

Romans 4

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If you went out and asked people around campus, “what is Christianity all about?” what do you think they’d say? If you asked people, “What is the heart of the Christian message?” what kind of answers would you get? How would *you* answer that question?

I suppose you’d get all kinds of answers. But you’d probably get a lot of people saying it’s about being a good person, doing good things, so you can get to heaven. You probably know people who think that. You may even think that yourself...

Well, if you’ve been here in previous weeks, you’ll have seen already that we have a serious problem, and *something* has to be done about it. You’ll know that Romans is a letter, written by a guy called Paul to a group of Christians in Rome (hence the name). And as you read it, this letter gets really uncomfortable really quickly. In the first couple of chapters Paul explains how we’ve rejected God, how we’ve turned away from him to worship other things instead, and how we face the just punishment for it. And he explains that we’re all as bad as each other. Moral people or religious people are no better – we’re all in the same boat. It’s pretty grim reading to begin with.

But then, in chapter 3, Paul explains that we can be made right with God, we can be *justified*, through Jesus.

“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

[Romans 3v22-24]

It’s like a light going on against the background of the first couple of chapters. Jesus died in **our** place, so that **our** sin could be paid for. And now instead of seeing us as sinners, God considers anyone who trusts in Jesus to be righteous, and we can be reconciled to the God who made us. It’s what the Bible calls **GRACE** – it’s God’s **undeserved goodness** to us.

That’s incredible news, isn’t it?! That although we’ve turned our backs on God and we deserve to be cut off from him, he’s made it possible for us to be made right with him, through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus.

But the message Paul presents would probably have provoked some questions. Paul said it applies to everyone equally – **all** have fallen short no matter who they are, **everyone** needs this rescue plan no matter what they’ve done, and **everyone** has access to it. But the Jewish people were God’s special people, and they’d been observing God’s law for centuries. That was how they related to God, by keeping rules and offering sacrifices as payment for their failures. So it’s understandable that they’d have all sorts of questions about how doing stuff fits into this idea of grace – being made right with God simply by trusting that he’s sorted it out through the Lord Jesus.

Paul answered some of those questions at the end of ch3. God justifies everyone, Jews and non-Jews alike, he makes everyone right in his eyes through faith in the Lord Jesus. But Paul needs to convince his readers of that. And so he does that here, in chapter 4, by going right to the roots of their faith. What about **Abraham**? He’s the acid test – if this doesn’t apply to Abraham, then forget it.

As we go, I hope you’ll see that this whole chapter is about God’s grace – the grace we’ve already seen in chapter 3, which Paul colours-in in chapter 4. It’s all about God’s undeserved but

overwhelming goodness. You might look at this chapter and think, “*that’s lovely, but I’m not a Jew living in the first century,*” and you might think it’s not particularly relevant. But let me tell you that **it really is**, and you’ll see how as we go along. In this chapter we’re going to see **God’s grace to Abraham**. Then we’re going to see how God’s grace to Abraham extends to **every single person who share’s Abraham’s faith**. And then we’ll see how the massive extent of God’s grace applies to **every single one of us here**.

If you like subheadings, you can use those:

God’s Grace to Abraham

God’s Grace to All

God’s Grace to Us

I really hope you won’t be able to get to the end of this chapter without being **blown away** by God’s grace to the whole of humanity, but especially to you personally. Let’s see shall we...?

God’s Grace to Abraham (v1-8)

Paul asks the question, “what about Abraham?” Abraham was basically the first of the Jewish people. He was the one God picked out, and all of Israel descended from him. So he’s the crucial test case. As Paul points out, if Abraham was justified by *works*, then he had something to boast about. But if he *was* justified by works, then everything Paul has said falls apart. It would mean it *is* possible to be made right with God by being good. This is important. So he turns to the Bible, and asks: “*What does the Scripture say?*” The Scriptures say (v3):

“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Paul’s quoting Genesis chapter 15, where this promise was made. I think we need to have a proper look at Genesis 15 so we know what we’re talking about. Turn to Genesis 15. (Abram is the same person – God adds an extra ‘ha’ to his name later...)

[Read Genesis 15v1-6]

God promises to give Abraham a son, and through that son he would have more offspring than all the stars in the universe. **Abraham’s response** is to believe God. And God credited it to him as righteousness.

But what does that mean, to believe and have it credited to you as righteousness? We need to go back to Romans 4 for the answer. Paul **explains** the principle, and then he **backs it up** with another Old Testament example.

