

Romans 4A (2017)

- My teaching on the first half of Romans 4 ended in a place of confusion, I feel, so I need to clarify my teaching from the previous lesson
 - First, let's take another look at our Structure of Romans chart



- We're in Chapter 4: Paul's proofs from the Old Testament
- Paul's seeking to prove three basic points related to obtaining righteousness
 - First, Paul proved that salvation has always been a matter of faith, not works
 - He used the example of Abraham as his proof

- Abraham was credited with righteousness because he believed in God to keep a promise concerning a future son
- He wasn't credited on the basis of his works, therefore Abraham proves works are not the way to righteousness
- Abraham is Paul's example to prove that salvation by faith is not a new idea
- Secondly, Paul proved that the means to salvation didn't change after the Law came to Israel
 - He used the example of David declaring in the Psalms that a blessed man is the one who has his lawless deeds forgiven and his sin debt covered
 - Once again, scripture testifies that blessedness (i.e., righteousness) is according to God's mercy only
 - David lived after the Law, so his example proves that the Law's arrival didn't alter God's plan
 - So David proves that salvation by faith alone has never changed
- Thirdly, Paul proved that God made faith the means to salvation so that both Jew and Gentile could receive His mercy
 - To prove this point, Paul returned to the example of Abraham in v.9 asking when was Abraham circumcised
 - This is where my teaching wasn't clear enough, so I want to spend a moment revisiting Paul's third proof
- Circumcision was commanded under two of the five covenants God gave to Israel: the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants
 - The Abrahamic Covenant came first, and it established Jewish identity
 - In that covenant, circumcision was the sign of the covenant
 - As such, it was like a Jewish birth certificate demonstrating who had been included in the covenant
 - It was performed at 8 days because it didn't depend on personal agreement
 - Every child born to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was a party to the covenant and circumcision was the sign of that covenant

- If a child was not circumcised, then the covenant was broken for that individual and they were cut off from the Jewish nation
- The Mosaic Covenant also expected males to be circumcised
 - Obviously, Jewish males were already commanded to be circumcised under the Abrahamic Covenant
 - But under the Mosaic Law, Gentiles who wanted to join in the commonwealth of Israel were also circumcised
 - So circumcision became a way for Gentiles to submit to the Law
 - That's why Paul warned the Galatians that if they took circumcision, they were obligating themselves to keeping the whole law
- So that leads to the question, must a Gentile become a Jew before they may be included in the promises of the covenant?
 - To address this point Paul asks when did Abraham receive his declaration of righteousness: before or after circumcision?
 - The answer is before, and Paul says this proves that salvation didn't depend on being Jewish
 - Abraham didn't have the sign of the covenant yet was still declared righteous by faith alone
- Therefore, Paul concludes that Abraham serves as an example (i.e., a father) to both Jews and Gentiles
 - His faith preceded his entry into the Abrahamic Covenant
 - Therefore, he is an example for all mankind, both those who descended from him and those who didn't
 - Any man or woman who repeats Abraham's example of faith will receive the same outcome: a heavenly credit of righteousness
- Today, we are entering into the New Covenant by faith, because the content of God's promise has been expanded to its fullness in Christ
 - Abraham received a promise with a lessor content but his faith was in the same object: the faithfulness of God
 - We too place our faith in the faithfulness of God

[1John 1:9](#) If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

- And like Abraham, we are justified by our faith in God's promise
- But the promise God gave to us in the New Covenant holds greater content concerning God's plan of redemption
- Still, the process works the same
 - We receive the promise
 - We believe in the One Who promises
 - And we receive the credit of righteousness that Abraham received
- Following our faith we follow Abraham's example in taking the sign of a covenant
 - By faith, we receive the sign of our faith which is the baptism of the Spirit, called the circumcision of the heart
 - Our spirit baptism happens without any action on our part, since it is accomplished by the Spirit at our moment of faith
 - In the same way that the sign of the Abrahamic covenant was given to an infant
 - We don't chose to enter in...our Father brings us in
 - Later, we give testimony to our spirit baptism by taking water baptism as a public witness
- In the last part of the chapter, Paul refutes once again that the Law's arrival and its requirement for circumcision changed the rules
 - Remember, the Mosaic Law also mandated circumcision
 - That fact suggested to some Jews that the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant were to be obtained through the Law
 - That was the argument being made by the Judaizers in the first century...
 - They said one must be under the Law to receive the blessings of the New Covenant

- So that leads Paul to give further argument on this point

Rom. 4:13 For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.

