Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Abraham--Justified by Faith, Part 1
Scripture: Romans 4:1-3
Code: 45-34

We come tonight to the fourth chapter of Romans, Paul's great epistle. Some have called it the Magna Carta of the Christian faith, the great statement of Christian doctrine. All religious thinking, all religious activity, all religious instruction must measure itself by the standard really of the book of Romans, which lays down God's truth in terms of His plan for redeeming man. So, it's a great, great epistle.

Now tonight, obviously, because we've done some special things tonight, we're not going to have the time we usually have to develop fully the message. But we're going to begin to look at chapter 4, a great chapter. If we were to entitle the chapter we could title it "The Faith of Abraham," because the whole chapter is really the story of Abraham. Paul uses him as an illustration of the truth that salvation is by faith not works. And Abraham is the illustration.

Bill Gold is a writer who recently wrote in the Washington Post and he said a little girl had saved up enough money to buy her father a present for Father’s Day but she was concerned about one thing. She said to her mother, "Mother, I want to buy something for Dad but I can't be going downtown every month to make payments. Is there a store anywhere where they'll let you pay for the whole thing at once?"

We understand that little girl's perspective. And you know, men have always thought and always taught that you buy salvation on the installment plan, that you sort of earn your way along and God looks at the good works this month and the good works next month and the good works the month after that and He sort of keeps the installment plan moving. But Paul is telling us it's not so, that there is a place where the whole thing was paid at once. And that place was the cross of Jesus Christ. Christ Himself paid the full price, once for all. Therefore, salvation is a paid-for gift, not something we earn on the installment plan.

Now basically that's Paul's message in this section of Romans, from chapter 3 verse 21 on to chapter 6, and even into chapter 8. He's talking about the fact that God has provided a salvation, a deliverance from sin and death and hell, and that salvation is provided by Christ through His work as a free gift to those who believe, not by their own works.

Now because he is very much aware that this doctrine is foreign to the ears of those who will hear and read Romans; it is foreign to the Jews who believed you earned your way into heaven. It was even foreign to the pagans whose systems of religion have always been religions of human achievement. But particularly does he have the Jew in mind as he argues through Romans. And he knows that saying salvation by grace through faith is God's way to save is going to run contrary to what they have always taught; that you are saved by earning your way in. And so, consequently, having taught salvation by grace through faith in verses 21 to 31, he now illustrates it and he selects as his illustration Abraham, Abraham. This man becomes the classic proof, the classic model, the classic illustration of salvation by grace through faith.

Paul has told us how to be right with God and he said a man is right with God not by what he does but by what he believes, by believing in Jesus Christ and His perfect work. And now it is very important that Abraham be his illustration because this that he has just taught would be unacceptable to the Jewish mind. And so he selects Abraham to make his point.

Let me give you some reasons why. First, Abraham would show the eternal truth of righteousness by grace through faith since Abraham was an Old Testament character. In other words, by using Abraham, Paul is saying this is nothing new, this is something very old. Abraham even preceded Moses. Abraham even preceded the identity of the nation Israel. Abraham really belongs in the patriarchal period, the very primitive time. He appears early on in the book of Genesis. And if Paul can establish that a man in the book of Genesis was saved by grace through faith and not of works, then he has given to us a timeless truth and nothing new at all.

Secondly, he selects Abraham because Abraham is also the supreme example of faith. Nobody in the Old Testament exercised as much or more faith than Abraham. And the New Testament even tells us that Abraham — the book of Galatians tells us — is the father of all who believe. In a very real sense, all who come to God by faith are children of Abraham, who sort of set the standard for faith by believing God in a most incredible way.

Now, this would run contrary to the rabbis' teaching. Let me fill you in a little bit. The majority of rabbis at the time of Paul and the time of our Lord in Jewish history believed — and this is still what the majority of them believe, certainly of the Orthodox persuasion — that Abraham was made right with God, was saved if you will, was forgiven of his sin, was given eternal life, was chosen by God for salvation because of his character. He was the best man in the world, the best man in his generation. Therefore he was chosen by God to be the father of His people Israel. And they say Abraham was a

righteous man and that's why God chose him. And we ask two questions. Number one, how could any man be righteous at God's standard level? And then a second question, how could a man keep God's righteous standard when it hadn't been given yet?

