

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for September 18: Good news to believe

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Thus far in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, he has stated his bold claims about the authority of Jesus and the power of God's good news. He also has described the desperate nature of our situation as sinners, and he has pointed to the great salvation God has made available to all people through the work of Jesus. This week, Paul describes how we come to enjoy this great salvation.

One of the questions causing some stress in the Roman church was how the good news of God in Jesus actually was obtained. Did Gentiles have to become law-abiding Jews before God would forgive their sin? Paul's answer is straightforward—"we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (3:28). Faith, then, is the key to unlocking the mystery of salvation, and it is the key for both Jews and Gentiles.

To prove his point, Paul explores the story of Abraham. This would have been an especially powerful illustration for the Jewish portion of his audience because they all, without exception, would have recognized Abraham as the father of their faith. It was to Abraham that God first gave the promise of blessing, and it was Abraham who received circumcision as the sign of the covenant.

Paul calls Abraham to testify about the salvation and blessing of God. How did Abraham receive the blessing? Was it by works of righteousness? No. Instead, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (4:3). Before there was any covenant to which Abraham

could be obedient, God gave a promise, and Abraham believed it. It was by faith that he was joined to God's promise.

To illustrate this point further, Paul asks his audience to consider the timeline of the events. When did Abraham receive the promise—before or after he was circumcised as a mark of God's covenant? “It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (4:10-11).

Abraham’s salvation, then, was not on the basis of any covenantal obedience, but on receiving the promises of God in faith. In 4:16, Paul summarizes his thought thus far: “Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith.”

In this careful exposition of Abraham story, Paul is forcing the Roman Christians, both Jew and Gentile, to answer a question: If Abraham’s salvation was by faith, why would anyone, especially Abraham’s children, think God’s salvation could come any other way?

Paul applies Abraham's story directly to his audience in 4:23-25. Abraham is our example of faith. His story was written so we might have hope and might believe. If Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, then we can be assured that if we believe in the promises of God revealed in the resurrection of Jesus, we will receive salvation also.

As we seek to guide our classes to an appreciation of these truths, we face two primary obstacles. One is similar to the obstacle Paul was addressing, namely the temptation to seek after God’s salvation as if we could earn it by our good works. Many people think all God wants from us is to be good. If

this is true, then perhaps it is within reach of our own efforts. We can, after all, achieve a certain “goodness” according to the standards of our society.

This is nice, but it misses the point. God’s call is not primarily to be good. God’s primary call is to be his. We become his not by our moral perfection but by faith. Abraham did not become God’s instrument of blessing and redemption in the world by his moral perfection. In fact, even after he chose to follow God, he demonstrated a certain looseness with regard to truth-telling—especially about his wife. No, it was not Abraham's moral superiority that connected him to the life and purposes of God. It was his faith.

So it is with us. Before we can have a conversation about goodness or morality, we must first have a conversation about identity and belonging to God. Is your class trying to be good? Or are they seeking to be God’s? The latter comes only by faith.

The second obstacle to applying the truths of our lesson is our frequent misunderstanding of the nature of faith. In a society that places a premium on knowledge, we often confuse knowledge with faith. We think that because we grow in knowledge, we have therefore grown in faith, but this is not necessarily true.

Think of all you know about God that Abraham did not. Yet Abraham is a great hero of faith. In fact, God really only asked Abraham to believe one thing—that God would provide. The rest of Abraham’s life illustrates the development of his faith in this promise. How would you describe the difference between faith and knowledge? Challenge your class to do more than know Jesus’ story. Challenge them to put their faith in Jesus as Lord.