

Gracious Father, you give life to the dead. Lord we are dead. In the waters of Holy Baptism we have been united to Christ's death. Our life is now hidden in him until he comes again. Help us to believe this wonderful promise. Amen.

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Romans 4:18-25

It's Resurrection, not bookkeeping

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 19Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. 20Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. 22This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." 23The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, 24but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. 25He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Obsessed with bookkeeping

Last Sunday, I said that the world calls our trust in God "cheap grace." I went on to say, "Of course it's cheap. If we earned it, it would not be grace." I misspoke last Sunday. Grace is not cheap, it's free. It is God's gift to us. It is God's Yes to us. Grace is always free.

The world does not like these words because it thinks we will abuse Jesus' gift. The funny thing is that Jesus doesn't mind. He isn't afraid of giving the prodigal son a kiss instead of a lecture, a party instead of probation. He isn't afraid of eating with sinners. It was the older brother, the Pharisees, who worry about these things. To them, Jesus says, "Cut that out! Your brother was dead and he's alive again. The name of the game from now on is resurrection, not bookkeeping" (Robert Farrar Capon, *Between Noon and Three*).

It seems that the world is consumed with bookkeeping. We keep records of everything – pledged delegates, soldiers killed, and even the price of a barrel of oil (\$138 a barrel).

We also keep records in our relationships. How many times have you winced when your spouse said, "Do you remember when you..." So much for the saying "love keeps no records of wrongs."

We even keep records of our religion. We can recall all the good words we have done. We can even list all the bad deeds our neighbors have done to us. We are obsessed with bookkeeping.

Did you hear about the three pastors, a Baptist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran who discussed what they would like people to say at their funerals? The Baptist preacher said, "I would like someone to say, 'He was a righteous man and a good preacher.'" The Presbyterian minister said, "I would like someone to say, 'He was a fair man and a good thinker.'" The Lutheran pastor said, "I want someone to say, 'Look! He's moving!'"

It's resurrection, not bookkeeping. We are obsessed with bookkeeping.

Father Abraham is the father of Israel because he was the first to receive grace

The people of Israel were also obsessed with bookkeeping. They measured themselves by how well they kept the law and fulfilled their religious duties. Their hero and example of righteousness was Abraham.

- Abraham left his country not knowing where he was supposed to go but trusted the Lord.
- Abraham was circumcised at 99 years old (that is faith).
- Abraham waited until he was 100 years old before receiving his son of promise.
- Abraham was willing to sacrifice that very son.
- Abraham even purchased the first piece of land in the Promised Land.

Abraham was a righteous man. If a Jew wants to be righteous, he should act like Abraham. Obey the law, be circumcised, and do many good works. W.W.A.D. (What Would Abraham Do)?

There are a couple of problems with this thinking. The first problem is chronological. You see, Abraham was justified 430 years before the law was given. Abraham was justified before he was circumcised. Abraham was justified before he had done good works. How can the law, circumcision, or works make you righteous when Abraham was declared righteous before observing these things? The timeline does not work.

The second problem is that Abraham was justified on the very night in which he had the most doubt. Genesis 15 tells us:

Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." 4And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." 5And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 6And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Do you think Abraham could look at the evening sky the same after that? No way! The punch line of the passage is that the "man of faith" was faithless until God came to him, spoke a promise, and gave him a sign. It is only after these things that it says, "Abraham believed the LORD." How could he not believe? He experienced the mercy of God.

This is important. The mercy of God does not keep a record of wrongs. The mercy of God looks like the relationship parents have with their children. Parents, suppose your child were to ask you, "Dad, Mom, what do I have to do to be your child?" Is there some law, some deed, some program you could suggest? Should I read the purpose driven son or attend a son-keepers event? Will that make me your child? Parents how would you reply? You would first, weep. And then you would grab your child and say, "There is nothing you can do. Listen to me, believe me. You are my child. I love you. I will never let you go." That is the mercy of God.

It's resurrection, not bookkeeping.

Abraham's Hope

The Lutheran pastor was right. The point of life is not to have people say how good you are. The point is to overcome the grave. Abraham knew this. Abraham was justified because he believed God gives life to the dead. Romans 4:16ff:

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. 17As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. 18"Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be. 19Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. 20Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. 22This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness" (4:16-22).

I love this passage, "Against all hope... Abraham believed." Abraham's body was dead. Sarah's womb was dead. There was no way that they could produce a child. They could not fix it. They were dead. And dead people cannot make life. That is the point of the passage. The law cannot bring life to the dead. Circumcision cannot bring life to the dead. Good works cannot bring life to the dead. The dead do not need morality. The dead need resurrection. Abraham was justified because he believed God to be in the resurrection business.

That is the good news for us. God is not a bookkeeper. God resurrects. That is why he sent Jesus. Jesus came to raise the dead. The only qualification for the gift of the Gospel is to be dead. You don't have to be smart. You don't have to be good. You don't have to be wise. You don't have to be wonderful. You just have to be dead. That's it."

Reformation, hear the good news. You are already dead in Christ. In the waters of baptism you were united to Christ's death. You were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, you too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4). "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). You have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer you who live, but Christ who lives in you (Galatians 2:20).

At a funeral we symbolize this truth by placing a pall over the casket. When you were baptized there was a white gown that you wore. In the waters of baptism you died. At the funeral we place the white gown (the pall) over the casket to remind us of our real death in Christ. The casket is the metaphor. The casket lasts but a moment. The work of baptism lasts a lifetime.

This is good news because it means you are free. The law can no longer accuse you. Your life is in Christ. Rejoice, for you who were dead are alive again.

The Real Promise of the Promise Land

I want to end with this final thought. Earlier I told you that Abraham bought the first piece of land in the Promised Land. Do you know what kind of land it was? It was a tomb to bury his wife Sarah (Genesis 23:1-9). Abraham knew that the real promise of the Promise Land was not the land, but the one who promises to raise the dead. **Its resurrection, not bookkeeping!**

**In Jesus' Name,
Amen.**