Well, they answer back, do the rabbis, he kept it by intuition and anticipation. He sensed in his conscience the law of God and he kept it as he anticipated it and he kept it intuitively. And so the rabbis said he was the best man, he was a good man; he was a righteous man on his own terms therefore God chose him because of his self-righteousness. And so, Paul selects Abraham in order to destroy this myth, to wipe out the Jewish illusion and establish the truth that Abraham is not an example of a righteous man whom God chose, he is an example of an unrighteous man whom God chose. He is not an example of a man who earned salvation by his good works; he is an example of a man who received salvation by grace through believing. In simple child-like trust, in complete yieldedness to God, he took God's word at face value, believed God. And by that act of faith he received righteousness. And of course it was very important to the Jews to have Abraham be an example of a righteous man whom God chose because they believed by their own self-righteousness God had to choose them to.

But Paul wants them and us to realize that it may be the supreme discovery of all of life to find out that you don't need to torture yourself with a losing battle to earn salvation. You don't need to torture yourself with a losing battle to gain acceptance with God on your own good works. You don't need to think you can buy salvation on the installment plan.

And there's a third reason that he chose Abraham. And that is because up till now all that he has said to us has been theological theory, theological truth, and it needs flesh and blood. And so he takes it out of the abstract and puts it into the concrete. He gives it flesh, the flesh of Abraham.

And so, for these reasons Paul chooses Abraham as his illustration. Now as you go through the 25 verses that make up his marvelous chapter, I believe — and this chapter has been analyzed many ways, it's been divided up many ways — let me give you what I think is a very simple way to divide the chapter. Abraham's life is an example and a model and a pattern of saving faith in three key ways. And I think the chapter divides easily these ways.

First of all, he was justified by faith, not works, verses 1 to 8. Secondly, he was justified by grace, not law, verses 9 to 17. Thirdly, he was justified by divine power, not human effort, verses 18 to 25. Simple enough; he was justified by faith not works, by grace not law, by divine power not human effort. And in both...or rather in all three, there are both negative and positive perspectives. Faith not

works; grace not law, divine power not human effort, and Paul hits on both the negative and the positive in each case.

So, in a very real sense, and you would understand this if you were Jewish. Some of you are and perhaps understand it even more than the rest of us. But when Paul attacks the opponents of justification or salvation by faith at the point of Abraham, he is storming the very fortress of Judaism. He is smashing down the walls of their strongest arsenal. Because if Abraham couldn't be justified by works then nobody can be because they said he was the most righteous man of all. And if you can show that Abraham cannot be justified by his works then nobody can.

Secondly, and conversely, if it can be demonstrated that Abraham was justified by faith then everyone must be justified by faith for Abraham is the standard. If Abraham can't glory and boast then nobody can because it must be of grace. So, this is critical.

Now let me talk a little more about Abraham because I think it's so very important that we understand this. Just think through this background because you need this to get a grip on the whole story. The reason that they believed that Abraham was righteous is because they picked certain scriptures, selected certain scriptures, turned and twisted certain scriptures to come to their own conclusion. Let me give you an illustration. Genesis 26:5 says this: "Because that Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments My statutes and My laws." Now God said that Abraham kept My laws, My commandments, My statutes, My charge. And so they say, look, Abraham did all that. What they don't say is: That that is not *why* God saved him — made him righteous — but that is *because* God saved him and made him righteous. And they also like to quote Isaiah 41:8 in which God spoke to Abraham as "My friend." They also draw from the book of Ecclesiasticus, which is an apocryphal book, not to be confused with Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiasticus, that spurious non-inspired book taught that Abraham was given justification, or made right with God, justified, and he was given circumcision because he earned it by keeping the law. The rabbis also taught that Abraham was one of the seven men who by his merit and by his personal righteousness had the privilege of bringing back the Shekinah glory to dwell in the tabernacle. The rabbis also taught that Abraham was so righteous he began to serve God when he was three years old. And there is the following quote from the prayer of Manasseh which is another writing, a non-biblical writing, says: "Therefore, Thou 0 Lord God of the righteous, hast not appointed repentance for the righteous, for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who did not sin against Thee, but Thou hast appointed repentance for me who am a sinner." Isn't that interesting? You have not appointed repentance for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who did not sin. Now you've really got to go through Genesis with blinders on to come to that conclusion, that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob didn't sin.

The Book of Jubilees — another historic, traditional, Jewish book, non-biblical, probably dating from the second century before Christ — said Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord and well pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life.

And so, the rabbis said because he was perfect and because he was righteous and because from the time he was three he served God and because he wasn't a sinner, God chose him and made him the head of the nation. And that's the standard. If you want to be righteous, if you want to be right with God, if you want to get your sin forgiven, if you want to be saved, as it were, and brought into the kingdom, you've got to get to where Abraham was. You've got to be righteous on your own good works.

