

Gamma

Romans 4

Study 7 When justification started.

Case 1

Mabel Thong had a Jewish friend called Freda Issacson who was very devout. They had very intense discussion about faith frequently. Freda always kept the Sabbath without fail and never failed to eat just kosher food. She was careful to read the Torah every day in Hebrew but did not understand much of what she was reading at any rate. Freda lived with her Iranian boyfriend in a sexual relationship.

Once Freda read Romans she became very puzzled on the difference between Judaism and Christianity. She could not believe how Christians can draw their faith from Abraham in the same way she did. She said salvation was from the Jews who had the Law the Torah how can you be saved unless you are faithful in obeying the law?

1. Can you advise Mabel how to explain the nature of saving faith of Abraham from Romans 4: 2-4

The main issue in life is righteousness. God has it , we do not and thus we need saving from our eternal death and doom. How do we get it?

The options are

1. Trusting upon our obedience or compliance to the law which is the reason the Jews have the privilege of the law
2. Trusting on what God had promised to do for us and not upon what we can do for God

Abraham is the best example of the nature of saving faith.

Look at verse 3 ...For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness

(Romans 4:3 ESV)

That particular verse was taken from Genesis 15:6 where God gave a set of unconditional promises to bless Abraham with abundant offspring even though he was old and his wife was basically barren. An unconditional promise means there is no work on Abraham's part.

“And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness”

(Genesis 15:6 ESV)

Abraham believed that God would keep His promises to him and it is this kind of trust in what God would do for us which was credited to Abraham as righteousness. When Abraham trusted that God would carry out all that He had promised him, God in turn treated Abraham as if he was righteous. Abraham in the eyes of God was given a clean slate as if he had never ever sinned in his life even though he was a sinner and pagan before. The penalties of his sin were removed even though Abraham never could fully comply with God's law. You see Abraham came many years before Moses was even given the law hence you cannot argue that Abraham was regarded as righteous on the basis of his obedience and compliance to God's law. Hence from Abraham's example faith is something he used to receive from God it was never a work to merit anything from God

2. Mabel also pointed out to Freda that believing that one could do good works and earn salvation is actually a huge insult to God as it would be a logical impossibility, why is it so ? Look at verse 2, 4-5

*Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due
(Romans 4:4 ESV)*

Paul is saying that if one could work for salvation then it would put God in the position that God had owed man salvation. Work means wages in exchange for work done hence if man did good works it would put God in his debt and we wind up with the illogical supposition that God can ever be indebted to mere human beings.

Additionally we are talking about sinful human beings under a death sentence being able to put God in their debt?

It is like having your 3 years old child do some work for her parent that would put the parent in her debt? One must appreciate the enormous chasm between God and creature.

Now back to verse 2 if Abraham could produce any work that could merit salvation he would be in a position to boast

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God

(Romans 4:2 ESV)

Abraham would be in a position to boast because like him we would be the authors of our own salvation. Its like the popular movie the “ Walking dead” the zombies who are insensitively dead and suddenly be the authors of their own salvation by their own merit. Such is the impossibility of it all.

There is a huge gap between God and us. We are the walking Dead and He is the king of the universe and the only way we can ever relate is that God throws a life line to us and we just have to grab it and hold on for our dear lives. There is no way we can throw a life line to Him and pull ourselves up to Him. That would give ourselves too much credit.

Case 2

**A practitioner of Evangelism explosion came to Mabel’s church and asked a random sample of church goer’s this question “ If you were to die today and come before God in his throne room. He would ask you the question “ Why should I let you in to heaven? What would your response be
The most common responses in Mabel’s church were**

- A) “because I have tried my best to be a good Christian”
- B) “because I believe in him and try to do his will,
- C) “because I believe in him with all my heart.”

1. Can you discuss which of the above answers convey the meaning of “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”

(Romans 4:3 ESV)

This is not a trick question — it reveals common misconceptions about what it means to believe. Answer type (A) is a “salvation by works” answer which is obvious because the person is expecting credit for trying to obey the law and live like a Christian and that should be worth something. Answer type (B) is a “salvation by faith plus works” answer.

Abraham wasn’t saved by just believing *in* God. Verse 3 says that Abraham believed God. It isn’t a general belief in God that saves, but it is believing God when he promises a way of salvation by grace. It is believing God will save you. Saving faith is not faith in God in general. You can have lots and lots of strong faith that God exists, that he is loving, that he is holy. You can believe that the Bible is God’s holy word. You can show great reverence for God. Yet all the while you can be seeking to be your own saviour and justifier by trusting in performance in religion, performance in moral character, performance as a parent, performance in vocation, etc.

To say saving faith is a “trust transfer” is to consciously see where your trust is, and remove one’s hopes and trust from those things and to place them on God as saviour in particular (not only on him as God in general)

(C) is a “salvation by faith AS a work” answer.

It is the strength of his belief in God ...described as with all my heart that is important . Hence now faith becomes a work, it confers merit I am saved because I have a high degree of intensity of my faith in God.

