

SHARING ABRAHAM'S FAITH

Romans 4:1–8,18–25

Dr. George O. Wood

Romans 4:1–8 says, “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.’” (NIV).

Continuing in verses 18–25 the Scripture says, “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why ‘it was credited to him as righteousness.’ The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (NIV).

We've indicated that if we think of the Book of Romans in terms of a symphony we have already passed through the first major movement of the symphony with Romans 1:18–3:20.

This movement would be called “Condemnation” or “Guilty.” We pick up the second movement of the symphony in 3:21 and it extends through chapter 5. It is called “Justification” or “Made Righteous Before God.”

I. As we looked at the description of justification last week, we noted that Paul is expounding the basic theme of the righteousness of God.

What does it mean for God to be righteous? It means two things. God condemns sin. He takes His place as a judge. He takes His place on the side of law. But that is not sufficient. For God in order to be righteous as well must not only take a position against sin. He takes a position on behalf of the sinner. This is gospel. This is grace. This is mercy. This is God not simply as judge but God as Savior. Jesus stood in our place and took our penalty that we might be free.

Paul then has developed this theme, and he comes to what we now know as Romans 4 where he will provide the illustration and example of the theme that he has addressed in 3:21–31. It's striking by the way, what he does not do here to cite an example of God's grace and being received by God as righteous through faith. He could have cited his own example in chapter 4 and said, “If you want to know how this principle which I've articulated works then let me point to myself. I was the Idi Amin of first-century Judaism. [Many similarities.] I hauled Christians off to prison. I was consenting to their deaths. I stood by and held the garments of those who killed the first Christian martyr. I had in no way any prospect of earning God's grace or coming into His favor. The marvelous grace of God is that He saved me.” He could have used himself as an example.

Or he could have even shared some thrilling testimonies of the church at Corinth where he is writing this letter from. There were persons in Corinth who had just recently been saved from idolatry, from adultery, from thievery and bank robbing, from homosexuality and other kinds of sins. Romans 4 could have been therefore filled with illustrations on the contemporary scene of how God is at work, illustrating this principle.

II. Paul therefore does something that should strike our attention when he cites Abraham as the test case for his doctrine of justification by faith.

For he's saying that the proclamation he brings is not simply rooted in what people are experiencing. It is rooted in something God has been doing for the ages. It is not something just recently discovered. This principle, by the way, is one reason why, continually at this church, we focus in on the written word of God, the revealed Scripture. We could, on the other hand, if we elected, choose to focus in solely on what we are experiencing now living in the 1970s. But God points us back to a firm arch or beyond our experience. So Abraham is the test case that is cited here of this principle.

There are several reasons why Abraham is chosen. He's the only person in the Old Testament who is called "friend of God." Twice he has that title. Even Moses only merits the title "servant of God." It is an extremely high title.

Abraham also is the father of the Jewish people. Paul is realizing that as he proclaims this message there are going to be those—and we have seen his critics as we moved through this chapter, seen him anticipate criticism—critics from Judaism who say, "Paul, this thing which you have enunciated about justification by faith—that is contrary to what we believe. That is contrary to the example of Abraham and to the example of all the patriarchs and Moses and the law and the prophets and the like. Abraham, after all, was justified by works. He piled up great

merit with God.” And what Paul must do in answering that objection is seize Judaism by the roots. And not only Judaism but every religion which relies on human effort and attainment for achieving a walk with God. He must seize it by the roots and pull it up and show that God has had only one way of saving people through the ages. One of the major limitations of dispensational theology is there are seven different ages in which God has related to sin seven different ways. It's as if God doesn't know from one age to the next how He's going to successfully relate to man and He keeps changing His program.

Paul doesn't know anything about that in Romans 4. God has had one program through the ages whereby people come to Him in saving grace. That is through faith. So Abraham is cited.

Paul anticipates his objector, and by the way, we're not going to hit every part of Romans 4 with the kind of totality that this text deserves. But just note the landscape for a moment. Verses 1–8 speaks of the question “Is Abraham justified by works?” The answer is no. Verses 9–12 ask the question, “Is he justified, then, by means of his circumcision?” The answer again is no. Verses 13–17 ask the question “Is he justified then by obedience to the law?” And again the answer is no. Verses 18–25 ask the question, “Is he, then, justified by means of faith?” And the answer is yes.

