in a perfectly rational way,

that the trustworthiness of God who promised him a son

outweighed the evidence that points in the opposite direction.

It's a totally reasonable, sensible decision to make,

one that you make with your brain switched on.

When it's God who does the promising,

it is always entirely reasonable to believe his promises.

Even if all the available evidence points the other way.

The reason is that God always keeps his promises.

He never makes a mistake.

He never forgets.

He never 'would like to do something but just can't manage it
due to circumstances beyond his control'.

God is totally trustworthy.
He is completely reliable.
Why wouldn't you trust someone like that?

The opposite of having faith is not being rational.
The opposite of faith is actually unbelief.

Verse 20 says,

“Yet Abraham did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God.”

If someone tells you something and you say,

“I don't believe you.”

That is the opposite of faith.

It's unbelief.

You don't need to have evidence.

You might base your unbelief entirely on the character of the person.

Occasionally I have people come to my door to ask for food or money.

And they always have a story

about how devoted members they were

of the Anglican church in the town they have come from.

Now I don't have any hard evidence that they are telling me lies.

But in my mind, I'm thinking,

“I don't believe you,

you're just telling me that because you want me to give you something.”

I don't trust them.

I don't have faith in them.

I disbelieve them.

Some people aren't trustworthy

and it's quite sensible to disbelieve them.

Even if you don't have any evidence that you are being strung along.

Though I think the Christian should try to err on the side of giving people the benefit of the doubt wherever possible.

But if you choose to disbelieve someone,

that's unbelief.

That's the opposite of faith.

So what it means to not have faith in God
is to choose to disbelieve his promises.

Sometimes people say to me,

“I wish I had faith.

I just can't make myself believe all this life after death stuff.

I guess I'm just too rational a person.

If I can't see the evidence I can't make myself believe something.”

What they don't realise

is that they need to think not just about the evidence

but about who has made the promise of eternal life to us.

If you don't have faith then you have unbelief.

If you don't have faith,

then you are looking God in the eye and saying,

“God, I don't believe the promise you have made to me.

God, I think you are lying to me.”

Now that's a pretty serious thing to say to the Almighty God.

That's a pretty serious thing to say to the person who created you.

So let us take God at his word.

Let us trust him and believe his promises.

Let's be children of Abraham –

those who have the faith of Abraham.