

Romans 4:1-12

In verse 28 of chapter 3 we have a conclusion. A man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. At the same time Paul makes a definitive statement in the same context that the law **does not** contradict salvation by faith. In fact, what Paul asserts is that his teaching **establishes** the law.

What Paul says next builds on the idea of justification **by faith**, not **by works**. At the same time it shows faith's relationship to the law by using the old testament to make the point Paul is about to make. Paul is using the law and the prophets to make his point. He is going to the Pentateuch for his teaching.

Now Paul picks Abraham as the example that he is going to use. Why would he do this? There are a couple of obvious possibilities.

1. Abraham's faith was prior to circumcision.
2. Abraham's faith was prior to the law.
3. Abraham was thought by many Jewish authorities of the day to have been saved by his own righteousness.
4. Abraham was one of the primary patriarchs.
5. Abraham was in a sense the least Hebrew of the Hebrews. Abraham was essentially a "Gentile" until God chose him. Abraham came from a culture rich in idolatry and he himself was probably raised as an idolator. So whether Paul was speaking primarily to Jews or Gentiles, both could relate to Abraham.

If Paul could prove that Abraham was saved by faith, he would by default, be making the case that **anyone anywhere** could be saved by faith. He would be proving that **the law** supported salvation by faith and by faith alone. He would be proving that it was not **by circumcision** or **adherence to the law** that people are saved, since Abraham's faith was prior to both of those things.

Basically, if Paul can prove that Abraham was saved by faith alone, he would take the high ground in this doctrinal battle, posing an argument that all his opponents would wear themselves out trying to overcome.

Romans 4

¹What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?

Our father- Abraham is not just the Jew's father. He is the father of all who believe by faith. So whether his audience is primarily Jewish or primarily pagan, it doesn't matter. Abraham is the father of those who believe. He has gone before us into the same salvation.

According to the flesh.

The word here in the greek is sarx

It means the flesh (the soft substance of the living body, which covers the bones and is permeated with blood) of both man and beasts

It also applies to the carnal nature- the man without the Holy Spirit- the man as he is, fallen in sin. So what did Abraham learn about life as an unregenerate man? Did he learn that if you pursue your ideas about God hard enough you will actually attain some kind of righteousness? What was Abraham's history and what does his history teach us about Abraham's flesh and regeneration?

²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

The popular theology of the Jews of the day was that Abraham was chosen by God because Abraham was righteous. Despite what scripture says, many Jewish theologians believed that Abraham in some sense **deserved** salvation. Paul sets the scene here to test this theory. He is basically saying, if Abraham worked for salvation and earned salvation, then what we will see when we look at the Biblical record is Abraham presenting himself in a manner giving credit to himself. We would see, even in his humility, seeds of self credit. Truth would demand it. The Bible writers would give themselves away with clues that extol the great faithfulness of Abraham and his righteous merit. You simply cannot avoid this logic. If Abraham was justified by works, he has a right to demand a righteous reward from God. And God would be unjust **not** to give it to him. He can say to God, God you owe me, and God would have to pay up if God is a

just God. He would have a boast. He can say I, by human effort, by the effort of my flesh, have earned my salvation.

But scripture says, "**But not before God.**" The way I read it we are already given the verdict of this theory. Salvation by works is not how this investigation is going to work out. Man might think this way, but this will not hold up before God.

There may be other ways of interpreting this verse but it seems to me that the phrase "but not before God" undermines the possibility of any righteousness being attained by human effort.

³For what does the Scripture say? "*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*"

When you want to know how things really are, go to the scriptures. Men have theories. God has truth. God cannot lie. The Bible is God's Word. Therefore the Bible cannot lie. If you want to know what the truth is, start with the question- "what does the Scripture say?"

