

“Raised to Life for Our Justification”

Sermons on Romans # 10

Texts: Romans 4:13-25; Genesis 17:1-14

In Psalm 32, David declares “blessed is the person whose sins are forgiven, whose sins the Lord will never count against them.” These words of joy are cited by Paul in the 4th chapter of his letter to the church in Rome to support the doctrine of justification *sola fide*. But some in Rome were asking, no doubt, “is this blessedness limited to the biological children of Abraham?” Paul’s answer is an emphatic “no.” The blessedness of being reckoned as righteous before God is for all who are Abraham’s spiritual children through faith in the promise—whether they be Jew or Gentile. While God justifies the wicked through faith in Jesus Christ, God will not justify any of the biological ancestors of Abraham who think they will escape God’s justice simply because of their biological connection to the father of Israel. No, the inheritance comes through faith.

We are working our way through Romans 4, and last week we covered the first twelve verses of this chapter. This section of Romans is an elaboration of sorts on Romans 3:27-28 where Paul writes, “*Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.*” In Romans 4, then, Paul addresses two major themes related to the misunderstanding between Jew and Gentile within the Roman church regarding the question of whether or not sinners can be reckoned as righteous through good works or through faith in the promise.

One issue Paul must deal with is whether or not a justifying righteousness comes from God as a wage (reward) for good works, or whether or not that righteousness which justifies is received through the means of faith alone. A second question is closely related. If Abraham was reckoned as righteous before he was circumcised, then justification does not depend upon any religious ceremony, even though circumcision was commanded by God as the sign and seal of the covenant of grace. All human boasting is, therefore, excluded if the promise is based on grace, and the inheritance is received through faith.

As we turn to our text in Romans 4:13-25, we continue with Paul’s discussion of Abraham, the biological ancestor of Israel and his relationship to the law, circumcision and those Gentiles who have come to believe that Israel’s Messiah is that one in whom a righteousness from God is freely revealed to all who believe.

In verse 13 of Romans 4, Paul returns to the issue of the law’s relationship to the promise. Some years earlier, in Galatians 3:17, Paul wrote, “*what I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.*” In Galatians, Paul made the point that Abraham could not have been justified by works, since the Law of Moses was not given until 430 years after Abraham was justified through faith (cf. Galatians 2:16). Therefore, Abraham was not justified by works of law, despite what the rabbis were saying.

It is also very important to notice that the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, does not supersede the prior covenant God had made with Abraham. Thus contrast between the promise God made to Abraham and the law God gave to Moses, is very important because the contrast clearly indicates a distinction between the works-based covenant given at Mount Sinai, and the covenant of grace, which God made with Abraham. The contrast between the two covenants can be readily seen by

simply looking to who it is that swears the oath of covenant ratification. In the covenant of grace God made with Abraham, God himself swears the oath of covenant ratification—"I will be your God and you will be my people." While in the covenant God made with Israel, it was the people who swear the oath—"we will do everything the Lord our God has commanded" (cf. Exodus 24:7).

But unlike the approach Paul took in Galatians 3, here in Romans 4, Paul does not contrast the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai with the covenant of grace God made with Abraham. In the Book of Romans, Paul's point is that the way of the law and the way of the promise are mutually exclusive at a fundamental level.¹ The way of the promise is by grace through faith, while the way of the law is a wage for something which is earned. These two ways—the way of the promise and the way of law—stand in diametrical opposition to each other. This is why historically speaking, Protestants were so concerned about properly distinguishing between law and gospel.

This will become clear as we turn to Paul's argument in verse 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.*" That this verse is an explanation of the preceding is not clear in the NIV, which omits the "for" (γὰρ) which alerts us to the fact that what follows is an explanation of Paul's comments in verses 11 and 12 to the effect that Abraham is the father of both the circumcised (Jews) and uncircumcised (Gentiles) through faith, and, therefore, because of grace, not works of law.

