**ABRAHAM, OUR FATHER OF FAITH**

Romans 4:1–25

Key Verse: 4:17

On Facebook, there’s this thing called a “relationship status.” You can select, “Single,” “In a Relationship,” “Engaged,” “Married,” or even, “It’s complicated.” People check each other’s statuses to see who is in what kind of relationship. And there’s this phrase that has developed. If someone starts a serious relationship with someone else, people ask, “Is it ‘Facebook’ official yet?” We often define our relationships by how close, how committed we are to someone else. I often wondered, if God and I were in a relationship on Facebook, what would my relationship status with God be? Many of us may have *a* relationship with God, but what kind of relationship would it be? Distant? Complicated?

In last week’s passage, we learned that through the Gospel, God made a way for us to have a relationship with him through Jesus. In today’s Passage, Paul talks about Abraham, and through Abraham’s life, Paul shows us that, now that God has provided a way for us to be in a relationship, how we can have a right relationship with him. We’ll be thinking about this relationship with God through Abraham’s life in three ways—(1) Trusting in God’s Grace, (2) Walking in God’s Promise, (3) Persuaded by God’s Power.

**Relationship | Trusting in God’s Grace (1-8)**

Look at verse 1. Paul begins this passage with one of his questions: “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?” What is Paul talking about when in he asks “in this matter?” Paul is talking about righteousness (Ro3:21,22). For those of you who haven’t been with us in our study of Romans this summer, this concept of righteousness has been something Paul has developed over the past 3 chapters. What is righteousness? The words justice, justified, righteousness, righteous, that we have been hearing throughout Romans are each variations of the same root word in Greek: *dika*, which means “being in the right,” or “being correct.” Righteousness, specifically, is this “rightness” relationally; being in a right or correct standing with others. Essentially, righteousness means having a right or correct relationship. In the context of Romans, Paul has been talking about righteousness or a “right relationship” in relation to God.

So Paul is asking, “What did Abraham discover about having a right relationship with God?”

Who was Abraham? To the Jews, who Paul had been addressing, Abraham was a big deal. Paul says, their “forefather according to the flesh.” Abraham is *the* patriarch of the tribe of Israel, the father of all Jews, the guy who started it. It was his family line that the Jews traced their ancestry to. The Jews saw themselves as different from everyone else because they were children of Abraham.

So, what did Abraham discover about having a right relationship with God? Look at verse 2. Paul says, “If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.” Here, Paul is being a little sarcastic. He’s saying that Abraham was definitely not a guy in a right standing with God because of anything he did.

Beyond all the lore around him, if you actually look at Abraham’s life in how it’s described in Genesis, the Bible is remarkably honest. And one of the things that stands out is how much Abraham messed up. This one time, he was afraid during a famine and went down to Egypt, where he lied about his wife being his sister in an attempt to protect her. But because of his lie, people thought she was single, and it caused more problems. God gave Pharaoh and his household some serious diseases and they kicked Abraham out of Egypt. Abraham messed up pretty bad.

And a lot of Abraham’s messy mistakes came out this one great desire he had, the one thing he wanted in life— a son. He was super old, and his wife was barren, so nothing could happen. So Abraham tried a bunch of ways to get a son. Once, Abraham’s wife Sarah had this crazy idea of Abraham taking on a concubine so that he could have a son. Abraham went along with this and slept with Hagar and she became pregnant. Bad idea. Sarah of course got jealous, despised Hagar and mistreated her while she was pregnant. And this child with this poor woman was never meant to be Abraham’s son, and the painful situation almost tore his family apart to the point where Abraham had to send Hagar and Ishmael away. A very sad mistake.

Mistakes. Abraham made a lot of them. Not a pristine guy. What could he discover about having a right relationship with God? Look at verse 3. Paul asks, “What does Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’” Here’s the key to what Abraham discovered: Abraham realized that having a right relationship with God, would not be because of anything he did. All he had to do is believe in God. And when he did, God just gave him “righteousness.”

“That’s it? All I have to do is ‘believe in God?’ You mean, I don’t have to do anything, I don’t have to make up for all my mistakes, I don’t have to clean up my act first and have my life together to be in a relationship with God? I just have to believe in him?” Yes. The beginning to having a relationship with God is believing in him.

Look at verse 4. Paul helps us understand. If someone works, they earn their wages. A lot of times, we think that we have to approach a relationship with God as something we must earn first. When I was 13, my dad wanted me to get a job. So he found me something at the Chicago Park District. Legally, I wasn’t supposed to work at all. So, somehow, my dad talked to them, and they agreed to pay me something. It was 50 cents an hour. And I was to “help out” a girl who was a freshman in college who was the actual “Camp Counselor,” and I would be the “Jr. Camp Counselor.” I think she spoke directly to me maybe twice, and most days she would sun bathe by the pool, and other days she would show up at the beginning of the day, and then just leave. So, that summer. I took care of about 15 seven year olds by myself, 8 hours a day, 5-days a week for 50-cents an hour. If you do the math, and if I remember, I made about $150 that summer. And I remember I cherished what I earned, because I worked really hard and I got paid for it. Bosses don’t pay you because they’re generous or because they feel like it, they have to pay you. That’s why we have minimum wage, so you get paid what you deserve.

