

WHEN IT COMES TO SALVATION, WE DO NOTHING; GOD DOES EVERYTHING

Sermon for the 2nd Sunday in Lent 2026

Romans 4:1-8, 13-17

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is taken from Romans 4:1-8, 13-17, our Second reading from before:

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

If you look at the AELC logo, you will find, as part of it, an open book representing the Bible. This shows that the Word of God is free and open for everyone. Printed on the pages of the open Bible in the logo are the words, “Grace Alone; Faith Alone; Christ Alone; Scripture Alone; Glory to God Alone.” These statements are the fundamental beliefs of Christianity regarding salvation. They answer the most important question in the world: *how are sinful humans saved?*

Ever since Jesus ascended into heaven, these basic, foundational principles have come under constant attack by false teachers and false teachings that require defending with the sword of God’s truth. This morning, God’s Word leads us to carefully consider one of those fundamental Christian doctrines: ***Faith Alone***. With Abraham, Paul, and believers throughout history, we ask today: *Does faith save?*

Paul begins today with a question. He asks, “**What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?**” and then launches into an answer using Abraham as an example and guide. Why? Couldn’t Paul find someone else, someone who didn’t live 4000 years before us?

In using Abraham, Paul is proving a couple of points. First, he shows that the Christian faith is not something that has evolved over time—Abraham was saved the same way we are. And second, this question “how are we saved—is it by faith or works?” has always been the most important question a person can ever ask, and if someone does ask this kind of question, we point them to Ephesians 2:8-9, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*”

Okay, if it is clear that we are saved by grace through faith, how do you define faith? Is it a *feeling*? Is it *knowledge of facts*? Is it equivalent to *church membership*? Is it a *hidden, undefinable force in a person’s heart that drives them to do what they do?*

One of the clearest definitions of faith is given by the writer to the Hebrews, who says, “*faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*” (11:1). Faith trusts even without sight what God has set forth in His Word. Earlier, our First Reading today told us of the LORD calling Abraham (then called Abram) to leave his country and travel to a foreign land. “*Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan*” (Gen. 12:5). Keeping in mind what we just heard from Hebrews that “*faith is being sure... of what we do not see,*” is that the sense you got as you listened to the story of Abram? What stuck out to you: was it what Abraham *believed* or *what he did*? It’s hard to get past the fact that when God told him to leave everything he knew and set out for an unknown “Promised Land,” he *actually did it*. Perhaps we may think to ourselves, “If that’s faith, I don’t know if I would have that kind of faith; I don’t know if I could drop everything and leave everyone and go to an unknown place even if God personally told me to.” If that’s what you took from Genesis 12, you’re not alone. Abraham was held up by the Jewish people as the pinnacle of righteousness because of *what he did*. Generally, the Jewish teachers of Paul’s day believed and taught that Abraham was justified *by his works*.

The Jews had learned the wrong lesson from Abraham. But, sad to say, many Christians do not really understand salvation by faith alone, either. Too often today, when people talk about faith, they either focus on the feelings of faith or on the great things faith does. If a certain hymn or song makes us feel funny inside, that must be faith pulsating there. If a person has incredible knowledge of the Bible, they must have great faith. Or, if a person is going through a difficult time in life but still comes to church, still has a smile on their face, and still confesses their trust in God, they must have great faith. Or, like the Jewish rabbis, we may think of Bible history's heroes as having great faith because of what they did. Noah, because he built an ark on dry land. Moses, because he stood up to Pharaoh and his armies.

David, because he defeated Goliath. A grandparent or parent, a pastor or teacher may stick out in your mind as being of great faith because of how they lived, preached or taught. But we must understand that when we think of faith in that way, then we're not really talking about faith anymore; we're talking about works. And Paul is very clear when he says, "**if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.**" Admittedly, Abraham's works were good and righteous, and before men they may have given him a reason to boast, but Abraham's good works could never justify him in God's courtroom, where nothing less than perfection is tolerated.

Faith is the opposite of works. Faith is not what you know, it's not what you do, and it's not what you feel. How can we be certain? Because of what Paul writes, "**For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'**"

Do you remember what happened before Abraham took a single step toward Canaan? God said, "*I shall make of you a great nation, and I shall bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I shall bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I shall curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed*" (Genesis 12:2-3). Yes, Abraham obeyed God's command to leave his home and family and travel to an unknown land, but Abraham didn't believe God's command; he believed God's promise—the promise to make him into a great nation, to make him famous, to bless all nations through him (a reference to the Saviour). ***That faith in the promise—trust in what God would do—is what was credited to Abraham's account as righteousness.***

The same is true regarding our salvation. The Gospel is not a command, but a promise. Long before you and I were even a glimmer in our parents' eyes, God promised to send a Saviour into this world who would be born of a virgin, who would destroy the devil's work by healing the sick and casting out demons, by preaching the good news, suffering and dying and rising again. 2000 years ago, those promises culminated on Calvary, where Jesus Christ offered His life as the perfect sacrifice for sin, so that on Easter morning God could announce that the sins of the world had been paid in full. And in His Word, God has promised to credit Jesus' righteousness to anyone who believes and is baptised. Where were you and I in that story? What did we contribute? Unless you want to take credit for your sins that put Jesus on the cross, you must admit that you contributed nothing. The only way to receive God's promise and Christ's righteousness is to receive it *as a gift*. Paul uses an analogy from the business world: "**Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. 5 And to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.**"