Paul is absolutely clear on this point that it is not through the law that Abraham and his descendants received the promise, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. There are a number of points here which we need to reflect upon. One important issue is when Paul says that the reception of the promise does not come through law, but through faith, is Paul referring to the Mosaic Law (the Ten Commandments)² or to something more general like "God's commands," i.e. law.³ Given the context of Paul's argument in Romans 4, designed to expose misguided Jewish confidence in personal obedience to the Law of Moses and circumcision, surely the context favors the notion that Paul is indeed referring to the Mosaic law specifically. Righteousness does not, and indeed cannot, come sinners through the law, since sinners do not and cannot obey it.

But since the covenant of works is a matter of divine justice—creatures are obligated to obey their creator—and since the Ten Commandments are a reflection of God's own holiness, this is why the New Testament in general and Paul in particular, places so much stress upon Christ's fulfillment of the righteous requirements of the law (cf. Matthew 5:17). Under the covenant of grace which God made with Abraham, Jesus saves us by grace through faith, by taking away the curse of the covenant of the works on the cross, and by fulfilling the law's demands through his own perfect obedience. Mercy does not eclipse justice. Rather, God graciously saves us by satisfying his divine justice.

The next issue to be addressed here is the nature of the promise given to Abraham's offspring, literally to

¹ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 205.

² Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.238-239; Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 273-274.

³ Cf. Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 205; Murray says that "the word 'law' should be regarded as referring to law as commandment demanding obedience and applies to all law which falls into this category" (Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 141.).

his seed (σπέρματι αὐτοῦ). When Paul speaks of the promise coming to Abraham's "offspring" to what exactly is Paul referring? In a similar context in Galatians 3:16, Paul speaks of the promise in overtly messianic terms: "*The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ.*" In Galatians 3:16, the promised seed is Jesus Christ.

But here in Romans 4:13, Paul's mention of the seed is a collective reference to the countless spiritual children of Abraham who embrace the promise through faith.⁴ But why does Paul speak of Abraham as "an heir of the world." The answer to this must be seen against the extensive Old Testament background which Paul's comments here effectively summarize. Throughout the Book of Genesis, Abraham was promised that he would have countless descendants which would constitute many nations (Genesis 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:4-6; 16-20; 22:17). Abraham was promised that he would possess the land of Canaan which God had promised him and his descendants (Genesis 13:15-17; 15:12-21; 17:8). He was also promised that he would be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18).⁵

Throughout the historical books, God's promise to Abraham regarding the land of Canaan in Genesis 17 (our Old Testament lesson) is presented as something which has already been fulfilled. According to texts like Joshua 21:43 and 1 Kings 4:20-21, Israel is already dwelling in the land of promise in fulfillment of the promise. In Joshua 21 we read, "*So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there.*" And in 1 Kings 4 we read, "*The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy. And Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. These countries brought tribute and were Solomon's subjects all his life.*" By the time of the monarchy, Israel is dwelling in the land of promise because the promise is fulfilled.

But by the time we come to the prophecy of Isaiah 55:3-5, written shortly before the exile when Israel is about to be removed from the land because of disobedience to the covenant, we read of the universalizing of the land promise associated with the dawn of the messianic age. Says Isaiah: "*Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples. Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.*" And then when the messianic age dawns and Jesus pronounces the messianic blessings upon his people in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:5), one of the blessings is this: "*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*" With the coming of the Messiah, the promise of a land in Canaan is now universalized to the entire earth!

In Romans 4, Paul likewise follows suit, seeing the promise made to Abraham of the land in Canaan, to now extend to the ends of the earth because the Messiah has come. Thus the notion held by contemporary dispensationalists that the establishment of the modern nation of Israel in her ancient homeland is a fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise, absolutely collapses. As we will see when we get to Romans 9-11, the return of the Jews to their homeland, while an amazing act of God's providence perhaps related to the conversion of Israel immediately before the end of the age, has nothing whatsoever to do with the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant. Paul, following the lead of Israel's own

⁴ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p.274; Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.239.

