

“Salvation is not a prize of our victory”

Romans 4:1-8

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? ²If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. ³What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”⁴ Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. ⁵However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. ⁶David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:⁷ “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.⁸ Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.”

We have been looking at the letter of Romans every week. In order to establish a relationship with humanity, God begins by choosing the Jewish people and giving them the divine law. This law was given so that they can live a blessed life. However, a problem comes to light. The problem was that they were not able to follow the law. A Japanese comedian, Beat Takeshi says, “With everyone together, crossing a red light is not scary”. But it does not matter if it is one person or ten people, crossing a red light is a violation nonetheless. The world says that there is a punishment for crossing a red light. The Bible tells us what we should do when we cross a red light.

In these verses, Abraham and David are mentioned. In the Bible, these two are familiar and well known. Abraham is called the father of faith and is honored by Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. David’s life and the Psalms he wrote is still read and loved by people around the world, and Israel’s flag today uses the Star of David as a motif. Why does Paul focus on these two people? Paul brings up Abraham’s life, David’s life, and tells us that we are not saved by works.

September 10, 2017 “Salvation is not a prize of our victory”

“Salvation is not based on works” was an idea that was surprising at that time. This is because the Jewish people at the time believed firmly that “we are saved by good works”. Therefore, as I have talked about in the past few weeks, that is why the Jews received circumcision and followed the law in order to please God. They believed that those things were the way to salvation.

This mindset is not limited to Jewish people, but also something that we accept as obvious facts. We have an idea that when we endure suffering, work hard, or train, we are accepted, we are praised, and that we are saved. And this thinking we accept as truth.

If Paul did not write the letter of Romans, and did not clarify this topic, church today would probably have not existed. If it still did exist, church probably would have looked like this. “If you want to become a Christian, please read these ten books this year and turn in a report for each book. And please don’t forget to come clean up the church every week. You are not saved yet because you missed three worship services last year. There are 100 theological questions. If you get 95 correct, you will be saved. We will announce the results next Thursday. You do not have enough training, please make three visitations before coming to church to brush up on your evangelizing skills”.

In verse 2 it says,² **If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about.** “In a world where we are justified by works” we think, “If I work hard enough, God will turn an eye towards me, and he will reach out to save me”. When we think this way, there is pride that says we have won our own salvation. It is like living life with a medal on our chest that says, “ I won my salvation”. As time passes, that person will begin to look down on others who are not the same.

Paul completely rejects this idea that we are saved by our own works. This is not something that Paul just thought up of. He says that this concept is not seen in the honored father of faith, Abraham’s life, or the respected King of Israel, David’s life. Paul says here, “Do you not know that Abraham and David were saved not by works but by their faith in God?”

September 10, 2017 “Salvation is not a prize of our victory”

Then how did Abraham live? Abraham was born and raised in a region where idol worship was common. However, one day God says to Abraham, “Abraham, you live in idol worship but you must not. Leave your country and go to the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, I will make your name great, and I will make you a blessing”. This is shown in Genesis 12:1 to 2. Abraham heard these words at age 75, when he was bounded by physical limitations and could not appeal to God. And it was at this time that Abraham obeyed God and left his hometown and family.

At that point, Abraham and his wife Sarah did not have any children, and it was physically impossible for them to have a child at that age. But God gives them Isaac. Isaac was born when Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 89. However, after Isaac is given to them, God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac. (Genesis 22)

Of course, he cannot just give away the life of his only son. But Abraham builds an altar for the sacrifice, lays his son down, and holds his blade up to Isaac. But just as Abraham is swinging down the blade, God stops him, and says “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.” (Genesis 22:16-17) This was a significant act that revealed Abraham’s submission and faith in God.

But in truth, Abraham was actually not saved here when he displayed his amazing submission to God. Abraham is acknowledged as righteous in Genesis 15:6, and this was before Isaac was submitted to God.

The time when Abraham was saved was not when he had solid faith, but when he was in a state where he could not believe in God.

This was a time when Abraham’s nephew Lot and his family were abducted and robbed by a king of another country. They were eventually rescued, but Abraham was probably thinking, “If God exists, why did such a terrible thing happen”. Also, when Abraham obeyed God and left his home, God told Abraham he would “bless you and make you into a great nation”. Abraham was promised many descendants, but after a number of years, he

September 10, 2017 “Salvation is not a prize of our victory”

was already 90 years old. Abraham must have thought in doubt, “I wonder where that promise went” and may have felt disappointment and hopelessness.

When Abraham was in a time like this, God took Abraham outside at night and said “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring^[d] be.”⁶ Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”

When Abraham was in despair, and even falling into unbelief, that was when God accepted Abraham as righteous. How? By Abraham believing in God’s word. There is no work done here by Abraham.

