

Romans 4:1-5,13-17

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. ³ What does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” ⁴ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. ¹³ It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. 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. ¹⁷ 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.

Faith is a gift from God.

- 1. It is a gift given to us in kindness.**
- 2. It is given so that we may rely on our faithful Lord.**

It's that time of year again. We are now in the second week in Lent. Lent is regarded by many as a time of renewal and rededication. It is a time when many people make efforts to give up sinful vices and change bad habits. For many different reasons during this season of Lent we may get the impression that it is about what I can do for God more than what God has done for me. I need to work harder. I need to resist sin better. I need to be more pious. I need to increase my faith. But before we dive headlong into that thinking and shift the emphasis off of what God has done for us let us consider what faith is and where our faith came from in the first place. Faith is a gift from God.

Faith is not about us as much as it is about God. Faith is not a choice that we make. Faith is more than just believing. Faith in our God and Savior is a gift of the Holy Spirit and given to us so that we may believe, so that we may rely and depend on him and live for him. Throughout Scripture and especially in this section from the book of Romans that truth is made very evident. Faith is a precious gift. It is a saving miracle of God through which God gives new life to those who were spiritually dead. As Paul writes here in Romans 4:17, ***God gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.***

We who were dead in transgressions and sins are now alive through faith. Those who were by nature enemies of God are now called sons and daughters and heirs of our Father; those who were sinful and wicked from birth, God calls righteous and justified. Sinners are now called saints through faith in Christ Jesus. What a precious and generous gift, this gift of faith.

Faith is not something that we make up or we earn. It is not a work that we take part in but it is a gift of God. Then when that gift is given is then, of course, expressed in many different ways. However, first and foremost, saving faith in Jesus Christ is a gift of God. It is given to us in his kindness. It is given to us so that we may rely on our faithful Lord and his steadfast love.

This is what Paul was trying to explain to the Romans and to us his later readers. In some very well known verses in this very well known and quotable letter to the Romans, Paul writes of a righteousness from God apart from the law. He gives us reason after reason that proves that we cannot save ourselves. He shows us time and time again, the error of trusting in our faithfulness and our obedience to save ourselves. He writes, ***“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and our justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:23,24).*** Paul goes on to explain that if we viewed our relationship with God as a worker who gets his wage the only thing we could earn is death. But through faith, through this precious gift, we are no longer workers or merely servants but we are heirs. By this gift of faith we freely receive the blessings that our Lord, our Savior, has earned for us.

During this time of the year when so much attention is giving to rededication and renewal of the faith, may we see faith in the proper light! This is not a time when we great people of faith dig down deep to produce more obedience and increase our faith and improve ourselves from within. Rather this is a time of repentance when we realize how sinful we are within and how salvation must come from outside of us and outside of this world, that is, from our heavenly Father. During this time of Lent we are renewed in our faith, but it is not our personal faithfulness that bolsters our confidence and makes us content, but it the goodness and kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ who gives us peace and makes us completely confident of our salvation.

In his kindness God gives us the gift of salvation in Christ Jesus who came to live the faithful life I owed to God. He came to suffer for my unfaithfulness. He came to die to pay for my transgressions. And in love and power he rose again to give us life. And to top it all off, in his kindness God gives us his Holy Spirit and the gift of faith which receives the gift of salvation. Praise be to God for his gift of saving faith!

Paul continues to express this gift of saving faith clearly as he can. He speaks of the pointlessness and foolishness of boasting in our obedience. He goes on to explain how it is an empty pursuit to think that we can better ourselves to the point that we may even attempt to justify ourselves before God by observing the law. He does all of this, he runs through different scenarios, he creates different illustrations. He produces this long and logical argument so that it may be crystal clear that it is by God’s grace through God’s gift of faith that we are saved. Faith is not a work. Faith is a gift.

