JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

Romans 4:1-25
Key Verse: 4:20-21

“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.”

In last week’s passage, we thought about the righteousness from God that is by faith. All men were like helpless paralytics because of our sin. But it was not God’s desire to destroy us forever, as our sins deserved. Instead, God had a plan to rescue us and restore us to himself. At the moment when our utter sinfulness and rebellion against God was made fully plain, God would reveal his mercy and grace to save all men by faith. And so it happened. Men rejected the Savior, Jesus Christ, and put him to death by nailing him to the cross. It was the end of whatever hope man might have had in his own righteousness. But at this moment of despair, God made the way for sinners to be justified through faith in the blood that Jesus shed for our sins. At the cross of Jesus, all men are shown to have fallen short of the glory of God, and at the same time all men are justified freely through the redemption that comes by faith in Jesus’ blood. Therefore, the cross of Jesus puts an end to man’s boasting. From now on, the way of salvation for all men is through contrition and faith.

In today’s passage, St. Paul speaks about our father, Abraham. He was the forefather of the Jews, and the one to whom the promises of God were given. In fact, his influence and example were so great that he had become the reason for boasting among the Jews. Their pride in Abraham’s accomplishments was understandable, and it gave them a sense of identity that has enabled the Jews to survive till this day as the most influential nationality in history. It also became the justification for their racial prejudice and rebellion against God’s world salvation purpose. What went wrong? As St. Paul examines Abraham’s pilgrimage of faith, we find that Abraham, and by extension, Abraham’s offspring had nothing to boast about. How could he and they be made right before God? Let’s learn how Abraham could be justified before
the holy God, and how we too can be justified by faith and become heirs of God's promise.

I. Justified by faith

As usual, Paul concluded his argument in chapter 3 with a question. Look again at verse 27. "Where then is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith.” Telling human beings not to boast is like telling cows not to eat grass, or dogs not to chew up their master’s shoes. Nevertheless, those who confront God's righteous standard in the law must be silent. Shhh.

But Paul knew that Jews like him had been trained from birth to have pride in the law and confidence through circumcision in their status as the chosen people. So Paul looks back in the history of the Jews to the story of Abraham, the father of their nation. Look at verse 4:1. “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter?” What did this great and glorious history teach them?

Look at verse 2. “If in fact Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God.” If anyone had the right to boast about what they have done or are doing, it was Abraham. It was he who, in spite of his age and the despair in his heart over his childlessness, heard God’s calling and went to claim the promised land for his descendants after him. He was indeed a great man, and now three religions claim him as their father. But he had nothing to boast about before God. Look at verse 3. “What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’” Verse 3 is a quotation from Genesis 15:6. At that time, Abraham was still struggling in his heart over the choice he had made to follow God’s leading in the land of Canaan. In particular, he had just risked everything in order to rescue his nephew Lot, and had rejected the worldly reward offered him by the king of Sodom. But his hands seemed to be empty, because he had no son or heir, except for his servant. So he complained to God, “You have given me no heir, but a servant from my household will be my heir.” The key point is that Abraham had obeyed God as best he could. But now his heart was not right with God. He doubted God’s intentions and he questioned whether God would do what he said he would do. God is God. God had
every right to judge Abraham for his unbelief, and unthankfulness, and strip him of all his privileges and his calling. But God in his mercy did not do so. God instead took Abraham outside of his tent and made him look up at the stars. They say there are more than eight thousand individual stars that can be counted in the night sky, and countless stars beyond that in the Milky Way and other galaxies. But God said to Abraham, “Look up at the sky and count the stars, if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be.”

God’s promise to Abraham was not given at the moment of his victory, or of his bold decision to reject Sodom's offer. God’s promise was given at a moment of great weakness, when Abraham was losing heart and giving in to his despair and fear. Abraham listened to God’s word, and heard in it God's hope and love and mercy. He believed what God said, although he still had no child, and would not have one for 25 more years. He accepted God’s gracious offer as it was. Then what happened? Verse 3b says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Abraham was not declared righteous after his accomplishments in Canaan. Abraham was declared righteous in God's sight after he confessed faith in God’s gracious promise. His righteousness was “credited to him” by God for his faith.

