

Blessed is He Whose Sins are Covered

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- [0 : 00] We are in the book of Romans and this is a letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in the ancient city of Rome.
- And we're in chapter four, which is the end of a section, the first section of Romans. It's been an argument from chapter one through chapter four, a masterful argument.
- And chapter four itself is its own argument within the big argument. And it's got a just like a good essay, it's got a thesis statement, it's got proofs, it's got a conclusion.
- It's highly logical. And because it's a detailed argument, because it's logical, it's a little bit heavy. And that means it's not the most inspiring text.
- It's not the text that's going to immediately pull your heartstrings. This is my last sermon for the present and eight times in the passage, Paul uses the metaphor of counting, which is an accounting verb.
- [1 : 02] It literally means to number crunch eight times in these 12 verses. And then at the end, he illustrates his point with Abraham's circumcision. And I'd always hoped, as anybody would, that your last sermon would be about accounting and circumcision.
- It's perfect. This is what Paul has said so far. The gospel is good news. It's not good advice. And that means that it's not about what you do, it's about what's been done for you.
- That was chapter one. He said that that good news is a history, that something came down, that God became flesh, that the gospel is about what happened in history.
- It's not about bettering yourself, it's not about moral conformity. And that means that whether you're religious or irreligious, no matter what background you've grown up in, whether you're Jewish or Gentile, no matter what you believe, that everybody is equally a sinner deserving God's wrath and punishment and judgment because of guilt and because of sin, but in the gospel.
- And this is what he said so far, that he has come and offered salvation instead through Jesus Christ. How? And the thing we've been focused on for the past three weeks is justification.
- [2 : 18] And justification is this, that God sees you like he sees Jesus when he looks at you. That when he looks at you, he sees Jesus Christ for you.
- And he says something that's not actually true of you. And that's that you're righteous just like Jesus is. And that's what he said so far. Now he's making another instep, a more detailed theological argument within the big argument here.
- And he's anticipating two objections in chapter four. So what are they and why do they matter to us is the question. And so we're going to look at how God saves, how God gives gifts, and how God counts this morning.
- Okay, so first, how God saves. Now, this is the main theological point of Romans 4. So let's get it first and then we can move on to the things that do pull heartstrings in this passage.

Claudius, the emperor of Rome, expelled the Jews from Rome, the ancient city, in the late 40s of the first century.

[3 : 27] And a few years later, they were allowed back in. And now Paul is writing in the late 50s, 10 years after the Jews had been expelled and then come back.

And he knows that this church is now filled up with Jewish people in a way that it hadn't been previously. They had been expelled, but now they're back. And there was all sorts of issues that were happening between the Jews and the Gentiles in this church in the first century.

And he knows that the Jews there know their Bible. For them, the Bible is the Hebrew Bible. It's the Old Testament. He knows that they know their Bible. And so he's anticipating in this passage an objection that he thinks might come up, especially from the Jewish people in Rome who know the Hebrew Bible, who know the Old Testament really well.

And here it is. Paul, you're telling us that it's not by works that you get in. You don't get salvation by works. That's what you keep saying. But it's only through the free gift, the radical grace of Jesus.

And this to us sounds brand new. Because before, you could obey. You could obey Torah, Genesis did an oronymy.

[4 : 44] And you could do good works. And that's how you could get into God's kingdom and stay in through doing good things. And now, Paul, you're saying that God has flipped it.

And now that this radical gift through Jesus negates all your efforts, all your religiosity. And that sounds to me like salvation has changed fundamentally.

And that God therefore must have changed too. And that's the objection he's anticipating. And his answer is no, no.

That's not, you don't get it. That's not true. And there's three ways he says no to that here. And the first one just briefly, it's come up twice already in chapter one and chapter three.

And it's this, he said at the very beginning of the letter, God promised the gospel beforehand through the prophets. And in 321, But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, but the law and the prophets bore witness to it.

[5 : 52] So he's saying the stuff I've been telling you about, actually, people have said things about it in the law and the prophets in the Old Testament. So it's not that new.