They were so in love, by the way, with this theory, because it fed their ugly pride, that they needed Abraham for their support so they twisted everything around. For example, in Habakkuk 2:4, you don't need to look it up, it takes too long to find Habakkuk anyway, but in Habakkuk. (In Brazil they call it "Habakookie". I always think of that when I think of Habakkuk. But anyway, it's for your file.) In Habakkuk 2:4 there's a very familiar verse which Paul quotes in the New Testament and it is this: "The just shall live by (What?)faith?" The rabbis changed it and they quoted it: "The just shall live by his faithfulness." See the difference? Instead of living, that is, before God in a right relationship, by believing faith, the just live by being faithful to keep God's law. So they twisted the scripture conveniently to fit their own desire.

One ancient rabbinic commentary says, Abraham our father inherited this world and the world to come solely by the merit of faith whereby he believed in the Lord. And this is an interesting shade. What they say is that it was by faith, but it was his own faith, it was the merit of his own faith, he earned it with his own faith. And that isn't right either, as we shall see.

So, because of all of this teaching that Abraham was righteous before God on the basis of his own personal righteousness, Paul has to attack Abraham. And he has to disprove that because, you see, Abraham became the standard and then the Jews said that's the standard so we all gain righteousness by living as Abraham in perfect obedience to the rules. And so they all tried to keep the law. So, Abraham's faith must be made clear.

Now, let's look tonight initially at point number one. We won't get past this; we may not even get through this. I'm sure we won't get through this. But Abraham, first of all, was made right with God not

but...rather by faith not by works. Abraham was made right with God by faith not by works. Let's begin in verse 1. "What shall we say then, that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he has something of which to glory. But not before God. For what saith the Scripture? Abraham believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward, not reckoned of grace but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man who...whom God imputeth righteousness apart from works, saying, 'Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.'"

Now, that's the first section. Now it begins with a negative: How Abraham was not justified, how he was not made right and it was not by works. Back to verse 1: "What then," in other words, "therefore." That's the Greek term, the force coming from the previous passage since we've been talking about justification by grace through face...faith. Then what then about Abraham? What do we say about him? Our father Abraham, the one whom we've always said, and Paul said this too before he was saved, was righteous by his own self-righteousness and therefore sets the standard for us, what about him? What has he pertaining to the flesh discovered? In other words, what do we learn from him? Is his case a contradiction? He is our father, he's the father of the nation, he is the one who would be called, I guess, the father of the Abrahamic Covenant, he is the man of the covenant, he is the supreme one of all of God's people, the whole nation of Israel came out of his loins. Therefore whatever is true of him must be true of all of us as his seed. If he is the progenitor then whatever was true of him must be true of us. Now what has Abraham as pertaining to the flesh found? What does it mean "as pertaining to the flesh"?

Well, it basically means by his natural unaided powers, by his natural human ability, his natural human power. What did he do? What did he discover? What did he find? What did he attain? What did he appropriate on his own? Does Abraham contradict? Has he been able to gain something on his own according to his natural unaided powers? Does he contradict what we've just said?

Verse 2, Well, if he were justified by works — that is by those things which he did by his natural unaided powers — if he was able to be justified by those things, then he should have something of which to glory, then he had a right to boast. "But not before God."

And that's Paul's way of saying, but not so. He can't open his mouth before God. The translation is really saying in verse 2, if Abraham was justified by works, then he has something about which to boast. I mean, if I save myself by being so good, then I have a right to say, hey, I'm so good I saved

myself. But, from God's viewpoint he had no right to boast. He had no basis for pride, none at all. Now Paul's going to prove that in the rest of the chapter. He was not justified by his works.

You see, men are never made right with God by what they do. You can go and light all the candles you want, you can pray all the prayers you want, you can go to all the religious meetings you want, you can get baptized, you can buy a Bible, you can take Communion, you can feel religious feelings, you can go through all of the religious exercises, you can be a good person, you can be a very good person, you can be a goody-good person, you can be so good that nobody even likes to be around you, but the sum of it all is you that cannot attain unto God's standard of righteousness. That's why it says in chapter 3 verse 27 that boasting is excluded. No one can boast. And that's Ephesians 2, “We're saved by grace through faith, that not of ourselves; it is the gift of God not of works lest any man should boast.” Because salvation is designed to give glory to God, not glory to man.

So, Abraham had nothing about which he could boast. Now what Paul is doing here, if any of you have studied debate or logic, Paul presents what is called a hypothetical syllogism. A hypothetical syllogism has a major premise, a minor premise and a conclusion. Now the major premise is: If a man is justified by works he has ground for boasting. The minor premise is: Abraham was justified by works. The conclusion is: Therefore Abraham has a right to boast. But then God says, not on your life. So, if the conclusion isn't true then we ought to back up. Now the major premise, if a man is justified by works he has ground for boasting, is that true? Yes it's true. If you were justified by works you'd have ground for boasting, right? So that's true. The minor premise, Abraham was justified by works, is that true? That's not true. So we cannot grant the minor premise, therefore the syllogism doesn't work. The minor premise is false. Abraham was not justified by works, not before God.