In each case, the religious person has not “stopped working” and has not done a real trust transfer. In the last case, the person has even come to trust in his or her trust. But each alternative misses the glorious release of the gospel. These false understandings of saving faith will lead to insecurity, anxiety, a lack of assurance, possible spiritual pride, touchiness to criticism, and a devastation in light of any moral lapses!

So this definition of faith cuts against both the religious person and the irreligious person. On the outside one seems to have faith and the other does not. But the religious person may be just as lost, having never confronted his or her own trust in self-justification.

Abraham believed God....he believed that all God had promised to him will come to pass. We need in the same way to believe God that all that He has done for us in Jesus will come to pass.

2.Which would be the right answers that convey the meaning of “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”

The right answer would be I should be allowed in to heaven because of what “Jesus Christ has done for me”.

Case 3

Kow Cheong and Tony were arguing about Abraham’s faith. There is a difference between believing in God and believing God says Kow Cheong but Tony says no.

How does the case of Abraham (vv.18-25)illustrate the difference between only believing in God, and believing God (v.3)? How can his example help you strengthen your faith (v.19)?

Abraham did not simply believe that God existed and that he was good and holy. To *believe God* is to look at what God has said and to let that define reality for you. We are told what it means to “believe God.”

1. To not go on feelings or appearances. *He faced the fact that his body was as good as dead* (v.19a). Elsewhere Paul says, “we walk by faith, not by sight.” Faith is not opposed to reason, but to feelings and appearances. Abraham looked at his body and it looked hopeless. But he didn’t go on appearances. This shows us that faith is not simply an optimism about life in general, nor is it faith in oneself. It is the opposite. Faith begins with a kind of death to self-trust. Faith is going on something despite our weakness, despite our feelings and perceptions.

2. To focus on facts about God. *He gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power* (vv.20-21). This shows that faith is not the absence of thinking, but rather is a profound *insistence* on acting out of measured reflection, instead of just reacting to circumstances. Abraham pondered and considered the power of God. He thought it out like this: “If there is a Creator God at all (and I know there is), he must have all power — there can be no limit to it. God knows Sarah and I are both old — but he’s the one who hung the sun and moon and scattered the stars like sand with both hands! It is ridiculous for me to think our agedness presents such a being with an obstacle!” Faith is thinking about God — focusing on facts about him.

3. To trust the bare word of God. *That God had power to do what he had promised* (v.21). Lastly, we see that “believing God” is not simply thinking about God but trusting his word. Indeed, it is taking God at his word even when there is nothing else to go on, when feelings, popular opinion, and common sense seem to contradict his promise.

Abraham shows us the way to strengthen our faith. 1) Get to know a lot more about God! Study, reflect, meditate. Abraham was able to overcome his sense of weakness by reasoning things on the basis of what he knew about God. You need to do the same. 2) Act on God’s promises and word even when it is hard. Faith is living as if these promises are true. For example, you give away your money generously, though that may appear economically risky, because of his promise to care for the generous giver (Malachi 3:9-10). You tell the truth even though it may lose you a friend or favor with a particular circle, because you know it pleases the God who is Lord of history and who holds the hearts of all people in his hands.

“There are two factors which determine the strength of our faith. The first is our knowledge of God. That is the most important factor in faith — it was Abraham’s knowledge of God that made him the man he was.

The second element is our application of what we know. That is most important also... The disciples in the boat during the storm were failing to apply their faith and that is why our Lord put His question to them in that particular form. He said, 'Where is your faith?' You have faith, but where is it? Why do you not apply it to this situation? What have you been doing with your faith? Why isn't it here? Why are you not applying it to this very situation in which you find yourselves?' The trouble with the disciples is that they did not use the faith they had; they did not think. They were looking at the waves and the water coming into the boat.

[But faith is application of the *promises*, the word of God.] Many people say they prayed 'the prayer of faith'... and the healing did not take place, and they are greatly perplexed... but they misunderstand what God's word promises. Now Abraham was perfectly clear about that... God has not promised that His people are always to be well...

In other words... faith is holding on to the faithfulness of God. Faith does not even look at itself. I go further. Faith is never interested in itself and never talks about itself. That to me is a very good test. I always distrust people who talk about their faith. That is the characteristic of the cults. They always direct attention to themselves... you have to be 'thinking positively'. The emphasis is on the self. But faith looks at God, holds on to the faithfulness of God. Abraham 'gave glory to God'."

– D.M.Lloyd-Jones

Abraham believed God would carry out His promises and that belief was credited to him as righteousness. What about us what do we believe God will do for us that would be credited to us as righteousness?

But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification
(Romans 4:23-25 ESV)

Paul clearly states this idea of being credited with righteousness was not written solely for the benefit of Abraham or the Jews exclusively. It will be credited to us who believe that

1. God raised Jesus from the dead
2. That Jesus died for our sins to take the penalty of our sins and was raised so that we would receive His righteousness
3. Jesus is our Lord