

## By Faith Alone – the example of Abraham

### Introduction.

#### What is faith?

Faith is trusting in God's character, belief in God's Word; having confidence in God's promises; and showing loyalty and obedience to God.

It can be defined as: faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

So, faith is believing without necessarily seeing or having proof/evidence.

It's intangible.

#### Three Questions/Headline Topics.

HAVING presented the work of God in justifying sinners *"freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus"*, Paul goes on at the close of chapter 3 to present three hypothetical questions which some may be inclined to ask in response to such doctrine and to such an emphasis upon faith in the work of God alone. With three brief, yet unequivocal, answers Paul affirms the truth of justification by faith in reply to such doubting opposition.

*"Where is boasting then? **It is excluded**"*

*"Is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also of the Gentiles? **Yes, of the Gentiles also**"*

*"Do we then make void the law through faith? **God forbid: yea, we establish the law.**"*

It is these three questions, and the answers to them, which Paul proceeds to open up, to expound more fully, throughout chapter 4. Using the life of Abraham as an example he illustrates the total contrast between justification sought by the works of the law, and the free grace of God by which God justifies undeserving sinners through faith. All grounds for boasting are set aside, the blessedness of sins forgiven, and righteousness imputed are set before us, the scope and scale of God's mercy to both Jews and Gentiles is demonstrated, and the law is shown to be established through the righteousness of faith given to all of the seed of promise, all those *"of the faith of Abraham"*.

## **Boasting excluded by the Law of Faith... (Romans 4:1-8)**

Paul begins by asking, what did Abraham find? What was he taught? (4:1) What did God teach Abraham regarding salvation, regarding justification, that we also need to see before ever we'll know the blessedness of sins forgiven?

Abraham was taught "*as pertaining to the flesh*", that his own works, his own efforts in religion could do nothing to save him – absolutely nothing. They were but '*filthy rags*' before God, the very best of them being tainted by sin. Such works, such 'good deeds' might appear worthwhile and commendable to other men, they might give Abraham something in which to glory in before man, "*but not before God*" Before God Abraham stood as with all men as a sinner, as ungodly. Yet to be justified before God demands righteousness, but in the flesh, by our own efforts, neither Abraham nor we can produce such perfection.

Abraham discovered that he needed a righteousness provided for him and that justification *must* be through faith resting in that righteousness. Justification *must* be the work of God, it *must* be by grace – else we'd forever remain in our sins. And if of grace then all glory *must* be to God, and not to man. Then where is boasting? It is *excluded*.

Notice in Romans 3:27 how Paul answers this question. Boasting is excluded by the *law of faith*. He refers here to the Gospel, and that faith which is at the heart of the Gospel, as a *law*, as a *principle*, in order to contrast it with the *law* of works. Paul does this to emphasise the contrast between faith and that which *characterises* the law – works. Hence the Gospel itself is referred to as a law, but a law characterised by faith. Here is a law fulfilled not by working, but through *believing*! This is a law which brings in righteousness, not by works, but by faith – the "*righteousness of faith*".

This righteousness is brought in by God to the account of His people. It is imputed to them. It is altogether outside of them and it owes nothing to their own merit or efforts. This righteousness was wrought by the faith of Christ and is received by the faith of the believer, as the gift of God. Hence all boasting is excluded – and with all the efforts and works of man set at nought – *this* is how God saved Abraham. Not by works, but by grace. Not through the law, but through faith. If Abraham was justified by works, he would have had something to glory in, and salvation would be simply a reward for his works. *He* would have merited it, *he* would have earned it, *and he* would deserve it but how *could he* when he was *ungodly*?

No, what Abraham *found*, what Abraham came to believe was that salvation is, and must be, by grace alone, that whilst in his sins, that whilst being ungodly, God justified him, his iniquities were forgiven, and his sins covered his faith being *counted* for righteousness. Now of course, this does not mean that Abraham's faith *itself* is righteousness, but that God counted it for righteousness, God imputed righteousness to Abraham, because of the righteousness of God in Christ which Abraham looked unto and rested in *by faith*, that righteousness which Christ brought in to the account of His people when He suffered and died in their place upon the tree, taking their sins as His own, suffering the outpouring of God's wrath against them, taking away sin, and covering His people with His precious blood shed for them. This was how Abraham was justified and *this* was what his faith rested in.