Rom. 4:14 For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified;

Rom. 4:15 for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.

- As we read this section, we need to pay attention to Paul's vocabulary in this section
 - Paul mentions the promise to Abraham and the Law
 - The promise to Abraham refers to the Abrahamic Covenant
 - The Law refers to the Mosaic Covenant
 - The Abrahamic covenant was a one-way grant, where the blessings were given as a promise based on faith
 - The Mosaic Covenant was a two-way agreement, where the blessings were earned by performance of works
 - Both required circumcision, which was the mark of Jewish identity and submission to the Law
 - Secondly, Paul talks of heirs
 - In the covenant God spoke to Abraham, He made promises to both Abraham and his descendants (*see Gen 15:18*)
 - Likewise, in the Mosaic Covenant, the Lord made an agreement with all future generations of Israel (*see Deut 29:14-15*)
 - So the question is who are the heirs of the covenant God spoke to Abraham?
 - Since both covenants commanded circumcision, which covenant is responsible for delivering the promises God gave Abraham's descendants?
 - Or we could ask it this way: which covenant did God intend to use to fulfill His promises to Abraham and his descendants?

- Did God intend for Abraham's descendants to keep the Law in order to receive the promises He gave Abraham?
- Did God add circumcision to the Law so that the two covenants would work together to bring about the promised blessings?
- Or did these two covenants stand apart?
- To this Paul says plainly in v.13 that God's promises to Abraham were to be obtained in the way Abraham obtained them, by faith alone, not by the Law
 - In Genesis, God promised Abraham that his descendants would be heirs of the world
 - God made a grant to Abraham, a grant of land and prosperity
 - The Lord said that this blessing would be Abraham's inheritance
 - And like any inheritance, Abraham would pass that inheritance down to his descendants
 - Earlier, Paul taught that Abraham's descendants were those who share in his faith
 - So the connection between Abraham and his heirs will be spiritual not physical
 - Abraham received that promise when he put his faith in it
 - After Abraham believed God, God established His promise as a covenant
 - But Paul says if those blessings were later incorporated into a covenant of works (i.e., the Law), then they would no longer be on the basis of a promise
 - He says in v.14 that if those who are Abraham's heirs were those who were party to the Law, then it would mean that the promise was void or nullified
 - The original promises that God gave Abraham were received on the basis of faith only
 - But if the Law was the means of receiving the blessing, then it would be by doing works of Law
 - That would have made that earlier promise of no effect

- Let me use an example to explain Paul's point more easily
 - Imagine I promise my son \$100 for his birthday and he believes my word and looks forward to his gift
 - I've told him that this blessing will be his without any condition
 - By my word alone, he expects to receive a blessing
 - But what if later I return to him and say that he can have that \$100 only if he keeps his room clean
 - At that point, my earlier promise is no longer in effect
 - He is no longer assured the money simply because of my word
 - Now he must obey my rule if he is to receive the money
 - So my law has nullified my earlier promise
 - Paul says that if this were how God's covenants worked, then it would have had a profound effect
 - In v.15 Paul says law always brings about wrath
 - He means that laws are cause for accusation
 - They do not makes us do the right thing; rather they expose us when we fail to live right
 - When I added my rule for my son, I introduced the possibility of failure and condemnation
 - I didn't increase the chance of receiving the money; I greatly decreased that possibility
 - But when no law exists, there can be no violation, Paul says
 - Before I added the rule for my son to follow, there was no chance he would fail to receive the money
 - There was nothing he could do to ruin it, since I never connected his receiving of the blessing with his behavior at all
 - Without law there can be no violation and without violation there is nothing standing in the way of blessing
 - That's the difference between works and grace

