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**DATE:** March 14, 2026  
**SERIES:** The Gospel Is  
**MESSAGE:** Justification By Faith (Even for Abraham!)  
**PASSAGE:** Romans 4:1-25  
**SPEAKER:** Ryan Harmon

As we begin this evening, I want to encourage you to think about the best person that you have ever known. The nicest, the kindest, the most godly person imaginable. So here's the question. Do you have them in your mind? Now, as you think about them, here's the question for this evening:

*Does God owe that person anything because they are so good? Do they have any reason to boast before God?*

Last week as we walked through the end of Romans 3, Paul made it abundantly clear that at the cross, God made a way for unrighteous, ungodly sinners to be declared righteous before him. Justification, the declaration of righteousness, by faith and by faith alone. But, Given who we are as human beings, given our propensity to think that maybe somehow we can earn, maybe we or a really good person we know, maybe they are the exception.

Given that truth, the question still remains: is the good news of the gospel only for the bad, or is it also for the very good and even for the best people we've ever known? That's the question we want to consider this evening. So open your Bibles with me to Romans chapter 4, as we continue this exploration of all the contours of the gospel that Paul lays out in this very book.

Now last week, again, Paul ended with a question in verse 27. Chapter 3, verse 27, he said, "where then is boasting?" Where then is boasting? See, Romans is a deep explanation, an exploration, of the gospel. But I think the reason it also is so powerful is it deeply reveals the way we are wired as humans. We are wired to believe, to fall into an attitude of, earning—that maybe our works can accomplish something before God. So in verse 27 of chapter 3, Paul said, "where then is boasting?" And as soon as he asked the question, he then responded, he said, "it is excluded." It's excluded.

But now as we turn to chapter 4, knowing our inclination to work, to earn, to think that maybe God owes us something, Paul is going to continue to illustrate this very point, the power of the gospel and the centrality of faith. And to do that, he's going to look at someone that the Jewish people considered absolutely the best person who had ever lived. He's going to look at the life of Abraham. So beginning in verse 1 of chapter 4, Paul says this. He says:

*1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?*

Now, throughout Romans, we've come back again and again to this pressing concern of Paul's to make it abundantly clear that sin is a universal problem. All have sinned, Jew and Gentile alike. Therefore, all also need to hear the good news of God's response to our desperate need. Everyone is in desperate need. Paul has gone back to that again and again. Gentiles are sinners. And the Jews are sinners. Everyone is caught in the trap of sin.

I think it's important for us to understand why Paul has to come back to this over and over. It's easy for us to miss, but in that day, in the first century, the division between the Jews and the Gentiles



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was a deep division. And it was supported by a theological system—beliefs that were incorrect, but beliefs that maintained that division. So Paul is pressing over and over again to make it very clear that before God, because of sin, everyone is on a level playing field.

Now, there's no question that God, in giving the law to the Jewish people, gave them what easily could be called the most excellent moral system that had ever existed up until that moment. There is no question God's law given to Israel was the best outline of what a moral society would look like. But over time, here's what happened: that became an obstacle for the Jewish people. It became a point of pride. And over time, especially in relation to the Gentiles, they began to fall into the trap of thinking that when it came to them, they were morally superior to the Gentiles.

So now the question is, in dealing with God, is anyone on the basis of their morality able to come before him and tell him they are owed something by him? That's Paul's concern. That's why he turns to Abraham. See, Abraham is the "forefather according to the flesh" of the Jewish people. He is where it all began. God began working with Abraham, and through Abraham, began to form for himself a unique people. And we need to understand as we think about Abraham in this passage, for the Jewish people he was absolutely the model. He was the icon. He was the one that they believed to be absolutely worthy of emulating. He was the one that found righteousness on his own merits. If the Jewish people could have had a Mount Rushmore of faith, the first face on that mountain would have been Abraham. He was the one.

And so that's why Paul is going to look specifically at Abraham's faith. So he continues, he says, verse 1, "what has he found?" In other words, on what basis did Abraham enter into his relationship with God, his life with God?

Verse 2, he says:

*2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.*

So the logic there is that if anyone has any right to boast before God, it surely is the best person, the person that is the most moral. Whoever you thought of in your mind, maybe they have a right to boast. So Abraham was considered that way by the Jewish people. And Paul is saying, now, if it's true, if it's true that Abraham was able to stand righteous before God because of how good he was, if Abraham was justified by works, then it would be true that he would have something to boast about.

And honestly, when it comes to Abraham, probably in comparison to us, Abraham probably was a pretty moral guy, maybe the best. And that's the way that we humans think. We think of our goodness and our standing before God in relation to one another. We think that maybe because we are better than others, maybe that means we're gonna get a little more privilege. If righteousness is based on how we measure up in comparison to others, then maybe there is room for boasting.