From a human point of view, Abraham’s unbelief, unthankfulness and despair negated the heroic feats he had accomplished in the previous chapter. His best efforts to win God’s approval and gain assurance of God’s reward were in vain. He remained a wicked man. But precisely at the moment when Abraham’s unrighteousness was revealed, God’s righteous promise was given to him. This is the matchless grace of God. What did Abraham have to do to receive this grace? He just had to believe. He believed because he had no other hope. But God did not despise his desperate faith. God “credited his faith to him as righteousness.” Look at verse 4. “Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.” Here, Paul is presenting the contrast between the “works” view of righteousness, and that of “faith”. The basic idea of the world is that we are rewarded for doing what is good and right, and we are punished when we do wrong. The reward is not a gift. It is earned because of what we did. The same goes for the punishment. But God’s dealing with Abraham is different. Abraham did his best. But it wasn’t enough. Then Abraham
became upset, and fell into despair, questioning God’s promise to him. At that moment, God came and made the promise newly. Abraham did not earn it. It was God’s gracious gift. Abraham received it by faith. Then God credited to Abraham righteousness, enabling Abraham to live from then on as God’s servant. God does not pay us for our obedience or righteous acts. God credits our faith in him as righteousness, so that we might be justified and accepted by him, in spite of our failure. Look at verse 5. “However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited to him as righteousness.” The righteousness of Abraham was not the fruit of his deeds. It was the gift of God, given to Abraham when he despaired of himself and trusted in God alone. Where was there room for Abraham to boast? None. His best was not enough. But God’s grace to him was everything. So, he gave glory to God.

David, the one to whom God gave the promise of the Messiah, was also a key figure in the Jews’ history, and a symbol of their hope. He was a man of ability who could do anything, it seemed. But when victory was firmly in his grasp, and Israel’s greatness seemed assured, he fell into sin by taking Bathsheba, his general Uriah’s wife, for himself, and then having Uriah killed. When David realized his sin, he became powerless. He had the wealth to offer God thousands upon thousands of sacrifices, and the strength to go and kill thousands of God’s enemies for his glory. But David despaired, because these great feats meant nothing, once his wickedness as a sinner had been exposed. So he humbled himself before God with a contrite and broken heart. He knew he was worthy of rebuke and derision. So he could humbly accept Shimei’s taunting when he was forced to leave Jerusalem because of his son Absalom’s coup. But he still trusted in God’s mercy to rescue him. Look at verses 6 and 7. “David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man who sin the Lord will never count against him.”

Paul wants us to understand here how sinners can be justified before God. Justification is a theological concept, but the idea is simple: How can I, a sinner, stand before God or ask anything of him? If I am not justified, I can’t. But if I am justified before God, I can. No
accomplishment or sacrifice will ever earn you or me the right to stand before God, because of our sins. But God in his great mercy and grace offers us the promise of his love, and credits faith in that promise as righteousness, so that we might stand before the holy God with a confidence and assurance that cannot be shaken. Such a man is truly blessed. I confess that every time I do something for God that receives praise or recognition in the world, I am tempted to consider myself righteous by works. Then sin rises in my heart and I am condemned, because of my dead hope in myself. But God’s gracious promise comes to me newly without fail, and God credits my faith as righteousness when I repent and believe. Then I can stand once again before him as his servant. I have many blessings in this world, beginning with sh. Jennifer, my children, and my precious friends in Jesus. But the blessing of justification by faith is the best blessing of my life, and the only blessing that I can share freely with all men on earth. Praise God!

II. Walking in Abraham’s footsteps

Still, Abraham was a Hebrew. Abraham had handed down the command for his people to be circumcised in order to be considered as God’s people. How could those who were not “one of God's people,” that is, one of the uncircumcised, be made righteous? Was not the righteousness by faith in Christ just a restoration of the original righteousness that came through circumcision? Paul here is being kind in his discussion of this issue. Earlier, in his letter to the Galatians, he called those who belonged to the ‘circumcision group’ – mutilators of the flesh. But Paul addresses the issue here thoroughly, because it is a serious one that arises in some form or another in every generation. The key point in his argument is one of timing. When was Abraham circumcised? When did he receive the blessing of having his faith credited to him as righteousness? Because he believed in God’s promise before the command for circumcision was given, Abraham's example clearly indicates that circumcision did not make Abraham righteous. Rather, circumcision is the seal of the righteousness that he had by faith. Therefore, Abraham's example applies equally to the circumcised and the uncircumcised. And his heirs are not only the circumcised, but the uncircumcised as well, as long as they walk in the footsteps of Abraham’s faith.
Circumcision, or some other outward sign of the righteousness that is by faith, is a strong temptation for men because it is definite and permanent, without any further struggle or trial. If getting circumcised were all that was required for salvation, it would be like money in the bank. We could make the deposit and forget about it until it is time to collect. But ultimately, circumcision has no meaning except for the faith that it represents. Circumcised or uncircumcised, we are saved by the same faith, the faith of Abraham. This faith is not a once and for all proposition. Rather, it is a set of “footprints”, a pattern for our life that we should follow. As Paul said in 1:17, “a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.”