What about David? Like Abraham, David is also respected greatly by the Jewish people. He went from a common shepherd to the King of Israel by his faithfulness to God. But David’s life as a believer was not exemplary. He too made mistakes.

What were David’s mistakes? The first thing we think of is that one incident. At that time, David was the King of Israel, and was in the midst of war against the Ammonites. The victory was already within Israel’s grasp so David left the leadership position to his subordinate and was taking a nap in the palace. However, the peaceful scene quickly became a dangerous place.

Waking up from his nap, David probably felt refreshed and went to the rooftop of the palace for some fresh air. As he was looking out at the city of Jerusalem, David saw the naked wife of a loyal subordinate bathing. David lusted after this woman Bathsheba, invited her to his palace and had a child with her. To hide his sin, David thinks of many strategies, but resorts to sending his loyal subordinate and Bathsheba’s husband Uriah to the front lines of battle in hopes of his death.

David commits adultery, falsehood, and murder at the same time. These are sins that cannot be redeemed. David is in the brink of spiritual death. But God sends a fearless prophet Nathan to David and he earnestly repents his sins.

September 10, 2017 “Salvation is not a prize of our victory”

If we are only thinking about works, David is not at a place worthy of salvation. David lived most of his life in faithfulness to God, and God blessed him. However, we want to confirm this morning that God did not see David as righteous when he was in his best condition with no faults in his words or actions.

When David was at his lowest point, God helped David out and saved him. In Romans 4:7-8 Paul quotes David's words from Psalms 32:1-2, “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them”. This was the song that David sang after seriously repenting for the Bathsheba incident. This was not about his merit but a song about the blessing of being accepted by God. This came from the bottom of David's heart.

I just talked about David and Abraham's stories but the author of the letter of Romans, Paul also did not receive salvation by works but through God's grace. Paul met God during a time when he was persecuting Christians, and traveling to Damascus. There, God spoke to Paul. Paul does not make an ounce of effort to receive salvation when they meet.

“Can only a person with high moral become a Christian”? I sometimes hear this question. “Yes. Only a person with high moral can become a Christian”. “Okay, I will work hard”. Is that true? In the first place, isn't it arrogant for a person to believe that he or she can come closer to God by their efforts? Would a God who created all things in heaven and earth tell a man he created from dust say this? “Go train and be hit under a waterfall 100 times, then I will save you”. That is like a flea trying to reach the sun by it's own power.

Not by our power, but as we look up to God and declare our faith in him, and grasp his outstretched hand, we are saved. This is what we call the grace of God. In the grace of God, there is no work, training, or effort on our end to convince God. It is simply a pouring out of God's grace on us. We cannot reach God by jumping, climbing, or anything by our own power. We instead grasp onto what God reaches out towards us.

A Christian author, Philip Yancey said this, “When asked what a person has to do to get to heaven, most people answer saying, “doing good things”.

September 10, 2017 "Salvation is not a prize of our victory"

The story of Jesus contradicts that answer. What we have to do is yell "Forgive me, save me".

When a child breaks a dish at home and fearfully says, "I'm sorry". There is probably not a parent who wouldn't forgive their child. No parent would demand 20 pushups for forgiveness. Their apology is enough on its own. We parents feel love for a child who can honestly apologize. Just like David's confession in Psalms 51:17, "My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise".

Soren Kierkegaard writes an even more amazing thing. "God does not stand in silence and open his arms saying, "come here" to sinners. Like a father waiting for the prodigal son, God wait. But he not only waits, but also goes out to search for the lost. Like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, or a woman looking for her silver coins. God will leave, no, God has already left. God goes a long distance, goes so far that he comes as a human to search for the lost sinners.

The one who came to us was Jesus Christ. When we believe in him, we are saved. There is not a single effort or deed by us. We are not asked for training, service, or achievements. God heals us and accepts us just as we are. We do not attain salvation through training, service, or achievements but we become victors when we believe that Jesus won over sin and death. As we live our lives, we will lose many things. We will miss many chances. But no matter what we lose or what chance we miss, we must not miss the salvation Jesus Christ offers us. Anyone who desires to accept this can accept it today. This is God's grace, and this is God's love revealed to people.

Let us pray. Dear heavenly father, you indeed know us. Our works, our actions always have limitations, and we cannot become victors of salvation by our works alone. And to our limited selves, you reach out your hand for us, and you come all the way to our place to save us, and we thank you for that. I pray now that you will break our hearts, and direct us so that we can experience your love and mercy. I pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Translated by Kou Okura