

SALVATION IN LIVING COLOR

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study
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Let's Begin

Romans constitutes Paul's "magnum opus" (Latin for "great work") among the literary projects the Holy Spirit inspired. More than any other place, either in Paul or perhaps the entire Bible, God's gracious salvation is defined, described, and defended. We have repeatedly observed Paul's primary task in the first three chapters: to make God's case for sinful human depravity that is both deep and wide.

It is deep in the sense that every area of the human condition is thoroughly infected with the deadly spiritual disease known as sin. It is wide in the sense that it is a universal infection; in other words, every human being who has ever been born—excluding the Lord Jesus Himself—suffers from this known killer. Romans 1-3 makes this crystal clear to anyone who reads it with an open mind.

Chapter 4 is a pivotal shift in Romans. What Paul began in the latter half of chapter 3, he now vividly portrays in living color. Salvation is exemplified in the life of one man—Abraham. Having begun his explanation of salvation (3:21-31), Paul now illustrates it in the everyday life of a human being. Indeed sometimes the best, most effective way to understand is to see something in living color, in real-time existence. And, no greater example could Paul imagine than Abraham, who is called God's friend (cp. Isa. 41:8).

As we examine chapter 4, let's ask four plain but pertinent questions noted in the outline below:

- I. What is Salvation? (vv. 1-11)
- II. When does Salvation Occur? (vv. 10-12)
- III. Why is a Person Saved? (vv. 13-15)
- IV. What is Accomplished by Salvation? (vv. 16-25)

I. What is Salvation? (vv. 1-11)

Paul opens fire with a cannon ball—the example of Abraham. From our standpoint, choosing Abraham may sound like a natural place to begin. After all, he is the father of our faith! However, for Paul's Jewish readers, Paul shot a cannon into their tabernacle courtyard. The average Jew would point to Moses as the place to begin thinking about being saved and delivered. Exodus was the quintessential illustration Jewish believers looked toward as their prime example of faithfulness to God. Paul digs deeper into God's Word, passing Moses up by 400+ years! He begins with Abraham, not Moses; with faith not law.

Reflection Connection

Amazingly, multitudes continue to think they will be justified in God's sight by good works. Why do you think this is so? Explain. What ways can the church pursue to establish the truth that no one can be saved by works but only through faith? Be specific.

Hear Paul as he thunders his pronouncement, "What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness" (vv. 1-3). Centuries before Moses lived, Abraham was not justified by the works of the law; the law had not been revealed! Instead, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness" (v. 3).

Furthermore, Paul uses Abraham to explain what it means to be saved. He writes, "Now to



him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness" (vv. 4-5). Being saved is the greatest experience of life. Paul makes it plain that being saved is not because one earns the status; he does so by contrasting "grace" with "debt." A person who earns a "reward" by working is owed the bounty. Thus, Paul dubs it a "debt." Debts in this context are wages owed. But salvation is based on "grace" and therefore is a gift (cp. 6:23; Eph. 2:8-9).

Additionally, Paul speaks of the "ungodly" as being justified through belief in Christ. Indeed the only ones who need salvation are the ungodly. But all are ungodly! Hence, we are saved because God "counted" our faith as "righteousness." The term "counted" is a bookkeeping term, used of recording clerks in the first century. Books were kept similarly to books we keep today to tally debits, credits and balances. God debits the cross upon which Jesus died and credits the believer's account to the good! The transaction takes place through faith.

Paul makes it plain that being saved is not because one earns the status.

Every one of us must allow our hearts to be opened and our books checked. Do we have an outstanding balance due because of our sin? The only hope for us is through faith in Jesus Christ. If we are saved by works, everything depends on us. If we are saved by faith, everything depends on Him.

The example Paul offers of Abraham is stunning. Now he gives another stunning example. Once again, hear the apostle's words, "Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness" (vv. 6-9). While Abraham is Israel's great founder, David is Israel's great ruler—Abraham the forefather and David the King. Thus, David is another heavyweight to which Paul appeals who had and taught faith. The person whose "sins" were "covered," "iniquities" were "forgiven," and to whom God "imputeth righteousness without works" was the person of faith. David too was characterized by belief apart from the works of the law.

II. When does Salvation Occur? (vv. 10-12)

If doing *right deeds* will not affect our standing with God, perhaps some will count on *religious duties* to do the job. For Jews, the most religious ritual which could transpire was circumcision. And, of course, Abraham was circumcised. The question remains: when was Abraham circumcised? The apostle continues, "How was it [righteousness] then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision" (v. 10).



Paul makes two assertions in these verses. First, he speaks of the *sequence* of Abraham's circumcision in relation to Abraham's faith. For Paul, timing was crucial. Abraham was clearly in right relationship with God before he was circumcised, not after. That is, Abraham was "in uncircumcision" when he believed God. And, since his belief was "counted to him for righteousness" (v. 5), Abraham was in right relationship with God, not because he was circumcised, but because he had faith. Consequently, circumcision was the result of faith, not the root of salvation.

Undoubtedly, every Jewish reader by this time listened to Paul with jaws wide open! Faith came before law; grace preceded Moses. Note also, circumcision is not the main ritual in New Testament times. Instead, baptism is the most prominent ritual. And, the sequence is identical to the sequence of circumcision and faith. It's faith first, then baptism. People may be saved with or without baptism. However, no one may be saved without faith. Where faith in the Lord Jesus is absent, so is forgiveness of sin.

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Reflection Connection

Do you think there are people in the church who believe or rely on baptism to save them? Why or why not?

