

**Romans:
The Bible Says Abraham Was Justified
by Faith!**

Romans 4:1-3

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 4. We have been looking for a number of weeks in our study of Romans 3 at Paul's teaching on justification by faith. That is, the teaching whereby Paul sets forth the scriptural truth that the way a person is saved is by being declared righteous, that declared righteousness is received by faith. It is grounded, however, in the grace of God and is purchased through the work of Christ, not through our own works. And so when we speak of being of being justified by faith, we mean being declared righteous, and so accepted as righteous by God through the instrument or the means of faith. And we've been looking at that truth in detail.

Now in Romans, chapter 4, Paul begins to defend this teaching from the Old Testament. And you'll appreciate why this was important. He is speaking to a congregation not nearly of Gentile Christians but of Jewish Christians. They would have grown up in their Jewish context with rabbinic teaching that would have been directly contradictory of what Paul has been saying in Romans, chapter 3. They will, of course, have embraced the Messiah. They will know something of grace because they have been saved. And yet they could be very easily confused because the teachers of their youth, very impressive men, godly in a manner, had taught something very different. Furthermore, being Jewish Christians, they were surrounded by friends and family, perhaps in that same city, who had not embraced Jesus Christ, and there would have been many discussions. Well, is Paul right or are the rabbis right about this teaching about justification by faith? And so it was very important for Paul to explain this truth to that congregation.

But, of course, more than that, it was important for Paul to explain this to all of us. And even as Paul defends this teaching and elaborates on it in Romans, chapter 4, he does so by appealing to the Old Testament. He actually teaches us more about this doctrine. And this is one truth of the Christian faith which no Christian can afford to be willfully ignorant of. So let's attend with God's word in Romans, chapter 4, beginning in verse 1:

"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to Him as righteousness.'"

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, there are few truths more important than the truth of Your free grace and salvation and the truth of Your justifying sinners by faith on the basis of what Jesus has done. Help us to understand this word. If this is a truth that we have some secure grasp on, deepen our appreciation for it, expand upon our knowledge of it, and the comfort which we derive therefrom. If we do not understand this truth this day, if we have never embraced Jesus Christ, we pray that by Your word and spirit, we would be awash in a new understanding of the freeness, the depth and the power of Your love to forgive sins, to bring us back into a restored relationship with You. We pray that You would honor Yourself in Your word, even as we hear it this day. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

Now keep your fingers in the Bible because we're going to turn to a couple of passages which Paul has already spoken about in Romans, chapter 1, verse 2, for instance. You will be reminded that Paul went out of his way to indicate that the gospel that he was announcing, the gospel that he was teaching, had in fact been taught beforehand by the prophets. In Romans 1:1 he says, "the gospel of God." And then look at verse 2: "The gospel of God which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures." In passing, in other words, Paul is reminding us that this teaching that he is bringing about the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is one which had been promised beforehand in the writings of the Old Testament. And then again if you'll turn to Romans, chapter 3, verse 21, he indicates that the righteousness apart from the law which is offered to those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ is, look at the last phrase, "witnessed the Law and the Prophets." In other words, this righteousness that is not produced by us, this righteousness that is an alien righteousness, this righteousness which is accomplished by Jesus Christ, but which is available to us by faith, has been witnessed by the law and the prophets. In other words, they teaching about that righteousness which is not a self-righteousness. It's not a righteousness of our works, it's a righteousness of Christ.

So Paul has tried to make it very clear that this gospel of his salvation is rooted in the teaching in the Old Testament. Now he's going to make that clear here again in Romans, chapter 4, verses 1 through 3 and for good reason. As I've already mentioned, the rabbis of Paul's day would have had a real disagreement with him about this doctrine of justification by faith. They taught very clearly that God's salvation, God's election of His people was based upon merit; that our righteousness compelled God's electing, saving choice of us in salvation. And

this the apostle Paul had diametrically opposed in Romans, chapter 3.