When people first start a relationship, they usually go about it this way. They do nice things, take people out on a date, pay for dinner, give gifts, show their best selves, until the are “deserving enough” to be in the relationship. Some people feel like they have to do this in every relationship. They have to do all these nice things for people for them to like them or accept them. And we also do this with our relationship with God. We think we have do a lot of good things to deserve a relationship with him. We go to meetings, we study the Bible, we pray, we go to church regularly, we help out, we may clean up at church, help out with music, we may even try to teach the Bible, share God’s word and after a while have build up for ourselves a lot of good things we’ve done. We deserve a relationship with God. I put in the work, I should get paid. Why do we do this? Because, fundamentally, we look at ourselves as not good enough, as undeserving. So we desperately try to put on our best selves, do a lot of good things, and cross our fingers and hope it’s good enough. This is how some of the Jews saw a relationship with God was like—doing a lot of good things. But this is not a right relationship with God. This is a very dysfunctional and superficial relationship with God. Moreover, it’s not the kind of relationship God wants to have with us.

Let’s read verse 5 together. “However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.” Abraham realized that, although he was undeserving, he didn’t have to do anything. He didn’t have to work or prove himself or do a bunch of things and then God would have a relationship with him. All he had to do is **trust that God justifies the ungodly. Abraham believed in God’s grace.**

A right and full relationship with God begins with this: “Although I am so undeserving, God justifies me through Jesus. So, even though I’m not good enough, God covers all of my sins, and sees me as worth being with. “

Look at verse 6-8. Paul brings up David, because David realized this. Again, David is a guy considered by Jews to be *the guy*. And unlike Abraham, for a lot of his life, David wasn’t known as a mess up. He was a great guy. As a boy, he was this young, hard-working, hipster type kid who spent his days petting lambs in fields, writing and playing music for God out in nature with his harp and with an audience of sheep. As a teenage boy, he was the champion of Goliath, the defeater of the Philistines, the calmer of the crazy Saul, the poet and writer of most of the psalms, a great looking guy. Everybody loved David. Girls would go through the streets singing songs about him. When he was king he was victorious over everything, Israel flourished as a nation, and he loved God so much he worshiped through the streets in his underwear. Everything he did was golden, with God and with people. David could do no wrong. If anyone “deserved” a relationship with God, it might’ve been David. But one day, he slept in. He didn’t’ go out with his troops, but instead stayed and walked around on his palace roof. I’m sure he thought he deserved a break; he was king after all. As he was strolling, he saw this really hot girl taking a bath. No one was around. He was King David. So, even though she was married, he went to her, and they slept together. This act wasn’t so golden, so David tried to pretend it didn’t happen. And when he found out she was pregnant, David still wanted to pretend like this never happened, so he resorted to have this woman’s husband killed. And even though David committed adultery and then murder, he tried to continue to pretend like it never happened, because he wouldn’t be the good guy anymore.

But God brought this deed into the light. He exposed it. And when David allowed God to bring to light this deed, he experienced something that really changed him. God did not give David what his deeds deserved. God forgave him. He experienced God’s amazing grace. So he wrote, “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.” (7,8).

You know, sometimes you may feel that you’ve messed up too much, that you’ve done too many bad things, made too many mistakes, that you have to somehow make up for all the guilt you feel to ever hope to be in a relationship with God. But the amazing truth of the Gospel is that we don’t do anything. God already did everything by dying on the cross for us. God wants to cover up all of your sins, to heal you, and to accept you as you are, that he thought you worth giving his own life for. The worst of you, the most undeserving you, is worth that much to God.

Can you believe this? “I am justified by God’s grace. I don’t have to do anything to deserve it.” May we trust in God’s grace, that he accepts us as we are, and may we live in a right relationship that lives depends on his grace alone.

**Relationship | Walking in God’s Promise (9-17a)**

Circumcision. Look at verses 9-12. Circumcision was this thing that Jews did. It was something that God actually commanded Abraham to do to himself and to everyone in his household. They sort of saw it as God’s branding—it was how God marked his people as his own. It was seen as the “mark of Abraham,” and set Jews apart as his children. But look at verse 9a. Paul asks if the blessedness of being righteousness is only for the circumcised. Look at verse 9b and 10. Paul explains that Abraham wasn’t justified when he was circumcised. It was years before circumcision happened that Abraham was righteous. So, this righteousness is not exclusive for Jews, but to Gentiles too (11-12). The “mark of Abraham” isn’t circumcision. Paul says it’s to “follow in the footsteps of faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised” (12b). Abraham then becomes our father of faith. We are his children if we share in his faith. This changes our identity. Our relationship with God becomes this family of faith. We become his children.

