

## **God's Great News for Humanity's Great Problem** *Paul's Letter to the Romans*

### **What is Faith? What Are We Believing About God?** *Romans 4:1 – 25*

<sup>1</sup> What shall we say then? Have we found Abraham to be our forefather according to the flesh? <sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup> For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. <sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. <sup>5</sup> But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, <sup>6</sup> just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: <sup>7</sup> 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. <sup>8</sup> Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.' <sup>9</sup> Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, 'Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.' <sup>10</sup> How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; <sup>11</sup> 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, <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; <sup>15</sup> for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation. <sup>16</sup> 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, <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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.' <sup>19</sup> 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; <sup>20</sup> yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, <sup>21</sup> and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. <sup>22</sup> Therefore 'it was also credited to him as righteousness.' <sup>23</sup> Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, <sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

## **Introduction: The Graveyard**

This evening we're talking about faith. What is faith? What are we having faith in? What is it about God that we are believing, or asked to believe? Let me give you a guiding thought: It is that God is the one who brings life out of death. (SLIDE)

By April of 2004, I had been a campus staff for ACF for 2 years by that time, but I felt like giving up on this fellowship. There were some good things happening, but frankly, ACF as a whole was lame. But at the end of the 03 – 04 year, I began meeting with the four new Core leaders: Clyde, Julie, Kay, and Sam. I took them to the fence right next to Ignatius and Walsh. So, we were right between the CAMPUS and the CEMETERY. I said, 'This is that, and that is this. God wants LIFE and not DEATH for people, and it's all based on their response to Jesus, the one who went from death to life.' We prayed for the following things: to be more alive to the broader Asian community on campus, to be more alive to the needs of Boston and grow in biblical social justice, and to see more people come alive to Jesus. That year, the spring break urban plunge brought out 9 students – a record number for this group. We started a 'sharing your faith' team and had 2 events for our non-Christian friends: the first drew 70 (only half were ACF'ers) and the second was with our sister fellowship IVME and drew 100. Between those events, a sophomore named Albert Yoon decided he wanted Jesus, and ACF became friendlier to a few non-Christians who were asking spiritual questions. Then in the 05 – 06 year, we did things with VSA for the first time. Two Korean students started a Korean speaking prayer group that drew non-Christian Korean internationals into something for the first time. We went to New Orleans last spring break to do Katrina Relief with our non-Christian friends, and there were 17 of us there, with another 8 in Boston doing the spring break urban plunge there. In the 06 – 07 year, four people became Christians, or came from death to life in Jesus. In 07 – 08, seven people did. God is bringing forth life out of death. And as He graciously uses us to do that, He pours more of His life through us.

## **Relevance:**

What we call 'becoming a Christian' is shorthand for what God calls 'bringing life out of death.' God has always been about bringing life out of death. He demonstrated it supremely by resurrecting Jesus from death, bringing him life out of death. And when God first made the promises to come in the person of Jesus, he brought life out of death way back then. For some of you who are not Christians, and you're wondering: What is faith? What does it mean to have faith? What kind of God is this? What are we supposed to believe about God? This is the answer to those questions. If anything, we are called to believe that God brings life out of death.

## **Context:**

Thus far in Romans, we've been studying humanity's sin and evil. What a depressing thing. And in Romans 3:21, we saw God's response. Jesus is God's resolution point where God showed the fullness of His great character, and His love in all its dimensions. He would give humanity a chance to be renewed and restored, but at the same time, He absolutely condemned each and every kind of sin from the root through the human choices of Jesus to never sin. Jesus is God's way of dealing with human evil, and bringing people to Jesus is His way of sharing that victory with us. But again, how did God relate to human beings before Jesus? What was He calling for? To answer this question, Paul goes all the way back to the start of God's dealing with Israel, to a man named Abraham. Paul begins this section of Romans with, 'What then shall we say? Have we found Abraham to be our forefather according to the flesh?'<sup>1</sup> Why Abraham? Who is this guy, anyway?

When I worked at Intel in late 1990's, I had a Muslim Pakistani friend in my group. We would joke around quite a bit, since we were about the same age, and I really enjoyed him. One day he asked me what I was doing on the weekend, and it turned out that I was leading a bible study on this chapter, Romans 4, and on the faith of Abraham. Of course, Abraham is revered in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim circles as the father of faith, or the father of the faithful, because each group claims to be the true heirs – the true children – of Abraham. I told him, 'I'm studying what kind of faith Abraham had. What do you think of that?' In response, he said, 'Hmmm...' and didn't reply. I think he knew what would be at stake if he had that conversation with me.

