

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(October 14, 2012)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

A Trustworthy God

(Romans 4:1-8)

Study #6

Introduction: Now faith is...

Faith is at the heart of life.

You go to a doctor you may not know well outside of your office contact. He gives you a prescription you cannot read. You take it to a pharmacist you have never met. He gives you medicine in an opaque bottle that you do not understand. You take it. That’s faith.

Your car runs badly, so you take it to a mechanic who tells you that the commuter valve is stuck and the muffler bearings are shot. Do you trust him?

You inherit a large sum of money from an uncle you never knew. Who will you trust to give you advice about tax laws, inheritance taxes, and investment strategies?

Or, you face a critical ethical decision. It might concern financial integrity, or sexual practices, or relational issues. And on this issue (whatever it might be) the Bible is clear about the direction you should go.

Pursuing the direction the Bible warns against appears to be more enjoyable, more fruitful, more appealing.

Are you so convinced of God’s goodness that you are willing to trust Him and to demonstrate that trust through obedience?

Our hearts long to find someone trustworthy, but, frankly, we’ve been disappointed time and time again.

We’ve placed our faith in money and been disillusioned with the rate of return on that investment. Over decades we’ve put our faith in government, with little to reward that trust. We’ve even turned to the mirror, trusted ourselves, and let ourselves down.

In a world so filled with disappointment, in what, or in whom, can we trust?

Vying for our trust is an invisible God we can’t touch, smell, or taste. This God doesn’t promise to instantly make all pain disappear and He doesn’t promise to make all your dreams come true.

But He does promise to meet your deepest need for forgiveness and eternal life and transcendent meaning, here and now. He claims to be the one Person worthy of your trust. In fact, all He asks of you is to trust Him.

In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul has established both our sinfulness AND that, in and of ourselves, there is nothing that we can do to get right with God. Salvation has to be of grace. It has to be a gift. It has to be of faith - or we don’t have a prayer.

So, as master teachers have done for ages, he resorts to story to illustrate his doctrine. In the passage before us today Paul brings forward two of the most well-known characters from the Old Testament - King David and the great patriarch, Abraham.

Abraham - and Salvation Apart From Works (vv. 1-5)

Identifying - and Identifying With - Abraham. (v. 1)

Abraham - born to culture and idolatry

We’ll start with Abraham, a man born two thousand years before Jesus in the city of Ur in the land of the Chaldeans/Babylonians.

The age into which Abraham was born was a high point of culture, art, and architecture in the ancient world.

The Chaldeans were a very advanced society and they traveled widely, spreading their influence to other lands.¹

Nor is there any doubt about the religion of Babylon. It was polytheistic, with its idolatrous worship centered mainly on the moon god.

The Bible tells us that all of Abraham's ancestors were pagans, as we read that "***Terah*** (Abraham's father) ***and all of his forefathers served other gods.***" (Joshua 24:2)²

With that kind of family tree, there is no reason to suspect that Abraham was anything other than a pagan idolator as well. But, with nothing special to commend him, God chose to bless Abraham.

The first statement of that blessing is given in Genesis 12, where we read what is usually referred to as the Abrahamic Covenant.

Abraham - chosen and blessed by God

[1] Now the Lord said (literally, "had said") to Abram

"Go forth from your country,

And from your relatives,

And from your father's house,

To the land which I will show you;

[2] And I will make you a great nation,

And I will bless you,

And make your name great,

And so you shall be a blessing;

[3] And I will bless those who bless you,

And the one who curses you I will curse.

And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

¹ Archaeologists have unearthed fabulous treasures from sites near Abraham's birthplace, dating from as early as 2900 B.C., 900 years before the time of Abraham.

² In fact, the names of Terah, Laban, Sarai, and Milcah point toward the moon-god as the object of their worship.

This blessing was repeated several times during Abraham's career,³ and the recurring themes in each restatement of the Covenant were:

(1). Inheritance of the land of Canaan, and

(2). The blessing of physical descendants through a son.

Following this first statement of the blessing, Abraham made his way into Canaan and began to experience God's blessings.

Since Paul's mentions Abraham in Romans 4, we'll hit some of the highlights of his life today, keying on his faithful heroism.