Paul carefully lays out this argument and then includes Abraham as prime example of this principle. *“Let’s take Abraham for example.” What about him? What about this great father of the faith? Certainly if anyone could claim that he was justified by his works, certainly if anyone could claim that he was God’s friend because he was such a good and likeable and guy, it was Abraham, right? After all he was a man of great faith. He did great things. When God said go Abraham picked up all his things, his whole family, all his stuff, and went. When God told him that a child would come from his flesh even when he was far too old Abraham believe and he and his wife Sarah bore a child in his old age. When God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son Abraham listened. What great faith! Certainly this must be what saved Abraham! Certainly this is what I must pattern my life after so God may have mercy on me.”*

At that time especially that was what many thought. Still today many are convinced that we have to earn our spot in the sun and I need to follow the example of Abraham to do so. Abraham must have warmed the heart of a vengeful God by his great acts obedience and I need to do the same. But Paul assured the people, he assures us, that was not the case. When we remember Abraham’s life, when we page through Scripture and go through Abraham’s highlight reel we remember the great acts of obedience, but an act of doubt and disobedience certainly sticks out as well. When his promised son had not yet come Abraham gave into doubt. He listened to his own misgivings, he listened to the flawed council of his wife, and he slept with the servant girl. Abraham was not perfect and God demands perfection. Abraham was not saved because of his works. He was saved by his faith in God’s grace. God gave him faith in the promised Savior and that gift of faith led God to call this sinner what he was not – righteous. It was the gift of faith that made Abraham righteous.

And in this way Abraham is our father, because this is how we are saved as well. And so after Paul neatly laid out this long and detailed argument, he gave all of his readers, this simple encouragement. Check the scriptures. Go back to God’s Word and what does it say about Abraham? How was Abraham saved? How are we saved? ³ ***What does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.***” It was faith in God. It was faith in the LORD that saved Abraham. It is the gift of faith in our faithful Lord and his undeserved love that saves us.

Our faith is sure and steadfast because of the substance of our faith. It is not that we make our faith strong by our mere conviction, but our faith is strong because of the object our faith Christ Jesus. Our faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see because our faith is in crucified and risen Jesus Christ. He has given us that which we cannot see. He has given us forgiveness. He has given us the victory and the full assurance of eternal life. He has promised and given us his Holy Spirit who is a deposit on what is to come. We have been given the gift of faith. This is a gift given to us in kindness by a fully reliable God, our LORD.

It is that time of year again. Yes it is Lent. But today is also March 16 which means that March Madness is officially upon us. And during this time of the year I can believe with all my heart, with full passion, and conviction that my favorite college basketball

team will make it to the big dance and go all the way and win the championship. However, just because I believe in my team with all my heart doesn't guarantee victory.

In a similar way I can trust in all sorts of things. I can believe strongly in an ideal, or a program, or a person but that ideal may prove worthless, that program may fall flat, and this person may fail. In this life the saying is quite true, "There is no such thing as a sure thing". There are no guarantees no matter how much I believe. But we trust; we rely anyway, only to be let down and disappointed. However our faith in Jesus Christ is different. We are sure and certain because our faith is in the Lord. Our faith is strong. It is certain. It is sure. Our faith and hope in Jesus will never leave us disappointed, because our faith is in Lord and in our Savior Christ Jesus who is completely reliable. He has kept all of his promises that he made to our forefathers. He has kept his promises to us. He will keep all his promises that are yet to be fulfilled.

We believe in the one who promised his people in the garden that a Savior would come to give us victory. We believe in the one who kept his promise to Adam, to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob and David, and he sent his Son, God came into this world to save us. He promised that he would suffer for the sins of the world. He promised that he would pay our debt and bring us peace and give us eternal life. He promised that he would give rest to our weary souls, the bread of life to nourish our hearts and minds, and the living water that quenches our eternal thirst. He is the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, who promised them salvation and eternal life in heaven. He delivered for them. He will deliver on his promises for us as well. By God's gift of faith we hold on to these promises and we receive the many blessings of our faithful God.

Now that we have been given the gift of faith we express this faith in how we live. We worship God in spirit and truth. We believe, we trust the truths of God's Word and we live thankful lives of service to the one who loves us. We live lives of obedience not to produce faith or earn God's love, but we live the obedience that comes from faith because God has, in his kindness, saved us and God will always be faithful to us. This is the God-given knowledge that renews us. This is the faith and knowledge that leads us to gladly obey and recommit ourselves to live for him. This is to be the proper focus of our observance of Lent: Christ and his underserved love for unfaithful sinners. This is what strengthens us to be more faithful. Faith in his love, in his sacrifice, in his resurrection, this is what compels us to live a faithful life. May you be renewed and rededicated to serve your Lord this Lenten season not by considering how faithful you have been, but by considering how faithful your Lord is. Let us give God all the glory for a faith that is a gift from him; for a faith that declares sinners like us righteous and holy through Jesus Christ. Amen.