III. Faith in the promise (13-17)

But what about the inheritance promised to Abraham? Doesn’t the inheritance of the promises, especially the land of Canaan, belong to those who are circumcised? Look at 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.” Again, the answer is no. Since the promise came by faith, so the heirs of the promise are those who believe as Abraham did. Look at verse 14-15a. “For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath.” Here, we must consider the essential nature of a promise. A promise is something that is guaranteed. But nothing that is promised conditional on obedience to the law is guaranteed. Actually the only guarantee for one who lives by the law is the coming of wrath. As we discussed last time, the prophets were quite clear that God knew all along that his people could not live up to the law. The promises he gave were never dependent on their obedience. The promises are unconditional, because they came to Abraham by faith, and they are ours by faith, as well.

Therefore, Abraham truly is our father, and not just the father of the Jews. He is our father when we set our hearts on living by the same faith he had in God. Look at verse 17b. “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.” If we summarize Abraham’s faith, it is faith in God the Creator, and God the giver of life.
If he did not believe that this is who God is, he could not hold on to the promise God had given him. Look again at 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.” Wow. God’s promise for sinners is awesome. We will be heirs of the world through faith in him. We will be made righteous, and will shine like the stars in the sky. Who can keep this promise? God and God alone. To have the faith of Abraham in the promise of God so that God can credit righteousness to us, is to acknowledge God’s awesome power to conquer the world, even the power of death.

IV. Keeping the faith (18-25)

In this part, Paul describes the struggle Abraham had to keep the faith that pleases God. It was a life and death struggle. Look at verse 18. “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.’” The character of Abraham’s faith in God is, “Against all hope, Abraham believed.” Look at verse 19. “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.” Abraham’s faith was against the facts. He did not have pie-in-the-sky faith that ignored the facts. He faced the facts. He was old. His wife was old, too. But he held on to the promise of God, without wavering through unbelief. Paul does not mention it, but Abraham fought this battle of faith for 25 years. Still, he did not give up. In so doing, he gave glory to God. How could Abraham fight such a long and hard battle? Look at verse 21, “being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.” With the eyes of faith, Abraham saw God’s power was enough to overcome all the “facts” and win the victory.

Here we can begin to understand the real motives of the circumcision group and others who put something other than righteousness by faith as the way to salvation and eternal life. They claim that they have overcome one kind of challenge or another in order to be made right with God. And maybe they have. But their real motive is to avoid the struggle to live by faith illustrated by Abraham’s example, which is from first to last, and to the death. They want to lock their salvation up in the bank. They think that meeting the requirements of the law is the
sure-fire guarantee, while the righteousness that is by faith from first to last sounds too nebulous, too demanding and too hard. But they are mistaken. Look again at our key verses 20-21. “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.” What the salvation by works people fail to see is that righteousness by faith means that we depend on God to do the hard work. In his struggle, Abraham was strengthened in his faith when he depended on God. And Abraham could always take heart, because no matter how weak he might be, God had sufficient power to make up the difference, and give Abraham the victory. There is a real struggle to live by faith from first to last, and to receive from God the righteousness by faith. But that struggle is joyful and hopeful, always, because God’s power is with us to carry us through. On the other hand, those who trust in themselves are always both arrogant and fearful, for they know that a time will come when they cannot meet the challenge and will fail.

Look at verses 22-24. “This is why ‘it was credited to him as righteousness.’ 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.” The struggle to live by faith, and to have the righteousness that is by faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection is a good one, because it leads to a victorious life through depending on the power and grace of Almighty God. From time to time we complain that living a life of mission, of overcoming one’s sinful desires, of serving others instead of ourselves is too much. But is it, compared to the grace we have received through Christ Jesus our Lord? Surely, our life is overflowing with God’s blessing, and our hearts are filled with joy, because we can be right with God by faith. We can live with “hope against all hope” because our God is there at our moment of greatest weakness with the promise of love and life. We can win victory upon victory, only by faith. Look at verse 25. “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” We who are sinful can be justified by faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection. We are not holy, but we can have a holy mission and an eternal inheritance in God through the righteousness that is by faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.