

Righteousness: Signed, Sealed, and Delivered

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Date: 05 October 2025

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- [0:00] This morning we're continuing on in our series through Romans 4. We're in chapter 4. We're picking up where we left off after spending some time in Genesis.
- And you'll see why here in a second. It feels like we just keep talking about Abraham. And we are because Paul is using him as an example to us all.
- So if you have a Bible or you have a bulletin in front of you, we're looking at Romans 4 verses 9 through 15. Romans 4.
- Is this blessing then only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him?
- Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.
- [1:04] The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised. So that righteousness would have been counted to them as well.
- And to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised. But who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.
- For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be the heir of the world did not come through the law. But through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be heirs.
- Faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath. But where there is no law there is no transgression. Let's pray. Lord we are thankful for your word.
- We pray that you might use your spirit in our lives. To open it to us. Let us see the beauty of Jesus. And may we cling to him more tightly.
- [2:00] We ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Recently I had lunch with a family from church. And we were talking about a number of things.
- And then the topic of music came up. And I shamefully and embarrassingly admitted to them. I don't know anything about music.
- I can't play music. It seems like magic when people are up here beating these wooden things together. And then sound comes out and it kind of all works together. They're literally wizards and maybe witches up here that are doing magic to create beautiful sounds.
- I have no idea how they work. And they told me that they have a term for people like me. And I said well let's hear it. I'm all ears. And they said I'm a music appreciator.
- Music appreciator. So as a newly minted music appreciator. Not just an admirer. I have to admit that whenever I look through scripture.
- [3:01] I'm constantly reminded of music. Whenever I walk about my day. Whenever I do life. Or I'm talking to my kids or other people. I am reminded of music. And if you remember from last week.

Paul is no different. Where does he go when he needs evidence. Or when he's reminded of something. He goes to the Psalms. Which oh by the way are music. Right? They might not be the chart toppers today.

But it's the thing that Paul goes to when he needs evidence. When he doesn't know what to say. Or he wants to point back to something. He goes to the Psalms.

Now as I was looking at this section of Romans 4. I turned to the great prophet of a couple years ago. And I couldn't get out of my head the song from little Stevie Wonder.

As some of you might know it. Signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours. That's the perennial refrain. Right? And as you look through Romans 4.

[4:02] I'm not saying that Paul consulted Stevie Wonder. Or Stevie Wonder consulted Paul when he wrote that song about love. But those themes are present here. And those words are repeated over and over.

Just like in the song. Signed, sealed, delivered. In fact, you could even look a little closer and say. Paul actually talks about faith in the same way that Stevie Wonder talks about love.

That righteousness by faith is signed, sealed, and it's delivered. And as we look at righteousness by faith, we're going to look at those headings.

Signed and sealed, and then delivered. And we'll see why in a minute. Now if you're here this morning and you've spent any time around Christianity, that righteousness by faith, that's kind of a big scary term.

It's familiar to us. But it's kind of hard to define. After all, how can anyone, let alone me, be right before God?

[5:07] Maybe it's the same question that gnaws at you. And if you're not a Christian here this morning, I'm going to let you in on a secret. Christians really struggle with that question too. And that's why Paul is writing this.

To kind of wade through all the feelings about this. And explain that. And if you spent any amount of time with us over the summer, as we walked through the life of Abraham, we saw this again and again.

We asked the question, is Abraham, is he actually trying to wreck this thing? Does he actually have faith in God? Because he keeps acting like a knucklehead.

You see, the most pressing issue in Romans 4 is how do we reconcile these people's lives? They look like train wrecks and they say that they're loved by God.

Or other people say that they're loved by God. Or they're right before God and they're a mess. That should resonate with us this morning. Whether we're Christians or not, we have to look at our own failings as we fail time and time again.

[6:13] And say, am I really right before God? I've done things wrong again. That's the thing I said I wouldn't do. And how does that fit with my faith?

I know that Christ died for sin. But did Christ die for me? If you remember, so far in Romans, Paul has been working through this bigger argument that everybody's guilty.

Everybody. Alright? No one is righteous. No, not one. And last week we saw these great mountains of men in the faith. Abraham and David. And even them were saved by faith.

Even them are made right in the presence of God by faith. Not by what they had done. And here in this text, there's this weird, peculiar fascination and zeroing in on circumcision.

And so as we look at that, we have to deal with what did it mean? It meant to be righteous by faith. And we'll explain that in a minute.

[7:18] So first, faith signed and sealed. If you notice as we read through Romans 4, it seems like Paul is like actually fighting somebody. He's debating them, but we don't know who.

He's responding to some kind of argument. And if we miss that idea, and we just read it as Paul talking about what he thinks, it seems like Paul is going nuts.