Look at verse 4. “*Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.*”

Who here has a job, or has had a job? When you go to work, you expect to be paid. Your boss doesn’t just give you a gift out of the kindness of his heart. But that isn’t how it works with God. If you trust God, who declares wicked people right with him, then you’re declared right before God. Not on the basis of anything you’ve done, but because of faith. But don’t misunderstand this. It’s not because of the faith in itself, **but because of the one you’re putting your faith in**. And that’s GRACE – that God would rescue people who hate him.

This has always been the plan. It isn’t just something that God had to throw together because he suddenly realised the law wasn’t working out. Justification by faith has always been the plan – it’s who God is. And to prove it, Paul explains something King David wrote. King David was the greatest king Israel ever had, but he wrote the words which are quoted there in verses 7 and 8.

“Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.”

Those words are taken from Psalm 32 – don’t turn there now, but read it later if you have time. The whole of Psalm 32 is about sinners who trust God and are credited as righteous. Not because they earned it or deserve it but because they trust a merciful God who will forgive sin.

Paul has made his point. Abraham had to trust God to make him righteous. It wasn’t because of anything Abraham did, but because of the faith he placed in his gracious God.

Take a second to let that sink in. **Aren’t you glad that being made right with God is based on faith, not on works?!**

If we’re honest, this goes against how we think the world should work, doesn’t it? We’re brought up to earn what we need, and get what we deserve. If we’re going to realise how great this is, then first we have to swallow our pride. We’ve got nothing to be proud of, just like Abraham had no room to boast.

But **aren’t you glad that we’re justified by faith, and not by works?** It’s great because we’re rescued where otherwise it would have been hopeless. If it *was* based on stuff we do, we’d have no chance.

But it’s more than that. It’s **SO** much more than that. It’s a whole different kind of relationship. A relationship based on grace is completely different to one based on working.

I was shocked to hear about a previous vicar of the parish church near where my parents live. Apparently he used to tell people, “I don’t really understand God, but we have a good working relationship!” I think he was basically trying to admit that he wasn’t a Christian. But at the very least that’s really sad, isn’t it? He certainly hasn’t understood Romans 4.

If our relationship to God was based on keeping the law, then the responsibility lies with us. And everything we get from God would just be him fulfilling some kind of obligation to us. Only we’ve seen that we’re rubbish at following the law, so we’d never quite manage to live up to his impossible standards. Basically, we’d be slaves if it worked that way.

But it’s based on faith in a gracious God, which changes things completely. The initiative comes from him, as he reaches out to bring us back to him. All we have to do, all we *can* do, is trust him, like little children have to rely on their parents. Do you see the difference? **Aren’t you glad it’s by faith, not by keeping the law?**

Paul doesn’t end there. He goes on to ask, **“does this just apply to a certain group of people?”** This is an obvious question, given that he went to such great lengths to point out that we’re all as bad as each other. Does this rescue only apply to one group? And as Paul tackles this question, we start to see God’s grace to all...

God’s Grace to All (v9-17)

Look at verse 9. Here’s the question: *“Is this blessedness just for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?”*

Circumcision, for those of you who don’t know, is a minor operation performed on boys, where a certain piece of surplus skin is removed. Circumcision marked out a man as a member of God’s people. Remember that promise we looked at in Genesis 15? After God makes the promise, he makes a covenant with Abraham. He basically makes a contract. And to show that he was living in

this covenant with God, Abraham was circumcised, along with every Jewish male since. When foreigners wanted to join God's people, the men had to be circumcised too. Being circumcised and being part of God's people were basically inseparable. So the obvious question arises: **what about those who aren't circumcised? How are they counted as righteous? Does this grace apply to them too?**

Paul's answer clear: it applies to everyone! He goes back to Abraham to show why. Abraham believed the promise, and then he got circumcised to show it. Abraham was circumcised because he was counted righteous, not the other way round.

Think of it like a marriage. When two people get married, one proposes to the other. Then they exchange vows, and exchange rings as a sign. When God made the promise to Abraham, he basically proposed marriage – to Abraham and all his millions of descendants, even though none of them deserved it. In faith, Abraham accepted, and God made a covenant between them – they exchanged vows. Then just as a married couple exchange rings as a sign of their marriage, Abraham was circumcised as a sign that he belonged to God.

So this is still all about grace. Membership of God's people isn't about having an operation, it's about faith in our gracious God. Anyone who shares Abraham's faith becomes one of his offspring, and part of the promise. *"He is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised."* (v12). Faith, not works. Being circumcised doesn't get you in, and being **uncircumcised** doesn't keep you out.

The next couple of paragraphs reinforce his point. He explains that if being part of God's people depended on keeping rules, then we'd never be able to trust the promise. Instead, the promise comes by grace. If the promise comes by grace, then it doesn't depend on our achievement, it depends on God who is infinitely more dependable than us. So the promise can be **guaranteed**, and guaranteed to **everyone!** Circumcised or uncircumcised, Jew or non-Jew.

