

All Roads Lead Here: Blessed
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Deuteronomy 10:12-22; Luke 24:46-48; Romans 4:5-12

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Romans 4:5-12. Hear now the Word of the Lord. “However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.” Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.”

One of the hardest biblical words to get a grasp on is the word “blessed.” We don’t even know how to pronounce it – is it “blessed” or “bless-ed”? And it has all sorts of meanings. Go down south and someone will say “bless your heart!” And the words don’t mean anything. It’s all in how you say it. “Bless your heart!” means someone is really grateful for something you’ve done for them. “Bless your heart...” means someone is really upset with you. Neither one has anything to do with blessing at all!

Today, we need to understand blessing as David means it in Psalm 32, which Paul quotes today. David’s statement is the heart of the gospel. We may not think we can find the good news in the Old Testament, but here it is. It’s proof that Paul’s argument throughout Romans is both valid and ancient. We’ll also see that, as far as God is concerned, everyone who has faith is a blessed child of Abraham, even if they aren’t his descendants in the normal way.

So let’s retrace our steps just a little. After learning of our complete and utter bondage to sin, we found that God imputes – He attributes, He counts – the righteousness of His Son Jesus to everyone who has faith in Him. We aren’t saved by anything we do, but instead, we are saved by our faith and trust in God. Our first sentence today reminds us of that – “However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” We recognized that even the faith we have in God is a free gift from Him, that His Holy Spirit has implanted and grown in us.

Now when we hear that word wicked – that God justifies the wicked – that makes us shrink back, doesn’t it? We don’t want to be wicked. Christians are told to stay far away from it. In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul says, “What do righteousness and wickedness have in common?” They are polar opposites. Wickedness defines bad people, right?

Yet God justifies the wicked. Romans 1-3 confirms we were once wicked. We were under that title. Even if we grew up in the church, we did things that displeased God. While we steer clear of wickedness, it is still a constant lure. This is hard to admit, but we have to recognize our wickedness if we are ever to turn to God. Only the sick go to see the doctor, Jesus said, not the healthy. If you're sick and you think you're well, you may well die before you get treatment because you think you don't need it.

Paul uses the word "wicked" here to grab our attention. That wickedness has major effects. In Colossians 2:3 we learned that because of wickedness, we're not just sick, we're spiritually dead. We need to be raised from death. But if you don't know your true condition, if you don't realize your spiritual state, you won't turn to God.

And here's the thing – it's the wicked who turn to God who are blessed. Here's how Paul puts it – "David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.""

So what is this blessedness? In Hebrew and Greek, two ideas describe being blessed. One is joy that comes from being favored or fortunate. The other means "good words" or "good report." As one pastor put it, "A blessing is a statement of good will and happiness that is said about another, as well as the condition that fulfills those good words."

Here's the main point: *if you have been credited righteousness by God apart from anything you do, you have the special favor, you are blessed by God.* It is nothing God has to do, but in His grace and mercy and love, if you have faith in Him, you are privileged. You have a good report with Him; you are favored by Him. If you are in God's special favor, you can have joy regardless of what the world throws at you. If your car breaks down? You're still blessed. Attacked and criticized by others? You're still blessed. Nothing in this world seems to go right? You're still blessed because you are forgiven.

David knew what he was talking about. David was an incredible man of God, the only one declared to be "a man after God's own heart." He has amazing trust in the LORD. He was anointed to be king long before King Saul died. Yet he defended Saul and became the closest of friends with Saul's son Jonathan. He defended Israel against the menace of the Philistines. Eventually Saul went mad and tried to kill David. On numerous occasions, David had the opportunity to kill Saul. Yet David wouldn't do it because Saul had been anointed by God too. As a ruler, David led his people in worship. He danced and celebrated in front of the crowds when the Ark of the Covenant, which had been stolen, was returned – even at the cost of the affections of his wife Michal. He genuinely loved God with his whole heart.

And yet he knew what it was to be caught up in sin. Most of us know that he committed adultery with Bathsheba. Yet he tried to cover it up by having Bathsheba's husband Uriah called back from battle so he would be with his wife. But Uriah wouldn't go home while the rest of the Lord's army was sleeping in tents. So David sent him back out, had him placed in the front lines, and then had the supporting troops fall back. It was calculated murder. David gets away with it until he is confronted by the prophet Nathan, when he repents and turns back to the Lord.

That's the most famous story, but David got out of line on other occasions too. When David fled from Saul, he camped among Israel's enemies and was ready to fight with the Philistines. Later in life, rather than counting on God's protection, David has his military leaders count all the fighting men of Israel, even though they had more than enough men and the favor of God. God would not let David build the temple because as a warrior he had killed so many.

David needed God's forgiveness. As loyal to God as he was – enough that God promised the messiah would be one of his descendants – David sinned greatly. He knew what it was to be forgiven sins the law could not forgive. He knew the weight of sin. Paul quotes Psalm 32, and after the quote ends, David writes, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD" – and you forgave the guilt of my sin."

Here's the beauty of it all: *Jesus frees us from the past so we can live blessed lives in the present and future.* Are you free from your past? We are often haunted by the past, by mistakes we've made, things we've done and things done to us. David was haunted by what he had done; he felt the hand of God's wrath upon him. But then he confessed and was set free.

Unlovable, unforgivable people are loved and forgiven by God, not because they are good but because they turn to Him. Tax collectors, adulterers, murderers and cheats, those who do things God despises, God still loves and brings into His Kingdom. God is the judge of the heart, and He changes hearts so they find Him.