- In the first situation, my son was looking forward to a reward and had no reason to fear or even labor to obtain it
- In the second situation, he had little hope for a reward and lived under the burden of constant effort yet with little or no hope to escape judgment
- One is a blessing, one is a curse
- So it was with the Abrahamic Covenant
 - God only asked Abraham to believe in the promise
 - And on that basis the promise was assured
 - From that point forward, nothing could stop it from coming to Abraham, since its fulfillment wasn't connected to his behavior

Rom. 4:16 For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

Rom. 4:17 (as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

- Paul says "for this reason" the blessing of righteousness was to come by faith (in the way of the Abrahamic Covenant) and not by works (Mosaic Covenant)
 - Paul means for all the reasons he's covered in the chapter up to this point
 - The first reason: the blessing must be by grace, not by works, because righteousness is credited not earned
- Secondly, it must be apart from circumcision (i.e., Jewish identity) so that it could be available to both Jew and Gentile
 - If Jewish identity were part of the process of salvation, then it would only be available to those who were Jewish
 - But Abraham was promised to be a father of many nations, Paul says in v.17

- Meaning, that many would be spiritual heirs of that man for following his example of faith
- Finally, God's blessing must be by faith in a promise and not by law because otherwise no one could have expected to receive the blessing
 - God is the One Who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which did not exist
 - In Abraham's case, Paul is describing the arrival of Isaac from a dead womb
 - But that statement has a double meaning
 - It also refers to the bringing of new life to a spiritually dead person
 - Calling into existence a faith and trust in God that previously didn't exist
 - This is how Abraham stands as ultimate proof for the manner of salvation
 - He is our example of how a person can be lead to faith in a promise from God

Rom. 4:18 In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "So shall your descendants be."

Rom. 4:19 Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb;

Rom. 4:20 yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God,

Rom. 4:21 and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.

Rom. 4:22 Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness.

Rom. 4:23 Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him,

Rom. 4:24 but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,

Rom. 4:25 He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

- Paul ends the chapter with an extended examination of the faith Abraham had in God's promise
 - The point in this examination is to understand how closely we follow in his footsteps as we believe
 - We aren't just repeating his example of faith
 - We are actually believing in essentially the same thing
 - In v.18 Paul says that Abraham believed in hope against hope
 - That phrase means that Abraham had hope in something that he ought not have had reason to hope in
 - Abraham had been promised by God that he shall have innumerable descendants
 - But Abraham contemplated his own body, Paul says
 - Contemplated could be translated "understood"
 - Abraham understood his situation
 - He was not naive or ignoring the obvious
 - He knew that he – and particularly his wife – were past the age when children could be expected
 - They had no reason to hope for a baby
 - But there was God promising to bring new life from something dead
 - And Paul says that Abraham understood his situation but nevertheless, he didn't let that fact weaken his faith in God's promise
 - Instead, Abraham did not waiver
 - He put no hope in his flesh to solve the problem, but he placed his faith entirely in the Lord to solve it
 - He gave glory, being fully convinced that what God had promised He was able to perform
- This is exactly how we follow in Abraham's footsteps in obtaining God's righteousness as he did
 - We receive a promise that God will bring new life from our dead spirit

- That by faith in Christ we may be born again, made new spiritually in the likeness of Christ
- As Jesus told Nicodemus

[John 3:3](#) Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

[John 3:4](#) Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"

[John 3:5](#) Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

[John 3:6](#) "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

- If we contemplated our deadness, our sinfulness, and our rebellious hearts, then we would have no reason to hope for heaven
 - But we don't place our hope in our flesh, just as Abraham didn't place his trust in his own flesh to solve his problem
 - We hope against hope, putting our trust in God to justify the ungodly
- More than that, God also promises that out of this dying body He will bring a new eternal body that will never die again
 - Paul explained that promise to us

[1Cor. 15:42](#) So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body;

[1Cor. 15:43](#) it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power;

[1Cor. 15:44](#) it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

- If you look at your own dying body, you have no hope to live eternally
- You see your body getting older, getting weaker, getting sicker
- You put no trust in it to solve the problem of death