And so he's waiting for an argument to begin. And the argument is going to go something like this. "Well, Paul, we understand what you've said in Romans, chapter 3, but we disagree with you. And we disagree with you because we think that you have interpreted the scriptures wrongly. We believe that the Scriptures will show you if you'll for instance go back and turn to Genesis 15, verse 6. We believe that the Scriptures teach that Abraham was chosen by God because of his righteousness. He merited God's choice of him, he merited God's choice of him as the head of Israel.

And the apostle Paul then, in Romans, chapter 4, verses 1 through 3 says, "All right I'd like to enter into that argument with you, because I believe that I can show you in two great characters in the Old Testament." And he does this in first ten or so verses, looking at Abraham and David. "I believe," he says, "that I can show you through these two characters in the Old Testament that God operated in salvation by grace through faith." In other words it is not simply that I am announcing that Christians are saved by grace through faith, but that all believers in the one true God in all ages are saved by grace through faith. In other words there's not one way of salvation in the Old Testament and another way of salvation in the new. And so Paul here in Romans 4, 1 through 3, is answering an objection which he is expecting. This objection comes from the quarter of the Jewish rabbis, but it is an objection which perhaps had an impact on some of the Jewish Christians and perhaps even some of the Gentile Christians there in the church in Rome.

And so in this answer to the objection, he actually accomplishes two things. He first of all manages to show us the continuity of God's plan of salvation. God's plan of salvation is one. It's not multi-parted. There are not numerous different ways that one is saved. Paul makes it clear that one is saved the same way in all times and all ages. There's one God, there's one Lord, there's one faith, there's one baptism. Paul makes it clear that God's way of salvation is singular, it's not plural. There are not multiple ways to be saved. Secondly, he makes it clear here that the way of salvation must exclude boasting. That any way of salvation suggested by man that allows man to stand before God and boast and demand on the basis of something in Him is obviously blasphemous, sacrilegious and offensive. And so in his great answer he responds teaching us those two things. I'd like to focus on two or three things that we learn in this passage in these brief verses.

I. The gospel teaching about justification by faith is confirmed in the life and experience of Abraham.

First of all in verse 1 you'll see Paul's teaching on the continuity of grace. Then in verse 2 you'll see his emphasis is on the unconditionality of grace. And then in

verse 3 you'll see his teaching about the instrument of grace. And I'd like to look at those three things with you today.

First, in verse 1, his teaching on the continuity of grace. Paul, in verse 1, is beginning to establish his teaching on justification by appealing to the Old Testament. And he is doing this knowing that the passage that he is going to quote is a favorite passage quoted by the rabbis to prove the opposite of what he is going to demonstrate from it. So Paul is establishing his teaching on justification by appealing to the Old Testament, but in doing so he knows that he is entering into an argument with the rabbis. But he teaches here in verse 1 that the gospel teaching about justification is in fact confirmed in the life and the experience of Abraham.

Now what better way, of course, to get the attention of Jewish Christians. Jewish Christians who are not only by the flesh, but also by faith, the children of Abraham. And Paul is wanting them to see that Abraham, too, was justified by faith. The Jews of Paul's day would have challenged his teaching on justification, and they would have charged him with coming up with a new idea that was utterly unknown in the Old Testament. They would have said, "Paul, that's very interesting. I see the flow of your argument. I don't see this anywhere in the Old Testament. You're coming up with this out of thin air. Nobody has ever heard of this stuff before." And so Paul is concerned to take up that issue, and he does so by saying, "Well, let me give you a good example of justification by faith. Let's go to Abraham." He goes right back to the fountainhead of Israel, the father of Israel. And he says, "Well, Abraham was justified by faith. Let's start there." And Paul knows that his contemporaries would have appealed to Abraham to prove that salvation was by works, that salvation was by our own righteousness, that salvation at least in some degree was by our own merit. But Paul appeals to the Old Testament to show that, in fact, the Old Testament, if you look at it closely, teaches the opposite. That salvation is in fact by grace, and that it's received by faith.

