

Introduction

Have you ever stopped to wonder how Old Testament saints came to be saved? I mean, at least 4,000 years elapsed between the fall of man and the arrival of Jesus. That is a lot of time and lot of people. And now it has only been 2,000 years since Christ came. So what of those men and women in the Old Testament? Does the Bible have anything to say that would give us clarity on this question? Yes, indeed it does. We are turning to a text this morning that answers that very question and emphasizes a non-negotiable aspect of the true gospel.

[Read text and Pray]

In our study of the scripture, it is always important to maintain awareness of context. We can misunderstand and misinterpret any text if we remove it from its overall setting. But as we see each tree in the context of the forest in which it is set, we will have a better and more accurate appreciation for the message that uniquely belongs to it. So let's remind ourselves of the flow of this epistle. There in Galatia Paul and Barnabas had been used of the Lord to preach the gospel and plant a number of churches. Now after their departure from the region, certain individuals came preaching a distortion of the true gospel. Referred to as Judaizers, they were arguing that these Gentile believers now, in order to truly be saved, needed to follow the law of Moses with particular attention to the rite of circumcision. Thus they were combining works with faith as the basis for being justified before God.

The substance of Galatians is Paul's vigorous disputation against the Judaizers. The message they were preaching represented a departure from the grace of God and the true and only gospel. The flow of Paul's case AGAINST the Judaizers and FOR the gospel he had preached began with the fact that he is an apostle called directly by Christ. Added to that, the gospel he preached itself he received directly from Christ. Moreover, he was not dependent upon the other apostles for it, but there WAS apostolic affirmation of it. The other apostles affirmed him and what he was preaching. Stunningly, Paul did have occasion to confront Peter directly when he and others compromised the gospel by their behavior, and Peter stood condemned. Paul's argument to Peter is restated here that he had been crucified with Christ and was no longer alive to the law but to God.

Then, finally, last time, we saw how Paul argued from the experience of the Galatians. Using rhetorical questions, Paul pointed the Galatians to the facts of their experience of salvation and receiving the Spirit. They had begun by faith; they had experienced mighty works of God by faith; and they should be continuing in the course of being perfected by faith. Each of these aspects of their experience validates the gospel as being received solely on the basis of faith and NOT through works of the law. Well, Paul is not done making his case. Where else can he go to prove that justification is based on faith alone? He goes directly to the Scripture. He makes his case from the word of God.

Beginning with Galatians 3:6, Paul cites no less than 6 different texts of the OT scripture. His theme is justification. And with reliance upon the Old Testament, Paul points out the means of receiving justification, the recipients of justification, the obstacle of justification, and the provider of justification. This morning in verses 6-9, we will focus on the biblical teaching regarding how a person is justified, who is justified, and the blessing of the justified.

Paul turns his attention in the Old Testament to the first book, Genesis, and the forefather of the nation Israel and the visible people of God. Abraham was a fitting subject for Paul to turn to because he was the father of the Jewish people and the one to whom salvation promises were given. It is likely that the Judaizers were themselves pointing to Abraham, though inaccurately so, as evidence of the need for circumcision in order to be among God's people. It was essential therefore that Paul clear up the incorrect biblical interpretation and the bad theology that accompanied it.

Sooner or later persons who come to faith in Christ begin to wonder about times past, specifically the times BEFORE Christ came. How were people saved in times past? In today's text we have the answer before us from the Old Testament and its proper interpretation presented by Paul. Paul points the spotlight on Abraham. He is the prime example of how people were saved in Old Testament times. He is also the prime example of how anybody from any time period and from any people group is saved. Those who follow in the likeness of Abraham are considered sons of Abraham. And, brothers and sisters, that is you and it is me if we belong to Christ. Let's see how Paul presents this point.

So I want you to see first ...