And what does it say about the source of Abraham's salvation? Any righteousness Abraham got was given to Him by God. It was credited to his account. It was not earned.

logizomai

Thayer Definition:

- 1) to reckon, count, compute, calculate, count over
- 1a) to take into account, to make an account of
- 1a1) metaphorically to pass to one's account, to impute

In other words, Abraham had nothing in his "righteousness" account. He was bankrupt. But Abraham believed God and Abraham received an imputed righteousness. Righteousness was credited to his account, it was counted for him. It was a righteousness that was not his but it was given to him. There is not a hint here of what should be here if Abraham had earned something from God. In fact, the words are just the opposite of what you would expect. And that is the point that Paul is making. Abraham's righteousness came as the result of believing God. It came by FAITH.

Now note that **Abraham believed God**. Most of you know my testimony, but an event this good bears repeating. I'd like to use it as an illustration this morning. I grew up attending church. But somehow I got into my mind that being born again was something that happened to you in a moment of time and it would happen in such a way that you would just know it had happened. It would be an experience which would leave no doubt in your mind that it had happened to you. I did the things that I thought would cause that experience time and time again. One day in desperation I sat in my pew crying and my mom asked if I wanted to go forward. That was the way we did things in our church. So I did. I think the pastor was a little surprised because it was a communion service. I guess I had created my own alter call. But anyway, I figured if this doesn't get God's attention, nothing will. He's got to know I'm serious now. But after talking to the pastor and walking away I felt no different. I didn't have the experience I was looking for. My despair only deepened. I was convinced that God did not want me. My mom noticed that I wasn't happy, in fact I wasn't eating and was pretty downcast. So she talked to me. She asked me what was wrong and I told her. She asked me if I knew John 3:16. Well I had quoted it so many times I could have probably quoted it backwards. So I quoted it. Then she asked me the perfect question. She asked me, "does God lie?" I am an expert at missing the obvious connection between two truths. But in three words she had gotten to the heart of the problem. I was asking God for an experience rather than simply believing Him. From that day forward I understood that Faith is believing God. I struggled with doubt on and off for years, but I always knew what the answer was. Believe God.

And that is what Abraham did. God said something and Abraham believed it. He took God at his word. Let's look at the context that this quote came from.

Genesis 15

1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward."

2 But Abram said, "Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"

There is always evidence to fuel doubt. There is always something in the sight picture to make you doubt God's Word or God's character. But faith believes and trusts God. One application for us this morning is to trust what God says over what we see.

4 And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." 5 Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

Now keep in mind that there were many years from the time the promise was given until it was fulfilled. Abram had to live by faith.

6 And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

We can see from the story that believing God did not **earn** Abraham his salvation. Believing God was the **means of receiving** that which God wanted to give Abraham. And even the faith that we act upon is a gift that is given to us by God.

⁴Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

If I put my time in at the insurance agency as an employee of theirs, when pay day comes I expect to be paid. If my boss were to say, Jon, "I have decided that I don't feel generous this week so I won't grace you with that money" I would explain to my boss that grace is not called for. If she will check the accounts payable in the accounting software she will find that there is a debt incurred by the business for the work I have done. She owes me

that money. And the strength of the American judicial system will stand behind me when I demand payment.

The Jewish scholars thought that Abraham was somehow earning a right standing with God. But the logic of that would mean that God owed something to Abraham. And God, being just, would have to pay up. That is how works... works. But that is not what Genesis says about Abraham's relationship with God. The next verse explains Abraham's true relationship.

⁵But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,

The but here shows a contrast to the works based theory. Here we have the faith based truth.

To him who does not work- Were there no other scripture we might misunderstand this phrase. But given the context of the rest of the Bible and the context we are in we can easily understand this. This is not to say that a believer never does good works. Scripture tells us over and over again that faith that doesn't work is dead. But we could paraphrase the phrase in our text "To him who does not work" to - "to him who **does not expect** by fleshly effort to earn a right standing with God". That is the specific kind of work that is being addressed. We can see this is true by looking at the full verse. The contrast is **working** to be justified or **believing** to be justified. So the working we are not to do is what we will call meritorious work- work to gain merit.

