

GOD JUSTIFIED ABRAHAM BY FAITH

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Introduction: There are two basic reasons why people do not receive Christ by faith as their Savior: they feel that they are too bad to be saved by Christ, or they feel they are good enough to be saved without Christ. Either way they refuse to be saved God's way, which is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who feel they are too bad, do not have faith in the power of Christ to save them. Those who feel they are good enough have faith in themselves and do not need faith in Christ. Both kinds are on the road that ends in Hell. Faith in Christ is the only way to be saved. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father, but by Me" (Jn 14:6).

This chapter serves to prove Paul's main argument that justification of sinners is by faith in Christ alone and not by the deeds of the Law (3:20-22, 28). The purpose of this chapter is to show from Scripture that God's plan of justification has always been the same for those who lived before Jesus died on the cross and for those who lived after it. Paul stated in the previous chapter that God passed over the sins of those who lived before Jesus died on the cross to propitiate His wrath for their sins (see notes on 3:25). They showed their faith in God by offering animal sacrifices that He prearranged for them to offer even though the blood of these animals could not pay the penalty for their sins. He justified them on "credit" until Jesus' sacrifice paid the penalty for their sins.

Abraham is an example of those justified in the Old Testament for two important reasons. First, Abraham was revered by every religious Jew as the esteemed father of their race. Second, the very Scriptures of the Old Testament clearly stated that Abraham's justification was by faith (4:3; Gen 15:6). No Jew could charge Paul with advancing a new doctrine which was at variance with the Old Testament. So, it would be impossible for a Jew to successfully dispute Paul's reasoning.

To further establish his argument, Paul undeniably proved from the Scriptures that Abraham was justified by faith long before he was circumcised (4:9-12). Many years elapsed between Abraham's salvation in Ur of the Chaldees and his time in Haran. He was 75 years old when He left Haran to go to Canaan (Gen 12:4) and he was 99 when he was circumcised (Gen 17:24). Circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham along with his descendants to form the Hebrew nation. Only to Abraham was circumcision a seal (verification) of his faith (4:11). Clearly, then, no fair-minded Jew could claim that circumcision was in any way connected to Abraham's justification.

Last, Paul gave the basis for Abraham's justification. Abraham believed what God revealed to him when he was in Ur of the Chaldees and kept on believing it (4:13-22; Gen 12:1-3; 15:6). His faith in God's promise was so strong that he did not cast God's promise aside when his body and Sarah's were past their normal time for procreation. He did not limit God's omnipotence. Abraham's justifying faith without works was recorded to serve as an example to those who still needed to be justified. God imputes righteousness to those who believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for their justification.

I. The Basis for Abraham's Justification — 4:1-8

A. Declared in the Pentateuch — 4:1-5

4:1 — Paul uses Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, to show that his faith did not make void the Law, it established the Law (cf. 3:31). What did Abraham find by faith that the Law could only promise? One, he was justified by God (4:3, 5). Two, he was the heir of the earth (4:13). Three, he was made the father of many nations (4:17).

4:2 — This verse anticipates another argument from the Jews. Remember that Paul was a Pharisee and knew all the arguments against Christians. They believed Abraham was justified by works (cp. The Book of Jubilees 23:10), so they opposed his teaching that is summarized in 3:27-30.

For the sake of argument, he said if it were possible that Abraham were justified by works, he would have grounds for glorying before people. Then he proved that Abraham was not justified by works in two ways. First, he proved that Abraham could not glory before God because the Scripture says he was justified by faith, believing God's word (4:2-3; Gen 15:6). Second, he proved from the same Scripture verse that justification is by grace, a gift of God, not a payment for any work of Abraham (4:3-5).

4:3 — Justification by faith was not something new in Paul's day. It was so in Abraham's day. This is Scriptural proof that God's method of saving sinners has not changed from one dispensation to another.

"Counted to him for righteousness" — God imputed righteousness to Abraham for his faith (4:19-22).

4:4-5 — Paul continued the antithesis between faith and works as it is related to a reward. The one who works looks to his own efforts for receiving the reward. However, the one who believes looks to the efforts of the one who made the promise to give him the reward. One who works for his justification (which can never occur by works) looks for his compensation as a result of his works, but one who is justified by faith, like Abraham, recognizes it is all of grace. Justification by faith makes a man recognize that his justification is totally dependent upon God's work, not his own. This faith has God as its specific object. He justifies the ungodly.