I. The Justification of Abraham.

As we said, verse 6 marks a transition in the case Paul is setting forth. In verses 1-5, Paul was focused on the experience of the Galatians. Paul transitions now into the biblical portion of his argument by noting that as it was with the Galatians in their experience, so it was with Abraham as recorded in the Old Testament writings. For the Galatians, they experienced God's power by hearing with faith, and it was "just as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

Paul quotes Genesis 15:6. Here was the situation. The Lord came to Abraham and spoke to him in a vision. He said to Abraham: "I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." Abraham replied with a question. "What could that reward possibly be? I have no children of my own." The Lord replied with an assuring word: "Your very own son will be your heir." The Lord took Abraham out at night and told him to look up and count, if possible, the multitude of stars in the sky. Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Then comes Genesis 15:6: "And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness."

So here we have it—God promises, Abraham believes, and God counts it to Abraham as righteousness. Abraham trusted that God was able to do what he promised and that he would fulfill what he said. God counted Abraham's belief unto him as righteousness.

What is righteousness? Righteousness is complete adherence to God's moral perfection. Jesus said, "You must therefore be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Israel understood righteousness as doing ALL the commandments of the Lord (Deuteronomy 6:25). As sinners, it is a humanly impossible standard to meet. Once we are a law-breaker, righteousness is impossible. We are all law-breakers in our father Adam, and we are born with a disposition to law-breaking. We do it all the time! It's what we do best! Scripture says that our righteousness is filthy rags.

Only one human being has ever been or ever will be righteous. And that is Jesus Christ, the God-man. In coming and living here on earth, he accomplished a life of righteousness. He lived and breathed in perfect accordance with the will of God. It is not just that he avoided doing certain bad things. It is also that he lived out righteously in every detail of the life he lived. Hebrews 5 explains that "although he was a son, he LEARNED OBEDIENCE." It was an accomplishment. "And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to those who obey him."

Now think of Abraham for a minute. When we get away from reading the details of his life, we might tend to lift him up on a pedestal, but Abraham was a sinner just like you and me. God did not call Abraham because he was the shiny image of godliness. We mustn't forget the doubt, the attempt to accomplish God's purpose for him, nor the lies he told. Like you and me, Abraham was far from perfect and could not earn right standing with God.

But God came to see Abraham as possessing the righteousness he could never attain. The text says, "it was counted to him as righteousness." The word "counted" is key. It means reckoned. It means imputed. These words describe the act of assertion. It was asserted. Abraham was DECLARED righteous. It was credited to him. Righteousness was considered as being in his account. Abraham was considered as possessing something he actually did not accomplish.

The result of it being counted to Abraham as righteousness is that Abraham stood with God as though he was righteous, as though he completely complied with God's moral standard. He stood before God as though he had fully accomplished complete obedience to the divine standard of holiness. This standing by being counted or being reckoned righteous is what the Bible names being justified.

In justification, we are not made to BE righteous but we are CONSIDERED righteous. When a person is justified, the righteousness we possess is not our own righteousness. We are not made to actually be righteous. But we are made possessors of Christ's righteousness. His righteousness is CONSIDERED as belonging to us, even though by our own accomplishment all we have ever produced is sin. What God does is he looks not at us but at our account. And in our account he sees His own righteousness since Jesus made the deposit himself. And seeing that righteousness in our account, he relates to us and treats us as though we are righteous. If we are counted righteous, we are in perfect standing with God. We have full and unconditional acceptance and favor with God. Paul so eloquently stated this reality in Philippians 3, saying that he was "found in Christ, "not having a righteousness of [his] own that comes from the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God."

And this was the reality with Abraham. Although Christ had not yet died, on the basis of that future death and resurrection, God counted Abraham as though he was righteous because righteousness was what he saw in Abraham's account.

