The world we all want is a world without suffering and without sin, a world without problems and without pain, a world without terror and without tears. God made the world that way at first, and then we messed it up. But God’s gracious promise is that He will make a new heavens and a new earth out of this broken mess that we live in now. That’s good news!

But if the Geico commercials taught us anything, we know that what’s good news for somebody might not be good news for everyone. You need to know if this good news is good for you. And so if you ask the question: “who benefits from God’s promise of new life in a new world?” Scripture answers that only the righteous will inherit the promise. Since that’s true, the next question becomes, “Am I righteous?”

And as we step into the middle of Romans in chapter 4, it feels a little bit like a Geico moment. Paul spends chapter 1 blasting the unrighteousness of the Gentiles, and chapter 2 blasting the unrighteousness of the Jews, concluding in chapter 3 that both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin: “there is none righteous, no not one.” Bad news. You aren’t righteous. A wonderful, glorious new world is coming, but it isn’t for you.

But then Paul says “Good news! Righteousness has appeared from heaven in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ blood can make you righteous, so that you can inherit the promise of new life in a new world.” That’s pearl-of-great-price good news! That’s sell-everything-you-have-and-get-that good news!

What Paul is saying is that you can leave the category “sinner” or “unrighteous”, the category of those who are headed for death, and join the category of “righteous”, those who are headed for new life. And going from sinner to righteous is what Paul means by “justification”. In order to leave the one category and join the other, you need to be justified. And the way to be justified is through Jesus and His righteousness. If you have Jesus’ righteousness, then you have been justified. If you have been justified, then you are declared righteous by God, and if you are declared righteous, then the promise is for you.

So now the all-important question becomes “How do I get Jesus’ righteousness?” And Paul is going to contrast two different answers: works and faith. These are two opposite approaches to obtaining Jesus’ righteousness, and only one actually succeeds. Which one is it?

In order to answer that question, Paul appeals to the most famous example of someone being counted righteous in the whole Old Testament, our covenant father Abraham. This means that the ancient patriarch becomes suddenly and eternally relevant to your life. The promised new world that you want to be a part of is the same one that God promised to Abraham and his offspring. The righteousness that you desperately need to enter that world is the righteousness that God gave Abraham.

So let’s look now at what the Apostle Paul saw in the life of Abraham that taught him that justification (remember, that means moving from sinner to righteous) is by faith apart from works.
Paul begins by setting up the contrast of faith vs. works in vv. 2-3, with two other contrasts following close behind. If justification comes by works, then what you get from God is not a gift, but your due. You’ve earned it, and this means that you have something to boast about. But if righteousness comes by faith, then it’s a gracious gift, and you have something to thank God for. So on one side we have works-wages-boasting, and on the other we have faith-gift-gratitude.

But the counter-argument tries to muddle the two positions by reversing the order. V. 9 raises the issue of circumcision, arguing that of course faith-gift-gratitude is what Abraham was all about, because that package of blessings belongs to those who were circumcised, those who obeyed God and joined the covenant. In other words, obey God first, and then the blessings will follow. Grace for the circumcised! One little tiny work at the beginning, and then faith gets you the rest of the way.

But Paul makes a powerful observation from the life of Abraham, one that depends on knowing the history and timeline of Abraham’s life. It’s not enough just to know generally that Abraham is a hero of the faith. Details matter!

And the detail Paul points to is that “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Gen 15) before the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17! Abraham wasn’t declared righteous because he was a covenant-keeper; he kept the covenant because he had faith! Circumcision was a seal of the righteousness he already had by faith. Nobody seals a letter before they write it! Or think of it this way: getting a birth certificate with that official seal on it isn’t how you get born – it just verifies that you were born! It affirms something already true about you.

And the way Paul applies this truth is good news for you and me: because Abraham was justified by faith, and not by circumcision, not by works, not by covenant obedience, he is more than just the father of the circumcised. He’s the father of the faithful, the father of all who believe, whether they are circumcised or not! In other words, Gentiles can be saved by faith and share in Abraham’s promised inheritance!

And that’s where Paul goes next: because you’re made righteous by faith, the promise of a new world for the righteous belongs to you by faith, not by works. If law-keepers are the ones who inherit the new world, then faith is nothing, and the promise is useless. Why? Because Paul has already shown in chapters 1-2 that there aren’t any law-keepers! The law of works just condemns everybody and brings wrath, but the promise brings blessing to the world through faith.