But you notice that in doing so Paul teaches you something about the continuity of grace. He is saying to New Testament believers, your salvation is accomplished the same way that the salvation of believers under the Old Testament was accomplished. It's not done in some different way. It's not that you're saved by faith, and they were saved by works. It's not that you were saved by Christ, and they were saved by the blood sacrifices of animals. No, they were saved by the same means. God accomplished their salvation by the blood of Christ, and they received their salvation by faith. Paul would never have asked this question. We ask this kind of question all the time. You know, we know that we're saved by grace in the New Testament, but how were they saved in the Old Testament? We ask that kind of question all the time. We know the Holy Spirit operates this way in the New Testament, but how did He operate in the Old Testament, or did He operate in the Old Testament? That kind of a question never would have occurred to the apostle Paul.

Now Paul might have said the question this way: Well, we know that salvation is by grace in the Old Testament. I wonder if it's still the same in the New Testament? Paul makes it very clear this continuity of God's plan of salvation, He always operated by grace and faith was always the instrument whereby we receive salvation. Paul is showing here that salvation is one and the same in all ages. It's accomplished by the same means. It's received by the same means. And so we see the continuity of grace. The New Testament believer shares in the same salvation as the Old Testament believer. There is one covenant of grace.

II. If our works have any place in our justification then salvation is not by grace and we have reason to boast.

And then in verse 2 Paul tells us something about the unconditionality of grace. Paul, in direct challenge to contemporary Jewish teaching, is asserting that Abraham was not justified by works. And this is very important because as far as Paul is concerned, because if our works have any place at all in our justification, then salvation is not by grace; and we have reason, we have cause to boast before God. The Jews of Paul's day taught that Abraham was chosen by God because of his righteousness. They taught that he was the most righteous man of his day, and that, therefore, God chose him to be the father of Israel. Furthermore, the Jews of Paul's day taught that Abraham was without sin, that he did not need to repent, and that he had kept God's law perfectly throughout his life.

Now you say, oh come on, nobody's ever said that. Let me give you a couple of quotes. In the prayer of Manasseh, which was written just a couple of centuries before the time of Christ, we read this: "Therefore, You, O Lord, the God of the righteous have not appointed repentance for the righteous, for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who did not sin against you. But you have appointed repentance for me, a sinner." Now when you read that phrase, at first you might think, well, he's being humble. You say I'm a sinner, you've appointed repentance for me, but these other people were much more righteous than me. But you see there's really bad theology contained in that phrase. There's the suggestion that there's someone out there that doesn't need to repent, that there's someone out there that hasn't sinned other than our Lord Jesus Christ. And the apostle Paul is contradicting just that kind of teaching.

And then there's this quotation from the book of Jubilees, another Jewish work written before the time of Christ. It says this: "Abraham was perfect in his deeds with the Lord and well pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life." Read Genesis 12 through 17 recently? You want to go, hello, wake up. This is not the Abraham of Genesis 12 through 17. The Abraham in Genesis 12 through 17 was a man who fell into sin and displeased the Lord and wounded his own people, and who had to be restored in his feeble faith. And yet this was the kind of

teaching and, in fact, even in commenting on Genesis 15:6, and if you'll look at Romans 4:3, you'll see a quotation of Genesis 15:6. Look at the quote again closely. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Listen to what the rabbis said about that verse: "Our father, Abraham became the heir of this and the world to come simply by the merit of faith. In other words, his faith was a work whereby he earned the right to the inheritance of this world and the world to come."

Now Paul says, look, let's grant for a minute that you're right. That Abraham merited salvation. That his righteousness is the cause of God's choosing him. If that is the case, then Abraham has the right to boast before God. Now the minute those words get out of Paul's mouth, every pious Jew immediately recoils at the idea of somebody standing before God and boasting. Immediately, the Jew, the Jewish Christian, the Gentile Christian knows well that can't be. No one can stand before God and boast. No one can stand before God in his own righteousness and demand that God take account of him in his own merit, in his own goodness, in his own works. And so the apostle says, "Aha, but you see if you say that we are saved by our own righteousness, if we're saved by our works, if we're saved by our deeds, if we merit God's salvation, then we have a reason to boast before God."