Now the matter is why? Why did God count ABRAHAM as right before his law? The text tells us: "Abraham believed God." God made a promise and Abraham believed him. Did Abraham do a good work or do good works? No. The text is plain and simple and straightforward. Abraham believed God. This is faith. Faith believes. It is faith ALONE that is the basis upon which it was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

Steve Lawson points out that the Judaizers were no doubt teaching that Abraham was justified by his circumcision. Hence Paul's reference to Genesis 15:6 is critical for correct biblical interpretation. Here there is no mention of circumcision. God did institute circumcision with Abraham but not until some time later. It appears in Genesis chapter 17. So Abraham was counted as righteous BEFORE the practice of circumcision was prescribed by the Lord. His justification PRECEDED the ceremonial rite and WAS NOT brought about by it. And the conclusion of the matter then is that Abraham's justification in no way depended upon circumcision or any other work of the law for that matter. God COUNTED him righteous exclusively because he BELIEVED God.

Now we move quickly from the justification of Abraham to ...

II. The Sons of Abraham.

Look at Galatians 3:7. Here is Paul's point. "Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham." Abraham was justified by faith alone, and here is what everyone MUST KNOW. Those who follow in his likeness, who demonstrate themselves to be his descendants, are also those who are of faith—not of works. Abraham in a sense, you see, is the father of all who believe. Perhaps you have heard that children's song, "Father Abraham has many sons, many sons has father Abraham. I am one of them and so are you. So let's all praise the Lord." What Paul says here is key to embracing that children's song. Abraham was promised numerous descendants. And, yet, those truest descendants are not necessarily those who were produced biologically. His truest descendants, his truest family, are those who like him are justified through faith alone.

Tom Schreiner asks, "What is required to be part of Abraham's family, to be counted as his sons? Not circumcision or other works required by the law. Those who belong to Abraham's family believe just as Abraham did, for Abraham lived before the law was given. Therefore, his faith was what constituted him as righteous before God. The Galatians, then, do not need to be circumcised to be Abraham's sons. They are already Abraham's children if their faith is in Christ Jesus.

What was true for the Galatians is true for you and for me. We rarely hear a person referring to themselves as a son of Abraham. Indeed ultimately we are children of God if we are in Christ. But to be a son of Abraham does not have to do with gender or ethnicity but with likeness. It means to bear the same faith as Abraham. Such faith embraces Jesus Christ. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever BELIEVES in him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Jesus made some interesting statements in connection with Abraham and his sons, recorded in John 8. The Jews who turned in hostility against Jesus were clamoring that they were offspring of Abraham. And Jesus acknowledged it to be true in one sense. And yet he said, "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. You are doing the works YOUR father did." They said, "GOD is our Father." Jesus replied, "You are of your father THE DEVIL." Later, of Abraham, Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." True sons of Abraham rejoice in Jesus and believe in him. It matters not if you are a physical descendant of Abraham. What matters is if you are his spiritual descendent. And THAT YOU ARE if, like him, you are not working to be right with God but simply trusting God to be right with God.

Turning now to verse 8, Paul sets forth ...

III. The Gospel of Abraham.

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." This citation from the OT comes from Genesis 12:3. God called to Abram and told him to go up from his father's house to the land he would show him. And made this declaration: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." It came even before Abraham believed God and was justified. It was certainly also way before the Lord instituted circumcision. Paul calls this message "the gospel." It is good news! The good news is the promise of

blessing—that which brings joy and rejoicing and happiness! It is good news that God's blessing would come through Abraham to people from all the families of the earth—not just Abram's but everyone's!

The gospel, the good news, preached to Abram at that time is that blessing would come to people from ALL nations, not just his great nation. Now, Paul has his attention on justification by faith and he is asserting that God's assurance to Abraham was a prophecy that people from all over the world would come to be justified through faith just as Abraham was. So not only has it been the experience of the Galatians that they were justified and received the Spirit by faith; this is precisely according to what the scripture said would take place long, long ago. Not only just that people from other nations would belong to the people of God, but that they too would make their entrance to that family by faith and faith alone.