And Paul gives us two reasons why God chose to have everything depend on faith: grace and guarantee. If the promise rested on our works, then we would have something to boast about, and God hates boasting. But since the promise rests on grace, then God gets the glory, which is where glory belongs anyway. And, if the promise rests on our works, there’s no guarantee you will keep obeying in the future. But since the promise depends God keeping His promise, rather than counting on men to do the right thing, then the end result is guaranteed. Men fail to obey all the
time; God’s Word cannot be broken. In fact, God can keep His promise that the righteous will inherit the earth even when there are no righteous people, since, as Paul says, God calls into existence things that do not exist. God can make children of Abraham out of rocks. If the promise rests on God and His grace, then it’s guaranteed.

Because his faith rested on this gracious guarantee, Abraham believed against all hope. (Does your faith run out in hopeless situations?) He did not weaken in faith when he considered his circumstances. (Does your faith crumble when you look around you?) No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God. (Does unbelief ever tempt you to waver?) Abraham grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised, and God counted that faith as righteousness. Abraham’s lawless deeds are forgiven, and his sins are covered, so that righteous Abraham inherits God’s promise of new life in a new world because the promise comes through faith.

So now that we’ve seen that Abraham was justified by faith, I want to remind you of what that means for you. Look at vv. 23-25 [Read Rom. 4:23-25]. The Bible says that you can be forgiven and justified the same way Abraham was. We haven’t spent months looking at Abraham as an exercise in church history or Bible knowledge. No, the life of Abraham is recorded in the Bible so that you can be saved just like Abraham.

And what Abraham’s life shows is that the promise comes to you through faith, not works. Your righteousness cannot inherit the promises; in fact, Isaiah says that your righteousness, that is, the value of your good works apart from Christ, is simply a pile of filthy rags. It’s another way of saying that apart from Christ, no matter what you do, you don’t have any righteousness, which means that you don’t belong in the promised new world. But by faith in Jesus, you are counted righteous, which means that you do belong. New life in the new world is for you.

That’s what Abraham’s justification means for us. So how can we take what it means and apply it to our lives?

First, the world we all want is only available to the righteous, and you can only be counted righteous by faith in Jesus, specifically, the Jesus who died after being delivered up for your sins and who was raised for your justification. Abraham’s faith was future-oriented; ours rests on what God did in the past through Jesus, but we wait along with Abraham for new life in a new world when Christ returns, because that’s what God told us. This new world is coming, and if you share Abraham’s faith you will see it. So the first application is simple: believe God, and receive Christ’s gift of righteousness.
Second, do not boast or become proud. “God, I thank you that I am not like this tax collector; this racist, this sodomite.” No, what separates us from the world is not what we do or don’t do. It is the grace of God, and grace alone. So when you encounter sin in others, you can practice self-righteousness and put on your shocked face, or you can fall to your knees and say, “There but for the grace of God, go I.” And in that moment, instead of telling that poor sinner to work harder at being good, be like God, and give them grace.

Third, realize that your faith rests on an ironclad guarantee. Some of you have timid consciences that tremble when you face your own sin. You wonder “am I good enough for God, or have I fouled it up so badly that God can’t possibly count me as righteous?” Do not waver in faith! Remember, your righteousness doesn’t come from your works! God counts you righteous because you believe in Jesus, who died for your sins, all of them! So when you doubt, you aren’t doubting yourself, really. You’re doubting Jesus. So stop it! The promise of forgiveness and new life is guaranteed, because it doesn’t rest on how good you are, but on how good God is.

And when you find that your faith is weak, Abraham can help with that, too. Abraham’s faith grew strong, vs. 20 says, as he gave glory to God. And this is the other benefit of spending months studying the life of Abraham: Abraham’s life is packed full of reasons to give glory to God. When God calls Abraham out of idolatry, give glory to God. When God makes a gracious covenant with Abraham, give glory to God. When God delivers Abraham from greedy tyrants, give glory to God. When God judges wicked cities with fire from heaven, but saves His people, give glory to God. When God miraculously opens the womb for 90-year-old Sarah and 100-year-old Abraham, give glory to God. When God gives Abraham a piece of the Promised Land, give glory to God. When Abraham dies in faith and is goes to wait for his resurrection, give glory to God.

And when God tells you that the promise isn’t just for Abraham, but for you, give glory to God! Remembering God’s faithfulness and giving Him glory for keeping His promises - that’s what makes your faith grow stronger, until you’re fully convinced that God is able to do what He promises.

May God’s faithfulness to Abraham lead you to give glory to God even now,

- In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.