

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

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

An Outrageously Reasonable Faith

(Romans 4:9-25)

Study #7

Introduction: No help. Please!

Do you remember Paul Harvey? The radio storyteller entertained for years with his news and commentary and his famous “The rest of the story” stories.

One of his news bits fits well with what we have seen in recent weeks as we have walked through the first chapters of Paul’s letter to the church at Rome.

Harvey reported seeing a sign in the service bay of an auto repair shop. The sign was to let customers know the charges for labor.

- One hour’s work: \$10.
 - One hour’s work while customer watches: \$12
 - One hour’s work while customer helps: \$15
 - One hour’s work after customer had already started the job: \$27.50.
- (I know, multiply by about six to arrive at 2012 rates.)

No mechanic wants his customer’s help. And God doesn’t need, doesn’t want, and will not accept our help when it comes to the matter of our eternal salvation. It is all from Him. It is all of grace.

To the extent that we offer Him help, or try to fix things, we only make matters worse.

The patriarch, Abraham, and King David didn’t offer their help when God saved them. They were saved solely by God’s grace, as a gift, when they believed.

Abraham - as good as he was - wasn’t good enough to be saved by works. And David - as bad as he was during one episode in his life - wasn’t so bad that he couldn’t be saved by faith.

This morning, we are going back to Abraham again, because his story shows us even more about the centrality of faith when it comes to relating to God.

Paul has just quoted David’s words from Psalm 32 about the blessing of having his sins forgiven. Now he asks a question.

Salvation: Nothing to Do With Rites and Rituals. (vv. 9-12)

Religious Rituals and Salvation - Is There a Link? (v. 9)

[9] Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, “FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

Are there initiation rites with God?

It’s a good question.

Does the blessing of forgiven sin come only to those who have undergone a certain ritual (in this case, the ritual of circumcision)? Is being rightly related to God restricted to those who have gone through this - or any other - rite? Is getting saved like joining a club or like being initiated into a fraternity, or a gang, or a lodge?

A brief survey of the world's major religions would reveal that rites and rituals are almost always key elements to going to heaven (however that religion envisions heaven).

Certainly Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism all require certain rituals. So do off-shoots of Christianity, such as Jehovah's Witness and Mormonism.

It seems that there is something deeply embedded in the human psyche that wants to contribute to salvation by following a prescribed ritual.

This is the idea that Paul is exploring here. Is there a ritual that must be followed in order to come to God? Was there a necessary rite in the Old Testament? Is there now, for Christianity, a required ritual?

The test case is Abraham and the rite of circumcision.

The rite of circumcision for the Jews

From the days of Abraham forward, it has always been considered very important for a Jewish male to be circumcised. In fact, an uncircumcised male was not considered a Jew, no matter what his lineage was. Circumcision was his initiation into the community of God's people.¹

By the time of the New Testament, that understanding had widened to the point that circumcision was thought to have *saving power*. Many rabbis taught that if a man was circumcised, he was saved.

Of course, that was never the point of circumcision. But, the misunderstanding of some people has forced Paul into the discussion here in Romans 4. And it is actually a helpful issue for us to consider.

¹ It was not that for the generations after Abraham, eight day old baby boys (the day when they were circumcised) were thought to believe in the Lord, but that throughout life, their circumcision would remind them of the faith that was to rule their lives as members of the covenant community.

Paul takes us back to Genesis 15 and asks a question that was easily answered - but usually ignored - by the more educated Jews of his own day.

ABRAHAM Was Saved Before any Rites (v. 10)

[10a] How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised?

Answer?

[10b] Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised;

Let's review the chronology.

- Genesis 12: Abraham left Haran and went to Canaan when he was seventy five years of age. It was at that time that God had first given Abraham the promise of a physical descendant through Sarah.
- Genesis 15: Ten years later, God restated His promise to Abraham. This was when Abraham believed God's promise and was justified.
- Genesis 17: Fourteen years later, God gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision.

In this case, CHRONOLOGY is the key to THEOLOGY. Just looking at the timeline, it is clear that circumcision had nothing to do with Abraham's justification. And there is a "point" to be made about this chronology.

WE are Saved Separate from Ritual (vv. 11-12)

[11] and he received the SIGN of circumcision, a SEAL of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, [12] and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.

Circumcision - the sign of the covenant

What was circumcision? Paul says that it was a “sign.”

The wedding band on your ring finger is a sign to all those who see it that you are married. It’s circle advertises that you are out of circulation. You would still be married without the ring, but the ring advertises, *“I’m married!”*

So also, circumcision was a sign of Abraham’s faith. It wasn’t the same thing as faith, but his willingness to be circumcised said, *“Lord, I believe. I entrust my future, my posterity to You.”*

Then, Paul called it a “seal.”

