

While We Were Yet Sinners 2023
Romans 4:1-5, 13-14

Romans 4:1-5, 13-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

The passage we just read from Romans was primarily addressed to Jewish Christians about a divisive issue in the early Church. The first Christians had almost all been Jewish believers, but with gentiles coming to faith there was a growing conflict.

The Jewish Christians had always followed OT Law and traditions, and they expected gentile believers to follow that same pathway, and for their faith to emerge from Jewish practice as theirs had.

But Apostle Paul was absolutely adamant-against that perspective. Since both Jews and gentiles were all sinners separated from God, that meant they were also **equally dependent on God's grace.**

God's unconditional and unrelenting grace received through faith, means to trust God's gift of righteousness **through Christ alone**, and is a most critical understanding of what God's up to in Christ.

Paul's point was that to include & insist on following religious law distracted from **faith alone** in God's promised gift of grace, vs. 5, 14

But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, **such faith is reckoned as righteousness.** If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, **faith is null and the promise is void.**

To make that point more clear, especially to the Jewish believers, Paul points back to Abraham who believed & obeyed as God had asked. Through his trust and obedience, Abraham received God's favor, and by that relationship participated in God's purpose & plan.

Nothing in the text suggests that Abraham was especially religious or did anything trying to earn or deserve God's favor & blessing. In fact he did a lot of things wrong along the way, **but he believed, and God counted that trust as righteous, before any good works, vs. 3**

For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was **reckoned to him as righteousness.**"

The critical point is that **it was all** God's initiative and doing. Abraham heard, believed & trusted God's promises. **That was it.**

Faith is trust in God's promises.

Neither the Law or good works secured God's promises & blessings, and it's also the same truth & reality for all who follow Christ, for it is **by faith in Jesus Christ alone that any**

are declared righteous according to God's grace.

Paul sees Abraham as the example of what was happening for gentiles.

In this text, **reckoned as righteous means to be justified by grace**,
which is the same blessing Abraham received by faith,
which is the same process for gentiles coming to faith.

Our good works actually contribute nothing toward our salvation,
and in the same way, our mistakes, our flaws and failures
also do nothing to hinder or block God's gracious love for us.

Grace is all and entirely God's free gift

to those who cannot possibly earn it or deserve it on their own,
though sometimes we act as if God's grace is not really enough.
But that's a very dangerous and very destructive heresy.

Sometimes, we allow guilt and shame for our past mistakes and flaws,
or the events that damaged, or wounds we've endured in the past,
to cruse our sense of trust & hope, and to demean our self-worth.

And none of that is what God intends for his beloved children.
It is not that our sins, struggles or good works don't matter,
it's just that God's grace matters more, infinitely more.

Several years ago I remember watching
"The World's Strongest Man Competition" on TV,
in which these huge muscle-bound men would compete
in unusual races and contests of extreme strength.

One of the competitive events was a race in which
they would pick up a car that had holes cut into the floorboards
and then run around a track with it like a Flintstones car.

In another contest, they had to pick up a full-size refrigerator,
run with it for a few yards to gain enough momentum
then suddenly stop, and heave it as far as they could.

It was amazing to watch these remarkable athletes stagger & struggle,
burdened with objects way heavier than most of us could even lift.

But an even more awkward and difficult, and an even heavier burden
than any of those "The World's Strongest Man Competition" objects
is the terrible burden of guilt and regret, loss and remorse,
our feelings of shame & sorrow that we try to hide deep inside.

Sometimes you can even see it in a person's weary troubled eyes,
or in their stooped shoulders and faltering uncertain steps...
...for who doesn't cringe a bit, remembering some of their own history,
and who doesn't have painful memories of regrets that still haunt.

Several years ago, just a few of years into my ministry as a pastor,
I kept having what seemed to be, disturbing flashbacks of memories.

During a time of quiet and reflection with startlingly vivid clarity,
the memory of an event, something wrong or hurtful I'd done or said
would crash and intrude into my consciousness and meditation
almost like I was re-living it & forced to revisit that moment.

