

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ABRAHAM'S FAITH

Romans 4:1-25

Key Verse: 4:3

*What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”*

In Romans 3, Paul declared that all people have sinned and are under the righteous judgment of God. There is no one righteous, not even one. Everyone is condemned to eternal death. Then Paul gave us the good news of Jesus Christ. God, in his mercy, opened a way for us to be saved. He sent his one and only Son Jesus to pay for the price of our sins with his blood. Our salvation is totally by God's grace. It is impossible for us to earn salvation with our good behavior. We are justified freely by the grace of God when we believe in Jesus. In today's passage, Paul uses Abraham as an example to make the point about how we are saved by grace, not by works. He also teaches us the character of Abraham's faith. May God help us to learn from Abraham so that we may follow in the footsteps of his faith!

### I. ABRAHAM WAS JUSTIFIED BY FAITH (1-17)

Look at verses 1-3. *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”* The Jews were proud to be called children of Abraham. They respected him. So Abraham was a good example to use to help them to understand justification by faith. If their forefather Abraham was saved by his good behavior, justification by faith in Jesus alone would be less convincing to them. But the fact is that Abraham was saved by his faith. He didn't earn it by doing some good works. What does Scripture say about this? Genesis 15:6 says: “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” It clearly says that God made Abraham righteous when he believed the Lord. This is very important to us today as well. If Abraham had to earn his righteousness, then we would also need to do good works in order to be justified, which Paul already said is not possible. No one is good enough before God to merit his righteousness. But the fact is that Abraham was justified by faith alone. Therefore, we are also justified by faith alone, as his spiritual descendants. This is by God's design. If even a fraction of our salvation is based on our works, then our salvation is not a free gift, but a compensation to our works (4). And if we are given justification as a compensation, we would become proud, saying, “Hey, I earned my salvation.” We would fall into the sin of pride. More importantly, no one is good enough to earn his or her justification. The wages of sin is death (Ro 6:23). Our paycheck will never be enough to pay for the price of our sins. *However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness* (5). Abraham is the evidence that we are justified when we believe in Jesus.

It is interesting to note that Abraham's faith was “credited” to him as righteousness. The word “credited” (in Greek λογίζεται (logizetai) meaning reckoned or

counted) appears 10 times in this chapter. It is as if God entered Abraham's faith as a credit in his accounting system. And then, he settled the account when Jesus came to pay for the full price of Abraham's sins. At the moment Jesus died on the cross, declaring, "It is finished," all of Abraham's sins were canceled out and his salvation became official. This is the reason why Abraham was looking forward to the coming of the Messiah. Jesus said in John 8:56, "Your father Abraham rejoiced as he looked forward to my coming. He saw it and was glad." In addition, the word "credit" reminds us that all of us have been saved by the debt of love from Jesus. None of us could pay for the price of our sins. But Jesus did with his own life. We owe him an eternal debt of love!

Abraham was not the only one who was justified apart from works. Look at verses 6-8. *David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them."* David was a man after God's own heart (Ac 13:22). But he was not perfect. He sinned before God. In fact, he committed adultery and murder. But when he repented before God from his heart, his sins were forgiven. God credited to him righteousness apart from works (6). This grace of God made David the happiest man in the world. David had many things to make him happy, including gorgeous women, many children, loyal friends, enormous wealth, power, beautiful palace, and so on. But he said that the most blessed man is one whose sins are forgiven by God. He really appreciated the grace of God. He knew in his heart that he didn't deserve to be forgiven. But in his mercy and grace, God did not count his sins against him. David was justified by the grace of God, not by his works.

In verses 9-12, Paul makes the point that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness before he was circumcised, not after. Therefore, Abraham's example is applied to not only the circumcised Jews but also the uncircumcised Gentiles who believe in Jesus. Abraham is "the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them" (11). In fact, Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness in Genesis 15 and his circumcision was not done until in Genesis 17. Not only that, Abraham received circumcision "as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (11). Circumcision was just a sign. A sign is not the real thing. It only points to the real thing. If you see a sign that says "Starbucks coffee," you don't try to drink the sign. Instead, you go into the store and buy the real thing to drink. Abraham's circumcision pointed to the righteousness he received by faith. Why is this important for us to know? Look at verse 12. *And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.* It was not for his circumcision but for his faith Abraham was credited as righteous before God. So it is not circumcision or uncircumcision that counts when it comes to justification. Only faith in Jesus Christ counts.

Why does Paul bring up the subject of circumcision again and again in his letters? We need to understand the historical background behind this very critical matter for the early church. The church in Antioch, Syria, was a first Gentile church. Many Gentiles became Christians as the Holy Spirit moved their hearts through the word of God. Then

some Jewish Christians came from Jerusalem and told them, “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved” (Ac 15:1). They implied that faith in Jesus was not enough for salvation. They added circumcision to the gospel. Paul saw the great danger in this false teaching and brought the problem to the Jerusalem Council for resolution. Whenever he had opportunity, he vigorously defended the gospel from this false teaching. He said, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation” (Gal 6:15). Is this also relevant to us today? Yes, it is. Circumcision to us may be anything other than faith in Jesus that people may consider for salvation. Since faith in Jesus seems too simple, people are tempted to add something else to the gospel of Jesus Christ. But as we learn in Romans again and again, we are saved by faith plus nothing else. Our baptism, church membership, and moral behavior are significant, but they are not required for our salvation. We are saved by faith alone. We are justified when we follow in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham who trusted God and walked with God.