And you're like, Paul, you just said this, but then you said this again. These ideas are all mixed up. Now, Paul might not be actually responding to a person, but it's kind of like shadow boxing.

And if you were a middle school boy or a middle school boy once, you've all shadow boxed on the playground, right? You're fighting that imaginary person. It might be even your own shadow, but they're really there and you're really slugging it out.

Paul's doing the same thing, except for he's not slugging out with a shadow. He's slugging out over theology. Look with me at verse nine. We see the battle lines of this argument are clearly drawn.

[8:19] And they are this. He asks this kind of question. Is this blessing then only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

So it's circumcision versus uncircumcision. And we have to figure out what's going on. Now that blessing that he's talking about, he's pointing back to what he just talked about a few verses earlier.

When we said that blessing, is it tied to something somebody does or who they are? Or is it tied to something different? Remember, Paul is parroting back the songs of his day when he says, blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin. So blessing or being blessed is tied to those things and not to who Abraham is and what he's done, his actions, or what David has done.

That might seem obvious to us if we know the lives of those two men. I just said Abraham acts like a knucklehead. David is no better. We see all of his sin on display.

[9:29] But these men are righteous because they put their faith in the Lord. Now we see this kind of foray into circumcision. It's both.

It's for both, it says. Look at verse 10. How then was this righteousness or this blessedness counted to him? So we know that he received it, but was it before he was circumcised or was it after?

So the question is, can circumcision, can it secure righteousness? Oh, man. Abraham was righteous because of his faith, not because of circumcision.

And we see that in the timing that Paul is trying to draw out. He's trying to show us how this works out, that he was righteous before he was circumcised.

So think back as we walk through Genesis. He was righteous in Genesis 15. And he gets circumcision much later. Paul kind of goes on about this and he says, not only does it secure, not secure righteousness, but it plays no part in it whatsoever.

[10:40] It's not even a portion. It's not even one little iota. If we think about that in our own faith, we can understand that.

None of our works, none of the things that we do actually secures our right standing before God or our faith in Jesus. That we can identify with.

But as we look back to Genesis 15, we know this, that Abraham is counted as righteous and God is the one that's doing the work.

And then after a period of time, he receives the sign of circumcision. Now sometimes that's difficult for us to grasp because when we read the Bible, we think about, it seems like maybe not that much time passed.

Like if he's talking in Genesis 15 and then in Genesis 17, is that the next day or is that like breakfast the next morning? Like how do we know how long has passed? For just for perspective, in 15 to 17, he's talking about maybe 10 to 15 years.

[11:46] So it's not like he put his faith and is declared righteous and then he receives the covenant sign the next morning. Some time elapses. When we think about that, we have to think about the fact that Abraham is called righteous and then many years later, receives the sign.

But it's not just a sign. It does something different. As Stevie Wonder reminds us, right? It seals. What in the world does that mean? Well, when we think about that, we have to think through all the struggles that the New Testament church had.

And one of those is the fact that they get really confused about circumcision. Think about Paul's own interactions with some of the other apostles. They actually kind of duke it out over this.

And they say, hey, some people are saying, you got to be circumcised first and then you come to faith in Jesus and then you get baptized and you're good. Or something like that. But they're mixing it up because they're not understanding this part about sealing.

And up until this point, the language of sign is obvious to us. We know that. We see signs everywhere. Signs on the highway that point us to get off on the exit. Signs that tell us to do stuff or signs that point us to things.

[13:04] But seal is a little bit more squishy. If we think about seal like sealing an envelope, not licking the back over and over again and then get that nasty taste in your mouth, not that seal, right? But putting a wax on something to verify that it's true, to authenticate it.

And then maybe if I'm a king, I'm putting my ring in it and sealing it to make sure nobody is going to falsify those things. That's what seal means. And that's what Paul is pointing us to here.

Look with me at verse 11. He, being Abraham, received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

The purpose, which we'll get to in a minute, was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised so that righteousness would be counted to them as well.

So that sealing is ratifying and securing in some capacity what is already true in Abraham's life. We're all familiar with that seal, closing that envelope and knowing that it's protected and it's kept.

[14:10] This seal is ratifying what Abraham had by faith, that righteousness. Now, if you've been around a Reformed or Presbyterian church, you know that this section is what we go to when we talk about baptism.

So let's just talk about it there for a second. It doesn't say the word in here, but the concept is ever present. Now, immediately, I just got puzzled looks when I said that because you're like, hey, I didn't see baptism in this at all.

Why are we talking about this? And some of you are probably thinking, okay, here goes the shell game of Presbyterians. They're going to trick me and I don't see it in the text. Just follow along with me, okay?

Yes, it does not say baptism in here. But what does it say? It does say circumcision, which is what? A sign and seal of righteousness by faith.