⁵ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 274.

prophets, as well as the teaching of Messiah himself, now universalizes the promise to extend to ends of the earth, well beyond the original boundary of the promise, the Nile to the Euphrates.⁶

In verse 14, Paul explains why the way of the promise and the way of the law are two completely different things.⁷ Paul says, “*For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless.*” If people can attain the promise through obedience to the commandments, (those who live by law), then faith has no value, (it is literally “emptied”—κεκένωτα), and the promise is now worthless, completely nullified. Paul’s point, if it stands, flies directly in the face of the widely-held view among the rabbis that Abraham was regarded as righteous because he obeyed the commandment of God (cf. Sirach 44:20—which states the Abraham “kept the law”). Thus Paul’s point is that after the fall of the human race into sin, God’s way is through faith in the promise, and not through the earning of a reward (wage) because of obedience to the commandments. While we are all guilty before God because of the covenant of works which God made with Adam on behalf of the human race, God’s promise to save sinners through the covenant of grace is based upon faith. This is because of human sin and because the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai is designed to expose the fact that we cannot save ourselves, rather than to provide sinners with a means of earning the inheritance through good works. This is why we must understand Moses in light of Abraham, and not Abraham in the light of Moses.

This become clear in verse 15, when Paul explains, that the promise cannot come through law, “*because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.*” The fact that we don’t obey the law, brings God’s curse down upon us, and as Paul will go on to say in Romans 7:7-8, the law, which is holy, righteous and good, actually excites sinful human nature into even greater levels of sinful behavior.⁸ As Paul stated in Galatians 3:24; “*So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.*” Clearly, then, the law was given not as a means of self-justification, but to make us conscious of our sin and to point us to Christ (cf. Romans 3:20).⁹ In other words, the law brings wrath, because the giving of the law ultimately leads Israel to even greater sin than had the law not been given.¹⁰ As Calvin so aptly puts it, “he who is uninstructed by the written law is not guilty of so great a transgression as the man who obstinately breaks and transgresses the law of God.”¹¹

In verses 14-15, Paul dealt with the negative assertion that the promised inheritance cannot be obtained

⁶ See my discussion of this in, Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003).

⁷ γὰρ indicates why the promise cannot be attained “through the law.” Cf. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 274.

⁸ Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 121-122.

⁹ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 206-207.

¹⁰ Contra Murray, who argues for a universal thrust here of “law” in a general sense here by connecting this to Romans 2:12-16 (cf. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 142-144. For the view that Paul has the decalogue in view here see especially: Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 276; and Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. 175-178.

¹¹ Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, pp. 94.

through the means of obedience to the law, so in verse 16, Paul will affirm the positive point as to how, exactly, the inheritance is obtained:¹² “*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.*” The sentence is again without a verb and we get the sense that since Paul’s “is rushing on” to make his point.¹³

As a number of commentators have pointed out that in this verse, Paul spells out one of the fundamental principle of God’s redemptive economy. The covenant of grace depends not upon human ability to fulfill the requirements of the law, but solely upon faith in the promise that our deliverance from the guilt and power of sin is always a matter of divine grace.¹⁴ This does not mean that because God is gracious, he simply lets the bygones of human sin be bygones. Ours sins committed against God through our violations of the covenant of works both in Adam and through our own sinful acts must be punished. Nor does God overlook the bygones of our countless violations of his holy law.

Rather, under the covenant of grace, God will graciously supply through the life and death of Jesus Christ what human attempts at obedience to the law could never supply, namely a perfect righteousness. This righteousness is none other than the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself, who obeyed all the commandments of God every moment of his life, in thought, in word and in deed, and who suffered upon the cross for all of our infractions of his law. While this righteousness is reckoned or credited to us through the means of faith *alone*, Jesus Christ had to fulfill the demands the covenant of works, now republished in the law of God to provide such righteousness. Because he is just, God must satisfy his righteous demands. And his justice and his mercy perfectly coalesce in the doing and dying of Jesus.

That the promise comes by faith—not works of the law—ensures that human salvation from the wrath of God and that our deliverance from both the guilt and power of sin, is purely a matter of grace. You cannot have justification *sola fide* without a corresponding doctrine of *sola gratia*. And if you profess to believe *sola gratia*, you must also affirm *sola fide*. The two are absolutely inseparable. This helps to explain, in part, why historic Protestant theology seems so out of step not only with Romanism, but with so much of contemporary American evangelicalism. Evangelicals clearly affirm *sola fide*. But those who believe that our salvation begins with an act of the human will, not with the electing grace and effectual call of God, end up denying *sola gratia*, which ironically, is something Rome is all too willing to affirm (although for Rome grace begins with baptism). Classical Roman Catholic theology, on the other hand, attributes salvation to an infusion of divine grace, but flat-out denies that sinners are justified *sola fide*. Thus, we live in an age of great confusion about the nature of the gospel itself, since historic Protestant theology, following Paul, insisted upon the necessity of both.