These would be from my distant past – something forgotten long ago,
but somehow triggered were being powerfully replayed in my mind.

These were not memories of my impressive or more godly moments,
but rather I was recalling disturbing and embarrassing history,
bad choices that led to losses, problems & harsh consequences.

It was like being hounded by sinful flaws and failures of the past,
and my sense of guilt and regret made me wish I could go back
**and speak some sense, some reason and better wisdom
to that younger, more foolish person I had once been.**

It was strange how over a number of weeks and maybe even months
events of my long-forgotten past kept rising to the surface.
As I would think and pray through each of these experiences
I began to realize how much they had effected my life and living,
and how much of that past had been secretly bothering me
with an unhealthy & fearful dread & crushing my spirit.

I realized that I had kept myself imprisoned and secretly troubled,
for there was no going back to fix my failures and mistakes,
and yet I also couldn't seem to really move past them.

I was deeply troubled & mystified by these memories and flashbacks
that kept intruding and forcing their way into my quiet times.

It was disquieting to replay bad choices that I'd buried so long ago,
and I couldn't figure out why that kept happening to me,
for I certainly wasn't trying to remember all my former sins.

But then something remarkable and totally unexpected happened.

It came like a flash, a truly incredible and healing new insight.
I realized that if I was presented again with that same situation,
that if given a chance to go back and replay – to redo my past,

that I would not do or say that same mistake, I would not repeat,
for I am no longer someone who would do or say what I once did
and I would not make that same sinful – wrong choice again.

Something had changed. I had changed, my character had grown,
for I am no longer that same person I once was, not anymore.

By this, I understood in a whole new and wonderful way
the incredible life-transforming power of **God's grace by faith**,
the impact of God's cleansing mercy to reorient a human life,
an incredible truth upon which to build a meaningful life.

And at that moment, I was overwhelmed by God's grace, and grateful,
for no doubt, God really had been quietly working in my life,
and guiding me to repent, and helping me to get past my past.

The overwhelming guilt and regret over sins of my past and history
became gratitude for and by God's grace, **that I had been set free.**
God's focus is always beyond the failure on into the future,
toward a new & deeper relationship & call to follow Jesus.

Just knowing that I would not do those things that I once had done,
because I was no longer that same broken person & sinner,
was such a release from the burden of my shame and fear.

As we read in the Call to Worship from Psalm 32 (vs. 1)

Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Do you recognize what a fundamental and amazing life-shift that is?
God had accomplished some genuine transformation, even in me,
and not just in my outward behavior and appearances,
but even to the very depths of the workings of my heart.

Although we cannot go back to change, cancel or correct the past,
we can let God redeem and reconcile the past,
that is, allow the past to be resolved in a beneficial way,
for even from disaster, God can & does make good & useful.

Now that does not mean that there won't ever be hard consequences,
or that we won't suffer and struggle from our failure and sin,
but it does promise that God can and will redeem our wounds.

Today, I recognize that the experience of reconciling with my past
was something like how when a grain of sand gets inside an oyster,
from that discomfort the oyster produces a beautiful pearl...
... just as God produces beautiful transformation & blessing within us.

By God's redeeming grace, something happened different within me,
though not deserving or worthy, I'd moved past shame, guilt & regret
toward the amazing experience of grace, new hope and gratitude,

and thereby rendered useful to joyfully serve the Lord God,
with more compassion for the failures and flaws of others,
with confidence that God's healing purpose will prevail in the end.

So during Lent, as we prepare to celebrate the wonder of Easter,
perhaps it's our time to revisit and reflect on past events
toward repentance, reconciliation, hope and new healing,

to allow God's grace to unshackle us from guilt & shame, regret & loss
by letting compassion and forgiveness have their way with us
by trusting God's steadfast love and mighty power to transform...

**... for that is what the Lord's Table signifies and proclaims,
where God's word of grace and wholeness are freely enacted.**