

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Abraham – Example of Faith

by Dan Trygg

“What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’ ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work, but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...” Romans 4:1-5

In chapter 3, Paul plainly set forth the revealed plan of God to free us from the bondage, brokenness and emptiness caused by sin. Salvation comes through the righteousness of God in Christ. **This has two very distinct dimensions**, which address separate issues in our experience. **On one hand, the righteousness of God is imputed (“put on”) to those who believe**, so that they are covered and purchased by the cleansing blood of the Lamb. This is similar to the OT sacrificial system, except that those animal sacrifices merely *covered* sin, whereas Christ’s payment actually *cleanses* and *removes it* forever (Heb. 9:11-26). In this way, those who believe are *justified*, legally acquitted of all charges against them. They are treated as innocent before the Law, and are “just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned” in the eyes of God. God is righteous and just to do this, because Jesus paid the price to *redeem* us from our debt of sin. **Secondly, the righteousness of God is imparted (“put into”) to believers by the abiding glory of the Holy Spirit dwelling in them**, so that they are once again filled with the radiance of God’s life. Instead of *lacking* the glory of God (3:23), they are *filled* with it. (Paul merely hints at this dynamic in chapter 3, but he addresses it more clearly as we go along.) **All of this comes as a free gift, to be accepted by those who trust in God and His promise. It cannot be earned or worked for.** Human righteousness will always fall short, but God’s righteousness is more than adequate to cover our flaws *and* to change our character, if we will but learn to trust in His working in our lives.

Paul next decides to direct us to the example of Abraham, the OT father of the faithful. He was physically the forefather of the Jews (Gen. 12-25). Moreover, Jews around the world traced their spiritual roots to him. In the 1900 years since his time, however, Jews had lost sight of the spiritual underpinnings of their faith, which he had exemplified. **To most Jews of NT times, the faith of their fathers had degenerated to an emphasis on laws, rules and customs.** The conditional covenant of God through Moses, the Law given at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:1-8; Deut. 27,28), had come to overshadow the simple, unconditional covenant which Abraham had enjoyed (Gen. 15). **The emphasis on Law had all but strangled out the relational nature of the faith Abraham had enjoyed.** The Jews proudly thought of themselves as the “people of God”, because they kept certain laws which set them apart from other nations, but Abraham had been called the “friend of God” (II Chron. 20:7). Abraham had a relationship with God, not just a set of rules. Paul tells us in Romans 4 that it started with *faith*, not works.

Paul draws the distinction between justification by faith versus justification by works. To be justified by works would mean that I could boldly stand before God in my own righteousness. To do that, I have to meet God’s standard of absolute righteousness. I could never have sinned, not even once. If I had ever messed up even one time, I would bring upon myself the consequences or earned-result of that sin, ...death (Gen. 2:16,17; Rom. 6:23). If Abraham had been absolutely faultless, then he would have had something to boast about before God. To the one who works, Paul says, his wage is not given as a favor, but as what is due to him. **If Abraham, or any of us, were to be absolutely without fault or error, then God would be obliged to count us righteous, ...because we were.** He would be unjust to not recognize and accept our perfect lives. We would have *earned* His acceptance and respect. **Of course, that is not the case. We do not live perfect lives. None of us is righteous in our own strength.** We all have sinned. Even on our best days we still mess up, at least a little. The wage we earn for sin is death. **If God were to give us what we earned or deserved, then we would all be condemned to death and judgment.** We would all be lost.

This is an important backdrop for understanding what God has done for us. **This is one of the valuable functions of the OT Law. It shows us that we are sinners.** If we were to honestly examine ourselves before even the ten commandments (Ex. 20:1-17), which are the most basic of God’s moral and spiritual requirements, *every single one of us comes up short.* Have you ever told a lie? *Ever?* Then you’ve broken God’s Law. *You are shown to be a sinner.* Have you ever wanted something that belonged to someone else? Then you are guilty of coveting, and *the Law reveals that you are a sinner* (cf. Rom. 7:7). These are just two of the ten, but most of us can easily see that we miss the standard of God’s righteousness by measuring ourselves by them. We can appreciate now what Paul had said earlier, “Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may

be *closed*, and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:19,20).