But Paul, in verse two, as soon as he asked that question, he quickly answered, didn't he? He quickly supplied an answer. He said, "but not before God." In other words, Abraham could not boast when it came to his relationship with God. He had no room for boasting. Why? Because that's not how life with God works. And that's not how it worked with Abraham. In order to illustrate that, Paul is going to continue, and he's going to now talk about how this all unfolded for Abraham. And to do that, he's gonna turn back to the scriptures. It's going to be very interesting to watch Paul dig through, work through, the Old Testament and draw conclusions. So that's just what he does. He turns to Genesis 15 and he looks at this formative moment between Abraham and God. So Paul continues in verse 3, he says:



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*3 For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*

So that's a direct quote of Genesis 15, verse 6. Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.

*4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,*

Now, Paul's logic throughout this entire text is very clear, but we have not dug in as a church to Genesis 15 in quite some time. So in order for us to understand the context of what Paul is describing, it's going to be helpful just to think back upon that moment.

Now, Abraham and Sarah were married, but and in the ancient world, this was a serious problem: they were childless. They were childless. And because they were childless, Abraham was very confused because God had made promises to Abraham in Genesis 12. God's first interaction with Abraham was an interaction where he said, "I am going to make a great nation out of you. And through you, every family of the earth will be blessed." Now God had told Abraham that, but that was a confusing thing to Abraham because Abraham and Sarah were childless. They had no children that could grow into a great nation.

So God gave this promise of extravagant blessing to Abraham. But from the human side of things, it was a very illogical thing to believe and to trust God for. There was no human way that could possibly happen. It seemed impossible. How could the childless couple become the parents of a multitude of nations through whom eventually the whole earth would be blessed? And so Abraham was left wondering that, and it was a legitimate thing to be questioning, to be wondering about. And God came and met him, and Genesis 15 is the story about how God came and met him in that moment of wondering. God came to him in his tent. And then in Genesis 15, verse 5, we're told this. He took Abraham outside, and he said, "now, look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you're able to count them. So shall your descendants be." God reiterated the promise. And we're told that in response to that, Abraham believed God. Abraham trusted that God would keep his promise.

Verse 3 of Romans 4 is a direct quote of Genesis 15 verse 6. In response to God's reiteration of his promise, Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. So Paul's point is this: Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish people according to the flesh, the one that the Jewish people commonly believed was made righteous due to his works—Paul is being very biblical and going back to the text and saying, here's the truth: Abraham was not justified by works. Abraham was justified by faith. Abraham was declared righteous by God because Abraham believed. Justified. By faith.

Now understand then when God initiated this promise and his relationship with Abraham, Abraham brought nothing to the table. Abraham had nothing. To be childless in that day and age was to be impoverished. It was seen as a curse. It was a major problem. Abraham brought nothing to the table, but he believed God, and because he believed God, God declared him as righteous. He credited it as righteousness—no earning, no works.

Not only that, God was not obliged, obligated, to do anything for Abraham, as if Abraham had earned his wage, and God needed to grant him righteousness. That's not how it works. It's favor, the text said. God's grace. So here's the big point Paul's making in these first verses. Abraham's righteousness was the result of faith, not of works. It was the result of faith, not of works.



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So go back to Mount Rushmore for a moment. If Abraham is on the Mount Rushmore of faith, here's the point, he did nothing to get himself there. God put him there. Abraham trusted God's promise. He brought nothing to the table. No works, no earning. And God poured out his grace upon him. And in the same way, just as we cannot earn anything from God, we are justified by faith and faith alone—that's what we learned last week. In the same way, Abraham also was justified by faith.

Now, as Paul continues, he's going to draw in another hero of the faith. He's going to look to David's life, and David's words in Psalm 32. Verse 6, he says:

*6 just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. 8 Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."*

Now David, like Abraham, was also revered. His face should probably be up there too, but unlike Abraham, David was a very public sinner. Everyone knew about David's sin. David was an adulterer. And then David orchestrated a murder to cover up his adultery. David did not trust and could not trust in his righteousness, his righteous works, to justify himself before God. Instead, where did he place his trust? He placed his trust in the hope that God is willing to forgive lawless deeds, that God is willing to cover cover over our sin. David's hope was based on the fact that God would credit righteousness apart from works, no earning. No works. No righteousness that is self-made, only grace.

Now, these are two heroes of faith. These are two people that even today we look up to. We read their stories and we're so impressed by what God did in and through them. But understand, if they have no reason to boast, no one has a reason to boast. Gentiles can't boast. Jews cannot boast. There is no boasting because it is only grace. Grace is the only way that any of us can step in and stand before God as righteous. By grace, through faith.

