

Oct. 24, 2021

The Faith of Abraham

Romans 4:1-8

LTS: Gal. 3:1-10

BI: Sinners today are reconciled to God the same way Abraham was reconciled to God: **by faith alone.**

I want to invite you to take your bibles and open to Romans chapter 4. Arriving here at chapter 4 feels like we have passed another mile marker in our long journey toward chapter 16. I look forward with anticipation as we approach what Paul has to teach us in this chapter, and I'm confident that you are just as eager to dive in as am I. So, let's get started by reading the first section of Roman 4.

Please stand and follow along with me as I read **Roman 4:1-8.**

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “**Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.**” ⁴ 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, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

You may be seated.

Sinners today are reconciled to God the same way Abraham was reconciled to God in ancient times: **by faith alone**.

Over the past several months of preaching the epistle of Romans, I have repeatedly said that one of Paul's primary goals was to help believers, like you and me, understand the deep, rich complexities of our great salvation. And indeed, there is no denying **that is** the case. Paul, however, had other motives for writing this great letter as well.

For example, Part of the reason he wrote this letter was to offer an **apology** for the Gospel. Now, when I say "**apology**" I'm not suggesting that Paul was retracting his view

of salvation, nor did he **feel bad** about writing the letter. He's not saying, "Gee, I'm sorry for what I have written. I hope I didn't offend anyone. Rather, the word "**apology**" means **to make a defense**. The Jews had a number of objections to the Gospel, and Paul was determined to offer a powerful and clear defense to their objections.

One such objection he needed to respond to was the idea that the Gospel is a new teaching. And if it's new then it must be contrary to the O.T. Scriptures. And if it is contrary to the O.T. then it is false and must be rejected out of hand.

We have already seen Paul respond to this objection back in 3:21 when he wrote:

*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although **the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it...***

Here in chapter 4, then, Paul returns to this objection. Perhaps the believers in Rome were asking, “Paul, when we share the gospel with our Jewish friends and they reject it because it seems **new**, how should we respond? After all, for centuries we have almost universally been taught that salvation comes to those who faithfully obey the Law of Moses. You, however, teach that sinners are justified in the eyes of God by **faith** apart from the works of law. **How do we respond to such an objection?**

As we might expect, Paul’s answer to this objection is both powerful and clear. In support of his teaching, Paul calls **two witnesses to bear testimony** in favor of the doctrine of **Justification by faith alone apart from works of law**.

First, he calls for the testimony of **Moses**

Second, he appeals to the testimony of **David**. And the testimony these men bring to

bear on the question demonstrates that, regardless of what the Jews may have thought, **Justification** has always been **by faith and not by works**. So, let's begin with the testimony of Moses.

I. The Testimony of Moses

1. Notice with me Paul's words in v. 1. He writes:

"What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?"

2. Now, in order to understand what Paul is asking here, we have to glance backward at verse 27 where Paul initiated the question, *"Then what becomes of our **boasting**. It is excluded. **By what kind of law?** By a law of works? **No**, but by the law of faith. For we maintain that one is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.*

This is the issue Paul is wrestling with; namely, that the justification that God offers leaves no room for **boasting** because it has nothing to do with **self-effort, obedience to law**, or any kind of **achievable merit**. And if you can't do anything to earn or deserve a right standing with God, then you have nothing to boast about.

When we come to chapter 4, Paul is still running with that same thought. But now, instead of attempting to convince people by the sheer force of argument, he brings in witnesses; namely, **Moses** and **David**.

Now, it may occur to you that Paul is really appealing to **Abraham** rather than of **Moses** as I have suggested. But we need to remember that nearly everything we know about **Abraham** has come to us through the inspired testimony of **Moses** in the book of Genesis.

When you think about it, this was a very strategic move on Paul's part, because if he can demonstrate that **Moses** and **Abraham** believed in the doctrine of Justification by faith alone apart from the law, **he wins!**

4. After all, **Moses** is the one through whom the **law of God** came to Israel. Moreover, **Abraham** was considered the **Father** of the nation of Israel. In fact, in Jesus' day, the Pharisees and Scribes (the leaders of Israel) repeatedly rejected Jesus based on the high claim that **Abraham** was their father. For example:

- **John 8:39-40**, "They answered him, "**Abraham is our father.**" Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. **This is not what Abraham did.**
- **Matt 3:9** "And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have **Abraham as our father,**' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up **children for**

Abraham.

5. You see, as Israel's ancestor, Abraham was regarded as **the ultimate model for their faith**. So, Paul begins this chapter in a way that seems to say, **if you want to demonstrate that my Gospel is NOT new,** we should call for the testimony of Abraham. And that's what Paul does.

6. He writes, *“What shall we say?”*

A. Its interesting to note that in ancient times scholars and debaters used the phrase **“What shall we say.”** as a rhetorical devise indicating a transition in the argument. And that's what Paul is doing.

B. In fact Paul made use of this phrase at least 6 times:

1) 6:1 **“What shall we say then?**
Are we to continue in sin that
grace may abound?

