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Faith's Example

Romans 4

Series: The Pure Gospel

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I. Introduction

A. We find ourselves in our study of Romans in Chapter 4

1. So I would ask you to turn with me to Ezekiel 37

B. **Ezekiel 37:1-6** (ESV) —

1. 1 The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones.

2. 2 And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry.

3. 3 And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."

4. 4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.

5. 5 Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

6. 6 And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD."

C. **Ezekiel 37:7-10** (ESV) —

1. 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.

2. 8 And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them.

3. 9 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live."

4. 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

D. So what does Ezekiel 37, and the Valley of Dry Bones, have to do with Romans 4?

1. Absolutely nothing

2. Except as an illustration

- E. We have been working through the gospel – Paul’s great theme of his magnum opus, the book of Romans
1. Introduced in Romans 1.16-17
 - a. **Romans 1:16–17** (ESV) — 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”
 2. Then he lays out the case for the need of the gospel – sinful condition of humanity
 - a. **Romans 1:18** (ESV) — 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.
 3. He indicates that God has made plain to every human being the nature and character of God – through the created world
 - a. **Romans 1:19–20** (ESV) — 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.
 4. Paul goes on to show in Chapters 2 and 3 that this sinful condition of humanity applies to both the so-called religious and the non-religious people
 - a. To both Jews and Gentiles
 - b. **Romans 3:9** (ESV) — 9 ... For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin...
 5. And in case you missed the implications of his explanation, he goes on to lay out the universality and pervasiveness of sin
 - a. **Romans 3:10–12** (ESV) — 10 as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”
 6. And finally, Paul establishes that no amount of law-keeping can possibly justify sinful humanity
 - a. **Romans 3:20** (ESV) — 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.
- F. The comes the great “But” of the gospel
1. **Romans 3:21–22** (ESV) — 21 **But now** the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe....
 2. Righteousness is what we lack
 - a. Righteousness is what only God possesses

- b. But God has made it possible that we could receive the righteousness of God for ourselves
 - c. An “alien righteousness” – not one that we could ever produce ourselves
 - d. But one that could be transferred to our accounts
- G. How does that happen?
 - 1. It happens “through faith in Jesus Christ” (Romans 3.22)
 - 2. Because we are...
 - 3. Romans 3:24–25 (ESV) — 24 ... justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith....
 - 4. By trusting in the work of Jesus Christ – His life of righteousness, His death as a wrath-removing sacrifice (propitiation), and by His resurrection
 - a. God transfers our sin to Christ on the cross
 - b. And He transfers Christ’s righteousness to our account
 - c. And so justifies the believer
- H. That process is called “imputation”
 - 1. An accounting term indicating a transfer from one account to another
- I. That is the gospel of Jesus Christ
 - 1. Critical truth – central theology
 - a. The truth on which Christianity stands or falls
- J. But for many of you, it all may seem like dry bones
- K. Want to be careful – nothing about theology is dry bones
 - 1. But theology like that gets my juices flowing
 - a. I love that stuff
 - 2. But I know not everyone is like that
- L. And I think Paul understands that
 - 1. And so Paul breaths life into those bones
 - a. And sinew connects bone to bone
 - b. And the breath of God puts flesh on those bones
 - c. And they come to life
- M. That’s what Chapter 4 does
 - 1. Paul breaths life into the theology
 - a. He puts flesh on those bones
 - 2. He answers the question, “What does justification by faith alone look like?”

II. Justification on Trial

- A. Justification by faith alone, you see, is on trial in the mind of Paul
 - 1. In fact, justification by faith alone is always on trial
 - 2. There are those who can’t stand the idea that human beings are incapable, by law-keeping, of being justified by God through the righteousness of another, the righteousness of Jesus Christ
 - 3. There are those who believe that Paul is making justification by faith alone up out of whole cloth

- a. That justification is a novel invention
 - b. A NT concoction
- B. So Paul calls witnesses
 - 1. Witnesses for the defense
 - a. Witnesses from history
 - b. Witnesses to demonstrate, not just that justification by faith alone is the way people are saved today
 - c. But that justification by faith alone is the way people have always been saved
 - 2. He calls to the stand Abraham and David

III. The Witnesses

A. Abraham

- 1. No greater witness could be called by the defense than Abraham
 - a. Of all the OT figures, no one looms larger than Abraham
 - b. Jews throughout history trace their origins to Abraham
- 2. Abraham was called out of Ur of the Chaldees to leave his home
 - a. A home where he, along with his family, worshiped pagan gods
 - b. But God chose Abraham – called him to go to a land that he had never even dreamed of
- 3. Abraham heard God's call, believed God, and picked up and headed west to the Promised Land
- 4. The land was just one of the promises of God to Abraham
 - a. He was promised that he would be the father of many nations
 - b. That out of his own offspring, an entire nation would be born
 - c. That through Abraham, all the nations of the world would be blessed
- 5. Abraham is known as the friend of God
 - a. One to whom God spoke directly
- 6. While Abraham was no perfect person, he was obedient to his call
 - a. And is an impeccable witness
 - b. Unassailable by any detractor who seeks to undermine Paul's case