Abraham is important because God began to tell a new story about all humanity to Abraham and involving Abraham and involving the heirs of Abraham. Before that, all the stories about humanity were circular. They were fatalistic stories. Nowadays a lot of Asian movies have sad endings because the assumption is that life is circular. So the hero dies. The battle is not won. Evil goes on. There is no real hope. That's what circularity means. Imagine if all you

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<sup>1</sup> I am following Richard B. Hays' translation and exegesis, from *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture*, Eerdmans, 2005, p.61 – 84.

had to look forward to was death. Imagine if all humanity had to look forward to was an ongoing struggle against evil. Imagine if all the stories you had were circular, like the yin-yang of eternal balance of good and evil circling around each other eternally. Or like the Hindu concept of repeating this world over and over through reincarnation. All stories of the world were circular. Except the story God told to Abraham. Abraham's story would be a linear story, a story where God's goodness would win over evil, where humanity would be healed and restored, God's reign of peace and justice on the earth, and Abraham and his heirs would be central to that because God was making a covenant relationship – a special, binding relationship – with them. It is what's called a messianic story, or a happy ending story.

Well, that's helpful because it narrows the issue: We must look at Abraham. But that begs the question: Who are the true heirs of Abraham? Who has faith in God in the same way as Abraham? And for us, is Abraham's faith the same as ours? Because if it is fundamentally not, then the Christian story is incoherent, we have believed a lie, and we need to look at Judaism or Islam or somewhere else for the answers.

### **Life Out of Death in Abraham's Life: v.18 – 22**

Paul begins this section of Romans with, 'What then shall we say? Have we found Abraham to be our forefather according to the flesh?' That is the primary argument of Jews and Muslims, that we are heirs of Abraham according to the flesh. Jews trace their lineage back through Isaac, Abraham's son. Arab Muslims trace their lineage back through Ishmael, another of Abraham's sons. So how do Christians fit in there?

This is what we see play out in Abraham's life. Back in Genesis 12, when Abraham was 75 years old, married and without children, God promised Abraham that he would become a great nation, and that all the families of the earth would be blessed because of him. Therefore, even though Abraham was already 75, and Sarah was 65, they knew they had to have a child. Specifically, they had to have a son. That is the central issue in all of Abraham's life. All God's other promises hung on this one promise: that Abraham would have a son. So at that point, Abraham probably put his hands together and said, 'Okay! We're going to have a son. My name means 'father.' No problem!' But the son didn't come. Years had passed and Abraham turned the pages of his daytimer. He probably looked anxiously at Sarah and said, 'We're getting kinda old. We're really past the age of childbearing.' And Sarah probably said, 'I know, dear.' So in Genesis 15, Abraham tried to cut a deal with God. 'Hey Lord, I know you promised me an heir. Well, I don't know if you noticed, but Sarah and I can't have children anymore. So what about Eliezer of Damascus, my chief servant? Can we make him my heir?' But God responds quickly and firmly reinstates His promise; He replied, 'This man will not be your heir, but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.' In other words, it will be child from your own loins. Abraham was then faced with a question. Can God cause two senior citizens to have a baby? Can God bring something out of nothing? Can He bring life out of death?

Well, let's look at what Abraham believed back then: <sup>4:18</sup>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.' <sup>19</sup>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; <sup>20</sup>yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, <sup>21</sup>and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. <sup>22</sup>Therefore 'it was also credited to him as righteousness.'

Abraham did not do a moral act. No fantastic deed of heroism. Nothing at all. He simply trusted that God brings life out of death, and in his heart contented himself with the fact that this must be the character of God. It was an internal decision of humble faith in a great God. Faith began this way, and it has always been this way. Primarily because humanity brings about death and because we are dying beings ourselves, Christian faith is specifically in a God who is able to bring life out of death.

<sup>23</sup> Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, <sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

Illus: Let me tell you a story about how God continues to do this today. A few months ago, my friend Lawrence visited Colombia in South America and learned about Bellavista prison. Back in 1989, wardens and guards dreaded the prison. It was one of the bloodiest prisons in the world with innumerable riots and 30 to 60 murders a month. At its worst, even the guards refused to go inside the prison gates. Dead bodies were on the floor and blood-splattered

graffiti on the walls were common in the prison. Mindless mobs hacked victims, sometimes cutting off heads and gouging eyes. At that time Bellavista's riots threatened to spill over into the entire city. Many thought that the only solution to the mayhem was to send in the army. But a quiet decision changed everything. And, since 1990, there have been no riots and only eleven murders, which is still sad but much better than before. What happened in 1989? Instead of sending in the military, the warden gave permission for a small group of Christians to hold a prayer meeting inside the prison walls. God brought life in a place of death. Three hundred Christian inmates gathered as prayer partners. Prisoners began surrendering their weapons to a former inmate turned volunteer chaplain. That man had been working in the prison for three years – arriving at 8 a.m. and spending the entire day inside with the prisoners. In fact, Christian ministry going back to 1976 became visible in 1989. Now, people's lives are being transformed by Jesus. Jesus is bringing life out of death on an individual level and on the prison level. Prisoners now in love with Jesus have even requested transfers to other dangerous prisons in order to go talk about Jesus there. Bellavista prison now has a pastoral training program and is a missionary sending agency! (See the book by David Miller, *The Lord of Bellavista*)

Ultimately, God will bring new life out of the death of the old world. He will complete His pattern of resurrection and bring it to a new level where even the physical universe will be renewed and made impervious to decay.