Paul not only insists that *sola fide* and *sola gratia* are absolutely inseparable, but that this is God’s way not only for Abraham, but for all of his 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.*” There is much debate about the identity of those said to be “of the law.” This might be a reference to all Jews, since the Jews are biological ancestors of Abraham. The meaning would then be that Abraham is not only the biological father of

¹² Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 277.

¹³ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 207.

¹⁴ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.242.

Israel, he is also the spiritual father of those who believe—Jew and Gentile. Biological Jews are still the descendants of Abraham, but in a different way than those who believe the promise are the children of Abraham.¹⁵ But given contrast Paul sets out here, “not only . . . but also,” I think it better to take the phrase “of the law” to refer to Abraham’s spiritual descendants who happen to be Jews. The word seed or offspring (σπέρματι) as used here still has the meaning of spiritual children (those of the faith of Abraham)—those “of the law,” i.e., the Jews. Jews as well as Gentiles have likewise embraced the promise through faith.¹⁶ Abraham is, therefore, the spiritual father of all who believe whether they be Jew (“of the law”) or Gentile. The point is that faith in promise removes all racial distinctions.

In his typical style, in verse 17, Paul appeals to the Old Testament, citing from Genesis 17:5 (again, part of our Old Testament), “*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.*” There is the sense in these words of permanence—“I have made you” is God’s final word on the subject, what Calvin calls “the certainty of the divine counsel.”¹⁷

Abraham is indeed the father of all the faithful in God’s sight. Abraham believed in the only true God, the only one who can give life to the dead. This is perhaps a reference to the Gentiles, those whom the Jews believed to be dead unto God, but this is also very likely a reference to Abraham and Sarah, who were well advanced beyond the years of child-bearing, nevertheless believed God’s promise to send the promised seed through a child born to them. The God Abraham believed not only can raise the dead by creating spiritual life where there has only been death, but he can also create countless followers, give to Israel the land which he has promised, and ensure that an elderly couple give birth to a son, through whom the promised seed will come.¹⁸ Abraham’s God does indeed “*give life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.*” The entire course of redemptive history, as well as the righteousness revealed in Paul’s gospel, bear ample witness to this wonderful truth.

Beginning in verse 18, Paul now begins to flesh out some of the implications of Abraham’s faith in the God of the promise. Here, Paul defines Abraham’s faith in terms of the great patriarch’s hope in the promise. Paul puts it this way: “*Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’*” Hope is a major theme in Paul’s writings (it is mentioned some 36 times in Paul’s letters, 13 of those in Romans).¹⁹ Hope is not the same thing as optimism. Nor is hope the same thing as a blind leap in the dark—a baseless irrational act, an existential leap.²⁰ Hope, as Paul uses the word, should be understood as follows. When Paul says it was beyond all hope, or against all hope, Abraham believed God at a time when what was promised

¹⁵ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 278.

¹⁶ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 207; Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p.279.

¹⁷ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 208; Calvin, The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians, p. 95.

¹⁸ See the helpful discussion in; Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 208-209.

¹⁹ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 210.

²⁰ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 282-283.

was no longer a human possibility. Hope had reached its limit, humanly speaking. But Abraham still believed that God would do as he promised.²¹ And because Abraham believed the promise in hope, he became the father of many nations just as God had promised. As we read in Genesis 15:5: “[YHWH] took [Abraham] outside and said, ‘Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’”

Given the seeming impossibility that the elderly Abraham and Sarah would produce a child, nevertheless, Paul says that “without weakening in his faith, he 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 power to do what he had promised.” Abraham was an old man, and as the context indicates, he was probably impotent while Sarah was well past menopause.²² But God promised them on his sovereign oath that Abraham and Sarah would produce a child who will fulfill the promise, and Abraham’s faith never weakened, never wavered.