"Ungodly" — It is a particularly strong word describing the most degenerate persons. If we think we have too many sins to be saved, we are right, if we depend on ourselves to do it. But if we have faith in Christ to do it, He will remove the penalty of all the sins we have done and will do. Christ has paid the penalty for all our sins. He will replace our sins with His righteousness. This is a most amazing transaction. However, He disciplines believers who continue in their sins (Heb 12:5-11).

B. Clarified in the Psalms — 4:6-8

4:6-8 — David is cited as a second example of justification by faith in the Old Testament. But he is not so much of an example as he is one who explains the Old Testament concept of Abraham's justification. Notice David's threefold description of the blessed man, that is, one who is blessed by God (cf. Ps 32:1-5). First, God imputes (reckons) righteousness to a believer apart from works (4:6). The blessed man is one who has righteousness imputed to him by faith, not by a great list of works. Second, the blessed man has iniquities forgiven and sins covered (4:7). Notice, justification by faith alone covers the legal requirement for the penalty of sin. Third, happy or blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute (reckon) sin. That is, the man justified by faith will not have his sin penalty reckoned against him. The true picture of blessing then is the bestowment of justification by grace alone, not by any attempt to add merit to this blessing through works.

II. The Basis for Abraham's Circumcision — 4:9-12

A. The Time of Abraham's Circumcision — 4:9-10

4:9-10 — Paul returned to the matter of Abraham's justification by faith as it related to his circumcision. The Jews believed Abraham was made righteous, at least in part, by his circumcision. Paul showed the Jews that Abraham's circumcision had nothing to do with his righteousness. He went to Genesis 15:6 (Rom 4:3). Abraham was about 86 years old without a son when God told him that his offspring would be more in number than the stars in the heavens. He believed God and his faith was credited to him for righteousness. He was 86 when he had Ishmael, but he still was not circumcised, not until he was 99 (cp. Gen 16:16 with 17:24-25). While he was still in Ur, Abraham was justified when he believed God's call and left his people and their idols. He went around a desert

from Ur to Haran with his father's family and stayed there until his father died. Then God called him to leave Haran and go to Canaan when he was 75. God instructed him to be circumcised when he was 99. His justification occurred more than 25 years before he was circumcised. What a death blow this was to the Jews' understanding of circumcision (cf. 2:25-27). Paul proved that justification was only by faith and not by any work in circumcision. The same is true of baptism; it cannot save anyone. It is a symbol of our faith in Christ for salvation. Since Abraham was justified before he was given the sign of circumcision, so both the uncircumcised (Gentiles) and the circumcised (Jews) are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, not by the sign of baptism.

B. The Nature of Abraham's Circumcision — 4:11a

4:11a — "Sign . . . seal" — God made a gracious covenant with Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees (Acts 7:2-4; Gen 12:1-3). God promised him a land and would make him a great nation. God also promised him that he would have a posterity like the dust of the ground (Gen 13:16). After more than 25 years, none of this happened, but God told Abraham and his male household to be circumcised. It had a two-fold purpose. First, it would be a sign to him and to his household that God would give them Canaan and make him a great nation. Abraham did not know how God would do this, but he believed God would do what He promised. This promise will be kept when Christ makes Israel the head nation of the world and He will be the King of kings in His Millennial Kingdom (Deut 28:7-13; Rev 19:11-16; Zech 14:9, 16).

Second, circumcision was a seal only to Abraham. It sealed the righteousness that Abraham already had by faith in God's promise. God had told Abraham that He would bless those that blessed him and curse those that cursed him. Those that bless and curse Israel during the Tribulation will be judged by Christ after the Tribulation (Mt 25:31-46). God also said Abraham would be a blessing to all families of the earth. He will be a blessing to all believers through Christ. All people that have trusted in Christ as Savior will enter His earthly Kingdom to enjoy His blessings for 1000 years (Isa 65:18-25; Rev 20:4, 6).

Circumcision was a symbol of cutting sin away from the heart. Only God can cut sin from our hearts when we put our faith in His promise for salvation. A symbol cannot save a person. God uses a symbol to teach a lesson to people.

C. The Purpose of Abraham's Circumcision — 4:11b-12

4:11-12 — Abraham's faith is noteworthy since it is a clear example of saving faith. There are two reasons why Abraham received the sign of circumcision. First, he was justified while uncircumcised; he is considered the father of all who believe though they be uncircumcised. This shows that circumcision is not a prerequisite for justification. Second, circumcision made Abraham the father of spiritual Jews, those who have been justified by faith (Gal 3:7). Jesus went so far as to tell Jewish leaders that did not believe He was the Son of God that they were children of the devil (Jn 8:44).