As Paul begins this chapter, he says, “What shall we then say about Abraham our forefather according to the flesh? If Abraham was justified by works he has something to boast about but not before God” (Romans 4:1–2). You must remember Paul's critics listening to him really felt that Abraham earned his standing with God, piled up merits. Merit, indeed, that was great enough so that centuries later, simply because of his promise to Abraham, God would lead Abraham's descendants out of slavery. His sheer activity on behalf of what Abraham had done.

Is this the case, Paul says, "If Abraham is justified by God on the basis of his works then he has something to boast about."

How can I illustrate this in a way that would really kind of cross on the modern scene? Let's suppose I drove down to a Rolls Royce dealership. I don't know a great deal about Rolls Royce models that are available. Suppose I walked in and saw this fabulous Rolls Royce sitting there, this \$35,000 car. I looked at it and the dealer comes out and says, "You like that car?" I say, "Yes I like that." The dealer says, "We are selling those today for \$35,000 cash only." I say, "Fine." I get out my wallet and drop \$35,000 on the table, take the Rolls Royce. I'm tooling along the street and every chance I get I say, "This really says something about my status. I have taste. Look at the color. I have finances. Look at this car. This enhances me. I have something to boast about. I laid cash down and walked out with the car."

Go back with me though to the showroom and rehearse the scene in a different way. I come in and look at the Rolls Royce and the dealer says, "It's cash today only." I say I have to pass it up this time. He says, "I'm sorry. But what do you do?" I say, "I'm a pastor." He says, "I've been wanting to do something for a minister for along time and it happens that I haven't done anything for the church lately. I would like to give you this car. Here are the keys. Here's the title. Take it."

Now my grounds for boasting are different. When I go out in that car and anybody asks me how I got it I have to talk about the mercy of the dealer who took compassion on me and gave me the car. I must boast in the dealer and if I ever changed it around and start boasting of my economic status or power and the dealer happens to overhear the conversation, he would be extremely disappointed of my boasting because I would be falsifying what is the true situation.

The fact is if I can get the Roles Royce on my own money then it doesn't matter what kind of a person the dealer is. He can be the best and finest of persons or he can be the worst of crooks and shysters. The fact is I got it on my own and I deserved it. If he gave it to me it says something of him and his quality of mercy.

III. Paul then says if we attain our salvation on the basis of what we do it really doesn't matter what God is like.

We can just earn it on our own and we can go around and brag on it. But, if it is that God has given it to us, there is no room for boasting. So, therefore, saint Paul says Abraham has no reason to boast in the presence of God. Why? Because the Scriptures say "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3).

In that statement Paul takes us back to Genesis 15:6 to the first time the word "believe" was used in Scripture; the first time the word "righteousness" was used in Scripture; the first time the word "reckoned" was used in Scripture to a foundational text and he shows us how Abraham became justified or declared not guilty or became righteous in God's presence.

If Abraham is trying to be righteous by means of his works, rather than his faith, we could lay that to rest rather rapidly in another direction. Let's call Sarah his wife for a moment. Usually wives or husbands or people who are closest to us are better at telling the true story of our personality than we are ourselves. If Abraham has any illusions about being righteous, all we have to do is summon Sarah as a character witness. "Sarah, is Abraham your husband, a righteous man?"

"Abraham is a good man in a lot of ways. But I've seen him panic. I remember a time we were in Egypt. He thought because I was so beautiful that Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, who desired me for his wife and he would bump him off. He came to me and said, 'Pose as my sister, which is

technically correct. You're my half-sister. Don't let anybody know you're my wife.' He was willing to give me in marriage to another man simply to save his own skin.”

How many of you wives would tolerate that in your husbands? Sarah, I don't think would give Abraham a very good passing mark. Hagar would have less to say about Abraham's righteousness. And if you ask the Pharaoh or Abimelech, two people to whom Abraham tried to pass Sarah off as his sister, Pharaoh would say, “I sent the guy packing! Kicked him right out of my kingdom.”

If Abraham is depending on works he cannot be righteous, but instead he's depending on faith. How do we understand that? The setting of Genesis 15 is this. Abraham has been intense. He's reflecting on a promise that ten years before had driven him out of a place called Haran because God had said, “I will bless you. I will make you a great nation. I will give to you a great land” (Genesis 12:1–3). So following God he had set off. It's been ten years and there's been no son yet that is born to him. Abraham is lamenting before God that his heir is a servant born in his own household. The Lord does something extremely touching at this point. He takes Abraham outside and He shows him the stars of the heavens. He says, “As many of these stars as there are, the unlimited potential which you cannot count, so shall your seed, your children, also be.”