And of course Paul concludes that verse by saying, "Look, but not before God." What is Paul saying in that phrase? Nobody has the right to stand before God and boast. But he is saying very clearly if you teach that God's salvation is based upon your righteousness, you must necessarily teach that it's okay to boast before God, which is patently absurd, the apostle makes clear. Why is Paul saying this? Because his contemporaries were saying that God's election, God's choice, God's salvation of Abraham was based upon Abraham's righteousness. And Paul says, look, that's upside down. If you say that God's salvation of Abraham was based upon Abraham's righteousness, you're saying that God's salvation of Abraham was based on something in Abraham, not something in God. God looked out, and He saw that Abraham was good. And, therefore, God did two things: First, God responded to something in Abraham, and secondly you need to understand that God's election, God's choice, God's salvation of Abraham was conditional. God's responding to something in Abraham, and God's giving grace to Abraham is conditioned upon Abraham, and what he does. And Paul says that's entirely wrong. That's an entirely wrong view of salvation. It's an entirely wrong view of what God did in the Old Testament because over and over it's made clear in the Old Testament that God comes in salvation in initiative to His people, and that they do what? They respond to God's promise. They respond to God's free offer. It's not that God responds to something in them. It's that they respond to something in God. It's not that His salvation is conditioned upon something in them, it is that their salvation is purchased in Christ, and He fulfills all the conditions necessary for their salvation. God's sovereignty and salvation can only be maintained by the doctrine of justification by faith. Otherwise, we have to say that we save ourselves. If we say that

salvation is by our works, then ultimately we must say that we save ourselves. Listen to what Jonathan Edwards says: "If there be ground for you to trust in your own righteousness, then all that Christ did to purchase salvation, and all that God did to prepare the way for salvation, is in vain." Paul is reminding us here that the salvation which is set forth in the Bible from Genesis to Romans is unconditional in this sense. It is not conditioned upon something in us that prompts it or allows it or accomplishes it. It is accomplished by God in Christ. It is freely offered. It's not conditioned upon something in us. And so Paul teaches us about the continuity of grace here, and he teaches us about the unconditionality of grace.

III. The Bible teaches that Abraham was justified by faith, i.e., he believed God and His promise, and was imputed righteousness.

And then in verse 3 he goes on to teach us about the instrument of grace. Paul establishes, and he elaborates on this teaching by appealing to Genesis 15:6, that favorite rabbinic text. And he tells us there that contrary to what they have heard, contrary to what those Jewish Christians have heard, that Abraham was justified by faith. That is, he believed God, he believed his promise, and was imputed righteousness.

Paul goes right to this main Jewish proof text, and he explodes their argument. Now let's look at it closely. This is worth looking at closely. Listen again to what the rabbi had said about Genesis 15:6. He said this: "Our father, Abraham, became the heir of this and the coming world, simply by the merit of faith." So he had earned this salvation through the merit of his faith. Now listen to Genesis 15:6 again. "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now what's missing in that passage that the rabbi had added in? Think about it for a minute. What's missing in that passage that the rabbi added in? Now you think, it's been a hard week. Why are you pressing me on this? Look, we've been listening all week about the difference between 'shall' and 'may' and which act was passed last by the Florida legislature in the 1887 act of the electoral college. We can at least concentrate on this for a few minutes. What's missing in Romans 4:3? What did the rabbis put in that's not there in Romans 4:3? Here's Paul's argument. He says, I don't see anything there about earning merit or works. They are entirely absent in Genesis 15:6. Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him in his righteousness. I see nothing about Abraham's merit. I see nothing about Abraham's merit. I see nothing about Abraham's works. I see nothing about Abraham's righteousness. I see only faith, and I see the grace of God.