And how does Paul prove his point? I love this; this is a man after my own heart. Where does he go? Verse 3, "For what saith (What?) the scripture?" That, my friend, is the coup de grace. That's all you really have to know, right? What does the Bible say? What saith the scripture? And he quotes Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness." That's Genesis 15:6. Not exactly new, right?

How did he gain righteousness? “Righteousness” means to be right with God. How did he get right with God? Well, it wasn't that he was so good on his own that God just sort of had to accept him, but rather he believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness.

Now we enter into this section from verses 3 to 8 in which we find the positive, Abraham was justified by faith. Abraham believed God. Look at Galatians for a moment. This is again Paul's argument,

chapter 3 verse 6 of Galatians. It says there, "Even as Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they who are of faith the same are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles through faith preached before the gospel unto Abraham saying, ‘In thee shall all nations be blessed.’ So then they who are of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham." Abraham was saved by faith, not by works so that all who are saved by faith since Abraham in a real sense are the children of Abraham. He's sort of the father of all who exercise faith.

Later in the same chapter, verse 26, "For ye are all the sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus." So, from Abraham on, anybody who is saved is saved by faith. To Paul then and to the Holy Spirit, the essence of Abraham's greatness was that God had chosen him, God had commanded him and he believed Him. Now what in his life was the incident where he exercised faith? Let's look at Hebrews chapter 11, tremendous text, and let's see what it was that Abraham believed. And he did believe and took God at His word, no debate, no hesitation, no argument.

Here you have the list of the people who exercised great faith in the past and it says in verse 8 of Hebrews 11, "By faith (and always Abraham is associated with faith) by faith Abraham when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed and he went out, not knowing where he went." Now this is faith. He lived in the city, the Bible tells us, called Ur, the city of the Chaldees. He had his family, his possessions, his reputation, his business. His life was there. There was no nation Israel. There was no promised land. There was no people of God, as such. And yet God came and it says he was called; present participle indicated that he was being called, that God was working over Abraham. And when he was being called he also obeyed. And that was a great act of faith because God said, get up and get out of Ur of the Chaldees and I want you to go somewhere else and I'm not going to tell you where you're going, but you just abandon everything and leave.

So, he left the land of his birth, forsook his home, his estate, severed ties with those he loved and he left, abandoning present security for future uncertainty. That’s faith. Why did he do that? Because he believed God; he believed that God would fulfill His good promise and that God would take him to a good place and that God would bless his life. He believed that. And that's all God asks.

Verse 9, his faith was patient: "By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise." To God, Abraham was the chosen man. And yet Abraham never really saw the fulfillment. He never really saw the land unfold as the possession of God's people. He never owned any land, he spent his life as a tent

dweller wandering around just like Isaac and Jacob did. He never saw the fulfillment of his dreams. It was to be out of his loins that another generation would see that. He never saw that. And yet always as he went he believed. And verse 10 says, "He looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God." He always had his eyes on God. He always had that heavenly perspective, that heavenly vision. And so his faith was a patient faith.

And then came a great testing in verse 17: Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac. God finally gave him the son, Isaac, and God said I want you to slaughter him on the altar. And he did. He took him up, put him on the altar, ready to drop the knife. Why did he do that? It's very clear. "By faith Abraham, when he was tested," verse 17, "offered up Isaac and he that had received the promise offered up his only begotten son of whom it was said, ‘In Isaac shall all thy seed be called.'" In other words, he would kill the very fulfillment of the promise. Why? Accounting that God was able to raise him up even from the dead. He said, look, if God says I'm going to have a nation out of this child and God says kill him, then I kill him in confidence that God will raise him up. Now that's faith, great faith. Had Abraham ever seen a resurrection? Never. 0h what faith. Go to a land you've never seen, have a child you cannot have, kill the child who is the hope of all the promise. And he would have done it all, so great was his faith. He is a model of faith.

Now as we draw to a conclusion, go back to Romans 4 and see what this means to you now. Verse 3, what does the scripture say in Genesis 15:6? Abraham believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness. How did he gain righteousness? How was he made right with God? How did he become acceptable with God? Through his perfection? No, through his faith. Because he believed God enough to leave his country, because he believed God enough to trust God to give him a son, because he believed God enough to kill that son if God said so and believe that he would raise him from the dead, great faith.

