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Romans 4:1-8 “Abraham: Proof of Justification by Faith”

Intro. In the 3rd chapter of Romans Paul taught that we are made right with God by faith, and not by keeping and obeying the Law of Moses. But most people believe that we gain acceptance with God through our works. Men have always thought that they could buy salvation on the installment plan by doing some good works & religious acts periodically.

So what Paul was teaching in chapter 3 was contrary to the beliefs of most people, and it seemed new. But Paul affirmed in v.21 that his gospel of obtaining righteousness by faith apart from the law was “witnessed by the law and the prophets.” That phrase stood for the whole Old Testament. So in chapter 4 of Romans he gives an example of the fact that the Old Testament affirms that we are made right with God by faith. And who better to appeal to than Abraham. Abraham is called the “forefather” of the Jews in v.1. The whole nation of Israel descended from him. Therefore, whatever is true of him must be true of all of those who are descended from him. Abraham is even revered in the Islamic religion. So if it can be shown that Abraham was saved by faith, and not by his works and human goodness, then all who look to Abraham should follow his example. It is very important that he chose Abraham as his illustration because his teaching in Romans 3:21-31 would have otherwise been unacceptable to the Jewish mind.

I have good news for you. You do not have to torture yourself to gain acceptance with God. You don’t have to worry about whether or not you have done enough to earn God’s approval. You can be made right with God for time and eternity in a very simple way. Let’s talk more about how to be right with God.

Let’s start off by examining the common view that we become right with God by our works. If you believe that, consider with me:

I. THE PROBLEMS WITH JUSTIFICATION BY WORKS

As Paul examines how we are made right with God, he appeals to the case of Abraham. He said in v.1, “What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found¹ according to the flesh²?” Then Paul refers to the typical Jewish answer in v.2 that “Abraham was justified by works.” The majority of rabbis to this very day believe that Abraham was made right with God because of his character and works. They thought Abraham was the best man in the world during his generation. Therefore, he was chosen by God to be the father of His people, Israel.

However, that common belief that Abraham & others are justified by works must be met with 2 objections:

¹ The verb translated “has found” is a perfect tense in Greek, referring to an action completed in the past, but which has an abiding impact.

² The chief exegetical problem of v.1 is to determine whether “according to the flesh” is to be construed with “has found” or with “our forefather.” Several of the ablest commentators maintain that “according to the flesh” must be taken with the verb “hath found.” “According to the flesh” is closer to “has found” in the Greek word order. Thus, the thought is: did Abraham attain justification with God by his own natural powers and abilities?

A. If Salvation Is By Works, Then It Would Promote Boasting - Notice how Paul demonstrates that he could not have earned salvation by his good works. He says in v.2, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God." This verse could be translated, "For assuming (*ei*) that Abraham was justified by (out of) works, he would have boasting." That is the problem. Salvation by works leads to boasting. And if that were true, then you would steal the glory from God. But God doesn't allow that to happen, for the Old Testament says, "...My glory will I not give to another..." (Isa. 42:8). Sinful men may be able to boast to other people, but how can we boast in God's presence? That is why Paul adds, "But not before God," or literally, not "face to face" (*pros*) with God. Salvation is designed to give glory to God, not glory to man.

On the other hand, salvation that comes to us by faith, as a gift of God's grace, brings glory to God. When was the last time you praised God for your salvation?

There is another problem with salvation by works:

B. If Salvation Is By Works, Then It Would Make God Indebted to Us! - Paul says in v.4, "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt." If you worked for salvation, God would be indebted to you. That is hard to imagine, isn't it? Also, if we received righteousness because of our work, then grace would not be involved.

That's like going to work, putting in your eight hours, and going to collect your check at the end of the week and saying, "Please be gracious and pay me." You don't need grace in that situation. You have earned your pay. So if salvation is by our works, then God would be legally obligated to us.

But I want you to know that God owes you absolutely nothing. Paul gives an excellent affirmation of that truth in Romans 11:36: "For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen." We are indebted to God, but if salvation is obtained by our works, then God would owe us something as a result of our works. That turns everything around from the very design of God.

So Paul teaches here that justification is in no way based on human merit. Men are never made right with God based on what they do. You can light all the candles you want, pray all the prayers you want, go to all the religious meetings you want, get baptized, buy a Bible, take communion, feel religious, perform religious exercises, and even be a very good person, but you still cannot attain God's standard of righteousness. Don't count on good works as your ticket to heaven. It is the wrong way for it leads to boasting, and it would make God indebted to you.

How, then, are we made right with God? Let's consider next of all:

II. THE PROOF OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Paul has already stated in 3:28 that a person "is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." Now in chapter 4 he sets out to prove his thesis. And what better proof than the Scriptures! So Paul says in v.3, "For what does the Scripture say?" Jesus, Paul, and the other apostles appealed to Scripture to prove whatever point they were making. You can count on the Bible to tell you the truth about how to be right with God. Don't look to the religions of men to give you the answer. Look to the Word of God.