Because he believed God’s promise, Abraham gave glory to God and continued to believe God’s promise in hope, that the God who gives life to dead and calls things that are not as though they were has the power to do what he had promised, despite appearances to the contrary. And as Paul puts it in verse 22, this is what Genesis 15:6 is saying, even though the rabbis were saying otherwise. Says Paul: “*This is why it was credited to him as righteousness.*” Abraham was justified by grace through faith in the promise and not because he performed some saving work!

Having established the principle by which Abraham was justified, by grace, through faith in God’s promise, and not by works (i.e., justification *sola fide*), in verses 23-25, Paul now draws an important point of application for his readers in the church in Rome:²³ “*The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*”

What was true for Abraham, is true for every person in the church in Rome whether they be Jew or Gentile, who embraces God’s promise to save them from their sins through faith in Jesus Christ. By grace through faith they are heirs of the promise. The true children of Abraham are those who in trust in Jesus Christ and are also reckoned as righteousness, just as Abraham was. These are people who believe the gospel that Paul has been preaching—that Jesus Christ died for our sins and that as proof that his sacrifice accomplished our redemption through his shed blood, and that same Jesus was raised from the dead for our justification.

Paul’s phrase, “raised for our justification” has puzzled a number of commentators.²⁴ Certainly the

²¹ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.245.

²² Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 211.

²³ Moo points out that there are two parallel clauses here. Cf. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 287.

²⁴ See the helpful discussion in Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 289.

resurrection is at a minimum the triumphal sign that Christ's death removes the curse of sin, since his resurrection undoes the final consequences of our sin, which is death. Since Jesus died for our sins, the wages of which is death, his resurrection means that Christ's death upon the cross has done what God intended it to do—save his people from their sins. This is why Christ's resurrection marks the dawn of the new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17 ff),²⁵ because his resurrection reverses the curse, which amounts to the glorious verdict that the sentence of death which hangs over us, has been overturned, once and for all. Although we will die because of our sins, because of Christ, we all shall live forever!

But there is something else. Christ's obedience to both the covenant of works and the commandments of God also earn for him the reward of life. Thus even as Jesus died for the sins of his people as a final act of obedience, so too, he was raised for the justification of all his people because of his obedience. Jesus Christ's resurrection is the vindication of his own righteousness as the second Adam, which is why in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, Paul speaks of Christ's resurrection as the first-fruits of a massive harvest of all those justified at the end of the age. Jesus dies for his people because he is obedient unto death. He has earned the crowd of life, hence his reward becomes ours. Thus he was raised, "for our justification."

III. What, then should we take with us from this text?

It is easy for us to see in Abraham what the Jews saw in Abraham—an ideal man who did an extraordinary things. But seeing Abraham solely in this light is to miss the more important point that while Abraham was a man of faith and an example, of sorts, to us, he was not an ideal man, but a sinner as are we. Abraham was justified not because he did that one thing God required of him, but he was justified because of the object of his faith—he believed in the only true God, who gives life and keeps his promises. What matters then is the object of Abraham's faith, the God of the promise, who freely gives righteousness to sinners who believe his words. The object of our faith—the one to whom we look for salvation—is the same God who sent his blessed son Jesus to die for our sins, that one who was vindicated through his conquest of death and the grave, rising for our justification.

Therefore faith is not a blind leap in the dark, contrary to all reason and common sense. That faith which justifies looks forward with the same kind of hope that Abraham had. But faith looks forward in hope, because history has given clear evidence that the justifying God is faithful, gives life and calls the things that are not as though they were. Because Jesus Christ has died for our sins and was raised for our justification, with eager hope, we believe that one day God will raise our mortal bodies from the dead on the day of resurrection, the proof that we have been saved from sin and all its consequences. Because Christ has been raised, we know our sins are forgiven and that his sacrifice avails for all those who believe God's promise to save the ungodly through faith, not by works. Because Jesus Christ fulfilled God's righteous requirements and was obedient unto death, he was raised up Lord of Life. And because he was raised for our justification, he is Lord of life and the justifier of the ungodly. And through faith, his resurrection ensures ours. Because we are heirs of the promise, not even death can lay claim to us.

Let us therefore embrace the promise through faith! And with a bold and confident hope, let us look forward to the day of resurrection.

²⁵ Cf. Richard Gaffin, Resurrection and Redemption (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), pp. 122 ff.