Having brought Abraham to such belief, having opened his eyes to the truth, to his own state before God and his need of having his sins forgiven, God then greatly blessed him. Abraham entered into that very same blessing of which David spoke and rejoiced in Psalm 32:

*"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputes not iniquity, and in whose spirit is no guile."*

Oh, the blessedness of sins forgiven! To be just before God – forgiven! To be counted righteous before a Holy God!

Yet, this is the very blessing which both Abraham and David knew and believed.

Do you know it? Has God shown *you* this blessing?

### **From those of that faith of our father Abraham... (4:9-12)**

From 4:9 through to 4:12 Paul deals with the question of just *whom* does God justify? Does this blessing come upon the Jews only or the Gentiles also? Those who are circumcised or those in uncircumcision?

The answer is emphatic. Not the Jews only, but the Gentiles also. Though this answer was perhaps astounding to the Jew – despite the testimony of the prophets to this blessing of the New Covenant (Hosea 2:23, Zechariah 10:9) – Paul goes on to prove this by showing that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness, not *when* he was circumcised but *before*, whilst yet uncircumcised. Circumcision, seen by the Jews as representative of their law (though the law was delivered 430 years later), and of their special relationship as a nation with God, was in fact given to Abraham as a *"seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being*

*uncircumcised*". Abraham was not justified by the works of the law, nor because of his natural birth, nor even by his obedience to the command of God regarding circumcision, but through *faith in the work of God*. It was God who justified him, through the death of His Son in Abraham's place, a death which brought in that righteousness which God freely imputed to Abraham and to all his seed, who believe in the promise, and who are brought, like David, to know the blessedness of iniquities forgiven, or righteousness imputed.

This seed, this people, are those of *the faith of Abraham*, both of Jews and Gentiles, he being the "*father of many nations*", a countless multitude. A people with this in common: they are *all* found in Christ, that One true Seed of Abraham, the firstborn of many sons, the One who through His death brought in the inheritance of promise, the blessing of Abraham, to all those who believe, of both Jews and Gentiles.

What marks out such a people? They "*walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had yet being uncircumcised*" *Romans 4:12*. They *believe God*, and it is counted unto them for righteousness.

### **Who establish the law by faith (4:13-25)**

From verse 13 of chapter 4 Paul turns his attention to the third and final question raised at the end of chapter 3, "*Do we then make void the law through faith?*"

Oh, how important this is to answer! Having already dealt with such a disbelieving question in the firmest manner with the reply "*God forbid: yea, we establish the law*" Paul now seeks to demonstrate from the example of the promise made to Abraham, and the faith of Abraham, that faith does indeed establish the law.

In verse 13 Paul affirms the truth of the Gospel by taking us right back to the first book of the Bible and reminds us of the promise God made to Abraham in Genesis, and that everlasting covenant of grace. There God promised to make Abraham a father of many nations, to establish a covenant with him and his seed, to be his God, and to give him the land wherein he was a stranger as an everlasting possession. It is this promise and its precursor in Genesis 15 which Abraham was given faith to believe in, faith which God counted unto "*him for righteousness*" (*Genesis 15:6*). Was this in circumcision? No, in uncircumcision, for it wasn't until after these promises were made that circumcision was instituted as a "*seal of the righteousness of faith which he had yet being uncircumcised*" *Romans 4:11*.

Hence the promise was not "*through the law*", circumcision, figurative of the law, yet having been instituted, "*but through the righteousness of faith*". The promise, and

the blessings of that promise, as fulfilled by Christ in the Gospel, as the Seed of Abraham, came not by works, but by faith, not by law but by grace. But what was that promise? On the face of things, it would seem to refer to the inheritance of the land of Canaan in which Abraham was a stranger, and to that physical nation of Israel which sprang from Abraham's loins. Yet all that was merely a figure, a shadow, of what the promise truly referred to. Physical Canaan never was, and never will be, the everlasting possession of Abraham or the Jews. But what it *pictures*, what it represents, will forever be the eternal inheritance of all those who are the true children of Abraham, the heirs of the promise. For what it represents is that eternal inheritance of the world to come of which Abraham and his seed would be heirs, not *"through the law, but through the righteousness of faith"*, and not in time, but in eternity, in resurrection glory! A world in which all God's people, purchased by the blood of His Son, risen again in newness of life in Him, raised incorruptible having put on in corruption in the resurrection to come, with glorious spiritual bodies, will ever live in righteousness in the new heavens and the new earth! (See 1 Corinthians 15, 2 Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:1). *This* is the inheritance spoken of here, *this* is what will be brought in when Christ returns for His people, and *this* is the promise made to Abraham of which he was heir. By works? No, by faith!