- Instead, you place your hope in God's promise to raise you as Christ was raised
 - So hoping against hope, you expect to live again one day
 - In that future day, God will give you a new living eternal body
- What explains such a confidence?
 - Intellectually, we struggle to explain our confidence to others, don't we?
 - Imagine Abraham explaining to others that he was confident that he would receive a son despite being 100 yrs old
 - I'm sure anyone who asked for defense of his confidence would have heard Abraham speak of the glory of God (v.20)
 - But in the end, there was no proof possible
 - His confidence was a faith that defied explanation
 - That faith was a product of God's supernatural work in Abraham's heart
 - Hebrews says that Jesus is the Author and Perfector of our faith
 - He brings us the supernatural confidence not to waiver in that confidence
 - But what about that episode of Abraham and Hagar?
 - While Abraham was waiting for the Lord to fulfill His promise to Abraham, he took matters into his own hands
 - Abraham took Hagar as his concubine for the purpose of producing the child he expected from God's promise
 - He did this at the suggestion of his wife, but nevertheless Abraham went through with it
 - It seems as Abraham did exactly the opposite of what Paul was saying here in Romans
 - It seems that Abraham contemplated the weakness of his wife's body and then he wavered in his faith because of it
 - And so he doubted God, and it lead him to his sin with Hagar
- But that's not how to understand Abraham's actions

- He didn't seek for a son through Hagar because he doubted God's promise
 - He did it because he had faith God was at work to produce an heir
 - Notice that Paul says Abraham was about 100 when he had this confidence
 - But Abraham received the promise when he was 75, and it was at that time he was declared righteous by his faith
- So Abraham received a promise at 75, and believed and was credited with righteousness
 - Then time begins to pass
 - Even as time passes, Abraham's confidence in that promise doesn't waiver, but his patience did
 - The long time caused Abraham to second guess God's timetable and presuppose how the promise would be fulfilled
 - So that at a point Abraham becomes convinced, perhaps by his wife, that the child would simply come in a conventional way
- Eventually, Abraham assumed that God intended to keep his promise through the son he produced with Hagar
 - To Abraham, God's promise was still trustworthy and the blessings were no less true
 - But he wasn't patient
- Then after 25 years, the Lord announced that the time had come for the child to be born and that the son would come by Sarah, not Hagar

Gen. 18:9 Then they said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "There, in the tent."

Gen. 18:10 He said, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him.

Gen. 18:11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing.

Gen. 18:12 Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"

[Gen. 18:13](#) And the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?’

[Gen. 18:14](#) “Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

[Gen. 18:15](#) Sarah denied it however, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. And He said, “No, but you did laugh.”

- By this point, neither Abraham nor Sarah are looking for the fulfillment of God’s promise because they assume it has already happened
 - They suppose it has already been fulfilled in Ishmael, the son from Hagar
 - This isn’t a lack of a faith in God’s promise; it’s a lack of perspective and appreciation for God’s ways
- They both believed in the promise but they thought they understood God’s plan
 - So when they heard the Lord promising to bring a son through Sarah, after Ismael was already 13, they couldn’t understand it
 - Sarah laughed at the suggestion, Abraham puzzled at it
 - Much like a 100 year old woman might laugh at the suggestion today or an old man might assume he didn’t understand something
- Then God explained the plan to Abraham and when Abraham finally understood what God was going to do, he realigned his expectations
 - That happened when he was about 100, as Paul says
 - And at that point, Abraham demonstrated his confidence in God’s promise by acting without wavering
 - First, Abraham obeyed God by sending his beloved son Ishmael out of the house
 - Secondly, he willingly sacrificed Isaac when God required it
- Abraham’s story is so interesting precisely because it features such a contrast of highs and lows
 - Abraham hopes against hope for a child and later nearly sacrifices him at God’s request – what great examples of faith!

