

“What Does Real Faith Look Like”?

Romans 4:1–25

What does faith mean to you?

In recent years the word “faith” has got itself a bad name. People flew aeroplanes into the World Trade Centre because their faith directed them to do so. People of public faith commit the hideous crime of sexual abuse. Israel Folau has upset many people in the expression of his faith.

How do you understand your faith? What does faith mean to you?

I’ve had many people say to me, rather proudly, that they have a “faith”. As though the presence of a faith is a redeeming feature. Never do they say what their faith is in—and never have I been game enough to ask!

Yet for others, faith is anything other than a redeeming feature. Faith is what you have when you don’t accept science. Faith is often described as an irrational response to the reasoned outcomes of scientific discovery. Others say that faith is a chain that holds us in the medieval past.

What does faith mean to you?

Justified by faith alone. This morning we re-join Romans in chapter 4 which is a chapter about Abraham and his faith. As we have seen, Paul has said a lot about faith in his letter to the Romans. Let’s back track a little by going to Rom 1:16–17,

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who **believes**: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by **faith** from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by **faith**.”

The righteousness we need from God is a righteousness received by faith alone. The gospel is the news that God is prepared to declare us right before him when we put our trust in the Lord Jesus. This is hard for people to understand. “Surely I’m not that bad”, they say. “I’m sincere in my beliefs”, they say. “I can take care of myself”, they say. “I can justify myself”, they say.

The Roman church was a mix of Jews and Gentiles and they weren't mixing particularly well. The Jewish Christians claimed the high ground. So Paul is pushed to unravel the gospel from the stand point of Jewish objections and yet in a way meaningful to his Gentile readers. But whether one be a Jewish or Gentile reader in the 1st century or the 21st century, the objections to the gospel remain the same.

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The wrath of God. God's principle of judgement is laid out in Rom 2.6, "God will repay each person according to what he has done". To those who do good—glory, honour and immortality. To those who are self-seeking and reject the truth—wrath and anger.

Paul's observation is that everyone by nature is self-seeking and rejects the truth. This is the natural human condition. The back story to the gospel is that God will repay each person according to what they have done. Even now this is happening. Even now, as Rom 1.18 says, the wrath of God is being "revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness".

The gospel is good news because it's a saving gospel. What does it save us from? The gospel saves godless and wicked people from the wrath of God. So who are these godless and wicked people? And can anyone come up with an excuse that explains their evil heart?

This is really serious business. The wrath of God is being revealed. Look at your own heart, your own thoughts, your own actions. I'm tired of hearing about shootings, serious car accidents, sexual assault, corrupt businesses, home invasions, drink driving, drugs, greed, arrogance, lies, bad tempers—the news is the same old story and only the names and places change.

Do you deserve the consequences of the wrath of God? On judgement day, what will your excuse be?

The Gentile. Paul answers these questions firstly from a Gentile perspective. These are the ones who perhaps have a case for pleading ignorance. No Gentiles were on Mt Sinai when God forged a covenant with his people. The Gentiles know nothing about the law. They never went to Sabbath School. Some of them live in deepest, darkest Africa—well away from the church and the Scriptures and civilisation.

In our post-Christian culture, there are many in our world who have never heard of Abraham or Moses or Jesus in any meaningful way. Nor have they had contact with the Bible and some will never meet a Christian.

So is it fair that God pours out his anger upon people with no knowledge of him?

And Paul replies that there is no-one without knowledge of God. Creation plainly leads us back to the Creator. The world gives us knowledge of God by revealing his power, creative design and orderly ways. The psalmist says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge” (Ps 19.1-2).

Creation gives us knowledge of God. Creation testifies to the existence and wisdom of God. It ought to move all people to respond to his glory and give thanks to him.

And God in his goodness imprints knowledge about him on our hearts. He writes his law onto our hearts and on our conscience bears testimony (Rom 2.15). The heart has impressed upon it a divine sense of right and wrong and we ignore it too easily. As we choose to ignore what we know to be right we prove ourselves to be law-breakers by deliberately rejecting what we know to be true.

Gentile humanity cannot defend and excuse itself. It rejects knowledge of God. It chooses its own path and foolishly crowns itself God. The wrath of God is being revealed.

The Jew. The Jews are descendants of Abraham. They have the law, the covenant, circumcision, the sacrificial system—they have the heritage and the pedigree. They believe themselves to be already justified and so this faith requirement, they say, isn’t a thing for them.

This is like the person who attends church all their life—tries to live by the 10 commandments—spends lots of time mixing with Christians—serves on church committees. They have the heritage and the pedigree and don’t think that justification by faith is for them. They believe their religious actions have already justified them before God.

Pride only gets a person so far. Paul says in Rom 3.2 that if the Jewish person (the proud person) is looking for an advantage, then be proud in the fact that God has entrusted you with his very words. Being religious never gets one very far with God unless it’s gospel religion.

Summary. By the time we reach the end of chapter 3 there is a very clear conclusion. No matter how you look at it—from top to bottom—from side to side—from the inside out—“there is no-one righteous not even one” (Rom 3.11).

Both Jew and Gentile share the same heart and need the same gospel renewal.