Circumcision - the seal of the covenant

Again, consider the wedding band. On the day Kathy slipped my ring past an oversized knuckle, it publicly sealed the promises I had just made.

In the same way, circumcision confirmed the genuineness of something. It was a physical testimony to an unseen spiritual reality: Abraham’s faith.

It didn’t save, but it was a sign and seal of the fact that he was saved.

Now the confusion that Paul is writing to correct is a confusion that is easy to fall into today. It is easy to slip from an appreciation for ritual into ritualism.

We could attach saving significance to the rite of baptism or to taking the Lord’s Supper. But that would be wrong, because they are both symbols of a reality that already exists.

And, there are other rituals that have been added in many minds which have something to do with our standing before God.

Going to the front to testify of salvation can wrongly replace the vitality of personal faith.

Wholesome and helpful things like Bible study and prayer and witnessing and church involvement are, properly, the fruit of internal spiritual realities. But it is possible that any of these might become dead ritualistic attempts to approach God.

And the list could go on and on and on. Consider...

We will soon be turning our attention to Christmas. Here at Northwest we generally do Christmas up right. We celebrate the birth of Jesus with a “hanging of the green” Saturday, Sunday evening Advent services, special Sunday morning worship times, and Christmas Eve services.

But of course none of this is required by Scripture. We could let Christmas come and go without any recognition and be just as spiritually healthy.

The same would be true of Thanksgiving (yes, we are going to have a Thanksgiving Eve worship service), Easter (yes, we are planning on another Good Friday worship service and an Easter Sunrise service), AWANA, Sunday School, and Care Groups.

The bottom line is that becoming a child of God is not at all like joining a club. There are no initiation rites or rituals. And maintaining a good standing with God is not by way of ritual, either. We enter life with God just as Abraham did, by taking God as His word and believing His promise.

OK. No rituals. But what about rules to follow and standards to attain in order to get right with God?

Again, it would be easy to compile a list of rules and regulations that an adherent of this or that religion has to keep if he or she wants to be saved.

Frankly, I understand.

It can be comforting to know that there is something to do to reach God. Give me a set of laws to keep. Show me where the moral bar is set and I'll do my best to get over it.

So, is that the way it is with God? Does He require that we “measure up” before He will let us in?

Again, to answer that question, Paul goes back to Abraham. And again, chronology is the first line of defense against thinking that salvation is linked in any way to rules and regulations.

Salvation: Nothing to Do With Rules and Regulations (vv. 13-15)

Abraham's Salvation and LAW, Chronologically Considered

[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. [14] For if those who are of the Law² are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified

So here's a handy timeline:

- First there was Abraham.
- THEN, after Abraham came Isaac, Jacob, and Judah.
- THEN followed four hundred years of slavery in the land of Egypt, followed by the Exodus from Egypt through the parting of the Red Sea.
- THEN, while in the wilderness and camped at the base of Mount Sinai, God gave Moses and the Israelites the Law.

The Law of Moses could not have had anything to do with Abraham's salvation because the Law was given hundreds of years (430, to be exact) *after* the promise was given to Abraham.

² “*Those who are of the Law*” (v. 14) are those who are governed by law as the guiding and determining principle of their religion in contrast with those whose faith is the basic principle.

Of course, the Jewish rabbi's of Paul's day knew their biblical chronology, but some of them twisted the timeline to intertwine Abraham's salvation story with the Law of Moses.³

But to say that Abraham was saved by the Law is to violate history. It would be a ridiculous anachronism. An anachronism is a chronological inconsistency, where people or events or objects are misplaced in time.

One of the more famous anachronisms comes from Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar*, where Cassius says to Brutus, “*The clock has stricken three*” - when of course clocks were about fifteen hundred years from invention in the days of Caesar.

An anachronism would be a painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware River, checking his Timex Triathlon watch.

An anachronism would be Abraham being saved by keeping Moses' Law.

All we have to do is check the calendar to see that Moses' Law could have had nothing to do with Abraham's justification, because it hadn't been given when he was saved.

But, there is another reason the Law (or “law” generally) could not have played a part in Abraham's salvation story and that reason has to do with the whole purpose of law.

Abraham's Salvation - and law, Logically Considered

[15] for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no Law, there also is no violation.

³ Many of them held that Abraham was chosen by God because he was the only righteous man on earth in his day, and they said that Abraham actually kept the Law by intuition or anticipation.

The nature of law is to give commands and to set boundaries. Law knows nothing of grace.

It is expected that you will keep local, state, and federal law. If you go out and break a law and are caught, you will be punished. But nobody's going to throw you a party for keeping the law.