And then the second thing he says is now about justification. Justification means you stand before God's law court and you are pronounced righteous like Jesus.

And he said, look, this might sound new to you, but it's not. And so he goes to verse one, Abraham, and to verse six, David.

Now, for any Jewish person in the first century, and for any Gentile that had converted to either Judaism or now Christianity, Abraham and David are, well, they're boss, as we say.

They're everything. If there's anybody who got in, who got into God's kingdom, it's Abraham and it's David.

[6 : 54] And so he goes and he said, and he's saying, let me show you verse one and verse six, Abraham and David, let me show you how they got in, how they received the favor of the Lord.

And so thirdly, how? And that's the question in verse one. And the question for one, it's a little bit veiled. It's a little bit confusing on the surface.

What shall we say was gained by Abraham our forefather according to the flesh? What did Abraham get? What did he gain according to his flesh?

Now, what does that mean? What does that question mean? Well, the question is what does flesh mean here? And it doesn't mean according to his humanity, according to the blood that he has running through his veins, according to that he's our forefather as a human, one of the first people.

It doesn't mean that. It means you have to go to Philippians 3 to get it. And Paul says this about the same phrase three times in Philippians 3, according to the flesh.

[8 : 00] And this is what he says, we are the circumcision who worship by the Spirit of God in glory in Christ Jesus, and we put no confidence in the flesh, though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more than you. And this is what he means by being confident in the flesh. What does it mean? And here it is, I was circumcised on the eighth day.

I'm of the people of Israel. I'm of the tribe of Benjamin. I'm a Hebrew of Hebrews. As to the law of Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor to the church, as to righteousness under the law, I am blameless.

And so what Paul means by under the flesh, or according to the flesh is this. It means according to your religiosity, your religious works.

And so when he asks this question at the beginning, he says, what shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather, according to the flesh, he means according to his religious doings. According to all of his religious works. Just like Paul mentions there, his long list of religious works.

[9 : 05] Paul says, if anybody deserves anything in the flesh, according to religiosity, it was me. But if anybody deserves anything according to religiosity, it was Abraham.

He was boss. He was the best. He's the best there's ever been. He's the most faithful man that's ever lived apart from Jesus Christ. And he's saying, if anybody deserves it, Abraham deserved it.

Genesis 22, he said yes when God said, take your son up the mountain. And that's what Paul's thinking about there. That's the most obedient moment in the Old Testament. He was faithful. He deserved it.

And so Paul's question is, what did his religiosity get for him? The best man that's ever lived. And the answer is nothing. Nothing.

It meant nothing for Abraham and it meant nothing for David. Even in the Old Testament, and it means nothing for, in other words, here's the point.

[10 : 07] The free grace, the radical undeserved forgiveness of God, Paul is saying, he's anticipating this objection. This sounds brand new to me. And he's saying, this new news that you're hearing about Jesus is actually old news.

It's actually old news. Now, so here's the point, the first point, the theological point. The main idea of the argument that we've got to get out there.

And it's this, if Jesus came in about 4 B.C., which is what we think he did, and he lived and he died around 28, 29 A.D.

And you're telling us, Paul, we're saying from this pulpit, Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, him for you, you with him, is the only way to be saved.

Then how in the world can you say that anybody was saved before that moment? That's the underlying question. And Paul's answer is, every single person in all of history who has ever trusted in the true God was saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

[11 : 19] Abraham in Genesis 15, he's saying here, how was he saved? By the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How was David in Psalm 32 when he said, my sins are covered, how was he saved?

By the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ's death and resurrection has always been salvific for all of history. Now, how could that possibly be if he didn't come till the middle of time, the middle of history?

And the answer is that God is eternal. The answer is God is eternal. He isn't bound by space or time that theologians speak of the fact that all times are present to him.

And in Ephesians chapter one, it says that if you're a believer, if you're Abraham, if you're the last believer that will ever live in Revelation 21, that from the beginning to the end that you were found in Christ when before the foundation of the world, salvation has always been in Jesus from before the foundation of the world.