The scripture's gospel is not that all people will be saved. Not all will be justified. It is not ALL people in ALL nations that will be blessed. The Lord had already told Abraham that whoever dishonors him would be cursed. But it is the people of the nations who are of the faith of Abraham who will be saved. You are either saved if you bless Abraham by following his example of faith, or you are cursed if you dishonor Abraham by rejecting it.

It is reiterated by Galatians 3:9 where we see

IV. The Blessing of Abraham.

“So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” The Lord had said that he would bless Abraham and make his name great. He would bless those who bless him. Those who bless Abraham join with him in the blessing promised him by God. The Abrahamic blessing is the privilege of belonging to the kingdom of God. It is a blessing of grace in that this kingdom and family is entered not by doing the right works, not by being of a certain ancestral line. It is entered by faith. And those who enter it are sons of Abraham, evidenced by the very fact—the fact that they too have BELIEVED and it has been counted to them as righteousness. Abraham—the man of faith—is the spiritual father of those who like him are counted righteous not through circumcision or other aspects of law-keeping but through faith alone.

Conclusion

There several important takeaways from this text.

1. There is one people of God. They are the sons of Abraham because like him, they are of faith alone. That is, the blessing of justification comes on them through faith and nothing else. That is not to say that their behavior and their works are irrelevant. It is just to say that good works and sanctified obedience are not the basis of that justification. But there are not two peoples of God—one of biology and the law and the other of faith. There is only one—the kingdom whose progenitor is Abraham.

2. There is one way of salvation. There is only one way of salvation for all peoples of all times. It was that way as far back as the first person who was saved from his sin to today and every day into the future until Jesus comes. The way is faith. Some mistakenly believe that there was one way of salvation in the Old Testament times and a new way of salvation since Christ came. That is not so according to the testimony of the Lord in scripture itself. The difference under the Old Covenant is that they looked ahead to the fulfillment of God's promise. We look back to the promised Savior who came and crushed the serpent on the head. The gospel promises of God in Christ are preached and those who believe God and trust in Christ Jesus are justified. They are counted righteous in Christ through faith.

Romans 3:23-25 proclaims this one gospel: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are 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."

Today, at this very moment, if you feel and know yourself to be a sinner and you have not believed on Jesus, I encourage you to embrace him by faith even now. Such believing involves a turning from believing in yourself to trusting Christ as God's sufficient provision for removing your sins from your account and putting Christ's righteousness in its place. Oh that you would trust Him now.

3. There is an important clarification about faith. Faith is not a good work. And faith is not our righteousness. Believing doesn't make me righteous. So what is this faith? It is simply trusting in the promise of God. It is taking comfort and hope in that he declares me righteous. Faith is in essence saying from my heart—

In Christ alone my hope is found, He is my light, my strength, my song;

In Christ alone! – who took on flesh, Fullness of God in helpless babe.
This gift of love and righteousness, Scorned by the ones He came to save:
Till on that cross as Jesus died, The wrath of God was satisfied –
For every sin on Him was laid; Here in the death of Christ I live.

There in the ground His body lay, Light of the world by darkness slain:
Then bursting forth in glorious day Up from the grave He rose again!
And as He stands in victory Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
For I am His and He is mine – Bought with the precious blood of Christ.

No guilt in life, no fear in death, This is the power of Christ in me;
From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man, Can ever pluck me from His hand:
Till He returns or calls me home, Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

Faith is not a work. It is two hands accepting God's gift of the righteousness of Christ. And that faith can't help honoring the one whom it trusts. Tom Schreiner rightly observes that you honor whom you trust. He says, "If you trust your auto mechanic, you honor his integrity. If your coach calls a play and you make a scene in front of the crowd so that it is evident that you think the coach's play call is ridiculous, you dishonor your coach. If you trust your doctor, you follow his prescription. If you trust God, you gladly honor him and obey. It is not your righteousness, but it displays the genuineness of your trust in him."

Faith is not a work. But where there is faith there is honor. And where there is honor there is love and obedience.