If you truly believe in Christ, if you have turned away from sin and turned toward Him in word and deed, you are blessed. You are forgiven! You have found favor with God. Maybe this is a message you've heard before. Maybe you aren't dealing with guilt. Maybe you are confident in your relationship with God. But for those of us who aren't, who are still dealing with the sins of the past, we need to hear it over and over again.

You are loved by God. Your sins are cast aside and thrown away. David says it three times to make sure we get it. "Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him." That's the same thing said three different ways. That repetition is there because we need to hear it over and over again. Forgiveness is found at the feet of Jesus. Blessing is found there. Turn to Him.

Remember the story of the prodigal son. He comes home after spending his inheritance on fast living. He doesn't have a dime. He comes home because the pigs eat better than he does. He expects to be a slave in his father's house. And when he returns, what does Dad do? He dresses him in fine clothes; he has his servants take the best cow out and make everyone the finest steaks; he throws a grand celebration. My son was lost to me, dead, and now he's alive!

Maybe you feel like you're saved, but God should still be angry with you. He was angry at your sin. But now, when He sees you, He sees you clothed in Jesus! He sees His very own Son's righteousness. He is not angry with you. He wants you to enjoy His love! He wants you to flee from sin because it hurts you, and like any good parent, He wants what's best for you.

Hebrews 4 says we can approach the throne of grace with confidence. Ephesians 1 says God predestined us to be His children. Galatians 3 says, “You are all sons [and daughters] of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” 2 Corinthians 2 – “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” You are accepted, you are loved, you are forgiven, you are justified in His sight, you are His child through your faith and trust in Jesus. Let go of the past and know His redemption.

Paul’s final section moves us back into the account of Abraham. How do we know that we are included in the promises to Abraham if for centuries those promises flowed through the Jewish people, Abraham’s own physical descendants? Paul has said that salvation through Jesus is for everyone, but how can we see it even in the Old Testament?

The proof is in circumcision, that defining mark of Jewish men under the Law God gave to Israel. For 2000 years, if you weren’t circumcised, you weren’t in the covenant God made with the Hebrews. But can the uncircumcised still be blessed? Yes, and Abraham shows it.

Abraham’s faith was credited to Him as righteousness. When did that happen? When did God declare Abraham righteous? It was before he was circumcised. He had the faith and the declaration of righteousness before the external mark. Paul states, “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.”

We can claim Abraham as our own father in the faith – that’s what Paul says. “So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them.” Do you have someone who’s come before you and helped show you the way to God? Absolutely. The Bible is not a book full of stories about people unrelated to us. These are your ancestors and mine. These are *our* people. This is *our* history, *our* culture. We come to it secondhand, but because Abraham is our spiritual father, it all belongs to us too.

Maybe that will help us as we read Scripture. Because if you’re like me, it’s not that interesting to hear about somebody else’s family tree. But who did I come from? That’s more interesting. If you are a son or daughter of Abraham, you are the spiritual descendent of kings and prophets and priests. They belong to you. When you read, read that way.

But what else can we apply from this? Here’s my last thought: *Baptism is the mark of the New Covenant – it doesn’t save, but it’s a sign and seal of God’s promises.* We’ve heard about circumcision quite a bit the past two weeks, and we think, wow, I’m glad that’s not the sign of the covenant any more! Baptism has taken its place. But many people are confused about baptism in the modern church just as there was once confusion about circumcision in the ancient church. If we can sort it out, we can understand and appreciate our baptism so much better.

Baptism is introduced at the beginning of the New Testament era as the new mark of repentance. It starts with John the Baptist. Jesus commanded His disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When Peter preaches for the very first time in Acts 2, he tells the crowd, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you and your children and all who are far off – for all whom the Lord God will call.”

We believe in the mark of baptism. If anyone believes in Jesus but hasn't been baptized, they should be. Not only is it a command of Jesus, it marks that we belong to Him. If we believe, this is our first step of obedience. It is a seal on us as well. When a letter was written by an ancient dignitary or king, they stamped it with a seal showing the letter came from them. The sign and seal of baptism is a big deal. We baptize children of believers to mark them with God's seal. They are a part of this family, and God shows us grace no matter how young we are.

Baptism marks us as belonging to Jesus no matter when it happens. But just as both the circumcised and the uncircumcised were saved through faith and not the mark, we are saved through faith and not through baptism. Presbyterians don't believe salvation occurs the moment we go under the water. We also don't believe that everyone who is baptized is saved – just as some circumcised Jews despised God in their hearts and wanted nothing to do with Him. As Paul says, what matters is that we walk with Christ in the faithful footsteps of Abraham.

If you've ever worried about someone – a friend, a loved one, a grandchild – because they weren't baptized as an infant, don't. It is faith that saves us. Encourage those loved ones not so much to be baptized as to believe. And still, I encourage you to remember your baptism with joy – even if you were too young to remember it actually happening. If you were baptized at an early age and you're here today, it means you have followed in the faith of your family. Remember your baptism in times of trouble and loss and temptation. Because God has marked you and sealed you for Himself. You belong to Him; your faith shows it, and your baptism reveals it. Nothing can overcome your faith as you stand on His promises.

Next week, we'll take a deeper look at Abraham's faith. But for now, know that you are blessed by God through your faith. Your past sins are erased from God's sight. You are in His favor and not His wrath. You have Abraham as your father and baptism as your seal of faith. Go in peace to love and serve Christ Jesus who saved you.