

Sunday School Lesson for July 18, 2021

“The Faith of Abraham”

Background Scripture: Romans 4

Paul opened his letter to the Romans with a carefully constructed argument that all people are sinners, both Jew and Gentile alike, and all need a Savior. He expands his reasoning with examples of biblical characters who believed God's Word and whose faith was credited as righteousness.

Romans 4 focuses on the faith of Abraham. Genesis 15:6 says clearly that Abraham believed God and that faith, his trusting belief in God, was counted to Abraham as righteousness. Abraham was not justified by works. God wasn't paying him back for something. Abraham's was justified as God's gift to him. In the same way, David speaks of those whose sins the Lord does not count against them as being blessed by God. They do not earn forgiveness. God gives it (Romans 4:1-8).

Paul's main concern were religious Jews, who were convinced that men are saved by obeying the Law. They would not accept that we are saved by God's grace, through faith in His only begotten Son, and for this reason Paul used illustrations from the Old Testament to validate his line of reasoning.

Abraham was justified in the eyes of God hundreds of years before the Law was given to Israel, and Paul used Abraham to show that justification is not connected with keeping the Law. It was only through his faith that God reckoned him to be righteous.

The wages a worker receives can never be described as a gift. Payment for work is not a gift, but something that is rightfully theirs. Similarly, to the one who does not work, but believes on Him Who declares the ungodly to be righteous, that man's faith is credited as righteousness.

Paul chose King David as his second illustration and used a quote from Psalms to continue his line of reasoning. "How blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered." Like Abraham, David did live under the Mosaic Law, but was justified in God's sight in the same way as his forefather, by faith, and not by keeping the Law.

Paul wants us to see that a gift is not given as a reward for work, that would be a payment. God's blessing of salvation is not given because of works of the Law. God gives salvation freely, apart from works. It is unbiblical to teach, that to gain salvation one has to keep the Law, or that one is justified by engaging in a religious ritual, or undertaking a good work. Such teaching is wrong. It is unscriptural. It presents a false gospel. It removes the freedom we have in Christ and places people in bondage to sin.

The important message that Paul is sharing here is that we are justified by faith and not by works. We are saved by believing the Word of God and not by the keeping of the works of the Law. Paul wants to make a clear distinction between salvation as a gift of God's grace and salvation as a work of man's flesh.

Salvation by grace has nothing to do with what we have done but has everything to do with what Jesus has done for us, while works that we carry out in our own strength are meritorious. Any work we do to earn our salvation adds to Christ's work on the Cross and places God in a position where He is beholden to us.

Man is justified by grace through faith and not by works of the law. We are saved by God's grace and not through man's merit. Salvation is a gift, a free gift from God and not a right that has been earned. We are declared righteous by God through our faith in His Word and not the good deeds we carry out. If we were required to earn our salvation, we would consider it a legitimate payment, for wages are not considered a gift if the person has to work for them but rather an obligation of an employer, "for one

who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due."

Throughout Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, we see that salvation is not a reward for good works but is always given by believing the Word of God. We are not justified because we merit God's favor through keeping the Law, but through faith. Justification by grace through faith is not a new way to be saved.

We see that Abel, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah, Ruth, David, Isaiah, and many other saints in both the Old and New Testaments were all saved by grace through faith and not by works of the Law. We see Christ's disciples, the apostle Paul, the woman at the well, the man who was blind, and Joseph of Arimathea were justified by their faith and not by their good deeds, and the same continues to be true today.

Paul contrasted the receiving of a wage for an accomplished task and being given a free, unmerited, undeserved gift of gracious kindness. He drew our attention to the fact that in the former we deserve what we receive, while in the latter we receive that which we certainly do not deserve. "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due."

Paul may seem to be laboring the point - that being entitled to a wage or receiving a reward for working should never ever be considered the same as being given a free, unmerited, undeserved favor. Yet, then as now, there are many believers who insist that although salvation is a faith thing, we can't be saved without adding some works.

This is NOT what the Bible teaches. A reward for something we do is not the same as a free gift of God's grace, for what we believe and Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6 to emphasize that salvation always has and always will be by grace through faith in God. "Then Abraham believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." And the same is true of Abel and Noah, Sarah and Ruth, David and Isaiah, and all those who are identified in

the Word of God as men and women of faith as we read in Hebrews 11.

Paul concludes with a summary of the story of Abraham. His audience knew the story well, but Paul emphasizes certain points to reinforce what he has been saying:

Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." (Genesis 15:5). No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (verses 18-21)

In our salvation, too, we have no hope according to the flesh, no hope according to our works, but we can trust in the promise of God, given to Abraham and extended through Jesus Christ to all who believe in him. We should not be discouraged by our human inability to be righteous, but we should trust in the promise of God to count us righteous on the basis of faith. Paul reminds us that because Abraham trusted in God, "Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness'" (Genesis 15:5). We don't even believe as well as we ought to, but Jesus takes care of that for us, too. He is our judge, and that changes everything.

As his final point, Paul reasons that "the words 'it was reckoned to him,' were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also" (verses 23-24). Those words were not written for Abraham at all, for they were written long after he died. They were written for us, so that we will also have faith. We are the ones to whom righteousness will be reckoned: "to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (verse 24).

No matter whether we are Gentile or Jewish, we will be counted as righteous, as God's people, if we trust in God. What he did for Jesus, he will do for us: raise us from the dead. He has done it before, and he will do it again.

Paul concludes the chapter 4 with a brief restatement of his gospel message: Jesus Christ “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (verse 25). The deed has been done; the promise has been given. He died for our sins, and he now lives to ensure that we are accepted by God. We need to accept his gift, the gift of righteousness, given to those who believe in Jesus Christ. If God can raise the dead, he can save anyone.

Think about:

- If God saves the wicked (verse 5), does that allow me to be wicked?
- What is the seal or evidence of my righteousness? (verse 11)
- Does the law have any role in my salvation? (verse 14)
- If salvation is guaranteed (verse 16), can I refuse it or lose it?
- Am I discouraged by my own weaknesses? (verse 19)
- What gives me evidence that God will save me? (verse 24)

Closing: For the love that casts out fear, the faith that sustains and the hope that never perishes, be with us now and forever more. Amen.

Next week’s lesson July 25, 2021, “Justification through Faith”
Background Scripture: Romans Chapter 5:1-11

Sources for this lesson: The Bible, Grace Communion International - Example of Abraham, Father of Faithful - Abraham, Romans Chapter 4, and The Present Word Lesson.