The word "counted," very important word. It's the word *logizomai*. That word is used eleven times in this section. In fact, I think it's eleven times right in this immediate section. And what does it mean, *logizomai*? It means "to credit to one's account, to put to one's account, to reckon, to impute to one." And what it's saying is that because he believed, God imputed to him, put to his account, a righteousness which Abraham on his own did not possess. That's the whole point. And, beloved, that's what salvation is all about. When you believe God, when you believe the Word of God and the promise of God then God takes a righteousness you don't have and puts it to your account. That's a legal act. Righteousness is put on your account. It's like being a beggar, a pauper, and having nothing, and having the world's richest person put in the bank a fortune to your account; it belongs to you. We are credited with a righteousness we do not have and how? By faith; this is the heart, listen, of all Christian theology. It's the heart. You muff this doctrine and You've blown it.

John Murray, writing in his very fine book called *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* says, "God's judgment is according to the truth here as elsewhere. He constitutes the ungodly righteous and consequently can declare them to be righteous." And I tried to say that to you in weeks past that God actually credits to our account righteousness. He actually imputes to us righteousness.

How so? How can this be? How can God look at Abraham with his sin? And we know he had sin; you just read Genesis and find out. He lied, and that's a sin. I'll tell you how. Isaiah 53, oh what a great text, Isaiah 53 verse 4; here's a description of Christ. The prophet sees Christ on the cross. He says, "Surely He hath borne our griefs, carried our sorrows, yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement (or the punishment) for our peace was upon Him and with His stripes we are healed." What a statement.

Listen, do you know why God can credit righteousness to your account? Because He credited your sin to Christ's account. And on the cross Christ paid the price for your sin, which then satisfies God's requirement and allows God to credit His righteousness to your account and mine. That's the heart of the Christian faith. God never ever could have credited righteousness to Abraham's account had not Abraham's sin been paid for. And it was on the cross of Jesus Christ, though Christ had not yet come into the world. That's no more difficult to understand than that our sin should be credited to Christ who came 2,000 years ago. He is the apex of redemptive history.

Arthur Pink summarizes by saying, "It is called the righteousness of God because He is the appointer, approver and imputer. It is called the righteousness of God, and our Savior Jesus Christ, because He wrought it out and presented it unto God. It is called the righteousness of faith because faith is the apprehender and receiver of it. It is called the righteousness of man because it was paid for him and imputed to him. And all these varied expressions refer to so many aspects of that one perfect obedience unto death which the Savior performed for His people."

And may I add to Pink's list? Daniel calls it "everlasting righteousness." Daniel 9:24.

Now, that's a thrilling truth. What a joy to a person who's deeply convinced that he's lost, who knows he's a rebel against God, who knows he's a lawbreaker, who knows he's condemned to hell and he knows he can't earn his own way in, to discover that he doesn't have to, that God will impute righteousness, God will credit righteousness to his account because his sin has been credited to

Christ's account on the cross, if he but believes. And so, when a sinner is alerted to the holy majesty and unbending justice and sovereign power of God, there is a terrorizing sense of lostness, a great feeling of depravity. The foul character of sin and the inevitable deserved judgment becomes frontal in the mind and the awakened soul cries out for a salvation that he knows he can't earn. He may cry with that text of Micah 6:6 and 7, "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Isn't that a great word? What am I going to do? What am I going to offer to God? How many "Hail Mary's" does it take? How many religious rites does it take?

The poor soul may cry with Job 25:4, "How then can a man be justified with God? Or, how can he be clean that is born of woman?" And then comes this blessed truth. By faith, by faith righteousness is put to your account. What a great reality. Next time we'll talk about what that faith is. Some say it's a work. God says it isn't. We'll see why next time. Let's pray.

Father, we have had a wonderful, wonderful time in fellowship tonight and best of all, You've spoken to us. You've spoken through the words of the songs sung. You've spoken to us through the transformed lives of your children that surround us. And mightily and powerfully You've spoken to us through Your precious Word and You've reminded us of that great truth that we are saved by faith. Righteousness, the very divine character, is given to us, put to our account when we believe as Abraham believed. We pray, Lord, that You'll work especially in the heart of that one who is trying so hard to earn his way or her way in. May they, in coming to the desperate point of realization that they can't get there on their own, may they hear the echo of Paul's words, "If you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, you'll be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto salvation."

Father, we pray that You'll speak to every life, especially those who've not entered into this salvation by faith. To those of us who are Christians, may we never grow so indifferent that the thrill is gone when we think of these great truths. Thank You, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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