Now, he continues in verse 9, he says:

*9 Is this blessing then on the circumcised or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness."*

Now, Paul here is turning back to this idea of Jew and Gentile. He's labored to make it clear that there's no division, there's no distinction. All are under sin, therefore all are under wrath. But here, he wants to make it very clear that just because he's talking about Abraham doesn't mean he's compromising on this obliteration of the distinction between the two people.

So here's his question. He's asking this question rhetorically, and he's saying, okay, so since Abraham was the father of the Jewish people, according to the flesh, since the Jewish people can trace their lineage directly back to him, since the Jewish people took on circumcision as a sign of their relationship to Abraham, does that mean that the blessing of righteousness is only available to them? That's his question. Or is it available to the Gentile also? Is it only for the Jew, or is it also for the Gentile?

So now to answer this question, he just returns right back to the text. Think about what did God do? So verse 10, he says:

*10 How then was it [that is, righteousness] was it credited? While he [Abraham] was circumcised, or uncircumcised;*



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In other words, how did it happen? What was the timing? When did Abraham believe, and when was that belief credited as righteousness? He answers it at the end of verse 10. He says, “not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised.” So Abraham believed—this formative moment, foundational moment—Abraham believed and it was credited to him as righteousness long before circumcision ever entered the scene. Circumcision would come about for Abraham and his family 25 years after the events of Genesis 15. And so because of that, faith has priority because faith is prior to circumcision. The work of circumcision for God played no part in God's righteous declaration upon Abraham. It was all based on his faith, all based on belief.

So he continues in verse 11:

*11 and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, 12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.*

So circumcision was a later work that was never intended to be a work or a means of gaining righteousness before God. That was never its intent. It was an outward sign. It was a mark that pointed back to faith and pointed back to what God did through faith. So because of that—and this is Paul's conclusion, and I don't know that it strikes us as shocking as it would have struck the hearers in the first century, but Paul's conclusion, because of this is this—because of the priority of faith, Abraham is not only the father of the Jewish people, Abraham is actually the father of everyone who believes. Everyone that takes on the sign of the family—the family resemblance, which is belief, it is faith, everyone that believes—is actually truly a child of Abraham, because faith is the true mark of Abraham's family. Not circumcision. Not ethnic identity. Not outward works. No, life with God, his declaration of righteousness that makes our life with him possible and makes us a part of his family, comes through faith, period. That's Paul's point. Now he continues, verse 13, he says:

*13 For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; 15 for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.*

Now, we've talked about how the law was good, but the law exposed sin, and that's what Paul repeats here. The law brings about wrath. But Paul's point again is that after already pointing to the priority of faith over circumcision. Now Paul adds that in the same way, Abraham and all of his descendants, they will receive the promise, the promise that through Abraham's family the entire earth will be blessed. That will be received by the children of Abraham, who are his children by faith apart from the law, because God's blessing and the fulfillment of the promise was never intended to be attached to the law. If it were possible to become righteous by law keeping, by our works, Paul says, then faith would be nullified. It would be void. It would be void.

Paul's argument, again, is interesting. It's based on when and how faith occurred for Abraham and the law was introduced. See, once again, just like circumcision, faith occurred a long time before the law. Faith was introduced—this moment, this declaration of righteousness—came in Genesis 15. And 400 years later, is when God gave Israel the Mosaic law. Therefore, Paul says, the promise is not based upon law keeping. It's not based upon the law. It is based upon faith. It's based upon faith. We cannot by our law keeping, by our works, by our trying our hardest, we cannot bring about the blessing of God, which is the declaration of righteousness. And we cannot be a part of his family, and therefore take on the promise of seeing the whole world blessed through what God has done. It's all about faith.



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So here's what that means, here's what this all means. Verse 16, he says:

*16 for this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, 17 (as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you") in the presence of him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.*

So since Abraham—Abraham, the Mount Rushmore faith, the best person, according to the Jewish perspective—since he was saved, he was justified by faith, not by works, since he was justified long before circumcision, long before the law, then all of those like him who are saved by grace through faith are his spiritual children. And they too get to enter into the same relationship with God that Abraham enjoyed, that he walked in. They too get to cling to the promise of blessing upon the whole earth. God making a way for the unrighteous to come into relationship with him, to stand before him, declared righteous, and therefore to live in constant, interactive relationship with him.

And this is who God is. God is the one who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. That's who God is. Justified by faith, that we might be ushered into a brand new life with the God of the universe.

Now, Paul is going to go into how exactly God did that for Abraham in just a moment, but I do just want to stop and invite you to consider: Do you know that if you belong to Jesus, if you have placed your faith in him, then you are justified by your faith? You've been declared righteous by God, that you might enter into relationship with the almighty God who makes the dead alive. He made you alive, and he also brings to being that which is nothing, that which did not exist. And so my question is, as you walk around, as you go to work, as you go to school, do you know that you live in constant relationship with the God of the universe? The God who brings about miracles.

