

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Romans 4:1-8

Sermon Title: "You Don't Work for It" (A Journey through Romans)

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The Jehovah's Witnesses stop by my house from time to time. The Jehovah's Witnesses always stop by when it is inconvenient. They never come by when I want them to. If the Jehovah's Witnesses come by one day, and I am in the mood, I might stand at the door and ask them about their beliefs. Because, quite frankly, their beliefs are all wrong.

The Jehovah's Witnesses believe that you have to work out your salvation. We Christians believe that we must work out our salvation too, but the JWs believe that one must work at it and work at it, or the person is not going to receive salvation. "They regard salvation to be a result of a person's own decisions."¹ Oh, yes, they say they believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and they say that one is saved only by repenting of sins and calling on the name of Jehovah, who is God.² That all sounds Christian. Here is what's wrong, though: The work that they must do assures that they have salvation. It all rests on the individual, they believe. Salvation is determined by

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehovah%27s_Witnesses_and_salvation

² Ibid.

the individual, and so a person needs to work hard in order to gain it.

Paul has something to say about those who think they have to work for their salvation. He says they have it all wrong. He addresses the topic in Romans 4.

{SLIDE} He is talking to the Jews in the church, who learned from God's law ever since they could understand it. God's law has been their guiding force for all their lives. Some of these Jews might be critical of Paul's teachings, which say that a person is justified by faith in Christ and not by their observance of God's law. These Jews think that in order to be a faithful followers of God, one must follow exactly what God says. Read the Bible, and do everything it says, and you will receive salvation. Sounds like great idea. This is basically what the Jehovah's Witnesses have bought into.

Here's the rub: God never set up such a system for salvation. God doesn't mean for his law to be the way to get to heaven. And following God's law perfectly is not the measuring stick God uses in order to see who receive salvation.

{SLIDE} God's law is not the door we must pass through in order to receive salvation. If we read God's law and we work at it hard, then God's law should open to us, and we would pass through. But this is

our thinking. It has never been God's thinking. God's law is important – God's law is something we ought to follow. But we do not follow it in order to be saved of our sin. This is not how it works. We follow God's law because we have faith in Christ first. It is Jesus Christ who is the door. It is Jesus Christ who saves us from our sin. We discover Christ, and accept Christ, and he opens himself up to us. We step through, and we see the abundant life that God has in store for us. This is how it work. We do not work for salvation by following God's law. We receive salvation freely given to us by God through Christ.

This is a fresh idea for the Jews in the church in Rome. This is a new idea for the Gentiles who do not know God's law but might be curious about it. All of this talk about having faith and working out salvation might be confusing, so Paul points everyone to the Old Testament. The Jews would know about the Old Testament, because it is their Scriptures. **{SLIDE}** And Paul directs them to Abraham, the Father of many nations, because all the Jews identify with him. He is the rock from which all Jews are cut, according to their traditions.³

Abraham was a righteous man. Why was he a

³ John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, cf. 123.

righteous man? Because he listened to God's command? Because he was an astute follower of God's law? One might think this, whether the person is Jewish or not. One could say that he earned his salvation by doing what God wanted. God told him to travel a long distance from his home. {SLIDE} He used to live in a place called Ur, which is found in the country of Iraq. We can be sure that life for Abraham was quite cozy, quite comfortable. But God comes to him and turns his world upside-down. He has a mission for Abraham, which includes traveling west, and traveling to a land in the far, far, west. As you can see by Abraham's (and even Sarah's) journey, they didn't go directly west but followed the Euphrates River to the northwest. They then traveled down to the southwest at an extreme angle, and settle in a place which God calls home for Abraham and Sarah. They have had to endure a 1000-plus mile journey over many, many years. They encountered tribes of people who were friendly or who might have harmed them. They encountered rulers who wanted Sarah was their wives, and very nearly got their ways if not for God's intervention.

Now, Abraham's comfortable life in Ur was completely shaken up, and yet he did all God wanted him to do. Does this earn him righteousness? Because Abraham and Sarah listened and followed,

does this earn both of them salvation from God? It may seem that way, but Paul says no.

He gives a couple reasons. Abraham is not able to do anything God wants him to do, unless he has faith in God. He cannot generate his own response to God's law or words without God giving him the ability to do so. Remember what we said last week? **{SLIDE}** Remember the frog in the container. The frog will never get itself out of the container unless somebody helps it. Somebody needs to know how containers work, and lift the lid, and allow the frog an exit. Likewise, we cannot get ourselves out of our sin, unless Somebody, God, opens the lid and gives us an exit. God knows how sin works. More importantly, God knows how salvation works. It works through faith in Jesus Christ. It works by believing in the One who died for our sin, who gives us the means to live without our sin, and who perfects our lives so that sin and death have no effect on us ever again.

{SLIDE} Abraham believes God through faith. He encounters this God, who says that he will watch over Abraham and Sarah, that God will protect them from all harm no matter where they travel, that God will give them a future with lots of family members, and that those family member will prosper through faith in God. Abraham hears all of this, and he puts his trust in God. He believes God every step of the way, and he

shows his faith by doing what God wants him to do. But righteousness, salvation, are not credited to him through the works he does. It is credited to him through his constant faith that God is his God and will always be his God.

Now as a side note, we need to say something quickly about faith itself. Faith is not generated by Abraham or even by us. As we said, we are prone to sin and do our own thing. On our own, we are incapable of following God, let alone believing in God, which means we cannot generate faith in God on our own. It is impossible. God gives us the faith to believe. Faith originates with God, as does all good things.