Notice that Abraham didn't just believe 'in' God. Believing in God's existence may not be 'enough' depending on what question you're asking. You could believe in 'god' but which 'god' is that? A passive one? A distant one? A boring one? And yet if people in BC's cemetery suddenly came back to life and started popping out of their graves, that would be exciting wouldn't it? Wouldn't we rush over there and see exactly how it was happening?!? Who's next?!? How are they coming out of death?!? It would be exciting! And yet that is exactly what is happening on this side of Campanella Road, on campus. It's happening spiritually, and we get to be a part of it. We look for God at work. Who's next? How are they coming out of spiritual death? Why is it that some of you think your little story, with your little success and your little circle of friends, is more exciting than that? Abraham believed specifically that God would bring life out of death, and that this would have an impact on him and the world. That impact is happening right now! You need to specifically believe that this God is the *true* God. It's not just adding a new little nugget of knowledge to your pre-existing picture of a passive, distant, boring God. 'Oh yeah, one day God who feels so far away and so irrelevant will raise the dead.' No!!! Open your eyes and see it!!! If you are believing in this God, everything will change. I guarantee it.

**Count on God, Don't Count on Yourself: v.1 – 8**

For example, the biggest thing that would change is that: You would count on God to give great gifts, not count on your own moral efforts. Again, that's always been true. Let's look at how God began His special relationship with Abraham. In verses 2 and 3, Paul sets up a contrast. Look at the structure of his thought.

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about.	WORKS?
But not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'	NO BELIEVE

What does this comparison mean? Works is a dependence on yourself to do everything right or at least enough things right that God would give you eternal life, resurrection life. To believe, or to have faith, is dependence on God to make things about you right. That is the basic contrast here. Now to draw out this contrast between works and faith, Paul expounds further in verses 4 – 5.

Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a gift, but as what is due.	WORKS WAGE-DUE
But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness,	BELIEVES FAITH-GIFT

Here, Paul draws out this principle. His argument hinges on the difference between a wage and a gift. These are some of the most helpful verses in all the Scriptures to me because of this contrast. The system of wages operates like this: WAGES are based on what you EARN. You earn a payment by WORKING FOR IT. It involves PERFORMING against the Law or some code of STANDARDS. In this realm, all these concepts are linked. On the other hand, there is the realm of faith. FAITH is not based on what you earn. It is receiving life as GIVEN to you by

God as a GIFT. It involves trusting God to make things RIGHT, and to give you RIGHTEOUSNESS as a GIFT, not performing for Him by trying to earn it.

A little story called *What Bradley Owed* (found in *The Moral Compass*) pictures this beautifully. ‘There was once a boy named Bradley. When he was about eight years old, he fell into the habit of thinking of everything in terms of money. He wanted to know the price of everything he saw, and if it didn’t cost a great deal, it did not seem to him to be worth anything at all. One morning when Bradley came down to breakfast, he put a little piece of paper, neatly folded, on his mother’s plate. His mother opened it, and she could hardly believe it, but this is what her son had written:

Mother owes Bradley:	
For running errands	3 dollars
For taking out the trash	2 dollars
For sweeping the floor	2 dollars
Extras	1 dollar
Total that Mother owes Bradley	8 dollars

His mother smiled when she read that, but she did not say anything. When lunchtime came she put the bill on Bradley’s plate along with eight dollars. Bradley’s eyes lit up when he saw the money. He stuffed it into his pocket as fast as he could and started dreaming about what he would buy with his reward. All at once he saw there was another piece of paper besides his plate, neatly folded, just like the first one. When he opened it up, he found it was a bill from his mother. It read:

Bradley owes Mother:	
For being good to him	nothing
For nursing him through his chicken pox	nothing
For shirts and shoes and toys	nothing
For his meals and beautiful room	nothing
Total that Bradley owes Mother	nothing

Bradley sat looking at this new bill, without saying a word. After a few minutes he got up, pulled the eight dollars out of his pocket, and placed them in his mother’s hand.’

That is a cute but telling picture of how God loves us through Jesus. We sometimes think God owes us when we’re good and loving and truthful. But God is the One who endowed us with the capacity for goodness and love and truth in the first place. We utterly depend on God for that. And we sometimes think we owe God for all of the ways we have been evil and self-centered and deceptive. But Jesus offers his brand spanking new humanity – his very life – back to us not because we’ve earned it but because God wants to give it to us as a gift. So full reunion with God, full relationship with God, and the life of God, comes as a gift, PURELY AS A GIFT, because of Jesus. We do not owe God. We never owe God. God never owes us. We simply must receive gifts from Him, all the time.

