

GOOD NEWS FOR ALL OF US

WEEK SIXTEEN: Romans 4:1-25

Romans Good News for All of Us: A Brief Introduction

Paul's epistle to the Romans is the most influential of his letters and has had an enormous impact on Christian theology and doctrine. Part of the reason is that it is the most systematic of Paul's letters; outlining as clearly as in any of his writings his understanding of the good news about Jesus. One consequence has been that Romans has been treated like a systematic theology rather than as an occasional document; one written to address a specific pastoral occasion. Romans, like all of Paul's letters, has a concrete situation that he is wanting to address. Scholars agree that there is evidence of division in the Roman church. The upshot of this is that the doctrine which dominates the first two-thirds of the letter is less an overview of Paul's thought and more of a foundation for the exhortations in the final chapters. In order to better understand the doctrine, we will benefit from better understanding the pastoral issues that Paul is hoping to address. To that end, we will be working through Romans backwards; seeking clarity about the concerns Paul has and then exploring the doctrinal foundations.

I have included an outline of the series and a brief bibliography at the end of this document.

Sermon Outline:

A Brief Overview of This Week's Sermon

Key Text(s): Romans 4:1-25

In this passage Paul wraps up his first major argument and introduces his second. In general, he has been levelling the ground between the Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome by drawing attention to their shared dilemma – all alike are under the power of sin. Furthermore, the privileges of the Jewish people, especially the law, cannot save them.

However, it is important to remember that Paul is not writing a treatise about "how to be saved". If anything, he is writing to remind the Roman Christians "how they have been saved". This common salvation forms the basis of their unity.

As Paul concludes this first section he turns to Abraham. This is not surprising. In first century Jewish thought Abraham was held up as the exemplar of Jewish faith. It was commonly believed that the patriarch had fully obeyed the law (which would not be given for several hundred years!). The text that most fully encapsulated Abraham's faithfulness and trust was Genesis 22 and the call to sacrifice Isaac. Paul is demonstrating something different – who are Abraham's offspring and on what basis can they make that claim – and turns to Genesis 15.

In Genesis 15 Abraham complains to God that he, as yet, has no offspring at all. In other words, it isn't a passage about salvation but promise! The Lord tells him to go outside and try to count the stars. "So shall your offspring be" he declared. "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." (15:6). The narrative concludes with the Lord making a covenant with Abraham and reaffirming the promise... More on that in a moment.

After Paul draws attention to Abraham's faith he adds David's experience of forgiveness – God not crediting his sins against him – before turning to his central premise. In response to the question (most likely framed as coming from his

imaginary dialogue partner) about who this blessedness (that of God crediting righteousness and not crediting sin) is for: the circumcised or uncircumcised, Paul notes that Abraham's experience happened before circumcision!

And, for Abraham, the rite of circumcision (which was both a cultural identity marker and an indicator of a willingness to take on the ethical expectations of the law) looked backwards to faith, not forward to the law. The bottom line is that Abraham is the father of all who have faith – Jews and Gentiles.

It is here that it is worth saying a bit more about the contrast Paul is drawing between promise and law. The point that Paul is contrasting is important since Paul continues to affirm both promise and law. To begin with it is critical to remind ourselves that the promise and the law share quite a bit in common.

First, they share a common purpose. The Lord's promises to Abraham – to bless him, make him a great nation, plant that nation in the land, so that the world might be blessed – is echoed in the law. The law was given to Abraham's descendants as they were about to be planted in the land as the way they were to be a blessing (a living, breathing, display home of what it looked like to live in relationship with God).

Second, both the promise and the law were received by faith. In other words, each required a work of God. The promise could only happen through the miraculous power of God and the law, likewise, could only fulfill its purpose if God wrote it on the hearts of his people (Deut. 30:6; Jer. 31:33).

Third, both the promise and the law shared a common desired outcome: righteousness. Abraham was called to be faithful and blameless (Gen. 17:1) and the law was, likewise, to lead to the kind of righteous, blameless, godliness that drew the nations to the Lord.

If the promise and law have so much in common, what is the contrast that Paul wants to draw attention to? The difference, I think, is the same as that between a gift and a purchase.

Both share a common purpose (to fill a need in someone's life), a common mechanism (there is a cost to be borne), and a common outcome (a need filled). However, the differences between them is striking. First, the one who bears the cost is different. Second, a gift is relational while a purchase is transactional.