Abraham's heroics

In 1969, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin planted six American flags on the moon as a testament to American and human accomplishment.

Upon entering Canaan, Abraham's first act was to build an altar to God, an invitation to the pagan inhabitants of the land to worship the one, true God.

Not content to worship God, in several places in Genesis, we read that Abraham also "***called upon the Name of the Lord***" or "***called out in the Name of the Lord.***" (i.e. - he preached)⁴

Abraham was faithful and courageous to proclaim His God in a land of false gods. There he is, moving through Canaan, setting up altars and preaching to pagans.

We also get to see Abraham as a generous and sacrificial man. He gave his nephew, Lot, the choice of where to live when their herds became too large to keep together.

We can't help but admire Abraham's lack of self-interest as he gave Lot the choice of grazing land (and, yes, Lot did choose the much more lush area around Sodom and Gomorrah for himself.).

³ At chapters 13, 15, 17, 18, and 22.

⁴ Genesis 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 22:14

Later, in a courageous display of family loyalty, as soon as he heard that Lot had been taken captive by some marauding kings, he went to rescue him, taking more than three hundred of his own men to bring Lot back.

Then, too, there was Abraham's meeting with Melchizedek (his name means "king of righteousness) and his worship of God there.

And we can't bypass his faithful obedience to God in Genesis 22 where he showed that he was willing to offer up his only son, Isaac, on an altar in response to God's command.

After reviewing his life, we might be tempted to say at this point, *"This guy was something else."* We might even wonder if Paul was wrong when he said, in Romans 3:27, that boasting is excluded?

It sure seems as if Abraham has a lot to boast about. If anyone had a chance to make it to God on his own merits and good works - it was Abraham.

But, if Paul is right, and boasting is excluded, if Abraham has nothing to brag about, then NOBODY has anything to brag about.

So, what point can be made from Abraham's life? Or, as Paul asks the question, *[Romans 4:1] What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?*

It is certainly true that God took this courageous, faithful, fatally flawed and inconsistent man,⁵ and saved him. How? Listen.

⁵ Of course, we could spend a good bit of time detailing Abraham's monumental screw-ups. Such as... the two times that HE tried to pawn off his wife, Sarah, as his sister to protect his own hide, evidently caring little for her safety or honor. (See Genesis 12 - The words of explanation in Keil and Delitzsch's commentary are humorously pathetic: "She might very easily have appeared beautiful in the eyes of the Egyptians, whose wives, according to both ancient and modern testimony, were generally ugly, and faded early." He did essentially the same thing to Sarah, again, fifteen years later, when dealing with Abimelech, King of Gerar, chapter 20). Or when, tired of waiting for God's provision of a son through Sarah, he produced a son through his wife's maid, Hagar.

The Historical POINT of Abraham's Justification (vv. 2-3)

[2] For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. [3] For what does the Scripture say? (now quoting Genesis 15:6) "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."

That is a great verse about Abraham's justification before God. Genesis 15:6 actually records the point of Abraham's eternal salvation!

But we'll not appreciate how great it really is until we see the justifying event in its context.

The emotional tone of Genesis 15

My sense is that when we turn to Genesis 15, we are hitting Abraham at one of the low points of his life. He was ripe for depression, deep in the blues as thought about the fact that he and Sarah - after ten years of waiting for God's promise to come true - were still childless.

So, with Abraham at an all-time low, God showed up and spoke to Abraham in a vision.

[1]... "Do not fear, Abraham, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."

Perhaps the sense of this communication from God is less, *"Don't be scared, Abraham"* and more *"Don't panic, Abraham. I know you and Sarah still don't have a son. Trust Me."*

God portrays Himself to Abraham as a shield, a great protection against panic. Yes, the nursery is empty. Yes, there is no child in the cradle. Yes, your arms are still empty.

Will you trust Me, Abraham?

Well, Abraham's response shows more confidence in the cultural traditions of his age than in God's promise. He's thinking, "Plan B."

Abraham's "Plan B"

In those days, if a husband and wife were not able to conceive, a man's wealth would go to his chief servant.

It was a fine law, of course. The problem is that it is not the way Abraham understood God's promise. He and Sarah were to have had a son. Old Abraham was disappointed - big time - and he told God about it.

