

Peter Smith – February 28-March 1-2, 2026

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, New Ulm, MN

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

What then will we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered according to the flesh? If indeed Abraham had been justified by works, he would have had a reason to boast—but not before God. For what does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now to a person who works, his pay is not counted as a gift but as something owed. But to the person who does not work but believes in the God who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited to him as righteousness.

Indeed, the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not given to Abraham or his descendants through the law, but through the righteousness that is by faith. To be sure, if people are heirs by the law, faith is empty and the promise is nullified. For law brings wrath. (Where there is no law, there is no transgression.) For this reason, the promise is by faith, so that it may be according to grace and may be guaranteed to all of Abraham's descendants—not only to the one who is a descendant by law, but also to the one who has the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” In the presence of God, Abraham believed him who makes the dead alive and calls non-existing things so that they exist.

The way the human eye works is like this: Beams of light from the sun or a lightbulb or something travel out and run into something else, like this cross for instance. Some light gets absorbed, some of it bounces off. Brown light bounces off the wood, purple light bounces off the drapery, and it keeps going until it enters your eye, hits the tissue in the back, and that tissue signals to the brain what you've seen, making an image. That's the way we understand it. Some of the ancient Greeks used to think instead that the eye sent an invisible “beam of sight” out into the world, that would run into objects and lights, and sort of echo back to you. So they thought the visible world was something the human mind and eye was personally responsible for. They could not have been more wrong about that. In fact, they had it exactly backwards. That's the size of the error that Paul is fighting against in our reading for today. Some of the believers in Rome it seems thought they were personally responsible for their own salvation, that if they could just follow the law, God would save them. That is exactly backwards. Salvation is God's gift to you. And it's made yours through faith alone.

To explain this to his audience of believers in Rome, Paul uses the example of Abraham. Abraham is a very notable figure. He's the father of the Israelites. He's also one of the people we know for certain is in heaven. God introduces himself throughout the Old Testament as the God of Abraham, and like Jesus says, he is not a God of the dead, but of the living. So Abraham is alive. He has eternal life in heaven with God. When you're talking about a man who received God's salvation, he's the prime example. Let's drill down into precisely how he was saved.

Is it the case that God saved Abraham because he was righteous, or was Abraham righteous because God saved him? The text says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Well, what sort of thing is believing? Is it something you do, that you can decide to do, or does it just happen to you, whether or not you try and make it happen? When

Abraham believed God, did faith beam out of his soul to grab at God's promises, or did it merely receive the promises God gave it?

How do your eyes work again? Faith holds onto the promises God gives. Abraham believed those promises, and God made him righteous. God makes you and me righteous the same way. Salvation is not at all something you work for or do. It is given. The Holy Spirit brings it to you, like light to your eyes.

Salvation is yours by God's grace, through faith alone. I grew up in this church. Many of you did as well. We've heard that hundreds of times before. But it needs to be said over and over again because it's such a dangerous thing to get wrong, and it's such an easy thing to get wrong. We're used to thinking that the things that happen to us happen because of what we do. Sometimes that's true. If I step on my shoelaces, that will cause me to fall down. If I do a job, that will cause me to earn money. Your paycheck isn't a gift your employer gives you, it's what you deserve. Lots of things work that way. Your salvation is not one of them.

When my father, Pastor Smith, visits people who are sick and dying, he'll ask them where they're going. "Heaven," they'll reply. He'll ask them how they know. Sometimes he hears, "Because I tried my best to live a good life;" "because I've done more good than bad." These are people sometimes who have been members of St. Paul's their whole lives. That's not what the Bible teaches. And thank the Lord it's not. Could you imagine: "If you do more good than bad, if you try your best to live a good life, then you'll be saved?" I stack my own life against that standard and see no hope for me there. I look back on a lifetime of broken promises, broken trust, broken commandments. How could I possibly say I've tried my best? Even if I had, is that really what God wants? Is just trying good enough? No. "Be perfect, because I the LORD your God am perfect." That's the standard for anyone who wants to earn their way into heaven. It's impossible. It's damning. It's exactly the opposite of God's plan for you and I.

"If people are justified by the law, faith is empty and the promise is nullified," Paul writes. We know that's not the case, because we've seen already how Abraham was justified not by keeping the law perfectly, but by faith in God's promises. So what promises are those? In the chapter of Genesis Paul is quoting from, God tells Abraham he'll have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. There's no mention of heaven or salvation or Jesus, it's just about his offspring inheriting the land of Canaan. That confused me at first. It looked like Paul had taken this sentence out of context. God hasn't promised the land of Canaan to you or me. Just to Abraham. How does Abraham's reaction to a promise given only to him apply to you and me and the Romans?

To answer that, I'm going to explain a point of Hebrew grammar. When you tell a story in Hebrew, you begin almost every phrase with the word *and*. *And* God said 'let there be light,' *and* there was light, *and* God divided light from dark, *and* he called it day, on and on through the whole Old Testament. The sentence we're looking at doesn't follow that pattern. Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Not "And Abraham believed," just "Abraham believed." It breaks the sequence of the story. We aren't just hearing how Abraham reacted to what God said. Instead we're being told something about who he is. Abraham is

someone who always believes God. Not just when he promised him a son and the land of Canaan, things he got to see proof of, but also when he promised him a savior from sin, resurrection from the dead, and eternal life in heaven. Abraham never saw proof of those things while he was on earth, but he had a sure and steadfast hope they would be his, because God had promised them to him.

God has extended those same promises to you and me. And here we have an advantage over Abraham. He was looking ahead to things that hadn't happened yet. We're looking back at things that have already happened, things we have reliable eyewitness testimony of. The savior from sin God promised is Jesus Christ, who unlike any of us, kept the law perfectly. He was perfect like God is perfect, because he is God. His death paid the price for all your sins, and now God sees you as righteous. Even though we still sin, when God looks at us he sees Christ's perfection. So we have a sure hope that God has brought us salvation.

The resurrection of the dead God promised us is proven by Christ's own resurrection. Jesus triumphed over death so completely that he raised himself to life. If he can do that, he can and will raise all of us when the time comes. When the Judgment comes and the world is remade, you will stand up in a body of flesh and blood and see God with your own eyes. Even if that's hundreds or thousands of years from now, and your body has long since turned to dust, he will make you a new and glorious body. He's promised you that. Our God is the one who calls to what does not exist and makes it to be.

After Jesus rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven. All his disciples saw him go. Heaven is a real place. Jesus is there right now, and he's coming back to take you there, because he wants nothing more than for you to live with him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Just like Abraham. He's alive there right now. So is Paul, so are all the dead in Christ who have gone before us, all the people who share Abraham's faith, whom our passage calls his descendants. Heaven is yours, not because you've done anything to earn it, but because you're holding onto the promise of what Jesus has already done. You stand before God guiltless and justified by his grace alone, through faith alone.