but believes on God,

A man came to Mr Barnhouse asking him, what does God want from me. He was desperate to know what God wanted from Him. Mr Barnhouse eventually told him- God wants to be believed. More than anything else God wants to be believed. He went on to say that Since it is totally and utterly impossible for us to furnish the righteousness which His nature demands that He require of us, there is only one way for Him to do it, and that is to provide it Himself and give it to us as a gift. That which we can never attain we may obtain. And it must be done outside of our

being and beyond our reach or doing. God must do it all. We simply believe it.

who justifies the ungodly- There is only one criteria a person must have to be save-able. He or she must be ungodly. While being ungodly in itself is an awful state of being and one to deplore and regret, it is still the state that everyone is in who does not know Christ. So what wonderful news this is. We all qualify for salvation and it is available to all. Everyone we know meets this criteria. All we need to do is believe on the one who justifies the ungodly. We need to place our confidence on the one and only source of salvation. It is almost unbelievable that anyone would turn their back on such a great salvation.

And what does God do with the ungodly who believe in Him? He justifies them. He sets their account aright. He covers their sin debt with a credit to their account. His righteousness is set in the place of our unrighteousness.

his faith is accounted for righteousness. This refers to the one who believes. We are being told here that our salvation today works just like Abraham's did thousands of years ago. We believe the God who justifies sinners and we receive the credit of Christ's righteousness. Note that our faith doesn't earn righteousness. It doesn't merit righteousness. But it is accounted for righteousness. We exhibit faith and God provides righteousness.

There is a point of distinction in this verse that was very useful in a discussion I was involved in. In this verse we see **meritorious works** and **belief**, and they are mutually exclusive. Someone working to gain merit from God is not and cannot be believing God the way God wants to be believed. And just as true, someone simply believing God is not, by doing so, committing a meritorious work. Believing God is not a meritorious work that in any way merits our salvation. We as believers can and must challenge each other to believe God and act accordingly and we should expect that all believers can and must believe God and act accordingly. We all will need a great deal of help and patience, but it is in the sphere of that which we

should expect from each other. And that is in no way a meritorious act in which we are hoping to win salvation in any way. A believer choosing to believe God rather than sight is not a Pelagian act or an Armenian act. It is not in any way a work adding to salvation. It is a biblical act and a necessary act.

⁶just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

Here Paul jumps from Abraham to the writings of David to strengthen what he is saying about Abraham. David is describing the state of blessedness of a human to whom God imputes righteousness. Note that the righteousness is imputed. It is given, not earned. And it is imputed apart from works. So the next quote is going to prove the point that David believed in the same salvation that Paul is referring to. David was a believer in Paul's doctrine before Paul ever existed. This would be very hard on the Jewish legalists.

⁷ ***"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
And whose sins are covered;***

⁸ ***Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute
sin."***

Blessed, happy, fortunate is the man whose lawless deeds are forgiven. The Jews might have said "blessed is the man whom God gives credit for their righteous deeds." But David knows himself too well to float such a myth. He knows what his own heart displayed. David didn't want justice. He wanted forgiveness. He knew that lawless deeds were the result of his flesh. And he knew they needed forgiven. He did not want them held to his account. He did not want them reckoned against David. David wanted forgiveness, that which could not be earned or deserved. He wanted that which would only come from the mercy of God. He wanted his sins covered, not exposed. He did not want them imputed to his account.

Blessed, happy fortunate is the man to whom the Lord won't reckon or hold to one's account their own sin. This man is fortunate indeed. He should know that imputed sin is what he deserves. He committed the sin. Why should it not be held to his account. He could not call "foul" if God were to hold against the man the sin that that man committed. That would only be fair and right. But the man is blessed if God doesn't treat him justly for the sin that he committed. Paul

is using this to make the point that even David never view righteousness as something that is earned. The penalty of sin is earned. Imputed righteousness is not.

⁹Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised *only*, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness.