The question becomes, "What is the gift that God has given us?" We might be tempted to say "forgiveness of sins" – and this is, of course, a very significant gift. However, where Paul goes – and this leads into the next section (Romans 5-8) – is resurrection life!

The example of Abraham with which Paul concludes the section is all about the patriarch's faith in the one who brings life from the dead and calls into being things that are not! It is this resurrection life – including the forgiveness of sins – that fulfills the purpose and outcomes of God in our lives.

This gift is to be received by faith and, importantly, treated as a gift. When we treat a gift like a purchase we discount the cost that has been borne and undermine the relationship that motivated the gift. Both the promise and the law were to be received as a gift of grace (given all they shared). And remember the social nature of grace in the 1st century – there was the grace of giving, the grace of receiving, and the grace of repaying. There was an expectation to seek to repay the kindness received, but after receiving it and only as an expression of gratitude – rather than as an actual way to actually pay for what had been received!

In the next section of the letter, Paul will develop the idea of the resurrection life that unites all who believe...

Questions to Ask

1. Paul says Abraham's story helps show that Jewish and Gentile believers share the same basis for belonging to God's people. Why might this have mattered so much for unity in the Roman church?
2. The sermon notes that Paul is reminding the Roman Christians not simply how to be saved, but how they have been saved. How does remembering our shared salvation shape the way we relate to one another?
3. Abraham believed God's promise before he saw the fulfilment of that promise. What helps you continue trusting God when his promises seem delayed or unlikely?
4. Paul contrasts promise and law, and the sermon describes this through the difference between a gift and a purchase. Where are you most tempted to treat God's grace as something transactional rather than relational?

5. The sermon suggests that God's gift is not only forgiveness, but resurrection life. How might this broaden or deepen the way we understand salvation in Christ?
6. Grace is received as a gift and then lived out in grateful response. What is one practical way you could express gratitude for God's grace this week in your relationships, service, or witness?

A Prayer to Pray

Continue to pray for the unity of our community of faith. In particular, pray that we might demonstrate our unity more, and more significantly.

A Practice to Try

Choose one of the first steps you identified in Q. 6 above and implement it this week.

Readings to Read This Week

The following passages:-

1. Genesis 15
2. Genesis 17
3. Psalm 32
4. Jeremiah 31:31-34
5. Ezekiel 11:18-21

A Mission Commitment to Reflect on

One of our values is to be Others-Focused. The unity of the body of Christ is a mission-critical matter. Putting others first, serving them, and seeking to demonstrate our love for one another are all things we can do to strengthen our unity.

A GBC Initiative to Promote/Celebrate

Each week we will provide you with a key aspect of our community news that we would encourage you to remind your Life Group about.

1. This September we will be focusing on the work of Hopefield and, as part of that focus, seeking to raise funds to support a DV counsellor on the Hopefield team. Our target is \$40,000. This is a smaller financial target than May Mission Month, but is equally important. Please encourage your group to prayerfully consider if this is work that they might want to support. All donations to Hopefield are tax-deductible.

Good News For All of Us – Sermon Series outline

Please note that this is subject to change, but as it stands right now...

Term 1 (Romans 12-16)		Term 2 (Romans 9-11)		Term 3 (Romans 1-4)		Term 4 (Romans 5-8)	
15/2	Romans 16	7/6	9:1-29	16/8	1:1-17	25/10	TBD
22/2	15:14-33	14/6	9:30-10:21	23/8	1:18-32	1/11	TBD
1/3	14:1-15:13	21/6	11:1-24	30/8	2:1-16	8/11	TBD
8/3	12:14-13:7	28/6	11:25-36	6/9	2:17-3:8	15/11	TBD
15/3	12:1-13			13/9	3:9-31	22/11	TBD
22/3	13:8-14			20/9	4:1-25	29/11	TBD
29/3	Easter						
5/4	Easter						

A Brief Bibliography

The following commentaries have been utilised in the preparation and delivery of this series.

Bird, Michael, 2016, *Romans*, Story of God Bible Commentary, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Gorman, Michael J., 2022, *Romans: A theological and pastoral commentary*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan.

McKnight, Scot, 2019, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas.

Witherington, Ben III, 2004, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan.