

FEELING BETTER
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Texts: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 & Romans 4:13-25

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous." Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you."

God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Romans 4:13-25

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Last Tuesday I woke up with a headache and figured I just needed some coffee. But after three cups, my head was still pounding. So I took some ibuprofen and sat down on the couch and started reading this passage from Romans. I didn't get very far, though. I couldn't concentrate. All I wanted to do was go back to bed and close my eyes and feel better. And that's when it dawned on me: When you boil it down, that's what this passage is really about—feeling better, not in body but in spirit.

So let's go through it.

The basic question Paul is dealing with in this passage is, How are we made right with God? How are we reconciled to God? How are we justified? Does it depend on our actions and whether we do a good enough job of following the law—the body of rules that God gave Israel to live by? Or does it depend on our faith and whether we put our trust in God no matter what?

Paul answers that question by looking to the example of Abraham, and his reasoning goes something like this: God promised to give Abraham offspring and to make him the ancestor of a great nation. And even though Abraham was nearly a hundred years old at the time, and his wife, Sarah, was barren, he trusted God to make good on that promise. And God reckoned that trust to Abraham as righteousness. God said, "Abraham, because you believe that I'm going to do what I promised, even though it seems impossible, I'm going to consider that the condition that wipes the slate clean and establishes a new relationship between us."

So Abraham's righteousness doesn't have anything to do with the law. In fact, Paul says the law can only bring "wrath" because no matter how hard we try, we're only human, and we're not capable of following the law all the time. Sooner or later we're going to break a commandment or violate a prohibition. Sooner or later we're going to mess up and do something wrong.

So if righteousness depends on how good a job we do at keeping the law, then we're never

going to get there because we're never going to be perfect. We're always going to be stuck in a cycle of failure and guilt. We can't overcome our own flawed nature. We can't make ourselves righteous. God has to step in and do that for us.

Righteousness isn't something we can achieve through our own efforts. It's something that can only come as a gift—a gift from God that we don't have to do anything to earn. We only have to receive it the way Abraham did, with hope and confidence. When we do that, Paul says, we become in effect Abraham's descendants, and our faith is reckoned to us as righteousness.

Now, the shorthand for all of this is "justification by grace through faith," and to see what difference it makes in our everyday lives, it's helpful to have an example.

So a long time ago in Germany, there was a young monk, who believed, like most people in his day, that being made right with God is not purely a gift. There are some strings attached. We do have to earn it. And the way we earn it is by being really a good, devout, pious Christian.

Now, at first he was fine with that idea. It seemed fair enough. But the more he tried to earn his salvation, the more anxious he became. He was working really hard at being a good Christian. But was he working hard enough? He could never be sure, and it made him super anxious.

So he ended up going a little bit overboard just to be on the safe side. He started doing everything he could think of to atone for whatever sins he may have committed. He started volunteering for the hardest and filthiest jobs at the monastery where he lived. He scrubbed floors and cleaned toilets.

But no matter how much penance he did, he still wasn't sure that it was enough. He never reached a point where he felt like he could relax. And he stressed about it for years, until one day he made a discovery. He was reading Paul's letter to the Romans, and even though he'd read it countless times before, for whatever reason, on that particular day, he got what Paul is really saying: It's not our works that God

reckons to us as righteousness. It's our faith. It's our trust in God and our belief that God will make good on God's promises, even when it seems impossible, even when we're stuck in a place that seems hopeless.

Does anyone know who that monk was?

It was Martin Luther, and he experienced what his contemporary, John Calvin, described a few years later in his commentary on Romans: "If salvation depends on the observance of the law," Calvin writes, "the soul can entertain no confidence respecting it, yea, that all the promises offered to us by God will become void: we must thus become wretched and lost, if we are sent back to works to find out the cause or the certainty of salvation."¹

As a young man, Luther believed that being made right with God was something he had to do for himself, and that became a terrible burden for him because even as he was putting himself through all kinds of punishment, he knew it would never be enough. He was basically stuck on a theological hamster wheel. He was running and running, but he wasn't getting anywhere, and in the end all he had to show for his effort was exhaustion and despair. He didn't feel any comfort. He didn't feel any peace. He just felt tired and hopeless.

But when he read Romans he realized that God's love wasn't conditional, and his relationship with God didn't depend on anything other than God's goodness. It was a relationship born out of grace and built on trust. And that realization was like a ray of sunshine for Luther. It changed his entire life. It lifted him out of despair and brought him to a place of joy. In other words, it made him feel better, in a way that he never knew was possible.

So last Tuesday my headache did eventually go away, and I did feel better. It just took a little while for the ibuprofen to kick in. I wish it was that easy to feel better spiritually. I wish we could just take a couple of pills and feel the same relief that Martin Luther felt. But I think it's hard for a lot of us to accept what Paul is saying

in this letter—the whole idea of justification by grace through faith. I think it's hard because of the world we live. This is a world where there's no such thing as a free lunch. This is a world that tells us we have to work for everything. This is a world that values individualism and self-determination above all.

With that way of thinking ingrained in us, it's hard to believe that being accepted by God doesn't come with a price tag, and it's hard to stop feeling like we have to earn it. So here's a suggestion, something you can do for Lent. Instead of giving up something that makes you feel good, like chocolate, give up something that makes you feel bad. Give up the hamster wheel. Give up the cycle of failure and guilt. Give up feeling tired and hopeless.

If you can let go of all that and "hope against hope," like Abraham did, I guarantee you'll feel better than you ever dreamed you could. Amen.

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries On the Epistle of St. Paul To the Romans*, Calvin's Commentaries 19 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 171.