Aren't you glad it's about faith, not works? Because this is based on faith in a gracious God, not on keeping rules, membership of God's people is thrown open to everyone. Whoever you are, whatever you've done, the door is open.

This is crucial if you aren't a Christian. You need to know that there's nothing you could have done which puts you outside of God's grace, because it's not about what you've done. It's about what he's done. Whoever you are, whatever you've done, God's grace covers you.

But please don't think this stops being important once you're a Christian. Once you're a Christian by God's grace, don't try to make it about doing stuff. There's *still* nothing you can do to earn it. Don't fall into the trap these Jews did, and start thinking that it's rule keeping which keeps you in. They were thinking, *"I don't have a foreskin, so I'm OK"* – maybe not a mistake you're making. But are you thinking, *"I go to CU every week, so I'm OK."* *"I give money to charity, so I'm OK."* *"I don't swear so I'm OK."* Those things themselves aren't bad – it's the **I** at the beginning of the sentence which is the problem. When we think like that we're making it about us, and shifting the responsibility back onto our shoulders. That's not how it works! And the truth is, once we get into thinking like that it's a crushing burden to carry, and life as a Christian will just be a slog. **Don't abandon grace.** Become a Christian by God's grace, and **stay** a Christian by God's grace.

This is really important as you think about reaching out to the rest of the campus too. Isn't this the most phenomenal news you could possibly have to tell people?

But you need to be getting it yourself if you're going to share it with others. And you need to realise who this applies to. It applies to every single person on campus. There isn't a single person who isn't covered by the scope of God's grace. It doesn't matter what someone's done, what they look like, what their lifestyle is like. Does your CU, the way you treat people, the things you do, communicate that to everyone, no matter who they are or what they've done?

God's Grace to Us (v18-25)

So we've seen God's grace to Abraham, and then we've seen how that applies to all, regardless of anything they do. But then Paul makes it **personal**. He brings it back round to **us**, and (more importantly), he brings it back round to **the Lord Jesus**.

The promise to Abraham was eventually fulfilled, but at the time it looked ridiculous. "*Against all hope,*" Abraham ended up with millions of descendents. It was 'against all hope' because God had promised Abraham a son, even though he was old – 100 years old in fact. His body was as good as dead. And Sarah was long past the age of having children. But Abraham didn't waver – in fact, his faith got stronger. And eventually he did have a son. **But** the promise to Abraham wasn't fulfilled through his son, or his grandchildren or his great, great, great grandchildren. The promise would be fulfilled through one man...

We've already seen that righteousness by faith wasn't just for Abraham, it was for all of us who share his faith. And the last few verses spell out what that means. The words "it was credited to him as righteousness," apply to all of us who "*believe in the one 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.*"

Our justification depends on the Lord Jesus. God declares us righteous based on what Jesus has done. He was "delivered over to death for our sins" – he died on the cross to pay for our rebellion against God. And he "was raised to life for our justification." Through his death, the sin which stands between us and God is cleared away, and his resurrection proves it. Through his victory over sin, displayed in the resurrection, we're declared right with God.

So we trust in the same promise Abraham did, because it's ultimately all about Jesus. We can be made right with God thanks to the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And we join a long line of people who've done the same since Abraham. We look back on what Christ did and trust him. Abraham was looking forward to the same promise.

So do you see how this is massively relevant to us? We can't just say, "he's a Jew, and I'm not." It's all one story, one plan, with Jesus as the ultimate fulfilment of it, the ultimate expression of God's grace. That God so loves us and wants us to be reconciled to him that he delivered his own Son over to death in order to forgive us and make us right before him.

This is the *fundamental* reason why it has to be based on grace and not on works. It's all been done by Jesus. There's nothing else we *could* do, even if we wanted to. This is what it took to sort things out – the death of God himself. What work could ever come close to this? The cross shows just how ridiculous our attempts are to earn our way back to God.

The almighty creator of the universe gave up his life and died on a wooden cross.

What have you done?

Can you think of an answer to that question that isn't pathetic?

"I let an old person sit on my seat on the bus."

"I read my Bible every day this week."

"I gave a talk at CU."

Ditch your pride, because it's stupid. Don't try to earn God's love and forgiveness. Instead, throw yourself on his mercy, and trust in the Lord Jesus. If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, maybe now's your chance to do that for the first time. But if you are a Christian, live the reality of this. Live at the foot of the cross, live in God's grace, and enjoy getting to know the God who loved you enough to die for you, to put things right between you and him

Aren't you glad it's based on faith not works?