It looks to me like Paul expects his listeners to raise a question here. The question would be something like this. Wasn't this the way God treated the children of the covenant only? He surely is merciful, but doesn't he reserve that mercy for the Hebrews only?

Paul answers the question before it gets asked. Who gets this blessedness? He asks "is it only the circumcised who receive this mercy?" Or do the uncircumcised get this blessing as well? That is a very important question. If he can show from scripture that the uncircumcised receive this as well he has dealt another blow to any Judiasers that may be causing problems.

Then Paul reiterates that what we are saying is that Abraham's faith (not his works) were accounted to Abraham as righteousness. And if it was not the works of the law, would not the faith of a gentile be counted the same way as that of a Jew? So let's look at the scripture and see what state Abraham was in when this quote took place.

¹⁰How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised.

So when did Abraham receive this righteousness? Was he a good solid card carrying Jew at the time living by the legalistic Jewish law and carrying out all the signs of the covenant? No! Abraham had no law and he was not yet circumcised. He resembled your average gentile more than he resembled your average Jew. So there is no way that you can equate being part of the OT covenant to automatically being righteous. Abraham had not yet done any of the things that the Jews held as being signs of their righteousness and of their identity with being God's people.

¹¹And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which *he had while still uncircumcised*, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also,

We see here that Paul calls circumcision a sign. Only a fool would confuse a billboard advertising a restaurant as the restaurant itself. Abraham received the sign of circumcision. And what was that sign advertising? It was advertising, announcing, displaying the faith that Abraham had while he was still uncircumcised. It sealed a transaction that had already been committed. It was God's stamp that said that Abraham's faith was genuine and that righteousness had been imputed. That is what it was intended to be.

And why did God impute this righteousness prior to circumcision? So that the Jews wouldn't make the mistake in thinking that non Jews were excluded from salvation. Abraham was the father of every person who is saved by faith. He is the father of those who are circumcised and he is the father of those who are not. The only righteousness that a human will ever get will be imputed righteousness. It does not matter if they are circumcised or not. And circumcision is not a requirement, otherwise Abraham could not have received imputed righteousness prior to being circumcised. God's word revealed this clearly to all the Jews but they somehow managed to ignore this. Abraham was the father of all who would have faith in God for justification of their sinful selves. And that's not all.

¹²and the father of circumcision to those who not only *are of the circumcision*, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham *had while still uncircumcised*.

Abraham was also the father of all those who are both circumcised and who walk in faith. The Jews may have thought just following Abraham in circumcision was enough. But Paul emphasizes that it is necessary that every circumcised person must also have the faith that Abraham had in the God who

justifies the ungodly. And that is where they so often missed the mark.

Note how he says this- **walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.**

Paul makes it clear that the faith the circumcised need to have is the faith Abraham had while **unc**circumcised. That had to be humiliating to them. They were not allowed to count anything that they would do according to the law to be to their spiritual credit. Abraham's faith had no such trappings. He was saved prior to both circumcision and the law.

And they must walk in the steps of faith. The word for walk here is interesting. It means "to proceed in a row as the march of a soldier, go in order". And the word for steps means "a footprint, track, footstep, metaphorically of imitating the example of any one." In other words they were being told that they had to march in Abraham's tracks, just like Abraham did. If the Jews gave this much thought it would have great implications for them. Abraham at that point had little reason for pride. He did not have all the things that the Jews thought made them so special. He was simply a man who God reached out to and Abraham believed what God said, he obeyed God in a faulty fashion, and God accredited to this poor sinner the righteousness of Christ.

A simple application for us this morning is – Are we walking in Abraham's tracks of faith? What does your sight picture and all of your experience tell you this morning? Is it telling you that you must do something that God forbids? Is it saying that you cannot help yourself?

Or is it saying you cannot do something that God commands?

What are those things in your life? Will we choose to follow Abraham in these areas? Will we quote God's word to the devil like Christ did and walk in belief of God? It would be good to commit this day to believe God and ask someone you trust to hold you accountable to those areas you are struggling with.