III. The Basis for Abraham's Inheritance — 4:13-16

A. Stated — 4:13

4:13 — God promised Abraham that he was the heir of the world. This will happen when Christ returns to earth to rule all the nations during His Millennial Kingdom. God made a decree that He will set His Son as king over all the earth as His inheritance for His work on the cross to pay for all the sins of all people (Ps 2:6-9). Abraham and all believers are promised to be joint heirs with Jesus Christ and will reign with Him (Rom 8:16-17; Rev 2:26-27; 3:20-21). Abraham believed God's promise (Gen 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:4; 8-21; 17:2-21; 22:15-18). Faith in God's promise was the basis for his inheritance as it is for all believers. The fulfillment of this promise of God will occur after the Tribulation when Christ will judge the nations.

B. Proved — 4:14-16

1. Rejection of works — 4:14-15

4:14 — God's promise of an inheritance for us is to rule with Christ in His Millennial Kingdom. It cannot come through works of the Law because that would nullify God's promise. Why? No one is able to keep the law of God perfectly, so no one, not even Abraham, could receive the inheritance by keeping God's Law. It must be received by faith. Faith and works are mutually exclusive in receiving God's promise and diametrically opposed to each other. Therefore, the inheritance must be based on faith in God's promise without the works of the Law, or the promise of an inheritance is lost.

4:15 — A second reason is that our works cannot keep God's Law perfectly, so it brings His wrath on us. God must punish those that do not keep every point of His Law. Therefore, it is impossible to receive our inheritance to rule with Christ by keeping God's Law.

God's Law shows us His holiness, but God's promise shows us His grace. God's grace offers His plan for justification by faith and for all the promises in justification, including the inheritance with Christ. Faith in God's offer of grace brings peace and joy, but dependence on God's law for His blessings will result in His wrath.

2. Reception of faith — 4:16

4:16 — The promise of all of God's blessing is by faith so that it can be given by grace. God's grace is offered to those who live under the rule of the Law and to those who have been delivered from the demands of the Law so all people can receive the promises of God by faith. Law cannot reveal the grace of God, so those who attempt to attain God's promises by works cannot be heirs. Also, those who live by the Law can never do enough to be justified and receive God's promises. On the other hand, those who have faith in God, as Abraham did, will be guaranteed to receive the promise, whether Jew or Gentile.

IV. The Basis for Abraham's Offspring — 4:17-25

A. Decision of God — 4:17

4:17 — God told Abraham, "I have made you the father of many nations" (cf. Gen 17:5). It seems that God's foreknowledge of Abraham's faith in His promise to give him a son was at work here. He knew Abraham would believe His promise to give him and Sarah a son in his old age. Abraham's family would grow through this son (Isaac) to be a small nation. Then God sent His Son into the world through the family of Abraham. In this way God's Son became the Son of Abraham (Mt1:1). Now all those who put their faith in Christ become spiritual offspring of Abraham. So now Abraham has spiritual children in many nations of the world, but when Christ establishes His Millennial Kingdom, only believers that are not killed in the Tribulation will be able to repopulate the nations. (Church believers with glorified bodies will rule with Christ in His Kingdom on earth, but will not be married to repopulate the earth.) Then Abraham will be the father of many nations on earth for 1000 years.

Abraham's faith in God's promise to make him the father of many nations was remarkable. He believed God could give life to the dead – a reference to deadness of his body and Sarah's womb for procreation (Rom 4:19; Heb 11:11-12). He believed God could call into existence things that do not exist – a reference to a son He promised to give to him and Sarah. Normally this could not happen, but Abraham believed God could make it happen.

B. Demonstration by Abraham — 4:18-22

4:18 — Paul continues to reveal Abraham's amazing faith in God. He believed God's promise that he would be the father of many nations when there was no rational hope for it to happen. Humanly speaking, there was no hope of having a posterity (who against hope) but Abraham had supernatural hope. He believed in the omnipotence of God. Carefully note that his hope was not in himself, but in God's ability. He believed that he would become the father of many nations because God promised it to Him.

4:19 — When it seemed humanly impossible for Abraham to realize God's promise, he was not weak in faith. He did not even consider the fact that his own body, nor that of Sarah's, could not produce offspring. Paul indicates that these facts concerning his procreative ability were not taken into account in his mind as far as God's fulfillment of His promise (cp. Gen 17:17; 18:11). He so affixed his belief in God's promise that nothing could shake it.

4:20-21 — These verses explain how Abraham was not weak in faith. Negatively, "he staggered not," meaning he did not entertain doubts that would divide His mind so he would be double-minded with respect to God's promise. He did not know how God would keep His promise, but he believed that God would keep it somehow. Positively, he showed he was strong or mature in his faith in two ways. First, he gave glory to God; and second, he was fully persuaded that God would fulfill His promise.