B. David

- 1. And then there's David
 - a. Arguably the second most significant personality in the OT
- 2. The king of Israel
 - a. The first true king of Israel
 - b. The king who is the model for every other king
 - c. The king to whom every other king is compared
- 3. The king who was the great shepherd-warrior
 - a. The one who conquered the giant
- 4. The poet-king, the author of half of the hymnal of Israel
- 5. The musician-king, whose harp calmed the spirit of the disturbed Saul
- 6. The king who was said to be "the man after God's own heart"
- 7. Hard to imagine better witnesses than David and Abraham

8. Although David was not without his detractors
 - a. Remember, David, though a man after God's own heart, was one of the great sinners of Israel
 - b. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, and conspired to commit the murder of her husband Uriah
9. But Paul, in a stroke of legal genius, doesn't hide this transgression from his argument
 - a. He uses it to his advantage – and the very transgression is used to demonstrate the power of justification by faith alone
- C. Let's see how Paul makes his case

IV. The Case

A. Righteousness Counted

1. Romans 4:1–5 (ESV) —
 - a. 1 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?
 - b. 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.
 - c. 3 For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”
 - d. 4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.
 - e. 5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...
2. Here's where flesh is put on the bones of the doctrine of justification by faith alone
 - a. Abraham becomes the face of justification
 - b. Paul quotes Genesis 15.6: “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”
 - c. Counted = logizomai (Gk) – credited, imputed
 - d. Accounting term, indicating a transfer from one account to another
 - e. And it was the righteousness of God that was credited to Abraham
3. The timing of this transaction is critical
 - a. Abraham believed the promise of God
 - b. And he believed before he had done anything resembling a work
 - c. And certainly, nothing religious either
 - d. He believed, and it was credited as righteousness – before he was circumcised – which took place in Genesis 17
4. So here righteousness is credited to Abraham
 - a. Abraham is justified before God
 - b. Abraham is saved
 - c. Not by works, but through faith, by believing in the promises of God

5. Justification by faith alone – in which the righteousness of God is credited to the account of a sinner – imputation of righteousness – is not a NT invention
 - a. It was the way in which father Abraham was saved
- B. **Sin not Counted**
 1. That's the positive dimension of imputation
 - a. In which righteousness is credited to the account of the sinner
 - b. But the other side of imputation – the negative side – is illustrated by the other face of justification – David
 2. Not only is righteousness credited to the account of the sinner
 - a. The sin of the sinner is erased from the account of the sinner
 3. **Romans 4:6–8 (ESV) —**
 - a. 6 just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:
 - b. 7 “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;
 - c. 8 blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”
 4. Here's where Paul uses David's great transgression to prove justification by faith alone
 - a. Quotes Psalm 32 where David expresses the blessing of having his sin not counted against him
 - b. “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered...”
 - c. Justification involves forgiveness
 - d. But it also indicates his sins are “covered” – covered by the sacrifice of a Savior
 - e. And then he says, “blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin”
 - f. There is the accounting term again, but in this case it is negative
 - g. God will not count his sin against him
 - h. Just as illustrated by Abraham, God counts, positively, His righteousness into the sinners account
 - i. And as illustrated by David, God does not count, negatively, David's sin against him
 5. So Paul demonstrates that justification by faith alone, in which the righteousness of God – which we so desperately need – is credited to the account of the believer
 - a. And in which the sin of the believer is not counted against us
 6. And that is not an invention of the NT
 - a. That is the way God has always saved sinners
 7. And Paul does that, not by an abstract theological proposition
 - a. He does it by flesh and blood human beings
 - b. Who have experienced the blessings of justification
- C. **Imputation for All**

1. Paul goes on, however, with his argument – using Abraham as the face of justification
 - a. He shows that this imputation is not just for Jews, but for every human being who trusts in the saving work of God
 2. **Romans 4:9–12** (ESV) —
 - a. 9 Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?
 - b. For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.
 - c. 10 How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised?
 - d. It was not after, but before he was circumcised.
 - e. 11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well,
 - f. 12 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.
 3. Abraham's justification, which took place when he believed before he had done any work, religious or otherwise, was important to demonstrate that justification was not based on works
 - a. But it was also significant because that makes him the father of all who believe whether they have been circumcised or not
 - b. In other words, he's the father of the faithful, whether Jew or Gentile
 - c. The father of all believers
 4. Which means – not just Jewish believers in the person and work of Jesus
 - a. But all believers
 - b. Including most of you!
 5. Justification by faith alone – for everyone who believes!
- D. **Faith and the Promise**
1. And then Paul goes even further in making his case
 2. **Romans 4:13–15** (ESV) —
 - a. 13 For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.
 - b. 14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.
 - c. 15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.
 3. One again, with Abraham as the face of justification, Abraham's faith was in the promise of God – not in any works that he would do
 - a. And it was a promise to Abraham and to his offspring