Now brothers and sisters, if we believe that, how should that change the way we walk through life? When we encounter problems, and we don't understand how we're going to get through it, do we believe deep down that we are living in relationship standing on the righteousness of Christ, and because we stand there, we have access, we live in interactive relationship with the God that does miracles? He brings the dead to life. Is there anything that we could bring to him that would be too difficult? Nothing is too difficult for him.

So this is what he did for Abraham. Listen as Paul describes this journey of Abraham's faith, of this waiting and longing. Verse 18, he says:

*18 In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "So shall your descendants be." 19 Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; 20 yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully assured that what God had promised, he was able also to perform. 22 Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness.*

Abraham believed, in the face of overwhelming evidence, that there was no way God's promise couldn't be fulfilled. From a human point of view, it was absolutely impossible, ludicrous, laughable. Abraham believed that God is a God who calls into being that which does not exist, and that God could fulfill his promise that he would give him many descendants, despite the fact that in that



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moment, they had no children. Barren and wondering, he believed God, believed that God would keep his promise. All the evidence pointed the other direction.

Just imagine that moment. Paul is so blunt in the way he describes it. He said that Abraham contemplated his own body. I almost imagine Abraham going to a river and looking at himself and being like, not very impressed. Not much left here, not much vitality in these bones. Abraham's body as good as dead. Almost 100 years old. Not him alone—also, Sarah. The deadness of Sarah's womb. Sarah was barren. Make no mistake, they had been trying for years. They longed to have children. God had already promised them in Genesis 12 they would. Surely they thought, okay, maybe now God is going to allow this to happen. But everything that Abraham and Sarah did in the flesh, all of their efforts led to nothing.

So Abraham knew God would have to act. And that's exactly what God did. And Abraham believed it. And it was credited to him as righteousness. And in the midst of all that waiting, Abraham's faith grew. Although his body was drooping, his faith was rising—faith was rising as he awaited the moment that God would fulfill his promise.

Bryan has said before that faith is believing that God tells the truth, believing that God tells the truth. And that's precisely what Abraham believed, that because God said it, he could count on it. He could lean on it. He could believe it. His faith could remain strong, even though all the external evidence pointed against the fulfillment of that promise. Long before circumcision, long before works of the law. At the beginning of Abraham's life with God, here is where things began. Justification by faith. Abraham believed and it was credited to him as righteousness. And after that moment, his life with God took off.

What a journey after that declaration of righteousness. Journey of seeing God bless. Justification by faith, church, is the beginning of our life with God. We go from death to life. We go from guilty to innocent. We go from unrighteous to righteous—that now our life might proceed with him and we might step into the blessing of life with God who keeps his promises. We share the same foundation of faith with our father Abraham.

And in fact, as Paul continues and closes out this chapter, he tells us something quite interesting. He says, Genesis 15, it was written for Abraham, but it was written also for you. It's written for me. Verse 23, he says:

*23 Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, 24 but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 he who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.*

Genesis 15 was written for our sake also that we might know, this is how God works. This is how God enters into relationship with the undeserving. This is how God justifies the ungodly. He does it through faith—justification by faith and the renewed life that is made available through it. It's not something we can earn. It's not anything that we can bring about. And because both those things are true, it also is something that we can never boast about. Just like Abraham, we can't work for it, we can't earn it. We don't deserve it. God doesn't owe it to us. All we can do is receive it as a gift, by his grace, by faith.

Abraham believed God. It was credited to him as righteousness. Last week, Paul said the righteousness of God has been manifested through faith in Jesus Christ. For there is no distinction, he said—it's through faith that God gives life to our dead bodies. It's through faith that he calls us into life with him. We're made alive to him. It's through faith that he justifies us as a gift of his grace, and where there is grace, there is no room for boasting. So we can't be boasters.



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But, if we're going to boast, let us boast in this. Let us boast in what our God has done through Jesus Christ. And let us boast in our Lord. Let us boast in Jesus Christ, the one through whom we were saved. If we are going to boast in anything, let us boast in Christ alone.

Our Father, we thank you. We thank you for the testimony of Abraham, that him bringing nothing to you, he was justified through his belief, through his faith in you. And we thank you that you've given us this incredible gift, that when we can do nothing, you have poured out your grace upon us. Lord, I ask that even tonight, if anyone in this room has not yet received your grace, has not placed their faith in Jesus Christ, your son, and what he did on the cross, Lord, let now be the moment. And Lord, let us walk, let us walk full of faith as we make our way through life in this adventure of life now with you, the God, who makes the dead alive and brings into being that which did not exist. We thank you and we praise you. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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