[3]...*"Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir."*

Listen carefully and you can hear the accusation (or at least a question) in the comment - *"Lord, You promised. What gives?"*

If it is amazing that Abraham spoke so boldly to God, it is even more amazing that God seemed to appreciate his honesty.

God restates His promise

[4] *Then, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This man (Eliezer of Damascus) will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir."*

There can no longer be any doubt. Abraham understood God to say that he and Sarah would have a son.

This whole scene is being played out at night, so, without waiting for Abraham to speak, God speaks again to Abraham and says, *"Abraham, step outside of your tent and grab some fresh air. I want to show you something."*

Once outside, God told Abraham to look up and count the stars.

We can just imagine the scene. On some nights in San Antonio, we can see lots of stars. But take a trip to the desert and the night sky comes alive with stars.

One year our family went camping in West Texas in the Davis Mountains (at about this time of year). I got out of the tent early in the morning to start the fire.⁶

It was still dark, and when I looked up, I almost gasped at star show. If anything, Abraham would have had a better view of the stars in the totally unpolluted desert night air.

Of course, the point here is not astronomy, but biology. Abraham's descendants - from him and Sarah - will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. (v. 5)

And what was the impact on Abraham of this restated revelation?

Abraham believes God's promise

[6] *Then he believed in the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.*

Abraham's response to God's Word is one of *simple* - not simple-minded, and *childlike* - not childish - *trust*. He took God at His word.

Abraham's faith was faith in the God who had promised. And because he believed God, he believed God's promise.

God was so pleased with Abraham's response of trust that He rewarded Abraham with "righteousness".⁷

Fascinating...

Abraham did lots of things that I would have considered more "heroic" and salvation-worthy than going outside his tent late at night to look at the stars. But none of these heroic acts merited salvation.

- When he built altars throughout Canaan, worshipping and preaching, God didn't justify him.

⁶ Not far from the Davis Observatory, one of the best place for star-gazing in the lower 48 states.

⁷ That is "justification" or "salvation."

- When He gave Lot the pick of the land, God didn't make any comment at all.
- After Abraham went out on the search and rescue mission for Lot, God didn't say, "*Now, you are justified.*"
- God didn't justify Abraham after he met Melchizedek.
- He didn't wait for Abraham to offer his son, Isaac, on the sacrificial altar to justify him.

It was not Abraham's obedience that saved him at all. It was his trusting response to God's promise that justified him.

That kind of child-like trust, that dependence, that implicit confidence that what God says God will do, THAT FAITH is exactly what God is looking for in every person.

And when He sees it - in us, or in Abraham - He calls us "justified" and He saves us.

In fact, the point of Romans 4 is to show that this is always the way God saves people. It is never on the basis of works. It is now and has always been on the basis of faith.

Non-Believing Workers, and Believing Non-Workers (vv. 4-5)

[4] Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. [5] But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.

When you get a paycheck at the end of a pay period for work performed, you may very well say, "*Thanks*" to your boss. But, you are just being polite.

You don't think that your employer is actually being benevolent. You worked, and your wages are nothing more or less than what you have coming to you.

If we present our "work" - our deeds - to God and request payment for that work, God will respond by paying out what that work merits. But our works will never merit salvation. Because of our sin, our "work" always merits judgment and condemnation.

On the other hand, if we bring our trust to the Lord and put our faith in Him and in His promises, He rewards us with a gift: the gift of righteousness.

God justifies the ungodly in response to their faith.

So, what does Abraham's story tell us? Simply this: That if Abraham - a man of great and heroic obedience - was not saved by his works, but by faith, then nobody else will be saved on the basis of works, either. Salvation came to Abraham as a gift through faith - and that is the only way it will come to any of us, too.⁸

That's Abraham. Now, Paul wants us to turn our attention to Israel's greatest king, David.

David figures prominently into a discussion about whether salvation is from faith or works because he is rather famous for being BOTH a man after God's own heart AND a fatally flawed man with lots of imperfections.

The words before us are taken from Psalm 32. It is one of the Psalms David wrote after a season of being disciplined by God.

