

St. Andrew Evangelical Lutheran Church
Rev. Christopher Raiford, Pastor
" What Did Abraham Discover? " Romans 4:1-5
Sunday March 8, 2020 – 2nd Sunday in Lent

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

St. Paul's letter to the Romans was written to a congregation made up of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Each came into God's family from a different direction. The Jewish Christians were raised with God's Law. They could recite the Ten Commandments for you. They could tell you the stories of Abraham and Moses, Israel's kings and God's prophets. They knew the Old Testament laws and promises. The Gentiles, on the other hand, had none of that. God had written his law in their hearts, as he has for all people. These Gentiles, therefore, were guided by nothing but their God-given consciences to live good lives. So the Jews knew God's law and tried to obey it. The Gentiles had a vague knowledge of God's law through their sin-tarnished consciences and tried to live up to it. You know what? The result for both was the same. Neither did what God demands.

St. Paul hi-lighted all of this in the first three chapters of his letter to the Roman Christians. Then in chapter 4, Paul illustrated that no one is saved by his own efforts. No one even contributes to his salvation. As a case in point, St. Paul referred to the Old Testament patriarch Abraham. This morning, we will consider Abraham's situation and compare it to our own. So, what did Abraham discover?

St. Paul seemed to be addressing the Jewish Christians more than the Gentiles in our reading. We must understand that it was no small matter to be a child of Abraham. It was the Jews who were the possessors of God's word. Out of all the people on the earth, God had called Abraham for a special purpose. We heard that call in our Old Testament reading. **"The LORD has said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...""** (Genesis 12:1,2)

The Bible notes Abraham's response: **"So Abram left, as the LORD had told him..."** (Genesis 12:4) The Lord chose Abraham; Abraham listened and obeyed. From Abraham, the Lord brought forth the nation through whom the Savior of the world would come. This is an astounding event in salvation history. The Jews knew this. They cherished it. Unfortunately, they also seemed to hold it over the heads of the Gentiles. They seemed to have forgotten what Abraham learned in all this.

"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about — but not before God." (Romans 4:1,2) Yes, God chose Abraham — but not because Abraham had earned or deserved God's favor. And God greatly blessed Abraham — but not because Abraham's obedience was worthy of special merit.

Sure, we could look at Abraham's amazing faith and obedience to God. God told Abraham to go, but he didn't say to where. Abraham went anyway. God told Abraham that he would have a son through whom a great nation would come. Abraham was 75 when he first heard the promise. Then 90. Then 99. And Sarah was barren! Abraham believed the Lord anyway. What did Abraham earn by his amazing obedience to God's Word? Nothing! When God speaks to us, aren't we supposed to listen? In reality, Abraham did nothing more than what God said. And what did Abraham discover? God doesn't owe us anything.

I guess to be fair, though, Abraham did earn something from the Lord. He earned God's curse. Look through Genesis 12-25. While these verses hi-light Abraham's faith, they also show Abraham's sins too. On several occasions Abraham lied and failed to trust that God would take care of him. We know the punishment God has for sinners. The Bible says, **"All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.' Clearly no one is justified before God by the law."** (Galatians 3:10,11)

Was Abraham justified by works? Only if he was holy. And if he were holy, he only did what God told him to do. So even if he were holy, Abraham had nothing to boast about before God. But Abraham was not holy. Not even close. So, what did Abraham discover? God doesn't owe us anything — anything except a curse.

We discover the same thing Abraham did. Though God has not approached us and called us to leave our homes, our jobs, our friends, and to go to some distant land, God has told us to love him and gladly obey his commands. If we want God to be pleased with us — and we all do; our eternal life depends on it! — Then we must do as he commands. Remember: **"Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."** (Galatians 3:10) The only way to escape God's curse and God's condemnation is with continual, perfect obedience.

St. Paul writes, "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation." (Romans 4:4) If we give God perfect obedience, God gives us blessings because we have earned them. But we have not. In that case, we receive different wages from God. The Bible declares, **"The wages of sin is death."** (Romans 6:23) So what do we discover? The same thing Abraham did — God doesn't owe us anything but punishment.

