

## How God Justifies the Ungodly – Part 1

By David Harrell

Romans 4:1-8

What a privilege it is to be able to come together and once again open up the Word of God and study it.

Take your Bibles and turn to Romans chapter four. Our journey in Paul's epistle to the Romans brings us now to chapter four. And this morning we will begin examining the whole issue of how God justifies the ungodly.

From time to time people will ask, "Why do you preach the Bible verse by verses? Why not just pick various topics?"

My answer is simply because it would appear that verse by verse preaching was the method exemplified in the Bible. For example, in Luke 24 you will recall the resurrected Christ appeared to two men on the road to Emmaus. They were confused about the death and resurrection of this Jesus the Nazarene. And recognizing their ignorance of Scripture, the text tells us that Jesus began with Moses and with all the prophets and he explained to them the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures. And then that passage goes on to say that those men recognized that they were actually speaking to Jesus who then vanished from their sight and in verse 32 of Luke 24 we read, "And they said to one another, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?'"<sup>1</sup>

This will always be the response of those whose hearts are hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

Beloved, from the outset, may I remind you that as your pastor I have a divine mandate to preach the Word as Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy four verse two. And I must be faithful to do just that. I am to preach the Word. I am not to preach about the Word. I am not to use the Word as some kind of spiritual sauce that you put on various topics, but rather preach the Word.

And according to Ephesians four, my responsibility as a pastor teacher is not to entertain you, but to equip you for godly living and service and, frankly, this cannot be done apart from the expositional, systematic teaching of the Word of God. And once a shepherd deviates from this, once he abandons the exegetical process and abandons a firm commitment to a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic or principle of Bible interpretation, he will very quickly become a wolf in sheep's clothing and will no longer be a shepherd.

Frankly this is the legacy of many false teachers, well, frankly, all false teachers who end up reading the Bible and they end up just making stuff up. We have seen this over the past few weeks. There is a false teacher by the name of Harold Camping. You have probably seen the signs around Nashville that yesterday was supposed to be judgment day. It was supposed to be the end of the world. He is the self proclaimed Bible teacher

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 24:32.

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and pastor of a church in California. He is the founder and president of Family Radio. The fact that he prophesied falsely proves that he is a false teacher. But this is what happens when you replace the grammatical, historical method of interpretation with numerology and allegory. You end up concocting all kinds of doctrines and demons.

For example, he teaches that the Church age has ended, that no one can get saved in the Church any longer, that true believers need to flee from their churches and, of course, that the end of the world was supposed to be yesterday.

Well, God has warned us that before the Lord returns there will be a proliferation of teachers like this and it is my responsibility before God to protect you from them even if it costs me my life.

Paul said that the Church is the household of God, of the living God, the pillar and the support of the truth, 1 Timothy 3:15. And, beloved, this spiritual edifice will not stand unless it has a strong foundation and your lives will not stand unless they have a strong foundation, unless you are well equipped as a soldier of the cross.

So having said all of that, we return once again to a systematic, verse by verse study of the Word of God, consistent with, I believe, the apostle Paul's passionate commitment that he declared to the elders at Ephesus in Acts 20 and verse 27. He said, "For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God."<sup>2</sup>

And that was for good reason. In verse 29 he went on to say:

I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.<sup>3</sup>

We have experienced that very thing in this church in the past and there may be even a wolf prowling around the shadows of this church right now. I hope not.

So what must we do? We must learn the truth and we must live the truth, very simply.

Paul said in Ephesians six with respect to how do you stand up against the schemes of the devil? He says in verse 14, "Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS."<sup>4</sup>

So we must learn the truth. We must live the truth and that brings us now to the truth that God has given us in Romans chapter four.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 20:27.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 20:28-29.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 6:14.

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Now here Paul is going to answer the question: How does God justify the ungodly? Those who are sinners, who are guilty of sin, how does he declare them righteous?