{SLIDE} Here is a neat little thing I learned during my first round in seminary years ago. It comes from Martin Luther, the founder of the Lutheran Church. Faith is like a cylindrical tube that God gives us. Think of it like a plumbing pipe through which water moves. The water will not move unless it has a pathway. Likewise, we do not know anything about God unless God gives us a pathway. Such a pathway is called faith. The solid lines pointing to the tube and to Abraham show God giving him and even us such faith. Through this tube, so to speak, we have a better understanding of God. We may respond with belief

and works (this is shown by the dotted line from Abraham to God). So when we say we have faith, we are saying that God gives us something we cannot generate on our own, and God is opening the path for us to see him and accept. This is credited to us as righteousness.

Previously I said that Paul gave a couple reasons for why Abraham's works are not credited to him as righteousness or salvation. Another is found in verse 2: that Abraham cannot boast about anything he has done on his own. If Abraham can say that his works have justified him, earned him salvation, then does he really need God to give him salvation? Why not just live a perfect life? Why not just figure out what is correct and acceptable among all people, and live that way, and then earn your own salvation? If Abraham just listens to God, he doesn't need to believe in God, if his works justify him. Why do we need that "tube of faith" that God gives us?

God never created salvation that way. Salvation is a gift freely given. Salvation is something born from the hands of a loving God. God wants us to accept salvation by accepting the One who gives it. And we do so by accepting faith, as given to us by God, and then accepting Jesus Christ who makes us free from sin and alive.

Beside, if Abraham can boast about earning his own salvation, then isn't that a sin? Sin runs contrary to God's will. Boasting about ourselves means we think nothing of God. It says we don't need God. But we do. We need God for new life. We need God for salvation from sin and death. Abraham needed God to get him to where he and Sarah needed to go, and such firm belief was credited to him for salvation.

{SLIDE} Paul has one last reason for why he says that Abraham did not earn his salvation through works. It is found in verse 4: "Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due." That sentence struck me, and I had to think about it for some time. I also had to address it, because it is important to this whole discussion about works and faith.

When we work, what do we earn? A salary. Money is given to us through cash, a check, or direct deposit. We do something for somebody, and we expect something in return. If we do not get anything in return, we will not work. We will go somewhere else for a wage. If we use this model, then we may believe that if we work a certain way, we better get heaven as a reward. The work we do better give us all the benefits of heaven. And, if we work really hard throughout our lives, we might believe we should earn

the best that heaven offers. Greater toil should equal higher wages. However, if we do not earn heaven at the end, we will give up working for God. We will drop our work, and God can find somebody else.

Again, this is not how God fashioned the “system” for salvation. Salvation is a free gift. It is not dependent on our work or how much work we do. It is solely dependent on God and God’s love for us. God loves all his children, and wants all of us to respond to God through faith. Faith is the avenue freely given to us, so we may see God and trust God. If we accept and believe with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, then the reward is salvation. “Faith is reckoned as righteousness,” Paul says.⁴ God “created the universe from nothing... [God] calls the dead to life... [God] *justifies the ungodly*. That is the greatest of all his wonders: creation and resurrection are manifestations of the power of the living and life-giving God...”⁵

{SLIDE} We have run out of time to talk about King David. Paul mentions him in Romans 4:6-8. He doesn’t use David as an example of faith in God like he does with Abraham. However, he uses David’s words from Psalm 32 to back up his argument about faith.

⁴ Romans 4:5.

⁵ F.F. Bruce, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans*, 117.

“Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.” David knew about faith in God personally. When he sinned greatly against God by violating a man’s wife and then killing the man, he knew that there was nothing he could do to cover the sin. No amount of good or even perfect works would right the wrong. Only God could clean the sin through confession and repentance. A person puts his or her trust in God by admitting the fault and turning from it. That takes faith: faith in God to forgive, faith in God to restore, faith in God to lead.

Karl Barth says, “”Who is pronounced blessed? Is it the [person] who possess heaven and carries it about... Is it the [person] who deserves blessedness and displays it in his works? Assuredly not. David is certainly not referring to such blessedness as this... His eyes are fixed upon an invisible relationship between God and [humans] *apart from works*... And in this relationship, which is the righteousness reckoned by God, [David] beholds the whole fullness and significance of human [nature].”⁶

David was known as the man who went after God’s heart. This is mentioned in both 1 Samuel 13 and Acts 13.⁷ David pursued God, wanted to know God

⁶ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 124.

⁷ Verses 14 and 22, respectively.

deeply. Through such faith, he was made full of life. He was made significant (important, meaningful) as a king of a nation and as a child of God.

Paul would want the same of those Christians in Rome, who were in the beginning of faith: Go after God's heart. He would want their faith to grow stronger by this pursuit, and thus their relationship in God grow deeper. Forget about the works. Forget about trying to earn it, because we can't. We won't. If there is any "work" to do, it is to put more faith in God. It is to receive everything God gives us and run with it. It is to enjoy the righteousness of God through Jesus Christ on us, which lasts an eternity.

Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the Good News: what we deserve to have, Jesus has carried for us: sin and destruction and death. Jesus is the source of eternal life, and we can have such life when we accept him and believe. Believe this good news, brothers and sisters: In Jesus Christ you and I are forgiven! Thanks be to God! Amen.