I knew a Lutheran elementary school teacher who had a sign on the wall of his classroom. It read, **"I do not give you a grade. You earn your grade. I only tell you what grade you have earned." God does the same thing. Remember what St. Paul**

wrote, "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation." (Romans 4:4)

Sometimes we get the idea that God is vindictive, sitting in heaven and rubbing his hands together just waiting to unleash his almighty power on unsuspecting people. But God doesn't randomly give us a judgment. God gives us the judgment we have earned. If God proclaims a curse on us for our sin, how can we call God unjust? If God sends us to hell forever, doesn't he give us exactly what we deserve? If God withholds blessings from us, God cannot be faulted, because God doesn't owe us anything. Nevertheless, God dealt with Abraham the same way he deals with us: God gives us credit for everything.

"What then shall we say Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about — but not before God. What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.'" (Romans 4:1-3)

In other words, Abraham never earned anything from God. If he did, that meant he was perfectly obedient. We have already seen that he was not. But the Lord gave Abraham credit of being a righteous man. How? Not by Abraham working for it, but by faith. **"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."** (Romans 4:3)

What did Abraham believe? Everything God said to him. When God called Abraham to a new country, Abraham believed God and went. When God promised, **"I will make you into a great nation"** (Genesis 12:2), Abraham did not have much reason to believe it. Not at age 75 with a barren wife. But Abraham believed it because God said so. Abraham believed one other promise of God, too. **"All peoples on earth will be blessed through you."** (Genesis 12:3) That would happen when the Messiah would come into the world to pay for the sins of all. Through that Savior, all peoples on earth would be blessed. Again, a childless old man did not have good reason to believe all this. But Abraham believed it. Why? God said so. So, **"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."** (Romans 4:3) What did Abraham discover? God gives us credit for everything. God gave Abraham the credit for the righteousness which the Savior would earn for him later. Not because of what Abraham did, but by faith in what the Savior would do for him.

What do we discover in all this? We know that God came through in all his promises. He blessed a 100-year-old Abraham with a son, Isaac, through whom God later raised up the nation of Israel. The Lord gave to the nation of Israel the very land he had promised to Abraham. And greatest of all, the Lord sent the Savior he had promised. Abraham had all of these promises made to him. He believed the Lord, even though Abraham never saw them fulfilled. **"And we have the word of the prophets**

made more certain." (2 Peter 1:19) In other words, we have the Bible recording the fulfillment of all of God's promises.

What do we discover? We discover a Savior who did all the work that God demands of all people. God's curse never fell on Jesus because of sin, because Jesus did **"continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."** (Galatians 3:10) Jesus submitted himself to God's commandments, and Jesus earned God's favor with a holy life. In doing this, Jesus also earned his place in heaven. Even though Jesus earned the perfect grade, he did not receive the credit for it. Instead, God gives us credit for everything that Jesus did. Jesus, in turn, took the credit for every sin we have committed. The prophet had foretold it, **"The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."** (Isaiah 53:6) St. Peter explained this credit exchange in this way, **"Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God."** (1 Peter 3:18)

Another way to explain this is found on the Martin Luther statue at our seminary. The quote from Luther is this; "Lord Jesus Christ, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You became what you were not, and made me to be what I was not." Jesus Christ lived a perfect life as our substitute, and so God gives us the credit for everything that Jesus did.

St. Paul writes, **"Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited to him as righteousness."** (Romans 4:4,5) The Bible makes it clear--there is only one way that we receive God's favor. That is by continual, perfect obedience. Since we could not do it, Jesus Christ has done it for us. We did not earn it. So it is not by our works, not even a little bit. It is by faith in Jesus Christ that God has declared us righteous, or holy. It is by faith alone that God gives us credit for everything. Credit for Christ's perfect obedience. Credit for Christ's victory over death. Credit for a place in heaven.

What did Abraham discover? Even though God doesn't owe us anything, God gives us credit for everything. The Savior he looked forward to has earned God's favor, God's peace, and a place in God's Paradise for all. Abraham looked forward to it. You and I celebrate God's fulfillment of it. Through Christ, all who believe are righteous in God's sight. We believe it for the same reason Abraham did. Because God said so. Amen.