- 2) 7:7 “**What shall we say?** That the law is sin?”
- 3) Rom. 8:31, “**What then shall we say** to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”

C. Now this is not a terribly important observation, but it does confirm that Paul is in debate mode. He is writing a **polemic in defense** of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – the Gospel of **Justification by faith alone**. What could be more important than defending the Gospel.

- 1) I don't know about you, but I praise God for the men in our Generation, like
 - John MacArthur,
 - R.C. Sproul,
 - John Piper,
 - Paul Washer,
 - Steve Lawson,
 - and others who have given

their lives to the defense and distribution of the gospel.

- We need more men like these faithful brothers. And my prayer is that some of those future leaders and defenders of the faith will arise from Calvary Bible Church.

D. So, Paul writes, “*What shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?*” In other words, what did he gain as a ground of boasting relative to his right standing with God? (see. 3:27)

E. We should note here that the apostle Paul is not tip-toeing around, hoping to NOT make anybody mad. Rather, he dives headlong into the hornet’s nest. He attacks the proponents of **works righteousness**... at the very fortress in

which they deem themselves to be strongest; namely, **the story of Abraham**, that great patriarch who, according to the thinking of the Jews, had *earned* his way into a right standing with God.¹

F. Honestly, he could have taken a cleaner, less controversial path if he had simply scrapped chapter 4 and jumped right into the first verses of chapter 5, where Paul says, *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

G. He has already explained the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from the law. He could have blown on down the road without stirring things up. But NO! **That’s NOT Paul’s way.** Rather, he is determine to catch and defeat those who

¹ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul’s epistle to the Romans. New Testament Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Book House, 1980), 144

proclaim that God's way of justification is through **self-effort**, and striving to keep the law of God.

- H. To put in another way, Paul; is determined to “destroy arguments and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).
- I. It is for this reason that he calls for the testimony of **Moses** regarding **Abraham**.
- J. **Verse 2 reads**, “For **if** Abraham was **justified by works**, he had something to boast about, **but not before God**. For **what does the Scripture say?**”
- K. **Now, pay attention to this phrase:** **“What does the Scripture say?”** This should be instructive to us because, apparently, generation after generation of Jewish teachers had taught God's people that the way to gain a right standing with

God is by **law keeping**. And Paul implies that the reason they taught such error was because they were so busy listening to one another that they didn't take the time to carefully listen to the Scripture.

L. It's as if the Jews were saying, "Listen Paul, everyone knows the only way anyone can be declared righteous in God's sight is to **live a life of obedience to the law**. To which Paul retorts, "Really? Well, let me ask you a question. **"What does the Scripture actually say?"**

- 1) I think we will benefit from a short pause at this point to consider this phrase. ***"What does the Scripture say?"***
- 2) Notice that Paul doesn't say, "What **did** the Scripture say, but rather what **does** the Scripture say?"
- 3) You E4M guys will appreciate that the verb **"Say" is a Pres. Act. Indc.** The word of God was

speaking in Moses' day. It was speaking in Paul's day, and it **is** speaking in **our day**.

- 4) You see, the Bible is NOT a book that was intended to be displayed on the coffee table to let folks know that you believe in God. No, the Bible is God's counsel regarding EVERYTHING pertaining to life and godliness.
- 5) In the words of the author of Hebrews, it is **living** and **active** and sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12).
- 6) **The Bible still speaks to us** today if we have **ears to hear** and **hearts to receive** what the Spirit says to His people.
- 7) So, what does the Scripture **say**

about how Abraham was justified in the eye of God?

- M. Well, under the inspiration of the H.S. **Moses** wrote: (3) “**Abraham believed, and it was counted to Him as righteousness.**” That is, he was declared by God to be **Right with God.**
- N. In other words, **He was justified by faith alone.** And I insert the word “**Alone**” here because in Abraham’s day, **the law had not yet been written.** It wasn’t impossible for a man to be justified by the law of God because in Abraham’s day the law didn’t exist in Abraham’s day.
- O. This is why Paul said to the Galatian church, (Gal. 3:17)
- ¹⁷ This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not nulify a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void.

P. Notice what Paul says (4). “Now to the one who works, his wages are **NOT counted** as a **gift** but as his due.”

Q. The word “**Count,**” or “**counted**” is a **REALLY** important term here. In the GK, the word is **Logizomai**. By my count it is used **four times** in this short passage and **11 times** in this chapter. We saw it a moment ago when we read that Abraham believed and it was **Counted** to him as righteousness.

R. **Counted** is a **bookkeeping** or **banking** term used in ancient business document for **crediting** payment to one’s account.² Sometimes it’s translated in other Bible versions **Reckoned** or **Imputed**.

² Craig S. Keener, [*The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Ro 4:3.

- The important thing to see here, is that Righteousness was NOT **earned** by the self-effort of law-keeping. Rather, it was **counted**, or **imputed**, or **reckoned** as a gift from God and received by **faith**.