Next, Paul deals with the issue of keeping the law in verses 13-17. We learned earlier that the law has the important function of helping us to know what is right and what is wrong. The law does not have the power to save us. Instead, the law brings the wrath of God (15). Paul teaches us that, just as Abraham was justified by faith before his circumcision, his righteousness came before the law as well, which was not given until the time of Moses. Abraham was saved when he believed that God would keep his promise, not because he observed the law. Therefore, we the descendants of Abraham are also saved by faith apart from the law. Look at verses 16-17. *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.* Our salvation is guaranteed when we believe in God’s promise (16). If our salvation depended on our observance of the law, we would have no assurance of salvation, because we cannot keep the law 100% 24/7. Our salvation is guaranteed because it comes from God who keeps his promises 100%.

## II. THE CHARACTER OF ABRAHAM’S FAITH (17-25)

So far, we learned that Abraham was justified by faith in God, not by his works. Then one question comes to us, “What kind of faith did Abraham have?” How can we follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had? (12) From our Genesis study, we know that Abraham was a great man of faith. God called him to begin a new life of faith when he was a 75-year-old man living in an idol-infested region. His wife Sarah was past menopause and they had no children. But God promised that he would make him a great nation. Abraham believed in the promise and left his hometown even though he did not know where he was going. He had a simple, obedient faith. He trusted in God and believed in his promise. But his faith was not always strong. He stumbled several times in his journey of life. Each time, however, he repented his unbelief and grew in faith step by step. Finally, his faith matured to the point that he was willing to offer his only son Isaac as a burnt offering, in obedience to God’s words.

There are many things we can learn from Abraham's life of faith. But Paul emphasizes only one of them here, that is, his faith in believing God's promise. Look at verses 18-22. *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."* Let us put ourselves in Abraham's shoes. You are an old man, 99 years old. Your wife is about 90 years old. Your body is as good as dead. Your wife's womb is also dead. Your fertility doctor says that your sperm count is zero and your wife's ovary can lay no eggs. And it's been 24 years since God promised to give you children, but nothing like that has happened. Then one day, an angel of God comes to you and your wife and says, "By this time next year, you will have a son. You are to name him Isaac." How would you react? Of course, you will laugh. In fact, both Abraham and Sarah laughed. But it was only a momentary, jerky reaction to the unbelievable news. As they sat down to pray together, they decided to believe that it would happen, because it was the promise coming from God. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed in God's words. He did not weaken in his faith in God who keeps his promises. He did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God. He was fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. He gave glory to God by his strong faith. And God credited his faith to him as righteousness (22). Again this applies to all of us today, as Paul says: *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 (23-24).* We are justified by faith in Jesus who died for our sins and was raised to life on the third day according to the Scriptures (25).

What can we learn from Abraham? We can learn his faith that believes in God's promises. To live by faith in God means to live by the word of God, that is, the promise of God. To believe in God is to believe in his promises. This sounds simple, but it is not so simple. We can easily believe it when someone says that  $1 + 1 = 2$ . But it is not so easy to believe it when someone says  $1 + 1 = 1$ . That's what God told Abraham. It was humanly impossible for them to have a baby in their old ages. But when God told him about his son, Abraham believed that it would happen to him. He believed it because he trusted in God. He didn't waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God. Again this wasn't easy for him because God's promise didn't seem realistic at all. In John 3, we learn that a religious leader named Nicodemus had a hard time in believing. When Jesus told him that he had to be born again to see the kingdom of God, he protested, saying, "How can I go back to my mother's womb to be born when I am old?" Jesus told him a story about the bronze snake of Moses. God was angry with his people when they complained bitterly for leading them out of their slavery in Egypt into the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. God sent venomous snakes to punish the ungrateful people. Then they came to senses and pleaded with Moses to ask God to save them. In his mercy, God told Moses to hang a bronze snake on a pole with the promise that those who looked up the snake would live. It was not the snake *per se* that had the power to

save them, but it was the promise of God they had to believe. But it was not easy to look up the lifeless snake when many hissing snakes were circling them on the ground. Only by faith in God's promise, they would look up the snake and live. Likewise, to have faith in God means to believe in God's promise even when it is not very realistic or we cannot see it with our physical eyes. We believe Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures. We believe that he rose from the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures. We believe that he will come back someday to take us to the kingdom of God to reign with us in eternity.

When we look down ourselves, we only see what we cannot do because of our sinful nature. We pray that God may raise up disciples of Jesus from among SU students, but we lack the power to change ourselves let alone help change other people. Still, we learn here that Abraham became a father of many nations, not because he was a great man with charisma and power, but because he had faith that believed in God's promises. Our God has a good track record in keeping his promises. He kept all the promises that he had made. The biggest promise he kept was that he sent his one and only Son Jesus to save us from our sin and death. By faith, we believe that he will keep all future promises, including the promise that Jesus will return someday to take us to heaven!

In conclusion, Abraham, our father of faith, was justified by faith in God, not by works. We are also saved by our faith in Jesus alone, not by some good works. Abraham believed in God's promise even though it was unrealistic. May God help us to believe in God's promises because our God always keep his promises! May God help us to follow in the footsteps of Abraham's faith!