The text then says that Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Here is an awfully lot there in respect to faith, what God calls us to in respect to our faith. When God says to us to believe it is not something simply about himself. We often think that true belief in the Christian sense is believing a certain set of statements about God. That's an element of belief but it's not the totality. When God took Abraham out of his tent, He didn't say to him, “Abraham, I want you to believe that I am immutable, eternal, incomprehensible, all-knowledgeable, all-powerful and that I am existing in three persons: Father, Son and Holy

Spirit.” He didn’t put that kind of a test to him although that would be an important ingredient of faith. He says something to him like this, “I am the God who is able to do something for you.” And faith if it’s to be real faith must not only include a set of statements and beliefs we have in respect to God. It inevitably gets connected with us. And God is saying something extremely important to us: “If you believe in me then you’ll find something for your own life. You’ll find unlimited potential.” This is what’s being said to Abraham, “Abraham, look at your potential. If you trust Me it’s unlimited.”

Jesus is saying this so many times to us continually in the gospels: “He who follows Me shall never die death in a spiritual sense. He who follows Me shall rule and reign with Me. He who follows Me shall enjoy the resurrection. He who follows Me shall have life.” Jesus calls us to faith and unlimited potential when He says “Believe. All you have to do to receive it is believe it.”

And Abraham does not simply do a mental checklist, but he does something very active in his spiritual life. In spite of the evidences, in spite of the circumstances around him, he said, “I believe that God will do that for me.” He had faith.

Sometimes, by the way, in order to see what God wants to do for us, we have to get out of our tents, out of our kitchen or out of our study, someplace in the open where’s there’s a physical openness or a spiritual openness to begin to see that God has a marvelous design that He has for our lives. Abraham believed God and God reckoned it to him as righteousness. In other words God accepted his faith instead of his works and declared on account of his faith that he, Abraham, was righteous.

IV. This phrase “reckoned righteous” we may also use the word “justification” to describe it.

It's a tough concept to get a hold of, this justification.

I think how in the world can I portray to you the meaning of what's wrapped up in that phrase "reckoned righteous." Is there a term we use in our parlance today which can help explain justification and "reckoned righteous." All of a sudden it dawned on me there's a word in the field of real estate which explains what the word "justification" explains in the world of theology. It's the word "sold."

Let me explain.

When we sold our home recently and bought another home we had a small amount of money left—about \$500. My wife has wanted for some time to get some kind of investment. She felt that real estate would be a tremendous investment. So she found some new homes they were building up in Santa Ana. I said "OK, this is yours. But this is all I can give you. No more. So whatever you do, it's purely going to be done on faith." She took that \$500 and managed to buy this home that was under construction. She was going to use it as an investment. This was September or early October. I said, "That thing is going to be built in January or February. At that time you're going to have some goods to come through." I knew things were going to fall apart. But I was amazed what that \$500 could do. It was worth .007, that's 7/10 of 1% of the total value of the house and on the basis of that \$500 the realtor put a "Sold" sticker on the house. Nobody else could get a hold of it. All these months nobody else could get a hold of it because it's tied up with the down payment. It is sold. Then a marvelous thing happened. When the time to close came about, she did not have the funds but God supplied another person to come in as co-owner. She prayed, "Lord, if You bail me out, I'll give You \$500 and what's left over is mine to reinvest." She's giving \$500 to our missions commitment.

Abraham's faith is the kind of the way he enters into the transaction. Just as the word "sold" represents that the house has been sold, is being sold, it is in escrow and it shall be closed or it shall be sold when it comes through escrow, so the word "saved" or "justified" has those dimensions to it. We have been justified. We are being justified. We shall be justified. We have been saved; we are being saved; we shall be saved. But once our faith, which is supplied by God himself to get us in the whole transaction, once our faith gets us in and becomes active we then are in transit. And Abraham is justified by his faith. God hangs a "Sold" sign around him and says "justified."

This sign is so strong, as saint Paul will say that Abraham when he did everything to take the whole transaction out of escrow, out of the escrow of justification because he yet had faith in God, God did not reckon his sins. God kept that property for himself justified. Kind of that word "justified" is not something we earn. It is a gift. It is the grace of God given to us and we owe it therefore completely to Him.

Paul, in expounding this, will go on to counter some objections which are raised. "What about Abraham's circumcision? Doesn't that count for anything?" And Paul says, "No, he had faith before he was circumcised—fourteen years in fact before he was circumcised. We read in Genesis that he had faith. So Paul says Abraham is not simply the father of all who have gone through a physical act of marking their flesh as a sign of their covenant. No, Abraham because he had faith before he was circumcised is the father of all people who have faith, whether they are circumcised or uncircumcised. This is the blessing: "I will give him many nations."