And that's what Paul's telling them. And the law and the prophets, they all bore witness to it. Abraham and David, everybody, they were all saved by the exact same gospel that we're saved by.

[12 : 34] So either from the beginning, God either looks forward to the middle of history to save, or he looks backward for us to the middle of history to save.

But it's all through Jesus. That's never changed is what he's saying. Okay, that's the theological argument of chapter four. Now, secondly, how God gives gifts.

There's also another objection that he's anticipating that might come up from the city of Rome. And it's less Jewish and more Gentile.

It's really for anybody who grew up in the Greco-Roman world, and especially in a city like Rome. And it's all about cultural expectations. And it's this, you see it in verse four.

Now, to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift, but as his due. Now, Paul here, he brings up the language of getting a gift that a true gift is never earned.

[13 : 43] It's given over for nothing, but that if you do something, you deserve a wage for it. You know, if you work for your employer, you deserve a wage. Now, why does he bring this up? Here's something you need to know, that the word for gift in verse four is the exact same word for grace.

Chorus in Greek. So sometimes in the New Testament, it's translated gift, and sometimes it's translated as grace. But grace and gift are the same thing for Paul.

Here's the cultural issue he's addressing. People in the Greco-Roman world, just like today, treat gifts like wages.

We still do that. We treat gifts like wages. If somebody gives us a gift, we want to deserve it. Right? And when somebody gives you a truly great gift, you feel guilty about it.

And you want to return the favor and you want to do something to give back what's been given to you. Some great gift that somebody's given you in your life. You feel guilty. Everybody gives a guilt consciousness whenever you get a great gift.

[14 : 51] I mean, it happens to me at least. And that's exactly what was happening. That's exactly the culture of gift giving in the Greco-Roman world. John Barclay, a New Testament scholar at the University of Durham, is really helpful.

He's written a really helpful book last year explaining Romans 4 according to this idea of giving gifts in the ancient Roman world. And this is what he says. In the Greco-Roman gift giving scheme, you give a gift to somebody only if they are worth it.

In other words, when you give a gift, it's for the purpose of expecting your social capital to grow. That if you give a gift, you're expecting that you will be known for it, that it will be returned to you, that you're standing in the community will get lifted up.

That's the only reason you give a gift in the ancient city of Rome. That's the main reason. And that's the cultural expectation that this idea of grace is entering into. It doesn't make sense to them what's being talked about here.

Let me illustrate it. If you're a member of our church, you probably know Phyr and Siobhan, they got married on Friday. But all of us have been to weddings.

[16 : 03] And if you came Friday and you gave Phyr and Siobhan a gift, and you gave them a great gift, a gift that people are going to talk about for a long time.

It gets found out. And what a gift that so and so gave to Phyr and Siobhan. And your social capital is going to go up.

Because Phyr and Siobhan, naturally, they're going to like you more. I mean, they have to, right? I mean, if you were on the recipient end, you like the person more. That gives you a great gift. And then people talk about it in the church.

And everybody says, did you hear about the gift at the Cacai? And your social capital goes up. We still do this, even unintentionally. But, look, Phyr and Siobhan are just like the rest of us here.

Why would you give that great gift to them when Saturday morning, you could have given that gift to Harry and Meghan, right? I mean, talk about your social capital going up.

[17 : 07] I mean, Phyr and Siobhan, yes, in St. Columbus, maybe, but if you got your gift through to Harry and Meghan on Saturday morning, and somehow, somehow, they opened it and they knew it was from you and they loved it, you could hit the lottery, right?

I mean, you could become an in-person with the royal family. I know for some of you that would be a terrible thing, but for some of you, you would love it. That's the idea of gift-giving in ancient Rome.

You do it because people are worth it and they can raise you up in life and you expect a return every time on the gift you've given. Now, this also happened with the gods of ancient Rome or the Greek gods.

You give them a gift and you expect a commensurate return, what we call a blessing. If I give them enough grain, they give me enough rain to yield a bigger crop.