For Abraham believed God, knowing that God would bring in this inheritance through death. In this Abraham was taught in the trial of being asked to offer up Isaac, the son whom God promised him. Abraham obeyed his Lord, believing not only that God was able to rise up Isaac from the dead, but knowing that this figure pointed to One who was to come, far down through the ages, who would be raised again from the dead in order to bring in the inheritance promised to His people. For an inheritance is always brought in by death, and it is by the death of the promised Seed that the promise of the world to come is brought in to all found in Him. *This* was what Abraham's faith believed, and this faith is what God counted for righteousness.

This is the promise made to Abraham, and if by faith, then not by law. But does that make the law void? God forbid – it *establishes* the law. Yea, it establishes the law by the death of Christ, who took upon Himself the full penalty and demands of the law against His people, suffering the wrath which they deserved, dying the death which they should die, being made a curse for them, to deliver them from the curse, from judgment, from captivity, from sin. By such a death Christ brought His people through the rivers of death into everlasting life the other side of death, from this side

of Jordan into the promised land, from time into eternity, and from the bondage and rule of the law (as being the other side of death and out of its reach) into the life and liberty of the Gospel – from the reign of death into the reign of grace. *This* established the law, satisfying its every demand, fulfilling its every penalty, and bringing in everlasting righteousness for all the seed of promise – and *nothing* else does. And this is what faith lays hold upon – justification by the blood of Christ.

Does faith make void the law? In verse 14 Paul turns the tables on his hypothetical questioner of chapter 3:31. *Far* from faith making the law void the very *opposite* is true. Whereas faith, and the righteousness brought in by faith, both fulfils and establishes the law (fulfilling every promise of which it pointed in type and figure, and establishing that righteousness which it demanded, to be imputed to all those who believe) those who would turn to the works of the law to establish their own righteousness do in fact make faith void and the promise of none effect! Far from bringing forth righteousness from those found under its rule the “*law worketh wrath*”, it condemns the sins of those under its rule and places them under a sentence of death. Far from being a ‘rule of life’ the law shows itself to be a “*ministration of death*”, and a “*killing letter*”. The law owes nothing to faith, it doesn’t demand it, nor depend upon it. The law demands works from all those found under its rule, works which they have neither the means, nor the ability to render. But Abraham was taught otherwise. He *knew* that the promise could only come by faith, only by the work of God on his behalf, only by grace. He knew that righteousness could not be attained to by his own strength, for he lacked any strength by nature, being dead in trespasses and sins. He knew that righteousness must be brought in by God, must be put to his account – imputed to him – while yet in his sins and that the inheritance could only come through the death of another. Twice over God taught Abraham the need for resurrection. Having promised Abraham and Sarah a child that child was only brought forth, at the command of God, when both Abraham and Sarah were both ‘dead’ naturally speaking, when Sarah was way past the age of child bearing. Yet, when at such an age, past all natural hope, when faith was tested to the limit, then, and only then, God rewarded the faith of Abraham, “*who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations*” (*Romans 4:18*) and God gave him the child He had promised. Yet again, God taught Abraham about the inheritance to come in the resurrection, when he commanded him to offer up Isaac. And as we have seen Abraham believed God, being “*fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was*

*also able to perform” counting him “able to raise [Isaac] up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.” A figure of what? Of the raising up from the dead of Jesus our Lord ...*

*“Who was delivered for our offences and was raised again for our justification”.*

*This is what Abraham believed, which God counted unto him for righteousness, having brought in righteousness by the faith of Jesus Christ to be imputed to all who believe, that righteousness of faith which both established and fulfilled the law.*

*And this is what every child of God, every child of Abraham rests in by faith: “For we do not make void the law through faith. God forbid: yea, we establish the law.”*

### **How Does Genesis 15: 1 – 6 Relate to Romans 3: 27 – 4:25?**

Both readings emphasize the central role of faith in God’s promise of righteousness through faith. Abraham’s example serves as a foundation illustration of justification by faith, which Paul expounds in his letter to the Romans, emphasizing that righteousness comes through faith in God’s promises rather than through works of the law.