"What about the law?" Paul is asked. The law again came centuries after Abraham, and the law can't promise anything. It can only tell us you can't make it. In verses 18–25 Paul goes on into a fuller explanation of Abraham's faith. He says we have a chance to share this faith with

Abraham. And Abraham grew so strong in his faith that he didn't count his own limitations or the deadness of Sarah's womb but he grew strong in faith toward God.

I like the way the Scriptures talk to us about people because they show so much of their humanness. It strikes me also that they are people like me. One thing, as you read the story of Abraham, you can find steady support for the fact that his faith grew strong in God.

That's why we use the word "faith."

I really have some problems at times. Faith can be so mistaken, like if you raise your hand and come down an aisle that's it. Faith is more than that. Maybe it starts there but it's an affirming thing that goes on believing and trusting in God. It's not a word but it's a grace from God given to us. Abraham as he walked with God found his trust in God growing stronger. That thirty years after this experience when God had showed him the stars of heaven, thirty years later, God calls him now with his son Isaac to go out on Mount Moriah which would become the site of the temple, on that very mountain, God calls him to go and sacrifice his son. Abraham's faith in God is so strong that he is willing to take a knife to his own son out of the faith that God makes alive. That if God orders him to slay Isaac, yet God had promised him a generation through Isaac and blessing through Isaac and God would raise him back from the dead.

If you have a little boy, you think about the kind of faith that was required of Abraham here in respect for what God called him to do toward his own son. Abraham realized the limits of his faith when he was willing to do this. He totally trusted in God to bring resurrection. Therefore Abraham's faith had as its content, the God who brings life, the God of the resurrection.

Saint Paul said that's really not that much different than us because this Scripture, "it was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness" was meant also for us. Because when you believe that

God raised Jesus from the dead you're believing in the same affirmation that Abraham had. It is God who brings life.

So look at Jesus and recognize this: The one who through His death died for our trespasses also provided all the access necessary to bring us safely through the whole phase of being justified by God forever and eternally in His presence.

It's a striking thing to believe in the resurrection of the dead. As Christians maybe there's occasions when we use the term "resurrection" so much that we forget what an incredible belief we really have. I don't know if you've had the experience of witnessing an embalming. I have earlier in my life. I realized as I witnessed that what my faith was really saying at that point. That body, once it is dead, has no capacity any more to respond. It cannot feel. It cannot talk. It cannot relate. It cannot do anything. It cannot feel anything. Yet God is saying that for all of those who have faith because He's already demonstrated this in Jesus Christ there comes a moment in our existence even if we have died and become as dust in the earth, God is going to re-collect and re-gather and that which has lost it's color, that which has lost its feel, that which has lost its ability to speak and relate and to be young and warm and vibrant will regain it. This great miracle will be given to us through faith.

And whereas Abraham four thousand years ago looked at the stars in the heavens and he believed that God would do that for him, so also our faith is anticipatory in this sense. That we look forward to the totality of what Christ has for us. We have more going for us than Abraham because now we have demonstrated that Jesus is risen from the dead but yet our faith looks forward to the unlimited potential of the ages when God forever brings us into His presence in resurrected form. It will be reckoned to all of those who had faith in Christ's righteousness, being able to stand in God's presence as Abraham. God give you faith to reach out and trust.

Closing Prayer

You have the power to make alive. You have the power to make us alive when we are dead in trespasses and sins. You have power to make us alive when we have fallen short of Your glory. You have power to forgive when we have transgressed. You have great and extraordinary power. That You will take these remains either through Your coming and raise us literally without the need of death into Your presence forevermore. Or, if in the event of death, You will resurrect our bodies and bring us forever into Your presence. So we would not today rely on any of our good deeds. Or in any of our earnestness or our attempts to win Your favor. We acknowledge especially as we stand here at this communion table that Jesus our Lord has already won favor for us and that there now remains before us hope and there remains also for us the righteousness which You give to us. Which means we're in a condition of being free in Your presence. Sin cannot be laid to our account because You have chosen through faith to declare us not guilty. We praise You for what You have done, therefore, our Lord, and we anticipate with keen eagerness what You are going to yet do in our lives both here and in the age to come. We thank You for the exceeding great promises which You have made available and open to us. We rise up in our hearts to appreciate, to love and to respond to You. Through Jesus our Lord. Amen.