It worked the same way, right? So, gift-giving was all about your return based on your worth, which you would get back. Paul is saying here, verse 2, if Abraham was justified by works, by doing something for God, giving God a gift in the way that you give a gift to the ancient gods or to one another, then he has something to boast about.

[18 : 32] Now, the word boast there does not mean braggadocious. It means to make a claim. So, he's saying if he was able to give a gift to God that was really worth something, he could make a just legal claim against God, like an employee to an employer.

You see, verse 4. That's why he brings up employees and employers. So, verse 2, but Paul uses a bit of an unusual Greek term that's being translated here as the word but.

It's really emphatic. It's like, but no way, man. It's like that. It's like, if you were able to give a gift to God and you expect a return, it'd be worth enough to get a return.

No way, not this God. That's what he's saying, but not God. That does not work with this. You can do that with the Greek gods and with the Roman gods and with your friends that you think will boost your social capital.

That does not happen with the true God, but not God. John Barclay uses this illustration. It's like trying to go to the bank and trade in your shillings and your farthings and your half pennies.

[19 : 56] When the currency is pounds and euros and dollars. It's an exchange that cannot be. It can't work, not with this God. Now, there was a phariseal type view out there in the first century.

One of the apocryphal books written between the Old Testament and New Testament, the Book of Jubilees. It says that this is exactly what Abraham did. He actually gave God enough to credit back his righteousness.

It says this, for Abraham was perfect in all that he did before the Lord. He became well pleasing in accord with righteousness for all the days of his life.

You see, that was the view. I don't know about you, but I read Genesis 13 to 14. I can say that no, he did not.

He did not do well all the days of his life. He prostituted his wife twice. It's not true. He didn't. He had no capital to take, no currency to take before this God.

[21 : 02] Now, the way our hearts all work is that we want to say, even when we are able to come to terms with the fact that we're sinners, and we'll say, I know I'm a sinner, and I have so much to atone for, and I have so much work to do to get it right, to finally get it right.

That's where we want to be. That's the nature of the human heart. And well, Martin Lloyd-Jones, the great Welsh preacher, he put it like this, to make it quite practical, I have a very simple test.

After I've explained the way of Christ to somebody, I say, now are you ready to say that you are a Christian? And they hesitate, and then I say, what's the matter?

Why are you hesitating? And so often people say, I don't feel like I'm good enough. I don't think I'm ready to say I'm a Christian yet. And at once I know that I've been wasting my breath.

They're still thinking in terms of themselves. They have to do it. It sounds very modest to say, well, I don't think I'm good enough, but it is a denial of the Christian faith.

[22 : 15] The very essence of the Christian faith is to say that he is good enough, and I am in him. As long as you go on thinking about yourself like that and saying, I'm not good enough, oh, I'm not good enough, then you are denying God, and you are denying the gospel, and you are denying the very essence of faith, and you will never be happy.

Well, he said it, not me. Augustus Toplady said it really well as well in the great hemlock of ages.

Nothing in my hands I bring simply to the cross I cling. Naked I come to thee for dress. Helpless I look to thee for grace.

Foul I to the fountain fly. Wash me, Savior, or I die. The point is that you bring no gift that could ever turn God into your employer.

There is no wage that will ever merit the radical grace of Jesus Christ. It is truly free. John Barclay calls it incongruous grace.

[23 : 32] It's completely one-sided, is what he means. It's completely one-sided. Now, to third and final point, how God counts.

How God counts. Eight times in these eleven verses, Paul mentions the verb to count. To count.

You see it first in verse three. What does the scripture say? Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. And what he means there, he says Abraham believed God, he had faith.

And it was counted, reckoned, accorded to him as righteousness, as the gift of righteousness. All I want to do in this last point is explore with you two big mistakes we can make when we think about what it means to have faith according to this passage.

Two ways that you can construe God counting your faith as righteousness into bad news instead of good news. And the first is this.

[24 : 43] He says it in verse three. He believed and it was counted to him as righteousness. You want to have access to the grace of God and Jesus Christ and Paul says it clearly. Believe and it will be counted to you as righteousness.