4:22 — The greatness of Abraham's faith (described in 4:18-21) was the same faith for his justification. (See note on 4:3) It must be realized that Abraham's faith was tested and strengthened so that the more impossible it became to humanly realize God's promise, the more surely Abraham believed God.

"It was imputed to him for righteousness" — This is the second time that Paul said God imputed righteousness to Abraham for his faith. The first occasion is taken from Genesis 15:6 when God said Abraham's seed would be as the stars and he believed God; he was imputed with righteousness (4:3). "Imputed" is sometimes translated "counted" or "reckoned." Abraham had been in the promised land for ten years and was about 85 years old. The second occasion is taken from Genesis 17 when God made an everlasting covenant with Abraham to give his seed the land of Canaan through Isaac, not Ishmael. The sign of this covenant was circumcision. Abraham showed His faith in God when he was 99 by circumcising all the males in his household. This "imputation" occurred about 14 years after the first imputation (cf. 4:18-22; Gen 16:16-17:1-27).

How is it that Paul speaks of God imputing righteousness to Abraham for his faith in both of these experiences? The problem is twofold. First, how many times must a man be justified? Second, when was Abraham justified?

Scriptural teaching is clear that a man is justified once. Why then does Paul indicate that Abraham was imputed with righteousness twice (4:3, 22)? The best solution to this problem is to compare Scripture with Scripture. Abraham was saved before he departed from Ur of the Chaldees (Heb 11:8-10; Gen 12:1-4). We are not told the exact content of all that God revealed to Abraham but he certainly had to understand the relation of blood atonement for salvation (cf. Lev 11:17). He recognized that through his seed all families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3). In addition, he realized that he was a stranger and sojourner on this earth and was anticipating a heavenly city which would be free from sin and corruption (Heb 11:10-13). He likewise had a proper belief in Christ's messianic identity (Jn 8:56). Paul elsewhere indicates that Abraham had the Gospel preached unto him (Gal 3:6-9). He was saved then before he departed from Ur of the Chaldees and his salvation by faith enabled him to leave Ur and journey by faith to the land God promised him (Heb 11:8-10).

Paul then cited Abraham as a model example of true faith. He cited two experiences in Abraham's life which demonstrated the faith he had back in Ur (Genesis 12:1-3). The faith that he had in Ur was still being exercised by him; he still believed God would fulfill His promise, even after he had been in the land for about 10 years without receiving a son (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3). His second experience came when he was 99, after he had been in the land for 24 years. He still exercised that same faith in God so that he did not even consider his or his wife's procreative impotency as a factor in God's fulfillment of His promise (Rom 4:18-22). This is what made his faith such a classic example of a man that could be justified by faith. His faith certainly had matured and perhaps this type of faith is what Paul meant when he wrote "from faith to faith" (Rom 1:17). Paul then is not pinpointing the time(s) of Abraham's justification by faith, but he is illustrating the type of faith which Abraham had and that is the very reason God imputed it to him for righteousness. This conclusion is supported by several reasons. First, a man is justified once; there are no stages of justification. Second, the verb "had promised" (4:21) is a perfect

tense verb, which means the action took place in the past, but the results continue into the future. Abraham's justification by faith had occurred in Ur, but the results would continue until he died (4:9-12). To believe that Abraham was justified through circumcision would disprove Paul's main thesis that justification is by faith without any works of a sinner. Third, this view can theologically and logically account for all of the Scriptures pertaining to Abraham's faith.

C. Imputed to Believers — 4:23-25

4:23-24 — These verses indicate why Abraham's justification by faith was recorded. The same principle applies to the unsaved today (1 Cor 10:11). Abraham was justified because he believed in what God promised to him. Faith is not a blind hope, but is based upon facts (cf. Heb 11:1). The content of God's revelation has increased since Abraham's day because God has added to His revelation (this is the principle of progressive revelation). The unsaved must still believe in God as the object of their faith but the basis is the finished work of Christ on the cross (cf. 1 Cor 15:1-3). Still the principle of faith in God's Word is the only basis for justification.

4:25 — Paul clearly indicates that we are justified by Christ's resurrection. Christ was "delivered," handed over to die on the cross by God for our offences. It took both Christ's death and resurrection to save us from the penalty of our sins. We could not be declared righteous, if Christ were still in the grave. Furthermore, Christ's resurrection not only proved His victory over sin but it also proved that He accomplished the redemptive plan that God required to save us from His wrath.