If we must earn salvation by what we do, it's not a gift but something we have earned. But if salvation is a free gift of God's grace, then by definition, we *can't* do anything to earn it. So, does faith save? Yes, *in the sense that it simply believes God's promise and receives Christ's accomplished work.* Faith saves because it takes us, and anything we might do, out of the equation. ***When it comes to salvation, we do nothing; God does everything.*** In that sense, faith, and faith alone, saves. But we wouldn't waste our time asking a yes-or-no question if the answer were that simple. There is a way that faith does not save. *Briefly, faith, if it is misplaced or is regarded as meritorious, does not save.* Any religion that does not teach Christ as the only Saviour from sin and instead worships a false god,

such as Allah or Buddha or God alone, as opposed to the Triune God, or anything else, has followers who have misplaced faith. Trusting these false gods is no different from trusting nothing, because false gods are nothing. Having faith in a false god does not save.

In religion, like in rock climbing, the most important thing is not your rope; *it's what that rope is anchored to.* What is your faith anchored to? In verse 13, Paul talks about the **“righteousness of faith.”** That righteousness is *Christ's righteousness.* Our right standing before God is based on Jesus' work, not ours. He obeyed God perfectly; we haven't. He poured out His blood on the cross; we didn't. He paid the price for our sins. If we want to pay that price, we must spend eternity in hell. We are not saved because we believe; we are saved because Christ died and rose to save us. The rope of faith, in order to save, *must be anchored in Christ.*

Paul also describes the problem with understanding faith as something meritorious: something that earns God's favour by saying, **“For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath.”** If you trust your faith to save you, then you are back in the realm of obedience to the law. Specifically, the first commandment, *“You shall have no other gods before me”* (Exodus 20:3). If faith is going to save you, then your faith must be perfect in every sense: in what you believe and *how* you live. No one, not Abraham, not you, not me, has that kind of faith. So, *faith in faith is idolatry.* It is not trust in God. It is not trust in His grace. It is not trust in Christ's atoning sacrifice. It is empty, futile, worthless. To use the rope analogy, having faith in faith is like trusting your rope because it's so good and sturdy, even though it's not tied to anything. Martin Luther was so averse to thinking of faith as meritorious that he said: *“I am accustomed, for the better understanding of this point, to divest myself of the idea that there is a quality in my heart at all, call it either faith or love, but in their place I put Christ and say: “He is my Righteousness.””*

Again, Abraham serves as a case study. He had saving faith, but it was far from perfect. Did you know that before God broke into Abraham's life, he worshipped idols? Joshua told the entire assembly of Israel, *“Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods”* (Joshua 24:2). And then, even after God brought Abraham to faith, he lied about the fact that Sarah was his wife, not once but twice because he didn't believe God would protect him. ¹ Again, Abraham had a baby with his servant because he didn't believe God would keep his promise to give him a son. ² We don't bring this evidence up to ruin Abraham's reputation, but to demonstrate that even saving faith merits us nothing, earns us nothing in God's eyes, because it is never perfect.

And you know what? That's very good news. Because I'm sure many, if not all of us, do not know our Bibles as well as we should. We don't always live the way the Bible tells us to live. We don't perfectly trust God's protection, His love, His plan, and we don't always rejoice in suffering. Our faith doesn't always show itself in acts of love for our family, friends, fellow believers in Christ, and perfect strangers. Sometimes, when we keep falling into the same sin over and over again or when guilt leaves us lying awake long into the night or when the smartest people in the world claim to prove that there is no god, we sometimes have some doubts. But that's when we are right where God wants us. Because God's grace and His promise are not to save those who have lived a perfect life or even have a perfect faith. Jesus Himself said that He didn't come for the good, but the bad; not the healthy, but the sick.³ Paul says: **“And to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”** In the end, that's where we come into the picture. We are the wicked people God has justified (declared “not guilty”) for Jesus' sake. That *promise* is what saving faith clings to. So when you fall into sin, or Satan pounds you with feelings of guilt, don't look to yourself, your works, or even your faith, but look to Christ, because His life and death and resurrection provide the only solid anchor for faith and the only certainty for salvation.

So, does faith save? Yes...and no. Yes, when faith is defined as the opposite of works, that clings to Christ alone, faith alone saves. But no, misplaced or meritorious faith cannot save. To say “faith saves” is like saying “eating makes you strong.” Eating doesn’t give you anything—the nutritional value of the food does. Faith saves because it receives Jesus Christ as Saviour. Faith alone saves, but saving faith trusts in God’s grace alone, in Christ’s sacrifice alone, spelled out in Scripture alone. That kind of faith, and that kind of faith alone, is what saves. All glory be to God alone. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18

² Genesis 16:4-6

³ Luke 5:31