

Sermon Growth Guide

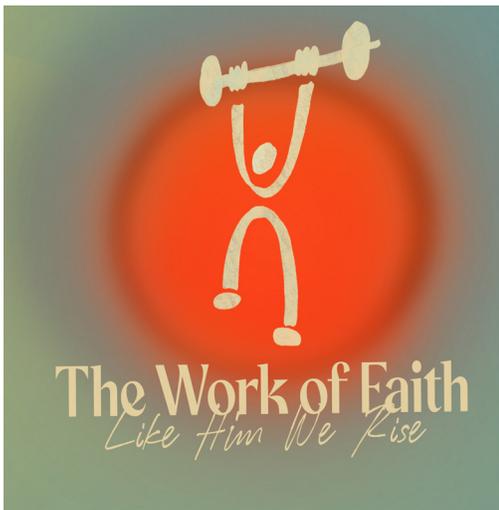
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The Work of Faith | Romans 4:1-12

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Key Verse: What does Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. (Romans 4:3)

Big Idea: God's plan for his people has always been a loving relationship grounded in faith and trust in Him.



Foundations

Paul of Tarsus, the writer of the letter to the Romans, was no ordinary Jew. Raised in the multi-culturally, polytheistic, and philosophically rich city of Tarsus during the times of a Roman occupation, Paul would be keenly aware of the crucial distinctions that marked the Jews as God's chosen.

Paul's family belonged to the most strictly observant sect of the Jewish people, the Pharisees. His father was likely a Torah scholar. As to Paul's command of Scripture, NT Wright writes, "He gives every impression of having swallowed the {Hebrew} Bible whole."

Paul, zealous for his beliefs, set out to destroy the budding Christian faith that threatened to destroy his Jewish heritage. Then comes the road to Damascus. Then comes Jesus.

After meeting Jesus, the shift in Paul's understanding of God's plan of salvation is seismic. Paul does not deviate from the teachings of the Law and the Prophets, rather he finally understands. In Romans 4 he is building a bridge from Abraham, to David to Jesus. He makes clear that the promise of salvation is for all people not just the circumcised Jews. The gospel is a gospel of faith, faith in God rather than faith in one's actions. We need to meet Jesus to get it

Understanding God's Word

Read together Romans 4:1-12 and Genesis 15:4-6. Discuss together what connects the passage in Genesis 15 with Psalm 32 and to Paul's argument that belonging to the family of God is not about circumcision.

Review Romans 1:1-2 In Paul's opening he calls himself a servant of the gospel of God-the gospel he proclaimed beforehand through his prophets. How might this statement align with his discussion of Abraham in Romans 4?

Discuss the meaning of the phrase the "Gospel of God."

Applying God's Word

Like the Pharisees we sometimes believe that God's blessing and our salvation is based on our obedience to God's laws. Where do you put your faith when you feel trapped by circumstances or when you have failed again? Where do you put your faith when your newsfeed is frightening?

Witnessing God's Word

In Martin Luther's treatise, he states, "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone" How is this statement true for you? How does it demonstrate your faith to the world? How does knowing Jesus make it possible?

Where is your faith? At the Super Bowl half-time show, as Pastor Greg pointed out at Ash Wednesday, Bad Bunny declared, “I’m here because I believed in myself.” In the Winter Olympics I heard an athlete say, “I’m here because I believed I could do it. Whatever you want to do, believe you can do it and you will.” And how important is self-confidence? So important! Others said they were there because their parents believed in them. How wonderful when we believe in one another and make sacrifices for one another’s dreams! Some said, “I need to start by giving it up to the big guy upstairs.” I heard that a lot. It sounded like God was there to help them hit their marks, a good coach. Eh. I do celebrate when genuine thanks and praise go where they belong, “I want to thank God for today.” Where is your faith? This week in our series, Like Him We Rise, we want to talk about The Work of Faith. The work of faith.

Where is your faith? Jesus and his disciples were caught in a storm on the sea. Jesus was asleep in the boat. “The disciples went and woke him, saying, ‘Master, Master, we’re going to drown!’ He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm. ‘Where is your faith?’ he asked his disciples. In fear and amazement they asked one another, ‘Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.’” (Luke 8:24-25) Where is your faith? Jesus didn’t ask them if they had faith. He asked in essence two questions. One, what is the object of your faith? Where are you placing your trust, investing your expectations? Two, do you know when to get your faith out and use it? You’re caught in the rain. Where is your umbrella? You’re caught in a trial. Where is your true faith? It’s time to get it out and use it. If we don’t know where our salvation comes from, we will easily direct our faith in unhealthy, untrustworthy directions. “Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’” (John 6:29) This is the only work. And even that is not

a work of ours—an effort that produces an achievement—but a gift, a receiving, a trusting for help. Believe in Jesus. Trust in Jesus. This is the only thing asked of us. If we don’t understand this, we can live our whole lives trying to live up to false expectations, or chasing false hopes attached to false promises from false gods. I’ve done both. I bet you have too. Here is the work of faith: believe in Jesus Christ. Believe in him.

Paul has educated the Roman church. We are one people, whatever your genetic line or culture. We are all stuck in sin. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) And, praise God, we all have one Savior. “And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:24) Jesus is God’s plan to forgive, God’s way of bringing us home to him, God’s plan to be both “just and the one who justifies” the unrighteous. All we are asked to do is put our faith in Christ. Is there an illustration of this? Yes. Abraham. “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?” (Romans 4:1) Half the church were genetic descendants of the Father of Nations, and by that lineage, they believed, the true people of God. These days you can take a test. They are working to isolate the DNA of the line of Abraham. Is that how salvation comes? Abraham was chosen by God. God made a covenant with Abraham and with his children and children’s children. Yes. But how was Abraham saved? “What does Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’” (Romans 4:3) Abraham believed God. Where is your faith?