Law sets limits and clarifies what is and is not allowed. Law lets you know when you've stepped over a line. The trouble with Law has always been that it can only diagnose a problem. It can never affect a cure.

And, as Law/law had nothing to do with Abraham's salvation, so rules-keeping and good behavior and being a good ol' boy will have nothing to do with yours, either.

It might seem to make sense to have a ritual way to approach God and it might seem to be reasonable that only people who behave in certain acceptable ways will find Him.

But as it was with rites and rituals, so it is with rules and regulations. The way of standing before God on the basis of what we do is shut. Our compliance with a code of conduct will never commend us to God.

It wasn't how Abraham was saved and it won't be how you are saved, either. The only way to come to God is by faith.

Salvation: Everything to Do With Trusting God (vv. 16-23)

The Gift of a Promise from God (vv. 16-17)

God's determination to save people by grace through faith

[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

From the very beginning the plan of salvation has always and only been ***“by grace through faith”*** (see Ephesians 2:8-9). Even in the Old Testament salvation was not about fulfilling a law; it was a gift received on the basis of faith.

And, if it is clear that God was determined to put together a plan marked by grace and made effective by faith, it is just as clear that Abraham was determined to trust.

Abraham's determination to believe God's promise

[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.⁴

Funny.

We have just closed the door on such reasonablenesses as *ritual* and *rules* for coming to God. Most of the people in the world think of rules and ritual when they think of how to approach God.

Abraham's approach to God is very different. According to him, a *reasonable* faith is one that embraces two ideas:

- (1). God raises the dead;
- (2). God brings into being that which doesn't exist.

Those are, after all, the things that would have to be true about God if the promise God made to Abraham was ever going to come true.

Let's listen to how Paul describes Abraham's faith.

⁴ Paul has in mind Abraham's faith in God having quickened the bodies of himself and Sarah for procreation (there is also a possible reference to the raising of Isaac, cf. Hebrews 11). By the second phrase is meant God's power to create out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). God's promise that Abraham shall be the father of many nations which at the time did not even exist proves His creative power.

The Response of Faith (vv. 18-21)

Abraham's faith in the promise of God was a loooong shot! (v. 18)

[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."⁵

Abraham believed ***"in hope against hope."*** Essentially he was believing in what looked to be hopeless.

You may know exactly what that is like. You may have hoped for something you hardly allowed yourself to believe might ever come to pass.

Maybe as it was for Abraham, it was - or is - for children. Maybe it is for a job, or a different job, or for financial stability or for a healthy marriage. I wonder if all who are honest really do understand a measure of Abraham's experience. We, too, have hoped against hope.

And while many of the ***"hope against hope"*** things we have hoped for carry no guarantee from God, Abraham did have an explicit promise from God that his hope - a son! - would be realized.

And Abraham chose to believe God when it was apparently not reasonable to go on believing.

Abraham's faith-without-pretending (v. 19)

[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...

⁵ Remember that the original promise made to Abraham at Genesis 12 was that he would inherit a land, and would become a great nation. By the time we come to Genesis 15, the promise is much more explicit and specific, including the assurance that he and Sarah would have a child.

Abraham was brutally realistic. He noted his own age. He noted the age and the condition of his wife. Both Abraham and Sarah were well beyond any reasonable hope for having kids.

In terms of how the world works it just wasn't going to happen.

But notice that Abraham didn't just close his eyes and pretend he and Sarah were some young kids of sixty, or even spring chickens of fifty. No, he didn't sink into denial but looked reality square in the face.

Denial can be a tempting place to live when we receive a tough report from the doctor or get sobering news from a spouse, a child, or a close friend.

But Abraham didn't retreat into denial. What makes him so appealing is that he honestly faced the grim realities and still believed in ***"hope against hope."***

His was not the faith of some airhead who spouts pat formulas.

No, he had come to the end of himself and figured that if he and Sarah were going to have a son it would be by a miracle from God. So, he courageously kept on hoping, because God, who promised, can perform miracles.

Abraham continued to trust God's promise (20-21)

[20] yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, [21] and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.

Paul is not praising Abraham's faith here for faith's sake. Faith is only valid when it is placed in a trustworthy object. His faith was commendable because it was faith in the God who had promised.

Abraham's faith was a defiance of all human calculations. He didn't allow himself to be staggered at the outrageousness of God's promise, because, again, he remembered WHO had made the promise.

Abraham's faith was what caused God to smile AND it was what moved Him to declare Abraham righteous. And that is such a major thought that Paul repeats himself. (See Romans 4:3)

God Saved Abraham on Account of His Faith (v. 22)

[22] Therefore "IT WAS ALSO CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."

So...