So what does the Scripture say? In v.3 Paul quotes Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." This could hardly be more clear that it is

faith in God that makes us righteous before God. So how did he become right with God? It's simple.

A. Abraham Believed God – He was a man of faith. Now we need to go back to Genesis to find out about the faith of Abraham. There are three key things that summarize the faith of Abraham. First, he believed God:

1. For A New Country - In Genesis 12 (cf. Hebrews 11:8) we read that God called Abraham from his home in Ur of the Chaldeans to go to a place where God would show him. God promised an inheritance for him there. Since Abraham believed God, he left the land of his birth, forsook his home, and abandoned present security for what others would view as uncertainty (Gen. 12:4). Why did he do it? Somehow he came to know about the true God, and was confident of the character of God, that He was worthy of his trust. He knew that God would keep His word, and not disappoint him.

He also believed God:

2. For A Child and Many Descendants - God promised Abraham and Sarah a child, even though she was barren and they both were very old. Sarah in particular was too old to conceive a child. Not only did God promise them a child, but He even promised that their descendants would be as the stars of heaven. It was then that we read in Genesis 15:6 that Abraham “believed the LORD.” In the Hebrew Abraham literally said “Amen” to God's promise.

3. For a Redeemer – In Genesis 22:18 God promised, “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed....” Adam & Eve brought the curse upon mankind, but God promised that blessing would come through the seed of Abraham. Galatians 3:16 says, “Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed,’ who is Christ.” In John 8:56 Jesus said, “Your father, Abraham, rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad.” He put faith in that promised Redeemer.

When this divine promise came to Abraham, in spite of the extreme improbability of its fulfillment by all natural considerations, “he believed God....” In simple child-like trust, he took God's word at face value.

Don't think that I am talking about mental assent, or just believing certain facts about God. I'm talking about the kind of faith that moves us to action. That was certain true of Abraham's faith.

When he believed God, he moved from Ur to the land that God would show him. Then Abraham's faith was really tested when he had to offer up his son Isaac to God. Hebrews 11:17-18 says, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac.” Then v.19 says that he was “accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead...” Now that is great faith! He believed God enough to leave his country, to trust God to give him a son, and to kill that son if God said so and believe that God would raise him from the dead.

So while we are not saved by our works, true saving faith leads to obedience and good works. What kind of faith do you have? Does your life demonstrate that you have true saving faith?

Now notice what happened when Abraham believed God:

B. His Faith Was Credited as Righteousness – Notice in the last of v.3 that the quotation from Genesis says, “and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” The word translated “accounted” (*logizomai*) is used 11 times in Romans 4. What does it mean? It means, “to credit

or put to one's account, to impute to someone." When Abraham believed, God put to his account a righteousness that Abraham did not otherwise possess. When you believe God, when you believe His Word and His promises, then the Lord puts a righteousness you don't have into your account. That is a legal act.

It is as if you were poor and deeply in debt, but the world's richest person put a fortune into your bank account. Even so, God actually credits righteousness to our account. "Righteousness" means "right standing with God."

Beginning in v.6 we see that Abraham was not an isolated case of the principle of justification by faith. King David's case is confirmatory, "just as David also." Paul used David as a witness, quoting from one of David's psalms of confession after his terrible sins of adultery & murder (Ps. 32:1-2). What works did he have to offer to make up for such sin? There was nothing he could do but trust in the mercy and grace of God. When He put his faith in God, he found forgiveness. So Paul proves his point from David as well.

Why is God so pleased with our faith in Him? It is because faith glorifies Him. Faith gives honor to the character of God. For example, when you trust someone, you recognize that they are truthful. You recognize that they are able to do what they have promised. Even so, God is able & trustworthy. Do you believe that? God will keep His promises.

I hope you are convinced that we are made right with God by faith, and not by works. Now let's try to explain:

III. THE PROCEDURE OF JUSTIFICATION

Here in v.5 Paul tells us what we need to do in order to be right with God. First of all:

A. You Must Realize & Confess Your Ungodliness – In v.5 makes a startling statement: God justifies the ungodly! In fact, He only justifies the ungodly. Why? Because among men, there are no godly for Him to justify! The fact is, just as Paul said in 3:23, we have all sinned. All people are ungodly at least to some degree. So if you want to be saved, you must confess that you are ungodly.

At one time the apostle Paul was a self-righteous Pharisee. He thought for sure he was godly. But when he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he realized that his righteousness was nothing compared to the righteousness of Christ. In the light of His glory, he saw his sin like never before. So Paul later wrote, "...This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15).

Even so, in the Beatitudes Jesus said that a person should come to God with meekness, brokenness, and a begging spirit. If you want to be right with God, you must start by acknowledging your sin & ungodliness. Don't try to deny what is obvious to everyone else, especially God!

B. Don't Trust in Your Own Works, but in the Grace of God – Paul mentioned grace in contrast with works in v.4. He already had said back in 3:24 that we are "justified freely by His grace...." Salvation is by faith in God's wonderful grace.