And so you say, you've been telling us it's not by works. You can't earn it. You can't give God, you can't turn God into your employer. You can't religiosity your way into the kingdom.

You can't do it. But you've got to have faith. You've got to have faith. You've got to trust and you've got to give over your whole heart to God and you've got to put your whole self into it and you've got to believe if you want to be a part of the kingdom of God.

You can't do that. You can't do that. That's not true. God counts differently than that.

That's not what this means. It doesn't mean you have to put your whole self and your whole heart into it if you want to be into the kingdom. That's not what it means. The theologians talk about the difference in subjective faith and objective faith.

[25 : 53] Subjective faith is that faith that you possess in your heart. The faith that you actually exercise right now if you believe. And it comes in all sorts of shades and qualities.

It changes all the time. It depends on your mood and you will get up some days and that faith will be incredible. Your subjective faith, the levels on it will be incredibly low and some days it will be higher.

Your subjective faith changes all the time. You believe more and you believe less depending on what day of the week it is.

But objective faith means this, the theologians say. It's that thing or person which you put your faith in.

You see the difference? Here's how God counts. It's like this. Three men were being chased by a bear.

[26 : 54] This is going to go somewhere. This is how God counts faith. Three men were being chased by a bear. And they reach an impasse, a river.

It's cold and it's icy and it's the middle of winter. And the first man looks at the river and says, it's frozen on the top but I don't think it's going to hold us.

And I'm not sure if I can step out there knowing that I might fall through the ice. And the second man comes and says, I don't know if it's going to hold us. I'm not sure if it's thick enough but we don't have a choice.

I've got to step out and go across this river because of the bear, you know. And the third guy says, I've lived in these woods for a long, long time and I've crossed this river many times and I can tell you the ice is thick.

It's thick enough and we will cross and we will make it. Or to use a more biblical example, Tim Keller and his great sermon, Getting Out on Exodus 14, he talks about the fact that the Israelites as they came up to the Red Sea, they were grumbling, you know, you remember.

[28 : 10] And some were courageous and faithful and some were grumbling. The text says that. And then Moses spread his arms out in two giant walls of water on the right and the left came up. And they went through the middle of the waters and you got to know that the ones that were courageous and faithful were probably turning around to the Egyptians as Keller puts it and says, eat your heart out Pharaoh, you know, look at me now.

Look at what my God did. I got two walls of water and I'm passing right through. There's nothing you can do to me. And they were beating their chest and saying, come get me now. You know, they were correct. They were bold and they were running right through brave as ever with two giant walls of water on each side.

And you got to know that the ones that in the verse before that had said, we didn't want to leave Egypt. We're saying, I'm going to die. I'm going to die. You know, there was two walls of water and they were just waiting for it to crash down on their heads.

They were afraid and they didn't even want to go through the waters. Some did and some were courageous and faithful and some didn't. And you got to ask the question of the three men who stood before the icy river and of the Israelites, the two different groups, who among them were saved?

Who among them were saved? Well, you see, it was all of them. Every one of them. And that means what this does not mean is that the strength of your subjective faith is what gets you into the kingdom of God.

[29 : 44] Because your faith varies. Subjective faith does not get you into the kingdom. You see, it is not the quality of your faith that counts. It is the object of your faith.

It is the object, it is objective faith that gets you into the kingdom. Faith in that whom, that person. And when they were crossing the Red Sea, what did God tell them?

When you are afraid, look up at the mediator, the one who has his arms open, standing there parting the seas for you. The object of your faith is what saves.

In other words, the first mistake is this. You cannot turn faith into a good work. Into something that, it is the faith that earns your way in by believing.

It does not. BB Warfield says it this way. You are not strictly speaking saved by your faith. You are saved by Jesus Christ.

[30 : 49] And so believe it. See, and if you try to add to God's salvation by having good faith, quality faith, then you subtract from it.

Instead, be still and know, he says. Alright, the second and final brief objection, a brief problem that might come up with this passage, the way we might misconstrue what he means here, faith, with our faith, is this.

It's common in our tradition here. And it's combining justification and a certain reading of the Old Testament, particularly Psalm 22, and it says something like this.