What kind of faith did Abraham have before he was circumcised? In verses 13-16, it says that Abraham believed a promise from God. What was this promise? Let’s go back again to a scene in Abraham’s life. Abraham had just fought against powerful kings to rescue his nephew Lot. And yet, he felt very vulnerable and afraid. So God spoke to him and said, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.’” What comforting words! God himself, speaking to Abraham, saying that he himself was his protection and his reward. They had a relationship, God was reaching out to Abraham and offering who he was to him. But Abraham didn’t really pay attention to this amazing promise. He instead gets very honest with God. He has to get something off his chest: “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” Then Abraham gets very direct with God: “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.” All Abraham wanted was a son. But he and is wife couldn’t. They were too old. It was more than having a legal heir or descendant, he wanted his very own son. And no reward could fill this pain and life-long longing in Abraham. So what does God do? He speaks to Abraham and says, “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” God is promising Abraham the impossible, that he and Sarah would have their own, flesh and blood son! Then, it says God “took him outside.” It was night, and God directs Abraham to look up, and tells him, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Abraham must’ve stood in awe of the sky, in awe of the countless stars up there, the wonder of it, that God had made those stars up there. Then God tells Abraham, “So shall your offspring be.” What a promise! God promises not only Abraham would have his own flesh and blood son, but that his descendants would be as numerous and countless as the starts in the sky.” And Abraham believed this promise. Throughout the rest of his life, although he sometimes forgot about it, Abraham would always hold onto this promise, followed it wherever it led him in life. He lived in tents in foreign lands, ready to relocate if this promise form God called him to (Heb11). And although he made plenty of mistakes along the way, his faith in this promise of God grew stronger (20), until it was the only thing he held onto.

This promise God made to Abraham to have a son, is the same promise God has for each of us. Look at verses 13-16. God’s promise to Abraham was that he would have a son, he would be a father of many nations, and that “all nations on earth will be blessed through you” (Ge12:3). The fullness of this promise to Abraham came about through Jesus. Jesus is God’s great promise to us.

Here, we can learn from Abraham about having a right relationship with God. A relationship with God is walking in the promise of Jesus.

What’s guiding your steps? What guides the decisions in your life? We sometimes view our relationship with God like this: we march to the beat of our own drum, and God aligns and blesses wherever we go in life. This is not a right relationship with God. It’s actually pretty delusional. Rather, a healthy relationship with God is believing his promise that Jesus is everything I need in life. It’s believing that if I, like Abraham, hold onto the promise of Jesus, God will guide my steps.

How can we do this? The author of Hebrews puts it so well. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” (Heb12:1,2a). There are so many things that could easily guide our steps. Our careers, our ambitions, our majors, our parents, a relationship with someone, even getting other people to like us, or we could just meander around, bounced from one thing to the other. But am I following Jesus? Am I holding onto the promise that Jesus really is everything I need? Am I guided by his forgiveness, following his example, living for his kingdom?

If we’re really in a relationship with God, may we drop all the things that entangle us, and may we learn from our father Abraham, and follow God’s promise of Jesus.

**Relationship | Persuaded by God’s Power (17b-25)**

Look at verses 17b. Paul finishes with the example of Abraham by talking about the resolve of Abraham’s faith—“He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.” Wow. Really? Abraham believed that God could raise the dead? In verses 18-21, Abraham, faced the facts—“his body was as good as dead,” his wife’s womb was dead. But, Abraham was “fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.” And God did. Abraham had a son! Isaac. God did the impossible! It actually happened. And, this strengthened Abraham’s faith in God. He became fully persuaded by God’s power.

After Abraham had a son. God told Abraham to do something crazy (Ge22). Abraham was walking with his son, whom God said he would give him and through him he would have all these descendants, and to take him up to Mount Moriah and to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering. What?! Why would God say this? Abraham went to sleep that night and woke up early. He took his son with two of his house servants next to him and journeyed to this place. On the third day of there travels, they arrived. He told his two servants to stay, and Abraham took his son, saying that they would go and worship God together. Abraham gave some wood for his boy to carry and he himself carried a torch and a knife. Then as they were walking along, little Isaac asked his father, “Father?” “Yes, my son?” “The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” And Abraham, knowing what God asked him to do, said, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burn offering, my son.” When they got there, Abraham bound his son onto the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. Abraham was actually going to do it. He was going to kill his son. Why?! This is the boy he always wanted. But as Paul said, Abraham was fully persuaded by God’s promise. God promised that through his son Isaac, he would have descendants as numerous as the stars. So even if he killed his son, God, who gave his own old body life, his barren old wife’s womb life, could even raise his son Isaac back to life.

Abraham was persuaded by the impossible power of God. And the picture of what happened on Mount Moriah is a depiction of God’s impossible power through the Gospel. As Paul says, “for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (24b-25).

To be in a relationship with God is to be persuaded by God’s power through the Gospel—that through his death our sins are paid for, that through him being raised form the dead, we can have everlasting life. The Gospel has power to change me. When I accept that Jesus died and rose again, and believe God who could do the impossible, the power of the Gospel is that it transforms. As we live in a relationship with God, fully persuaded by God’s power through the Gospel, we can be transformed.

So again, what is the status of your relationship with God? God has made this relationship available. May we trust in his grace, walk in the promise of Jesus, and be fully persuaded in the changing power of the Gospel.