This is from Genesis 15, the covenant with Abraham. The Jewish Background Believers would have been shocked. To their mind, Paul is deconstructing the Abrahamic Covenant with all this faith talk, all this “we are all one people” stuff. “No, we’re not. We are us. They are them! Maybe they can come be part of us. Maybe we can let them jump

in with us. Maybe faith in Jesus is enough to slip them in through the back gate, but there is no way Abraham is an example of this sort of thing you are talking about—being saved by faith.” In Genesis 15, Abram (he’s still Abram) had been waiting on this promise for years, a promise that he would be a father of nations. Not happening. Getting older. A lot has happened. No baby. Abram sensed again the presence of God, the word of the Lord. Let’s just read this: “After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.’ But Abram said, ‘Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.’ Then the word of the Lord came to him: ‘This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.’ He took him outside and said, ‘Look up at the sky and count the stars— if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’” (Genesis 15:1-5) Right. Nice promise. Nice sentiment. It’s not happening.

“The word of the Lord” came to him. Is that Jesus? I wonder. The word of the Lord said to him, “Look up at the stars. Can you believe this promise? Where is your faith?” “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:6) Why did it need to be “credited as” righteousness? That means it wasn’t pure righteousness. It had to be counted that way, registered that way by God. We pick up Romans again. “Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation.” (Romans 4:4) If this is fair pay, a fair wage for fair work, there is no need for “credited as.” Abram believed. It’s God who decided to take that little seed of faith, that little notion of trust and credit it back to Abram as if Abram had done nothing but obey and follow God’s word his whole life. Can God

do that? Yes, he can. Yes, he does, and it is a beautiful thing. “However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.” (Romans 4:5) See, it happens. “It does?” “Yes.” “Has anyone else experienced this?” “Yes, David.” “David?!” “David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.’” (Romans 4:6-8) David could not make up for his own sins, but God could forgive and name the sinner righteous.

Abraham and David. You can’t come up with two more defining figures for Judaism. In both cases faith was credited as righteousness. Believe the promise. Believe the Word of the Lord. God is able to take that belief and register it in the believer’s account as if the believer had obeyed every word of God, every holy impulse, had never stepped in a disobedient direction, had never once given in to sin. “Wow. God can do that?” Yes. The rite of circumcision was given later as a mark of it. That’s when Abram had a name change. What is your name in the Kingdom of God? We ask at baptism, “What is your Christian name? What is the Christian name of this child?” It is a naming moment. Not, what name is on the driver’s license for the state of Colorado? What is the Kingdom name, the eternal name? In the communion of saints, the fellowship of believers, what do we call you? Who are you? “And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father

Abraham had before he was circumcised.” (Romans 4:11-12) For us this is baptism. “In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. ...you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism...” (Colossians 2:11-12) Is that how salvation happens? No. It happens by faith.

Do you know how this works? The work of God is to place your belief, your hope, your trust in the one God sent. In Jesus. Believe in him and you will be saved. Do not believe and you are condemned already. Do you know that? I ask, because... Well, Paul said it so the Roman church would understand they are all on the same footing. I ask it to you today because time after time it seems that this truth doesn't really sink in. People sit in church hearing the gospel for years, but at the end of the day, when death is imminent, I hear someone say, “I don't know if I'm going to get in. I don't think I'm good enough.” Brother, let me help you: you are not good enough. Abraham wasn't good enough. David wasn't good enough. Paul wasn't good enough. Put “good enough” away. Where is your faith?

Look again at verse four and five. These two verses represent a choice. How do you want your relationship with God to be? “Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.” (Romans 4:4-5) Do you want a wage-paying relationship? Do you want to get what you earn, to receive what you deserve? What you earn is what you get. That's verse four. But verse five is different. You can trust God who justifies the ungodly. That means you need to admit that you are ungodly. You need to receive this credit, this gift. If you put your faith in Jesus to save, that faith will be credited to you—not only as forgiveness, which says you are not on the hook to pay

your debt, but righteousness, which says you are regarded in the eyes of God as if you never did anything but keep the Word of God at every turn. Righteous. Which one do you want? The wage or the gift? Where is your faith?

God is able to take faith in Jesus, your belief in Jesus, and credit it to you as righteousness. How? When God did this with Abraham, he had Abraham make a covenant. You can read this at the end of Genesis 15. A covenant was a promise guaranteed in blood. Animals were cut in two and laid out in pieces. To make the covenant, you would walk forward down this path of blood, saying, in effect, if I don't keep my promise, let it be to me as has happened to these animals of sacrifice. Abraham prepared to make that covenant with God. Then he fell asleep. He had a vision. “When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram...” (Genesis 15:17-18) God said, “Abraham, we are going to have this covenant. You will be mine. If there is blood, it will be on my side, not yours. I will pay.”

How can God forgive and justify a sinner? He pays. He sent his Son Jesus. Jesus paid the debt. Forgiven. Jesus transferred, credited his holiness to us, to all who believe in him. Righteous. Do you understand this? Can you believe? You say you get it. “I get it, Tim. I believe?” But if you really do, why are you still trying to earn it? Why are you still back on verse four? Give that up. Trust in Jesus. Be saved. Be redeemed. Be forgiven. Be made righteous. His blood has assured our salvation. This is the work of faith. Believe.