I want you to notice three things about that glorious verse. First of all, Abraham believed. Abraham's receipt of the promise was based upon his response to God's word of promise. It's not that God went down and said, "Hummm, Abraham, you're good. I'm going to bless you." It's that Abraham looked up to God who had made a good promise to him. God had taken the initiative. And

Abraham did what? He responded to God. Abraham's salvation isn't about God responding to Abraham. It's about Abraham responding to God. God's gift of salvation to Abraham is not secondary. It's not a response to something in Abraham, or something that Abraham has done. God's salvation of Abraham is primary. God reaches out to him first. He says to him, while he's a pagan idol worshiper in Ur of the Chaldeas, "Abraham, come out and I'll make you a great people." And so we see here that Abraham's believing is the instrument whereby he receives the promise that God is in the first place held out toward him. Secondly, notice that by his believing he was counted righteous. He was credited as being righteous. He was considered as righteous. He was imputed righteousness.

This passage, and many others in Paul's teaching in Romans and Ephesians and Philemon formed the basis of a glorious doctrine called the imputation, the Doctrine of Imputation. We are imputed, Paul tells us in Romans 5. We are imputed the sin of Adam. All of us are guilty in Adam, but there are two more imputations that you need to pay attention to. It's not merely that we are counted as deserving of condemnation in Adam, it is also that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us and our sinfulness is imputed to Christ. So that on the cross the exact price for our sinfulness is paid, and on the cross Christ's righteousness is established and made complete and imputed to us. We are counted as righteous, and Abraham believed, and it was counted to him as righteous. God counted him, He credited him, He considered him as a righteous man. It's not something in Abraham that prompts this. It's something in God, and it is promised.

And finally in this verse notice that faith is the means of receiving that righteousness. It's not the cause of that righteousness. It's not that God looked down and said, "Well, you know, Abraham, you have a lot of faith. Therefore, I'm going to make you righteous." No, faith is merely the means, it's merely the instrument whereby God declares Abraham to be just. For us that means that faith is merely the instrument whereby God declares us to be just. It doesn't cause God's salvation. It's the instrument through which God accomplishes it. Paul is not saying, that in the Old Testament they earned salvation by works. That was really too hard, so what God did was, He scaled down a little bit, and in the New Testament you earn salvation by faith. That is not Paul's argument.

First of all, Paul has already told you that salvation is the same in both the Old and New Testament. His argument is this. It is not that we earn salvation by works or that God lowers the bar so that we can sort of skip over a little more easily by earning salvation by faith, it is rather that God gives salvation freely, and faith is the saving response of the believer to God's gift. The Bible from beginning to end teaches free grace justification. Paul is making that absolutely clear.

But do we understand that today? God has accomplished everything necessary for our salvation outside of us. There are always people that think they need to

be good enough to respond to the message of the gospel. Wherever you go you will find a few people who think that they need to tidy themselves up enough in order to be worthy of the gift of salvation. Friends, you can tidy up from now to eternity and you're never going to be worthy of that gift. But your worthiness for the gift is not the point. God has accomplished everything necessary for your salvation outside of you. Your salvation is not based upon something inside of you. It's based upon something that Jesus did. It's based upon the plan of God set in motion before the foundation of the world. Your only, only response to that is to believe, is to receive, is to accept, is to embrace. It is to respond to what God has already set forth in His Son.

Now there are many of you who have believed that for many years today. But that truth never gets old, my friends. It's a truth that you have to go back to over and over and over again as you walk in this Christian life. But there may be some here today who've been in gospel preaching churches all their lives who have never responded to that truth. They have thought that somehow they had something to contribute to their salvation, and hence have never rested completely in Jesus Christ. If that is the case with you, then today is the day of salvation. Today is the day for you to realize that everything that is necessary for your salvation is accomplished outside of you. You contribute absolutely nothing to the basis of God's acceptance of you. You only need respond by faith and believe it, trust in it, receive it with empty hand, bringing nothing, realizing that it's not your works, it's Christ's work. It's not your cross, it's Christ's cross. Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Your cross I cling. That's the message of the gospel. It's an Old Testament message. It's a New Testament message. It's a Bible message. Let's believe it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your one plan of salvation, manifested in Jesus Christ. We thank You for its unconditional freeness, and we thank You, oh Lord, that even faith by which we respond to salvation is a gift of grace. Help us then to believe, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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