Now, you will recall at the end of chapter three he made it clear that this would be done by faith apart from works and here in chapter four he is going to expand upon that by giving us a concrete example of a man whom the Jews revered as their physical and spiritual father, the man Abraham, the greatest of the Jewish patriarchs, the man the rabbis held forth to be prototype of a person that would be justified by works, a falsehood that Paul will turn on its head.

Now, by way of summary very quickly just so you get an overview of what we will be looking at this Sunday and next, in chapter four Paul is going to raise this example of Abraham, in effect, to answer this question. How does God justify the ungodly? Was it truly by works as many claimed? And then he is going to draw his audience into asking: How did Abraham receive three things? And these three things were dominant in the minds of the Jews of that day and even, frankly, even to this day. How did Abraham receive righteousness? How did he receive his inheritance? How did he receive his posterity? And then at the end of chapter four he is going to close with a call for personal application.

But now this morning we are going to focus on the first eight verses which will, in essence, ask and then answer the question: How did Abraham receive his righteousness before God?

Let me read this passage to you, Romans chapter four beginning in verse one.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: "BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. "BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT."<sup>5</sup>

Now first we must think historically to get some context. We need to make sure we understand who is this man Abraham. The history of Israel begins with God calling a man named Abram. And later on his name would be changed to Abraham. And he would

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 4:1-8.

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be called by God to father a people that he would choose for himself through no merit of their own. They would become a chosen nation. These would be a people that would become a living illustration of sinners whom God will bless despite their unworthiness, despite their rebellion, a nation through whom the whole world would one day be blessed.

And in Genesis chapter 11 we read how Moses records a selective genealogical list. And in that text he begins with Shem, the son of Noah and he ends with a man named Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor and Haran.

And we read in Genesis 11 verse 28 that Terah lived in a place called Ur, Ur of the Chaldees. Now this was a famous Sumerian city located by the Euphrates River which was a region in southern Mesopotamia. It was about 100 miles northwest of the Persian Gulf. It would be today where Kuwait exists if you want to get a sense of where this would have been originally. And this would also have been the original area of the Garden of Eden which would have been destroyed by this time by the great flood.

Now biblical chronology places the birth of Abraham at about 2166 BC. If you want to be a little more precise that is 4177 years ago. The principle deity that they worshipped there in Ur was the Sumerian moon god Nanna. He was known in Acadian as the god Sin, literally, S I N.

Now this god also had a coterie of fellow deities that the pagans worshipped. And if we look at, for example, Joshua 24:2 we read that Terah, Abraham's father and I am sure his whole family worshipped all of these deities. So that gives you a little background of Abraham's culture where he grew up.

Some scholars even identify the name Terah as a form of the Hebrew word  $\text{xry}$  (yaw-ray'-akh) which means moon which may well be a testimony to his original religious orientation.

Now archaeologists estimate that around 300,000 people lived in this region during the time Abraham lived there with his father. They have unearthed many different things to help us understand more about the culture. We see from archaeological finds that they were a highly educated culture. They were well versed in science and math and astronomy, agriculture, weaving, engraving. But think about it. It was from this area that Satan first launched his attack on God, tempting Adam and Eve to sin. This was the ancient land, later on, of Shinar where Nimrod came along and instigated the tower of Babel. This became the ancient land of Babylon, a region that eventually became a dominant force in world civilizations and the Babylonians would one day destroy Israel and hold them for 70 years.

Still to this day that entire region in the Middle East is dominated by the most vile, demonic religion in all of the world, the religion of Islam, the most virulent haters of the one true God of the Bible.

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Now later on as we study biblical history we see that Terah and his family, including Abraham and his wife Sarah all moved 600 miles northwest to a place called Haran, another major center that worshipped the god of the Acadians, the god Sin.