Even so, God is gracious, and He is willing to give you what you need even though you haven't earned it. If you trust Him, He will grant you the forgiveness of sin, and a right standing in His sight. Even if you trust in Him in the last few years of your life, you can go to heaven just like the person who has lived for God all their life. That's because God is gracious.

Now, to motivate you to follow the example of Abraham & David, let us consider last of all:

IV. THE BLESSINGS OF JUSTIFICATION

If you are willing to trust God to make you right with Him, then you will experience several blessings:

A. Your Sins Will Be Forgiven – Paul quotes David to say in v.7, “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven....” I think it is significant that David used the term “lawless deeds.” The sacrifices of the Old Testament were not really for willful violations of the Law of Moses. They were to cover sins of ignorance & unintentional sins. But David violated the law by committing adultery & even murder. Is there any hope for forgiveness of such sins? The Law could not save him. It only condemned him. Thus, he carried on his soul terrible guilt for many months. That guilt was taking a toll on his health & well-being. In Psalm 32:4 he said that his life’s juices dried up. Guilt can cause the saliva to dry up. Anxiety creates pressure in the head, and that restricts the flow of blood. It can lead to psychological hang-ups.

But the day came when David experienced the wonderful blessing of justification. It appears that he simply acknowledged his guilt, repented of his sin, and cast himself in faith upon the mercy of God. Then he was pronounced “no longer guilty” before the tribunal of heaven. No wonder he said, “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven....” What a blessing it is to experience true forgiveness! The guilt is gone. It’s a great feeling to know that things are right between you & God.

Now there are 3 different word pictures for forgiveness in vv.7-8. First of all:

1. Forgiveness Is Sending Your Sins Away - The word translated as “forgiven” is the main Greek word used in the New Testament for forgiveness. It means “to send away.” How far? Psalm 103:12 says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” In Leviticus 16:21-22, the priest put his hands on a goat, symbolically transferred the people’s sins to it, and sent the goat outside the camp. As they saw the goat being driven away from the camp, they saw a picture of what God does with our sin. Likewise, John the Baptist said “...Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29b).

Another word picture of forgiveness is found at the end of v.7. There we see:

2. Forgiveness Is Covering Your Sin – David said in v.7 that a person is blessed “whose sins are covered.” The word “covered” is an Old Testament concept. In those days, the sins were covered up and not fully dealt with. But I believe that sins were uncovered and sent away for good at the cross. Jesus didn’t just cover up our sin; He removed it. However, the covering of our sin is a great concept.

Have you ever done something wrong, only to have someone spread all over town what you can do? Proverbs 10:12 says, “love covers all sins.” Likewise, Peter said in 1 Peter 4:8, “And above all things have fervent love for one another, for ‘love will cover a multitude of sins.’” Aren’t you glad that God is willing to cover your sins?

3. Forgiveness Is When Your Sins are Not Imputed to Your Account – In v.8 Paul also quotes David to say, “Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.” The Greek word translated “impute” is the same word translated “counted” or “accounted” in vv.3-5. It’s a bookkeeping term. Psalm 130:3 says, “If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” We cannot stand before a holy & righteous God if our sins are still on our

record. So David goes on to say in the next verse, “But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared.” When the ungodly sinner reaches out in faith to embrace Jesus as Savior, God hears his cry and does not impute sin to him anymore. Your sins are no longer charged to your account. Instead, they are transferred to the cross, where Jesus suffered & died for them.

Are you still carrying guilt in your soul? Have you done some really bad things? Perhaps you have hurt people. Perhaps you know that things are not right between you and God. Well you don’t have to carry that sin burden any longer. Look to Jesus, who died for your sins on the cross. You can be forgiven. Your sins can be removed. Such forgiveness cannot be earned. Instead, simply trust in the saving grace of God. Furthermore, when we recall David’s sins of adultery and murder, then no matter how grievous our sins, we should not despair. You can be forgiven!

So when you trust in Jesus, your sins will not only be forgiven, but furthermore:

B. The Righteousness of God Will Be Credited to Your Account – We have already discussed this in the case of Abraham. What a deal this is! You can trade your sin for God’s righteousness! If God offers you a deal like that, you would be foolish not to accept it. Well, He does offer such a deal! Look at v.5, “But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.”

Do you know why God can credit righteousness to your account? It is because He credited your sin to Christ’s account. Christ paid the price for your sin on the cross. Isaiah 53:4-5 gives the following prophecy of Christ, “Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities....”

Conclusion: In light of the message today, do you see yourself as right with God? Do you still feel like you are carrying guilt in your relationship with God? What are you doing to deal with that guilt? What are you doing to make things right with God? Don’t you want to be forgiven?

I hope you have learned that you are not made right with God by your works. What you need to do is confess your sin to God, and trust in Christ, who died for your sins on the cross. By faith in the grace of God, you can be forgiven, and made right with God. Why go another day with the burden of guilt. Come to Jesus. Trust in the promise of God’s grace.

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); John MacArthur, Jr., *Justified by Faith: Study Notes on Romans 3:20-4:25* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1984); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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