Justification tells us, we've just learned that you are not worthy before God. You have to reckon with that. You have to deal with that. That you are not worthy before God. You are guilty. And that's exactly what justification comes and says to us.

You need a mediator, you need Jesus to stand in your place. And so then we read in Psalm 22 something like this. David says, I am a worm. You remember this? Not a man.

[31 : 57] And you come to the conclusion, it's been spoken in many pulpits, that justification, this doctrine means that not only are you not worthy before God, but you are also worthless before God.

You are less than human, you are subhuman. That you are not a man or a woman, you are a worm. And God would rather stamp you out like an ant, but instead he does this for you.

We just lost the lights. And you can't do, that's not, no, you can't do that either.

Let me just say this. David in Psalm 22, when he says, I am a worm, not a man. Just to clear the air on this verse.

He is talking about the people who were chasing him. He is talking about his enemies, the people who were chasing him. And he says, in the eyes of my enemies, I am a worm, not a man.

[33 : 07] But not before God. But not before God. That's exactly the point of the passage. He is saying, everybody else around me thinks I am worthless, but God, you will not forsake me.

You do not think that of me. It's completely misconstrued if you think, it's not the point that God is saying, you are a worm and not a man. That's not what the gospel is about, that you are worthless.

And so God has to come in out of pity or something and lift you back up. Here's the difference. You are unworthy. You are guilty. It's judicial.

It's ethical. But you are of immense, immense worth. Christian and non-Christian alike. That's exactly why he comes.

Because he wants you. The gospel is not you are worthless, but he comes in pities and saves you by grace. The gospel is, in the eyes of God, you are so worth it, even though you are unworthy that he would come.

[34 : 14] We'll close with an illustration. I gave this one about six, eight months ago, so you'll remember it, but probably.

But it's exactly the point of what we're saying here. And, well, it's a hard one to get through, to be honest, this illustration.

You'll know it when I say it. Stephen Carter's Chapman. He, Christian contemporary music singer. Many of you will, if you grew up in the church, you'd probably listen to some Stephen Carter's Chapman in your day.

In the 90s when that was cool. And he and his wife adopted three little girls from China. And the youngest named Maria.

And it was a great day for their family in 2008. Will Franklin, one of their sons, was graduating high school in the southern states.

[35 : 12] And he had graduated, he was coming home, and Maria was excited to see him. So she ran out into the road and he ran over in his car. And his mom, the mother, they were recording this interview they did in 2008.

That the mom said, Maria, stop. But she was calling out Will Franklin's name, going to see her brother. And he hit her. So the dad, Stephen Curtis, picks up Maria.

And she's dying. And he puts her in the back of the car. And she dies there in the back of the car on the way to the hospital. But he rushes off, but before he leaves, and he says in his interview in 2008, that he didn't even remember doing this.

His uncle, his brother, Will Franklin's uncle later told him that this is what happened. But just out of instinct, he rolls down the window and as he's driving away with Maria, dead in the back of the car, he says, Will Franklin, my son, I love you.

And he drives off. And you see, that's the point of the Gospel. It's not that you are a worthless worm before God.

[36 : 30] So he comes to pity you and throw himself down to you and help you. It's not, it's this, it's when you are at your absolute worst, like Will Franklin was in that moment, that God says, I love you enough, well let me put it like Paul does, he who did not spare his only son for you, how would he not freely give you everything?

When did God love you before justification or afterwards? He loved you so he came to justify you, you see. It's the love of God that came first because he wanted you.

And so he says, believe it, believe it. No other religion has a God who gives gifts like that.

And so we'll end with the words of the Apostle John, my little children, God is love and God loves you. Let's pray.

Father, we give thanks to you for the love. The love that's so radical that you would give yourself over to death for us. We know that we have no merit, no wage to claim before you.

[37 : 52] So we plead the work of Jesus Christ for us. For those of us who believe that we would be renewed, for those who might not, that they would come to see the infinite worth of Jesus Christ for them.

I'm going to pray this in Christ's name. Amen.