Next, Paul speaks of the *significance* of Abraham's circumcision in relation to Abraham's faith. He writes of the "sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness" which Abraham possessed through faith (v. 11). A sign points to something else while a seal confirms it. Similarly, baptism is a sign of something else—the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and our salvation in Him—as well as a seal to confirm our salvation to a watching world.

III. Why is a Person Saved? (vv. 13-15)

Why was Abraham saved? Why is anyone saved? The Apostle Paul forthrightly answers, "For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect: Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression" (vv. 13-15).

Clearly, the Apostle rules out a person being saved based upon *trying* to be saved. Salvation cannot be "through the law." Why? *First*, the law was given centuries after Abraham, the father of the faithful, was counted righteous before God through faith. *Second*, the law contains no power of deliverance whatsoever. The law never converted any person from sin; instead it only convicted people of guilt. In other words, "law works wrath." Thus, if the law held any power, it was the power to condemn in sin, not convict of sin. *Finally*, if the law could save, "faith is made void." The promises of God, therefore, would become the pronouncements of deceit.

The fact is, Paul maintains salvation comes to us based upon the sure promises of God. The key word is "promise" (v. 14). God made Abraham a promise. Abraham believed the promise and righteousness was bestowed upon Abraham.

Reflection Connection

Do you think being saved is an either/or reality? In other words, either one is saved by faith or saved by works; it must be either faith or works; it cannot be faith and works. Explain.



The same may be said today. God makes us a promise concerning eternal life. We are to believe what Jesus did for us on the cross. If we do, we'll be saved (cp. John 3:16).

Have you claimed the promise of God concerning eternal life? Understand: no magic exists in "saying" one "believes" God's promise. In other words, one cannot conjure up genuine belief. One's faith must be authentic, saving faith. There is no tricking the Sovereign of the universe! Unless you genuinely believe, no salvation transaction will take place (cp. John 6:37; Rom. 10:13).

IV. What is Accomplished by Salvation? (vv. 16-25)

Paul is carefully dealing with the greatest subject ever conceived—man's quest to live forever. The salvation quest is the theme of the Bible; it is also the theme of Romans. We have discovered Abraham being justified before Almighty God simply by believing the Almighty's promise. There is a human side to the salvation equation, the side with which Paul deals in the latter part of chapter 4.

He first deals with the *certainty of faith*. Hear him, "Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is

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the father of us all, (As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God..." (vv. 16-17a). The promise God gives to us, Paul proclaims, is "sure." In other words, it's guaranteed, stable and firm. Our faith establishes certainty because it brings us into God's *favor*. This is what Paul means when he says, "it is of faith, that it might be by grace..." Faith links us to grace. The late Francis Schaeffer said, "faith is the empty hand that reaches out to God." Consequently, because we are brought into *God's favor*, we are likewise brought into *God's family*. He mentions the promise is "to all the seed." All believers are spiritual children of Abraham, members of God's family.

Second, Paul deals with the *constancy of faith*: "...even God, who quickeneth the dead [Abraham] Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations...And being not weak in faith...He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness" (vv. 17b-22). The description Paul gives of Abraham is stunning, indicative of his unshakable faith in God's promises.

Indeed Abraham refused to look at either obstacles (v. 17) or odds (v. 19). Instead, Abraham resolved to look at God's promise (v. 20). Indicative of his deep resolve to believe God, we may observe Abraham's performance (vv. 21-22). We find him "fully persuaded" of God's ability to fulfill His promise. In addition, Abraham "staggered not" at God's word, which would have been a dead giveaway of unbelief's presence.

Reflection Connection

Though considered a dying practice by many modern Christians, do you think there is a scriptural basis for calling each other "brother" and "sister." Why or why not?



Finally, Paul deals with the *centrality of faith* (vv. 23-25). Faith is the hub holding the wheel of salvation together. Thus, faith locks its eyes on the crucifixion of Christ. Paul writes, “[Jesus Christ] was delivered for our offences” (v. 25). The term “delivered” is a strong word which carries the idea of handing one over to another, as a convicted criminal would be handed to the custody of the hangman. A question immediately arises: who crucified Christ? Jews? Romans? Us? No! God did! His death was planned before the world was ever created (cp. Isa. 53:10; Acts 2:22-23). It has rightly been said the cross was in the heart of God before sin was in the heart of man. Why? Paul is clear, “for our offences.” Jesus is the substitute for our sin.

Golden Greek Nugget

Six times the Apostle employs a form of “imputed” in chapter 4 (vv. 6, 8, 11, 22-24). Out of 41 times the term is used in the New Testament, virtually half are found in Romans. The term possesses clear indications of crediting our account on behalf of Christ. Jesus Christ’s righteousness becomes ours through faith in Him. In other words, as with Abraham, our belief is accounted to us as righteousness.

What is more, faith’s eyes are not only fixed on Christ’s crucifixion, faith’s eyes are forever focused on Christ’s resurrection, “[Christ] was raised again for our justification” (v. 25b). We are inevitably faced with the same kind of impossibility with which Abraham was faced—can we believe in a God who can raise the dead? (cp. 10:9). Faith never stops at the cross. If faith ends at the cross, faith is a failure (cp. 1 Cor. 15:17). Rather, faith focuses on Sunday morning not Friday evening. It ultimately sees an empty tomb not a Roman cross. Jesus was raised for our justification!

Wrap Up

Our sin is paid for at Calvary and validated three days later when Jesus Christ arose from the dead. Is your faith fixed squarely on Christ? Faith must have an object. And, according to the Apostle Paul, Jesus Christ is the sole object worthy of saving faith. Will you trust Him today?