Paul’s point in this chapter is that even Abraham was counted righteous by God, not by his works, but by his faith. He quotes from Genesis 15:6, “...and Abraham believed (trusted in) God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Abraham was not accepted by works. In fact, he made no attempt to earn acceptance from God through works. Instead, he trusted in Him *who justifies the ungodly*, and *that* faith was credited to him as righteousness (Rom. 4:5). Did you catch that? **God is the One who can make ungodly people to be “just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned”.** **Abraham trusted in Him.** Furthermore, David understood the same principle, “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds *have been forgiven*, ...Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord *will not take into account*.”

How can God forgive sins? Why is it that He will sometimes not count someone’s sin against them? We come back to what Paul declared in 3:24-26. **Jesus’ blood *satisfied* the legal requirements and *paid for* our debt of sin. God offers this to us as a *gift*. This is *grace*.** We cannot earn this. If *we* trust in God, ...who is *righteous* and *just* to make even ungodly people to be considered and treated as though they were godly..., then, like Abraham and David, we too can be *credited with Christ’s righteousness* and be counted as *innocent* and *blameless* in God’s sight.

Paul is not done with Abraham, however. **The next question he asks is, “When was Abraham counted righteous by God? Was it *after* he had been circumcised or *before*?”** This is a crucial question, because circumcision was the mark of a covenant promise which God made with Abraham in Genesis 17. He promised that He would (1.) multiply his descendants exceedingly; (2.) make him a father of many nations; (3.) pass His covenant promises on to his descendants; and, (4.) give him the land of Canaan, where Israel is today. **Abraham and his descendants were to be circumcised as a *faith-sign* that they believed God’s promise**, and were putting themselves under His covenant. If they did not circumcise their children, it was a sign of their unbelief, a turning away from the covenant. This would amount to a disqualification from God’s covenant obligation to them. Circumcision for Jewish males on the 8th day was traced back to this original covenant with Abraham. **The Jews in Paul’s audience tended to think of themselves as superior to the Gentiles.** One of the ongoing issues he had to deal with was whether Gentile converts to Christ had to become Jews first, or not. This was answered by the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), but the issue kept smoldering in the background. **Here, Paul points out that Abraham was justified by faith while he was still an uncircumcised Gentile himself.** By this, we can see that he is the father of *all* who believe, whether they were from a Jewish background, or not (vss. 9-12).

Furthermore, **the promise to Abraham and his descendants that he would become heir of the world did not come through law (Abraham’s performance), but it was given to him as a gift to be received by faith**, not works. Without God’s grace extended to him, and received by the faith of Abraham, none of the rest of his spiritual journey, or the promised blessings that would follow, would *ever* come to pass. Paul goes on to say that **if it took keeping the Law to be qualified to obtain the promise, then the promise would be an empty offer. It would be a twisted joke, because no one can keep the Law.** Not only does this make the promise empty, since no one could *ever* fulfill the requirement, it also would call into question the *original* declaration that Abraham was counted righteous based upon his faith. Was he, or *wasn’t* he? If it was based upon trust in God’s ability to justify the ungodly (vs. 5), then it *must* be by grace, not works. By definition, we are talking about people who are *already ungodly*. How could they justify themselves? It would be impossible. **They *can’t* be declared innocent on their own performance, because they are *not* innocent.** For this reason, salvation, a relationship with God, and whatever promises the Lord might offer to us, all must be established on the basis of grace, not works. We can’t earn these things. God graciously offers them to us. If we trust Him, He will bring them to us. **The only way the promises are sure and dependable is if they are based upon God’s grace, not our performance** (vs. 16).

The radical nature of faith is that it trusts what is unseen (Heb. 11:1; II Cor. 5:7). In Abraham’s case, he looked at his inability to have a child at 99 years of age, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb, but chose to trust God to do the impossible, ...and He did! **In our case, we see our inability to save ourselves from sin.** God says He loves us and will accept us as gift, if we will just trust in Him and follow Jesus. He says that **even though it does not yet appear what we will someday be, He will do great things in and with our lives** (I Jn. 3:1,2; Jer. 33:3). He will give us victory over the sinful patterns, old messages and behaviors which we struggle with, and *move us beyond the limitations of our circumstances* (and even our *imagination*s!) to accomplish powerful things for Him and for others. **We can be like Abraham and trust in God, step out in faith to follow Him to unknown territory, or we can shrink back in unbelief and miss out on what He would do.** The opportunity comes to us as a *gift* to be *received*, opened and *utilized* because *God* is good, ...not because *we* are so good. **Be like Abraham, and step out into an awesome future adventure with God!**