- b. Indeed, that through his offspring, Abraham would be a blessing to many nations
 - c. It was that promise that Abraham believed; belief in the promise that was counted to him as righteousness
 - 4. And Paul's point is that if justification was by works, then the promise of God is irrelevant – null and void
 - 5. By the way, what did Abraham believe when he believed this promise?
 - a. **John 8:56** (ESV) — 56 “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”
 - b. Jesus says, Abraham believed in the promise that would come to fulfillment in Himself, Messiah-Jesus
 - 6. **Galatians 3:16** (ESV) —
 - a. 16 Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.
 - 7. Not only did Abraham believe in the promise of God
 - a. He believed in the promise of Christ
 - E. **Faith and Grace**
 - 1. Not only does Paul affirm justification through the promise of God
 - a. He also affirms the basis of justification – the grace of God
 - 2. **Romans 4:16–17** (ESV) —
 - a. 16 That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—
 - b. not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,
 - c. 17 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.
 - 3. Only justification by faith alone affirms that salvation is by grace alone
 - F. **Faith Against Appearances**
 - 1. And finally, we catch a glimpse of the nature of the faith of Abraham
 - a. What does the faith of Abraham look like?
 - 2. **Romans 4:18–22** (ESV) —
 - a. 18 In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.”
 - b. 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.
 - c. 20 No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,
 - d. 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.
 - e. 22 That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”
 - 3. This refers to the promise of God to Abraham

- a. That through his own seed, his own offspring, and Sarah's – he would have the child of the promise
 - b. You're all aware of the aborted attempt by Abraham and Sarah to have Abraham father a child through Sarah's Egyptian servant Hagar
 - c. An attempt that produced Ishmael
 - d. But Ishmael would not be the child of the promise
 - e. And God's promise still stood
- 4. And of course, as time went on, that promise seemed more and more ridiculous
 - a. How could a 100 year old man and a 90 year old woman – whose womb was closed – produce a child?
 - b. But God had promised!
 - c. And Abraham believed God
 - d. "In hope he believed against hope!"
- 5. But Abraham knew something about God
 - a. God "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist"
 - b. If that's the kind of God you believe in, how could you not trust in any of the promises of God?
- 6. In fact, this kind of faith of Abraham was again exhibited when he obeyed God, took his son Isaac – the son of the fulfilled promise to him and Sarah – to Mt. Moriah, to sacrifice him
- 7. **Hebrews 11:17–19** (ESV) —
 - a. 17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,
 - b. 18 of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."
 - c. 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.
- 8. That's what justifying faith looks like!
 - a. That's not what saved Abraham
 - b. Abraham was justified, saved, when he believed God all the way back in Genesis 15!
 - c. But when that faith is exercised, that's what justifying faith looks like
- 9. Abraham is the face of justifying faith

V. **Justification for Us All**

- A. Now I already said "finally" once
 - 1. But all preachers get several "finally's" in every sermon
 - a. It's in the fine print in the preacher's contract
- B. So, finally, finally...

1. Abraham's faith proves that justification by faith alone wasn't just for himself
 - a. Or for the Jewish people
 - b. Or even for believers in the NT time
 2. Abraham's faith proves that justification is for us all
- C. **Romans 4:23–25** (ESV) —
1. 23 But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone,
 2. 24 but for ours also.
 3. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,
 4. 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.
- D. Justification by faith alone is no mere doctrine
1. There is no such thing as a “mere doctrine” by the way
 2. But justification by faith alone is certainly no mere doctrine
 - a. It is more than dry bones
 - b. It has flesh and blood examples – Abraham and David
 3. But more than that – you also are, or could be, flesh and blood examples of justification by faith alone yourselves
- E. Do you believe in Jesus' righteous life, a righteousness which is credited to you through faith, His death on the cross by which your sin was credited to His account, and in His resurrection by which He destroyed the enemy of your souls and the enemy of death?
1. Do you trust Jesus alone for your salvation?
 2. Or do you still presume on God
 - a. Pretending that somehow you are righteous in yourself
 - b. Pretending that God grades on a curve, and that you're better than most people, and deserve to be saved
 - c. Pretending that God resembles George Burns more than He does the altogether holy and righteous God of the Bible?
 3. Dear friends, don't be misled – either by others or by your own imagination!
 - a. Believe the word of God
 - b. Which clearly declares that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life
 - c. Which declares that believers are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus
 - d. Which declares that there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved
 - e. Believe what Jesus Himself said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.”
 4. Cast yourself on the mercy of God
 - a. And like the tax collector who declares, “Have mercy on me, a sinner”

- b. About whom Jesus declares – “he went away justified”