

An Awesome Discovery

Martin Luther was struggling. He became a monk because he knew he was a sinner, and he hoped that living as a monk would give him some peace of mind. He lived in a monastery, reciting the Bible, working long hours, praying on and on. And his sins kept bothering him. More than that was the thought of God, the righteous God, looking down on him. God is righteous—he is always right, he is holy, he hates sin, he is angry at all who commit sin; and Martin Luther was a sinner.

Spurred on by a teacher, Luther kept studying Scripture seeking the mercy of God. And he found it in the book of Romans. The righteousness of God is a gift—God gives us righteousness, so that we are holy in his sight. We are “justified,” that is, acquitted of all of our sins. Luther wrote that the day this insight came to him, it was as if heaven itself had opened before him. Luther had been given an awesome discovery.

Now in Romans chapter 4, God points to Abraham, and then to David, and then to each of us. For all believers, that realization that God’s righteousness is a free gift, that in Christ we are justified, that heaven is ours simply by believing in Jesus—this is an Awesome Discovery. May God grant that we discover this truth again this morning as we study his Word.

Abraham was the forefather of the Jewish people. He lived 2000 years before Jesus. We heard how God called him to leave behind his pagan family and trust God’s promises: the promise that he would have many children, a “great nation” even; and the promise that all people on earth would be blessed through him—a promise that one of his descendants would be the Savior of the world.

Many Jewish writers in Paul’s day said that Abraham was blessed by God, was a “friend of God,” because Abraham obeyed God. Abraham was a good person, suffered many things, yet followed God’s commands, such as the command to be circumcised, and this is why God blessed him. In fact, they said that this is why God blessed the Jewish nation after Abraham.

But those Jewish theologians ignored the truth about Abraham. God had blessed Abraham before Abraham obeyed even one of God’s commands. In our First Lesson, Abraham was living as a pagan, when God came to him and gave him faith. This is how it always works. We are sinful from birth, with every inclination of our hearts driving us to sin, until God steps in and calls us to faith. As Paul goes on to point out, Abraham was not blessed after he was circumcised, but before—years before.

And Abraham did not always obey God. He had been raised a pagan. Even after his conversion, even after he was given promise after promise of children and salvation, Abraham sinned greatly. Several times Abraham passed off his wife as his sister—he would have allowed Sarah to have a child by another man, thereby despising God’s promise that through Sarah would come the line of the Savior.

No, Abraham did not earn his salvation. So how could there be any hope? Paul goes right back to the book of Genesis. **“What does Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’”** How did Abraham receive the righteousness of God? How did that perfection necessary for salvation get added to Abraham’s spiritual bank account? By faith. God had promised Abraham a Savior. And Abraham trusted in that Savior for his righteousness.

It would take 2000 years, but one of Abraham’s descendants would be that Savior. In our Gospel we see Jesus Christ living a perfect life in our place. Jesus was willing to talk to a Samaritan woman, a very sinful woman, who came to draw water at a well. Jesus did not run away, as other Jewish men would have. Jesus patiently talked to her about God’s love and the gift of eternal life. Jesus did not ignore her sin, as we probably would do—you know how difficult it is to bring up someone’s sin, much easier to skip it. But Jesus loved this woman, knew she needed to repent, so that she could have the forgiveness he came to earth to win. Day after day Jesus dealt lovingly with not-so-lovable people. He lived a righteous life. Abraham trusted in that life, Jesus’ righteous life, to cover over his sins. And this was an awesome discovery.

Likewise today we are forgiven and justified when we believe in Jesus for our righteousness. There are two kinds of people in the world: those who look to themselves for righteousness and those who believe in Jesus. God does not show favoritism to anyone.

Paul’s words in this chapter show how wrong some teachings are in false Christian churches, such as the teaching of Millennialism. Millennialists falsely say that the country of Israel is special today, and that God has a special plan for the Jews. Some even want to rebuild the Jewish temple. But Paul makes it so clear here: Abraham was saved before he was circumcised, because we are saved only by faith in Jesus, not by being Jewish. Paul says Abraham is the father of non-Jews who believe and Jews who believe. He says that the true children of Abraham are Christians, whatever our ethnicity. There is nothing special about Jewish people today. We are saved by faith alone.

Paul gives another example of someone who received this awesome discovery: King David. Now you may recall stories of David’s faith, for example in being willing to fight the giant Goliath. The Bible also is quite blunt in recalling some of David’s sins—adultery, murder. Yet David had an awesome discovery. Listen to Paul: **“David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.’”** That’s a quote from Psalm 32.

The Psalm says that God will not count something—our sins. All those bad things you have done—God is not going to let them get printed on your record. Instead he counts the righteousness of Jesus as yours. It’s like having all your bills wiped away and replaced with a note that millions of dollars are in your account. Believe in Jesus, and every good deed that Jesus did—every kind act, every loving word—every one of those is credited to your account. What an awesome discovery!

That Samaritan woman in our Gospel had this discovery. She had lived a tough life. She had lived a sinful life. She'd had five husbands. And now she was living with another man who was not her husband. You can picture it, can't you—a woman who is desperate for love, and willing to ignore God's command against adultery, and she doesn't find love; all she has is guilt. Jesus demonstrated his divine knowledge so she would listen. He then explained that God does not show favoritism but loves all people. Finally he revealed himself as the promised Savior. Yes, she had sinned. But God forgave her; God loved her; God saved her. What an awesome discovery that day at that well.

You and I have sinned against God. Yet God reached out to us and led us to Jesus. In Holy Baptism God washed away your sins. When you confessed your sins this morning, you heard God's response: your sins are forgiven. Our communicant members can come and receive further assurance of that forgiveness in the body and blood of Jesus; others are welcome to study God's Word with us, so that you can be rightly prepared to receive this gift. Every time you read the Bible, God will point you to this awesome truth: the righteousness of Jesus has been counted as yours.

Every day we sin, and are tempted to try to find something good in ourselves so we won't get punished. Yet every day God leads us to look at Jesus instead, confess our sins, and find the righteousness that covers over all our guilt. Every day we Christians have this awesome discovery.

Believe in God, and receive his righteousness. Amen.