- But in between those two high points, Abraham lies about his wife rather than trusting in God to protect them while waiting for the promised son
- And he beds another woman in an attempt to have the promised son rather than wait patiently
- From the first moment Abraham was trusting in God to fulfill His word
- And as a result he was declared righteous from the beginning
- But he didn't walk in perfect obedience or understanding
- Abraham's life is evidence that a journey of faith doesn't always reflect our great confidence in God for our eternal future
 - We may have saving faith in His promises but we will waiver at times in our obedience
 - We may assume too much about how God plans to work out His plan
 - Or we may decide to take matters into our own hands
 - But our faith is intact as is our justification
- And so Paul says in v.22 that's why God chose to declare Abraham righteous in Chapter 15 of Genesis, at the start of this journey...it was for our sake
 - In Genesis 15 Abraham was at the beginning of that journey, and his faith was childlike
 - He knew nothing of the future
 - He had no idea that God intended to make him wait a quarter of century before his promised son was given
 - He simply heard a promise and he believed it
 - And so God credited Him with righteousness
 - Even as God made that credit the Lord knew all that would come later for Abraham
 - He knew the sin Abraham would accumulate in those coming years

- Yet He was already prepared to cover that sin under this grant of justification
- Abraham was credited as righteous and his credit was a forever decree
- Paul says we needed to see this order of events too
 - We needed to see that faith produces righteousness regardless of the walk our life may take after that point
 - Like Abraham, our faith saves us from the penalty of sin and it also saves us despite our sin
 - So that even as we stumble like Abraham, we remain credited with righteousness as he was
- These things we share with Abraham even as we believe in a different promise than Abraham did
 - The content of our promise has fully matured
 - At the end of v.24 Paul says we are those who have believed in the promise of Jesus raised from the dead, which is something more than Abraham received
 - Nevertheless, we have what he had
- But eventually, Abraham's understanding of God's plan was fully informed, and at that point his behavior aligned with his faith
 - I think that's one of the reasons we have the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac in Genesis 22
 - Had that story never happened, we might still be debating Abraham's faith
 - Because after his declaration of righteousness in Genesis 15, his record of obedience wasn't very good
 - So we might assume his faith wasn't genuine or we might doubt the Lord's willingness to remain faithful to His promise
 - But then we reach the point that Abraham sends Ishmael away and is then ready to sacrifice his other son Isaac, the promised son
 - That moment confirms for us that Abraham was truly trusting in God and not flesh

- He was willing to put flesh to an end in the form of his son, yet remain confident in God to bring back the dead
- The writer of Hebrews explains Abraham's thinking in that moment

[Heb. 11:17](#) By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son;

[Heb. 11:18](#) it was he to whom it was said, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called."

[Heb. 11:19](#) He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.

- How encouraging for those of us who depend on God's grace yet repeat the same mistakes Abraham made!
 - We can know that our salvation is secure despite our sin
 - And all the more because of our sin
 - As Paul says in v.25 Christ was put to death because we have so much sin
 - Someone needed to cover it, because we simply can't escape it on our own
 - But then Jesus was raised for our justification, that is He was raised from the dead to give us confidence that our account in Heaven is truly clear
 - When Jesus returned to life, God brought life from that which was dead
 - And He gave us our proof that He can keep His promise to us
 - He has proven death is not a barrier to fear when God is on your side
 - So as we walk by faith, we have our confidence that our faith has cleared our account, and we maintain our faith in that future outcome
 - But like Abraham, we don't know how long the Lord will tarry
 - We don't know the length of our life or the trials we will face
 - Somedays our path in life may depart from the faith in our heart
 - We may try to work the plan ourselves

- We may try to find our blessing in the wrong way
- We may cling to the physical life rather than seeking for spiritual life
- But none of those things can change that heavenly credit of righteousness
- They only prove we needed God's grace all the more
- Meanwhile we grow, and as we do, our faith and our behavior are to grow closer together
 - As the Lord reveals more of Himself and His plan to us in His word and by His Spirit, His expectation is that we begin to live in the light of that knowledge
 - Our goal should be to begin our walk of faith like Abraham did
 - And that we should end our life as he did, acting according to that faith
 - As James said:

James 2:20 But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?

James 2:21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?

James 2:22 You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected;

James 2:23 and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God.

- Our faith is saving us from the first moment, but is it useful to God?
 - Does it bring Him glory?
 - Does it testify?
 - Abraham's faith was justified or proven when he offered up Isaac on the altar
 - And his faith was finally working to perfect or complete his faith

- And finally, the scripture that declared Abraham as righteous could be seen to be fulfilled
- That's our goal, that our life would become a testimony to all that we claim to hold true in our hearts