David Shows the Blessing of God on the Forgiven (vv. 6-8)

[6] just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

[7] BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN,

AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED.

[8] BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT.

⁸ Note these words from John Calvin, "Let us also remember that we are all in the same condition as Abraham. Our circumstances are all in opposition to the promises of God. He promises us immortality: yet we are surrounded by mortality and corruption. He declares that He accounts us just: yet we are covered with sins. He testifies that He is propitious and benevolent towards us: yet outward signs threaten His wrath. What then are we to do? We must close our eyes, disregard ourselves and all things connected with us, so that nothing may hinder or prevent us from believing that God is true."

The Setting for David's Fall

Now, why would Paul use David as “Exhibit A” of someone who has interest in God’s forgiveness of lawless deeds, of transgressions covered, and of sins not taken into account?

Well, it is painfully clear that God does not fill the Bible with sugarcoated stories of its heroes. He paints them with realistic brushstrokes - warts and all.

And David’s imperfections have been splattered all over the pages of Scripture for all to see for about three thousand years.⁹

When did David commit such sins? Well, it was after he had been king of Israel for quite a few years, after he had consolidated the kingdom, and after he had known the favor and the blessing of God.

The events that prompted David to write Psalm 32 are found in 2 Samuel 11. David is, at this time, about 50 years of age and we discover that he is at home in Jerusalem in the springtime.

That is surprising, because typically spring was the season when kings launched military campaigns against their enemies. And, in fact, Israel’s army was out fighting.

We would normally have expected David, the king, to have been out with the troops. Not this year. David had decided to stay at home.

And What a Great Fall it Was!

So, one evening while he was in Jerusalem, walking around on the rooftop of his palace, he looked out over the city he ruled and saw a beautiful woman bathing.

⁹ These verses teach that when God reckons righteousness to a man apart from works, it is equivalent to His forgiving sins. And, the word that is translated “sins” here (*ανομια*) refers to the most active kind of sin, rebellion against God’s authority, and a deliberate and open violation of God’s commandment.

He inquired as to who she was, and discovered that she was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Now Uriah (a non-Jew), was one of David’s loyal “Mighty Men,” known far and wide as an elite group of experienced warriors.

Uriah was not home when David was up on the rooftop looking at his wife. Uriah was out fighting Israel’s enemies, where he belonged.

When David found out who the woman was, he called for her, and she came to him (remember, David was the king; she had no choice in the matter).

Once there, the Bible simply tells us that David had sexual intercourse with her, and then sent her back home.

Now, in reading this incident, let’s not have any thoughts like, *“Well, what kind of a woman was she to have been bathing in broad daylight, anyway?”*

Zero guilt is placed on Bathsheba anywhere in this story. She wasn’t doing anything wrong. In fact, she had been carrying out the requirements of the Mosaic Law regarding monthly washings when the King - whose job it was to enforce obedience to God’s Law - called for her and then violated her in his own home.¹⁰

Perhaps David thought that this one evening stand would be the end of the matter. It might have been, too, except for the note she slipped him some weeks later, telling him that she was with child.

At this point, David did the only thing he could think to do - he called Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, home from battle.

So, did he bring Uriah home to explain to him what had happened, and come clean with the truth? Hardly.

¹⁰ As the original language makes more clear, she had been washing herself as the conclusion of the Levitical requirement for purifying after her menstrual cycle (v. 4).

His plan was to have Uriah go and “visit” his wife so that it would appear that he, Uriah, was the father of the child.

But, even when David got him drunk, Uriah refused to go home to be with his wife while the armies of Israel were fighting for God.

Adultery Covered Up by Murder

Failing in this attempt to cover up his sin, David sent Uriah back to the front lines, with a message for Joab, the field general, to place Uriah where the fighting was fiercest.

Then, the army was to remove support from Uriah, to ensure that he was killed in battle.

The horrible plan worked to perfection and Uriah died a hero’s death in battle. And after he was killed (and David killed him just as surely as if he had strangled him with his own hands.), David, the king of Israel, took Bathsheba to be his wife.