And as we think about that, what is baptism doing? It's doing the same exact thing, signing and sealing righteousness by faith. So this is Abraham, who was righteous by faith, very clearly, receiving the sign.

[15:21] So who's it applied to? Abraham and who else? All of his believing children? Some. All of his unbelieving children? Them too.

It's applied to believers and their children, whether they believe or not. Okay? So the sign of righteousness by faith, which is circumcision, is applied to believers, people that are righteous by faith like Abraham, and then all of their children.

Okay? That sounds very similar to baptism. It's because it is. If you remember in places like Colossians, that connection is made very clearly. It's even called something like the circumcision of Christ.

Okay? The relationship between baptism and circumcision is that they both signal righteousness by faith. And when we see that applied to believers and their children, then the consistent thing is to say baptism is applied to believers and their children.

Even though nowhere in this text does it say baptism. We're talking about the same thing. So often we can fall into this idea of a word concept fallacy. If it doesn't say the word, it's not talking about the thing.

[16:32] But we don't do that with other parts of scripture. Right? Think about the Trinity. It doesn't say the word Trinity, but we know it's there. We know it's going on. The same is true here in baptism. The Old Testament sign of faith is circumcision and the New Testament sign of faith is baptism.

It's signifying and sealing the same thing. Righteousness by faith and they're applied to believers and their children just like Abraham and his children. Now, with that, let's turn our attention back to what is he talking about?

That's one practical application of this text. But what are we supposed to do with all of this? Abraham, you're righteous by faith, but how are we supposed to think about that?

Well, he's talking to us about this idea that both Jews and Gentiles have a share in the kingdom. Abraham is the father to both of these people, whether they have circumcision or not.

And that last phrase that we just looked at is kind of, in verse 11, is indicative of this. Those who walk in the footsteps of faith. He's talking about anybody that walks in faith after Abraham.

[17:45] Those people have the sign and those people are the people of faith. I love college football. I love it. It's awesome. It's really fun to be all wrapped up in there.

I get some grins of some opponents here, but let me tell you what. I think college football is great. It can be all-consuming if we're really honest.

And I love nothing more than when my team, the Clemson Tigers, stomp out the people that are evil, that are in my family, the Duke Blue Devils. I love it.

It makes me so happy inside and when we stomp them in football and in basketball. But there's some people that are all consumed by college football. My college roommate was one of those.

He referred to himself only in the third person, Mr. Peets. He just got married. And Mr. Peets, not only did he love the color orange and did he love the Clemson Tigers and did he go to every game?

[18:40] Yes. He also only had hair in the shape of a Tiger Paul on the back of his head. He was that committed. So he might show up on Saturday. He might have a really weird haircut that got him no girlfriends.

And he might only obsess about Clemson football. He might skip class to go watch practice. When he shows up on Saturday, he's wearing the jersey.

He has the sign of being a Clemson football player. But nobody mistakes him for a Clemson football player. That might be because he's not wearing the pads and he's about five nothing.

Right? He's got no future in college football. But he's still wearing the thing that says I am a Clemson football player. But why does nobody think that he's a Clemson football player?

You see, it's what's inside of that. It's not just the sign, but it's the actual act of going on the field on Saturday and playing. Mr. Peets never became a player.

[19:41] He never was a player. But those same people that wore that same jersey were on the field. It makes certain what's already true by nature when they suit up.

That they're playing football. That is the substance of the argument that Paul makes. Is the sign doesn't make them a football player. The jersey doesn't make them a football player.

The sign of circumcision doesn't make them righteous. It just seals it and validates it. But as we think about this, we have to remember that it's not unimportant, but the physical mark of circumcision doesn't make us part of God's family just like baptism doesn't make us part of God's family either.

It doesn't make us righteous, but it's still important because it seals us and it reminds us of how God has kept us thus far.

We also see the freeness of the offer of salvation. Both in the Old Testament, Abraham got it freely, and for us, and even Paul.

[20:50] Paul reminds us of that in chapter 3. We have no room to boast. We have nothing to boast in, even circumcision. It's also showing us a lot about God, who he is.

If you joined us for adult community over the last couple weeks, we've been looking through the minor prophets, and there's this moment in Jonah, you know, the guy who gets eaten by the fish, and he gets all this judgment, and he's dropping down into the weeds and all that kind of stuff because he doesn't want to go do what God's told him to do.

There's a moment in there when Jonah is really mad, but he's really mad, and he confesses who God is, and he says back to God who he is, and he says, God, you are merciful, and I don't like it, slow to anger, abounding in love, you're gracious.

This sign, both circumcision and baptism, shows us the same thing about God, that God is the one that is working, that God is the one that is doing.

This is who God is. Remember, that confession of God about himself is coming on the heels of not Israel doing great things, but Israel being really, really faithless when they had stooped so low that they were going to worship metal idols, and God says that about himself.