- Abraham was saved apart from any works he performed. (4:1-8)
- Neither circumcision nor any other religious rite or ritual had anything to do with his salvation. (4:9-12)
- Rules-keeping and the observance of regulations - Mosaic or otherwise - had nothing at all to do with Abraham's justification. (4:13-15)
- He was saved solely on the basis of his faith in the promise of God. (4:16-22)

It was not a special kind of faith: faith is faith. Rather, it was a special kind of object - God! - in which that faith was placed that gave it saving significance.

Now, why did Paul want us to reflect on the story of Abraham again today? Listen...

As For Abraham, So for Us: God Wants Our Trust (vv. 23-25)

Faith saves us - just as it did Abraham. (vv. 23-24a)

[23] Now not for his sake only was it written, that it was credited to him, [24a] but for our sake also...

Seen against the backdrop of these verses, we understand that Genesis 15 was not just written as a memorial to Abraham.⁶ It was written to instruct and to encourage us.

HE was saved by faith. WE are saved by faith!

And for what, exactly, did he trust God? He trusted that ***"the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist"*** would bring a not yet existing son out of the deadness of his and Sarah's too-old-to-procreate bodies.

And for what do we trust God? Here you go.

The object of our faith - the God who raised Jesus from the dead (vv. 24-25)

[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

THIS is our outrageously reasonable faith.

A reasonable faith

It is *reasonable* because the plan God put together fits together so well. It is perfectly logical.

Walking through the first four chapters of Romans, and even continuing into chapter 5, Paul lays out the Gospel plan more clearly than he or anyone else does anywhere else in the New Testament.

⁶ In a couple of other places we read of a future looking purpose behind the Old Testament. For instance, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:11, ***"Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come."*** Again, in Romans 15:4, Paul writes, ***"For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."***

Small wonder that people with a technical bent are so drawn to Romans. It is a brilliantly crafted masterpiece of Gospelizing.

Paul first makes the case for the sinfulness of all people everywhere. He explains that Jews and Gentiles alike are condemned by God because of their sin.

Then he also makes the case for the holiness of God, which all of us have missed by a mile. And he concludes that the oil of God's holiness and the water of our sinfulness will never mix.

He goes on to explain that the way to salvation is now wide open to everyone who has faith in Jesus Christ. Our attempts to reach God by good works will never cut it. It has to be of grace because we will never be perfect enough (100% is required) to make it into His presence.

And to illustrate the idea of salvation by grace through faith, just look at Abraham. Just look at David.

Makes perfect sense. The plan God put together is a plan that allows Him to be both just and the one who justifies.

Very reasonable. And totally outrageous.

An outrageous faith

It is outrageous because of the cost borne by God and the grace shown to us who simply believe.

Have you allowed yourself to be astounded by the outrageousness of what God has done for you in Jesus lately?

To see outrageous more clearly, I propose that we take one final look at Abraham this morning. (See Genesis 22)

After waiting for about twenty five years for a son, God gave Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. Some years after his birth, when Isaac was likely a teenager, God told Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice on an altar on Mount Moriah.

The command no doubt took Abraham's breath away, but he prepared to obey, left the next morning and traveled three days to the foot of the mountain.

He and Isaac climbed the mountain together, mostly in silence. On the top, Abraham built an altar, gathered wood, and then tied up his son.

He was completely ready to do exactly what God had commanded. Then, with the knife raised high, God spoke to Abraham and told him to stop the sacrifice!

There was a ram caught in the bushes by his horns. Abraham could offer the ram instead of his son. And that is exactly what Abraham did, after untying his son and pulling him off the altar!

It's quite a story - an outrageous story on many levels. It gives lots of people lots of problems.

We wonder, "*Did God ever intend that Abraham actually sacrifice His son?*" and "*Why would God - who hates human sacrifice - have asked Abraham's willingness to do such a thing?*"

Hold on to those thoughts. Wrestle with them. Don't run away from them. Think about the anguish that a father went through on the climb. Think about the confusion of a son who was tied up by the father he knew loved him.

And then remember that the same God who stayed Abraham's hand on Mount Moriah did not stay His own hand when it came to time to bring the knife down on His Son.

The anguish of the Father and the confusion of the Son are all there on Calvary. It is outrageous.

And what happened there was all for you.

[25] He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.⁷

Your sin made Jesus' death on the cross necessary.

When you look at the cross, understand that Jesus went there to bear the brunt of God's wrath for you. He endured the punishment that was due you and was raised from the dead because your justification wouldn't have been complete without it.

Like Abraham, we find salvation apart from works, apart from external signs, apart from rules and regulations, by trusting God's promise.

It is an outrageously gracious plan put together by an altogether good God. And that plan invites our worship and praise wholehearted trust.

⁷ Romans 4:25 wraps up the whole section of 1:18-4:25.