Even at this point, all might have been swept under the rug, except for what we read at the very end of the chapter, **[2 Samuel 11:27b]...But the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the Lord.**

Conclusion:

Lesson from David

So, why did Paul include David’s words - which force us to think of his life experience - in a passage (Romans 4) dealing with whether a person is saved by their works or by faith?¹¹

It is because while David was a saved man, it was obviously not BECAUSE OF his works. It was IN SPITE OF his works!

¹¹ As has been pointed out before, in 2 Samuel 11 David broke all of the last 5 of the 10 commandments.

You may be one of those people who believe that you don’t have a chance at salvation because of things you have done. Listen to David’s story. His story offers hope.

Paul asks, “*Have you done worse than adultery? Are your sins worse than high-handed murder? Have you done more than David’s deceit and duplicity? Have you abused power? Have you practiced hypocrisy?*”

Even if your answer is, “*Yes! I have done all that David did,*” you can still be saved. That is because salvation was not for David and is not for you, on the basis of your works.

Lesson from Abraham

If, on the other hand, you wanted to make a case for being justified before God because of your good works, you might bring all kinds of evidence of your goodness to the table.

Paul would say to you, “*Have you - like my friend, Abraham, willingly left your country to go to a place you don’t even know? Have you boldly proclaimed the truth about Me in hostile territory? Have you worshipped sacrificially? Have you generously helped those in trouble? Have you been willing to offer your own son on the sacrificial altar?*”

Not too many people could measure up to the sheer volume of good works that Abraham amassed. Yet, not even he was justified by his works, but by his trust in God’s promise when he went outside to look at the stars.¹²

And, if Abraham was not able to be justified by works, but had no other course to follow than to be justified by faith, then so must everyone else be justified by faith if they are seeking to be righteous before God.

¹² In reading through some of the commentaries, I found it interesting to note that most Jewish rabbis of Paul’s day assumed that Abraham was justified on the basis of his works (despite what Genesis 15:6 says). In fact, it is written in some places that Abraham never sinned, and had no need for repentance. Clearly, they did not focus on his terrible betrayals of Sarah! Whatever men’s view of the matter may be, though, God’s view is that Abraham was NOT justified by works.

Lesson for us

So, Abraham wasn't good enough to be justified by works AND David wasn't so bad that he couldn't be justified by faith. And we come to understand that if we are to come to God, the only way to do so is through simple, child-like trust.

Nothing I have done *sinfully* can disqualify me from being saved and nothing I have done *well* can qualify me for being saved.

If I want to be saved, I leave my deeds behind and come to Jesus - and give Him my trust.

You and I are called to trust when we drive on the highway, fly on an airplane, or invest for the future.

Every time we trust, every step of faith, involves some risk. Yes, the right front tire might blow and the pilot might fall asleep and the market might crash.

But we risk it, betting on the odds that we'll arrive safely and that our investments will grow.

And when we place our trust in Jesus, we are betting it all on the proposition that God is trustworthy enough to keep His promises.

Is God trustworthy?

The cross where Jesus died shows us that He loves us unfailingly. The cross, followed by the resurrection, proves that He is powerful enough to do what He says He will do.

God is inviting you to take Him at His word. That trust is incredibly valuable to God, because He knows how difficult it is for us, who see no visions, who hear no voices to trust.

But...

when we place our faith in His Son's death to bring us eternal life;
when we obey Him when it seems to make more sense not to;
when we speak up for Him when it would be easier to remain silent;
when we die to ourselves, taking the way of the cross as Jesus did, to serve others in Jesus' Name,

our God smiles, and says, "*Well done, good and FAITHful servant.*"

Perhaps say something about the freedom Abraham had to express himself freely to God concerning the lack of a physical heir. How much freedom do we sense to express disappointment, rage, frustration, anger, bitterness, to God?

The challenge today comes to each one of us. We are being called to risk the loss of everything worthless for His sake; we risk the gain of everything eternal. God is not against taking risky gambles, He simply wants us to risk everything on Him.

It doesn't matter what in the wide world you have done in the past - good or bad. If you have never placed your faith in Jesus before today, you are not justified - you are not saved. But, you can come to Him in faith today, God Himself will smile, and all heaven will rejoice over your salvation. Faith is not being praised here for faith's sake. Faith is only valid when it is placed in a trustworthy object.