S. And all of this is grounded in the testimony of Moses about Abraham. So, what is that testimony?

1) Well, you may remember that in **Gen. 15:6**. Abraham had defeated the kings of the land (Gen. 14) and was wondering if they would return to fight again. At this time God appeared to him and said *“Abraham, I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”*

2) But the thing that Abraham wanted most was a son and heir. **God had already promised him a son**, but as yet the promise had not been fulfilled and Abraham

and Sarah were way beyond their child-bearing years.

- 3) It was then that God told him to look at the stars. “*So shall your descendants be!*” **God promised; and Abraham believed God’s promise.** The Hebrew word translated **believed** means “**to say amen.**” God gave a promise, and Abraham responded with “**Amen!**” It was this **faith** that was **counted** for **righteousness.**³
- 4) We could just as well say it like this: “Abraham **believed,** and God declared Him righteous **as an unmerited gift** apart from any works.
- 5) Righteousness was NOT earned by the self-effort of law-keeping. Rather, it was **counted,** or **imputed,** or **reckoned** as **a gift**

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, [*The Bible Exposition Commentary*](#), vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 524.

from God and received by **faith**.

T. **Paul summarizes**, then, with the words
(5)

*And to the one who **does not work** but **believes in him who justifies the ungodly**, his faith is **counted** as righteousness.*

T. What could be more welcome news to a sinner than that God Justifies by faith and not by the works of the law? That's why Paul calls this message the **Gospel**. It is truly **good news**.

U. But the news gets even better when we consider the identity of the only ones who can receive the grace of justification. Notice that Paul simply calls them **"the ungodly."**

- 1) Consider Abraham himself. The Jews considered him the ultimate example of righteousness. But if you read the full story of his life in the

book of Genesis, you discover that Abraham was born and raised in Ur of the Chaldees. This is an area of the ancient world that was full of idolatry. Abraham's ancestors were descendants of those who built the Tower of Babel as an act of rebellion against God.

- 2) And consider who Abraham was even after God called him out of that land. Some of his sins have been recorded for all time. Especially, the horrific things he did regarding his wife, Sarah. At one point he almost lost her when he gave her over to a king out of godless fear and a complete disregard of his responsibility to love and **protect** her as his wife. This was a gross sin. And it proved that though Abraham was a blessed man, a wealthy man, and an influential man, he was often a

Godless man. He was
ungodly.

3) But thanks be to God that the Lord of all the earth desires to be known as *“him who justifies the ungodly.”*

Charles Spurgeon says it like this:

The sinner is the gospel’s reason for existence. You, my friend, to whom this word now comes, if you are undeserving, ill-deserving, hell-deserving, you are the sort of person for whom the gospel is ordained, and arranged, and proclaimed. **God justifies the ungodly.**⁴

...The gospel will receive you into its halls if you come as a sinner, not otherwise. Wait not for reformation, but come at once for

⁴ Spurgeon, Charles Haddon. Works of Charles Haddon (C.H.) Spurgeon. According to Promise, All of Grace, Faith's Checkbook, Morning and Evening: Daily Readings, A Puritan Catechism & more (mobi) . MobileReference. Kindle Edition.

salvation. **God justifieth the ungodly**, and that takes you up where you now are: it meets you in your worst estate. Come... to your heavenly Father in all your sin and sinfulness. Come to Jesus just as you are, leprous, filthy, naked, neither fit to live nor fit to die.⁵

Come, you that are the very sweepings of creation; **come**, though you hardly dare to hope for anything but death. **Come**, though despair is brooding over you, pressing upon your bosom like a horrible nightmare. **Come** and ask the Lord to justify another **ungodly one**. **Why should He not? Come** for this great mercy of God is meant for such as you are. I put it in the language of the text, and I cannot put it more strongly: the Lord God Himself takes to Himself this gracious title, **"Him that justifieth the ungodly."**⁶

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

O My Friends, the only reason Abraham was declared Right in the eyes of God is because **God justifies the ungodly**. His faith is **counted**, or **reckoned as** righteousness as a free gift received by the empty hands of humble faith. This is the testimony of Moses about **Abraham**. Next, Paul brings into the court room (as it were) the testimony of another...

II. The Testimony of David

1. Paul mentions this only briefly, and so I will be brief as well. Let's begin by reading verse 6. Paul writes:

2. Paul writes,

...just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom **God counts righteousness apart from works.**

3. Where does David say such a thing? Well, he says it in one of the most beloved Psalms in the bible. In **Psalm, 32** we read (v. 1-2)

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ² Blessed is the man against whom the LORD **counts** no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

I think if I had been a Jew in Paul's say, having read this letter, I would bow my head in defeat. Why? Because, to continue taking one's stand that justification in the eyes of God is by **obedience to the works of the law** is to take one's stand against Not only **King David**; Not only **Abraham**, but against **Moses** as well.

O my friend. Perhaps you have returned again and again to this chapel and have repeatedly heard about the

abundant grace of God, but you have yet to respond from the heart? After hearing this message today, how can you turn your back on his invitation another day. **You have no promise of another day!** Why not come to him with all humility, renounce any goodness or righteousness of your own and fly to Christ who will freely expunge all your sins, and declare you Right with God, for His great glory and your own great joy.

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