[22:20] That's the same God who works through these covenant signs. That's the same God who gives us the gospel, people. And so when we think of ourselves, we have to remember how God has worked and how God is the one who's taken the priority, that God is the one who sent his son to die on our behalf for our sin.

And when we receive baptism, or when Abraham received circumcision, that wasn't the thing that saved him, that Christ's work on the cross that he was looking forward to, that is the thing that secured his righteousness.

And if we're honest, that should change us. That should change how we think about ourselves. We're not boastful anymore. We look at other people and we don't get angry with them, but we're moved with compassion because God, the one who is gracious and merciful and slow to anger has been merciful to us.

And that should extend in this room and beyond the walls to our neighbors, to our friends, to the people that we work with, that we are called to be gracious and slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love because we've been sealed, we've been marked by that same righteousness that's at work in our hearts if we trust in Christ.

Now, righteousness delivered. Look with me at verses 15 or 13 and following, excuse me. For the promise to Abraham and his offspring was that he would be the heir of the world, did not come through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

[24:02] For if the adherents of the law were to be heirs, received it, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, there is no transgression.

Faith is not just the instrument of righteousness as we saw in the life of Abraham in our own lives as well. It does, we start to see it's bigger than just Abraham.

It's bigger than just Israel. That faith is the thing that delivers this promise. And what is that promise? It's that same thing that was told to Abraham before, that he would have many descendants and he would have all this land.

and he would have it forever. That came through faith that could never, ever come through the law. He says that in verse 14.

That's really clear to us. That if it did come through the law, then the faith is worthless and the promise doesn't even actually happen. It's void. And what he's doing here, Paul is reminding us that if we associate with the law, giving life to us when we are sinners, especially those who had the law themselves, not just normal sin, but full-on transgression, he calls it.

[25:17] For Israel, they had the law and they should know this most of all. And instead of doing that, they just didn't care about it. There would be no land. There would be no descendants.

All of it would be gone. All of it. I love showing my kids videos of dogs because I love dogs. And one of my favorite things to do is to show them when dogs behave badly.

Specifically, when they're left home alone and they start to pull, you know, just a little bit of stuffing out of something, right? It might be a stuffed animal. And then it goes to, oh man, the furniture and what happens.

You might have seen one of these videos before where a dog is left alone and his owner returns and he's happy. He's elated because he has shredded that couch. He's disemboweled that thing and he is sitting in all the fluff there.

And he is so happy. And what is the, without fail, the response from the owner is like something like bad dog, right? But it starts small with pulling out a little bit of tufts of the arm and then that dog will gut the back of the couch, the cushions and yet they're so happy.

[26:34] It's a disaster waiting for the owner. None of that, that little, little pulling out of the couch ends up with this giant disaster.

The same thing is true if we think about relating to the law. If the law is the thing we're looking to, it feels like we're just pulling a little bit and we might not think it's a big deal.

But Paul is reminding us it's such a big deal, it's not just pulling a lot of little stuffing, it's undoing all of history. It's undoing this fact that God has promised them land and many descendants.

Something small has become something better, bigger, because they should know better, right? Israel should know better. That's exactly what Paul is telling them.

They should know better than this. The Jews should know better and that's why it's so bad. They have the law, they should know better. Their sin is more grave because they have the law.

[27 : 35] But it's not just Israel, it's each and every one of us. The promise is not just to them, but it's to us. Abraham isn't just a recipient of righteousness, so are we if we put our faith in Christ?

Why should we turn again to the law which can't do the thing that we want it to do? We can't turn back to it. We're pulling the stuffing out of the arm of the couch and we end up with no couch at all.

It's completely undone. That same God who's slow to anger, abounding in love, steadfast in that, it attacks when we go back to the law and look for righteousness, when we go back to circumcision and put our faith in that and not what Christ has done, it's completely undone.

That's what Paul is trying to remind us of. There's no heirs, there's no promise, there's no land, there's no descendants. Here's the good news.

It doesn't depend upon us. We should be really comforted by that. We are held and kept by Christ, not our own attempts to live through the law.

[28 : 54] It doesn't come through circumcision, it doesn't come through us being Jews or not Jews, it doesn't come from our family, our smarts, our skills, our ability, our toughness, our righteousness comes the same way that Abraham got it, through faith in Christ.

Signed, sealed, and delivered. You belong to Christ and he keeps you there, not you. Let's pray. Lord, we're thankful this morning for the reminder that we are kept by Christ and Father, the righteousness that we have is through faith in him, just like Abraham, just like the saints of old.

We ask that you might remind our hearts even when we struggle to see it clearly that you would point us back again and again to what Christ has done on the cross and not ourselves.

And we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.