Ivan Milat who was Australia’s most notorious serial killer recently died. He was serving seven life sentences for the murder of seven backpackers. Although he never admitted to his crimes, he was clearly guilty. And although humanity may never confess to its collective crime, it is guilty of rejecting God, neither glorifying God or giving thanks to him. All people are guilty of exchanging God for images and serving created things rather than the Creator himself.

We cannot save ourselves. The righteousness we need is received as a gift through faith in Christ Jesus. And that brings us to the end of chapter 3.

The example of Abraham. Paul, still very much with his Jewish audience in mind—we all know that pride is a difficult force to overcome—Paul turns in chapter 4 to Abraham as an example of a great man justified by faith.

Understand that the gospel is uncomplicated and clutter free. God declares a person righteous on account of their reliance upon Christ Jesus. What does Jesus do? His death atones for sin and appeases God’s righteous anger. Jesus stands in your place and takes upon himself the burden of God’s anger.

The righteousness we need to stand acquitted before God comes through faith in Christ Jesus. There is nothing mysterious about faith. The strength of faith lies in the person in whom we trust. And we see this in the example of Abraham in Romans 4.

We haven’t time to look at the whole chapter in detail and we shall concentrate on the summary beginning and the concluding end. We can make two big points from this chapter.

First (slide). *The greatest Jew of all was justified by faith (4.1–3).* If there was anyone in Jewish history who deserved to earn right standing before God, it was Abraham. We might hold up Mother Theresa as the best good person our race has to offer. The Jews believed that God accepted Abraham on account of his good works and piety.

Have a look at verses 1 to 3.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Abraham trusted the promises that God made to him and God declared him righteous. Abraham did not boast, he was not proud, he did not hold himself up to God as a righteous man. The quote from Gen 15.6. Abraham believed God’s promise of salvation—the promise of land and descendants—the promise of salvation—and God declared him righteous.

Note to proud people—stop boasting and relying upon your own goodness. No-one had more to boast about than Abraham but he chose to believe God’s promise of salvation. The APPLE computer man, Steve Jobs, said before he died, “Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important”.

Pride needs to be put in its place. Before the Lord of the universe our efforts are nothing. No-one can earn their righteousness. To the Jews in the Roman church and to every proud person in any other church—the ones who puff themselves up and look down on others—chill out! Unless God gives you the righteousness you need, then you will not avoid his anger.

Second (slide). Abraham models faith for us all (4.18–25). Abraham is more than an example for people who rely upon their religion, he is an example for us all. Listen to 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” (Rom 4.18).

Abraham is the father of many nations because God is using his faithfulness to bless the whole world. Look at the strength of Abraham’s faith. Keep reading from 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. 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. This 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. He was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification.

So what lessons can we learn from Abraham’s faith?

Lesson 1 (slide). We must ensure we put our faith in the promises of God. A genuine, real faith trusts in the promises of God. Faith is taking God at his word when it all seems so impossible. Abraham believed what he could not understand because he knew that the One speaking was faithful. Abraham was fully convinced that God had the power to do what he promised.

In this way Abraham distinguished himself from the world around him. Against all hope he believed and he was declared righteous before the nation Israel was born—before the law was given at Mt Sinai. Abraham was justified because he was persuaded that God can do what he promises.

Do you remember Israel in the wilderness? They failed to trust the promises of God. They wavered in their faith and a generation died in the wilderness. A generation failed to see the Promised Land. And the writer to the Hebrews says that their unbelief is a warning to us. Trust the Lord Jesus in whom all the promises of God are fulfilled. The gospel brings us into the Christian life, the gospel sustains our Christian life, and the gospel will see our Christian life home.

The mission of faith is to tirelessly keep our lives hidden in Christ.

Lesson 2 (slide). Faith is trust based on facts. Faith gains its strength, not from its emotional or religious value, but from the one in whom we put our faith. It is the object of our faith that validates our faith and gives our faith substance. So if you want to strengthen your faith, don’t talk about your faith but talk about Jesus, and as you grow to love him more, your faith will follow.

A certain medieval monk announced he would be preaching next Sunday evening on "The Love of God." As the shadows fell and the light ceased to come in through the cathedral windows, the congregation assembled. In the darkness of the altar, the monk lit a candle and carried it to the crucifix. First of all, he illumined the crown of thorns, next, the two wounded hands, then the marks of the spear wound.

In the hush that fell, he blew out the candle and left the pulpit. There was nothing else to say.

When we understand what Christ has done for us, there is nothing more to say. There is no room for boasting, no space for pride, no air for arrogance. Our faith is a trust based on facts. The fact that God has a track record of keeping his promises. The fact that Christ died and his resurrection validates sin atoned for and the hope of new life.

Conclusion. Christian faith is faith in the Lord Jesus who is our risen King. Our faith is a gift from God. It is belief that the man who was mocked as King, is the King. It is a belief that the man who looked utterly powerless on the cross holds the most power of all. It is belief that the man wouldn't save himself died to save others. It is a belief that the man who cried out in pain trusted God in his hour of need.

Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Mark Armstrong believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. Now insert your name believed God and it was credited to him/her as righteousness.