Now let’s stop here to apply this. If your ideas about God come from the conditional love you received from your parents, or from your friends, leave that behind! Maybe you had to earn everything: love, respect, privilege, admission to BC. So your life swings between feeling proud and feeling insecure. If you refrain from...whatever it is, you fill in the blank...and you feel like you’re better than someone else, stop it! God doesn’t owe us for our moral behavior. There is no room for boasting in ourselves, as v.2 said.

Illus: And of course, if we feel insecure, there is good news. I grew up being very competitive and performance oriented. I started swimming seriously when I was 10, and the better my times were, the more bars and patches I’d get to put on my jacket. It was kind of like the boy scout patches. You wore your patches, and those patches showed how good you were. Then, I went to a public magnet high school that was 70% Asian-American!! You can bet THAT SCHOOL WAS COMPETITIVE! I had to fight for everything! On top of that, my parents always told me that no woman would love me if I wasn’t successful. After all, love and respect were things to be earned. Then, I started learning about Jesus, and because of the beauty of his life, I came to want him to be my God. But before I accepted him, the first thing I did was to figure out what were the patches I needed to have to be ‘good enough.’ I needed to stop swearing, I needed to get my act together, I needed to start going to church, I needed to be respectable in the eyes of other people so they wouldn’t laugh at me when I became a Christian. AND THEN, WHEN I’M NOT

A PUBLIC EMBARRASMENT TO GOD, ONLY THEN, COULD I SAY THAT I WAS READY FOR JESUS. But I was wrong. Mako owed God nothing, because God simply gives, and always gives. He transforms us by giving. Even now, my life is not about me earning enough moral brownie points to be called 'a good Christian.' It is about letting God give me His life every minute, every second, so that the life He gives me can pour out through me.

So what does this mean for you? It means... If you haven't already, PLACE YOUR FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST!! Don't wait to get your act together. He wants to give you His love – His love that brings life out of death – right now! And He'll bring about real change in you!

**Don't Count on Ritual, Moralism, or Ethnicity: v.9 – 17**

Point number 2 is the middle portion of this passage, and it deals with religious rituals. It is sad to me that there are people today who will argue that you need to be baptized into their church in order to be saved. If you haven't run into these people already, you will. This is where you'd build a case against baptism or any ritual being necessary for salvation.

For the Jewish person back then, they would have asked Paul, 'Wait a minute. Doesn't everyone have to become like us, to be circumcised like Abraham (do the same rituals), or follow the Law of Moses given at Mount Sinai (live the same morals) in order to be acceptable to God?' Paul in this section says, 'No.' Even Abraham was not circumcised when he believed God and was declared righteous. In v.9 – 12, Paul makes that argument. <sup>9</sup> 'Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, 'Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.' <sup>10</sup> How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised.' And Abraham didn't even have the Law of Moses given at Mount Sinai. In v.13 – 16, Paul points out that Abraham came before Moses and that Law! <sup>13</sup> '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.' So it wasn't Abraham's moral behavior relative to those 'high standards'! It was simply his faith that God brings life out of death.

Now how is this relevant to us today? Some of you have been approached by people from the Boston Church of Christ, or International Church of Christ. They believe that you need to be baptized into their church and by their leaders to be saved by Jesus. So, how do you argue with that? There are many ways, but one of them is not to get tangled up in the proof texting that they do. Look to this section in Romans 4. Baptism is only an outward symbol of an inward reality. It's a good reminder of something deeper, and in that sense, it too is a gift from God, but that's all it is. It only has meaning if the inward heart reality is present. Therefore water baptism is the same as any other ritual. What is the real inward substance that draws us into God's righteousness? A heart that believes that God brings life out of death.

And if you are ever involved in a dialogue about the Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – this is helpful to know. I suppose my Muslim Pakistani friend, if he took his faith seriously, might have said that Abraham did the Five Pillars of Islam: Shahadah (profession of faith), Salat (ritual prayer), Zakat (alms giving), Siyam (fasting during Ramadan) and Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). But historically, Abraham did not do those things, or things like them. He especially didn't do them in order to be right with God. He simply believed that God would bring life out of death. If Abraham believed that, whose faith is most like that? Jews, Christians, or Muslims? Well, Christians!!!

<sup>16</sup> 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, <sup>17</sup> 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.

That is who the true God truly is. Circle verse 17 in your Bibles either right now or when you get back to your rooms. True faith in God has always meant believing that God will bring forth life from death. That God has raised Jesus from the dead into new life to start God's new humanity. May we rejoice in Him!!