So given Abraham's pagan idolatrous origins, I hope you see that there is nothing about him that would deserve God's special attention. There is certainly nothing about him deserving of being justified by a holy God. Yet in the providence of God, without any explanation, without any influence, God chose to bless Abraham in ways beyond his imagination, by giving him a covenant. That covenant is introduced in Genesis 12. And it is actually made in Genesis 15 and then ratified again later on in Genesis 17. And in this covenant, this promise that God made to Abraham, there are really four elements out of which or of which would eventually develop from Abraham.

God promised him, first of all, number one, a seed. And that seed, if we study it, is a reference to Christ who would one day be the Redeemer King, the Lamb and the Lion, that Christ would come from Abraham's loins.

He also promised Abraham a land. This referred to a specific territory that would be set apart by God for his chosen people, a place where he would one day dwell with him in holy and intimate union, a day that we are looking forward to, what we would call the millennial reign of Christ.

And, thirdly, he promised Abraham a nation. This would be a place where Abraham's godly reputation and legacy would be displayed materially and spiritually and even socially and the glory of God's grace would there be put on display.

And, finally, he promised Abraham that there would be a divine blessing put on him, a blessing as well as protection.

In Genesis 12:3 we read this. "I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."<sup>6</sup>

Notice he says, "The one who curses you I will curse."<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately this is a warning that our president and many of the people in our government fail to believe and they have violated which is going to bring disaster upon him and, I fear, our whole nation.

So 500 years after the flood God set his elective love on a particular man and through his progeny, an ethnic group, the Jew, later called Israel. And there with Abraham he made unilateral, an unconditional, an irreversible covenant that would orchestrate his sovereign

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 12:3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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plan to redeem a people for himself as well as restore the glorious kingdom that he has temporarily allowed Satan to claim for himself.

So believing solely on God's Word, Abraham hears God and trusts him, the God who tells him to leave his land, the place where now he has been living in Haran for about 15 years. And he tells him to go to a land that he would give him, this land of Canaan, a land that was notorious for barbaric idolaters in that day, people that were even worse than those that Abraham was familiar with in his culture.

God says to him, "I want you to leave your land. I want you to leave your family. I want you to leave your inheritance and I am going to give you a new land. I am going to give you a new family and I am going to give you a blessed inheritance."

Now think about it. Would you do that? If God somehow came to you and told you to do this?

As I reflected upon it I began to understand more of the faith that it took for Abraham to do this. After all, he was 75 years old when God told him to do this. Imagine going to your wife and saying, "Honey, let's pack whatever we can. We are going to move from here."

Imagine leaving behind your relatives a command, by the way, which he disobeyed because he did take Lot his nephew which proved later on to be disastrous. But to take only the most essential possessions and to take enough food to travel as far as you could, but you have got about 400 miles to go. Pack up donkeys and camels. Get your servants. Get as many sheep and cattle as your group can possibly herd and then leave behind all of your friends. Leave behind all of our security, security of your home and especially to convince your dear wife saying, "Honey, the one true God I believe has spoken to me and you have got to trust me and trust him through me. So let's pack up and let's go."

That would be a tough sell, wouldn't it? And I am sure Sarah would have said to him, "Honey, specifically just where are we going?"

"Well, I don't really know specifically, but God is going to progressively reveal this to me."

Oh, that is comforting.

But Abraham believed God and he set out for this land of Canaan and eventually Abraham and Sarah and Lot arrived and as we study the text and even some of the extra biblical literature, we see that the land was basically theirs for the taking, even though there were Canaanites that lived in the land.

And we know that they made camp and settled in a place where I have been, a very beautiful area that was later named Shechem. It is today in the Palestinian territories. It is

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a filthy town today called Nablus. You will see it a lot on the news because the Palestinians are constantly uprising in that area. It is an area about 40 miles north of Jerusalem.

And when they arrived at this place, beautiful hilled, hilly area, God appeared to Abraham and said in Genesis 12:7, “‘To your descendants I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.”<sup>8</sup>

Later on as we study the history they proceed to a mountain on the east of what later became Bethel and he built another altar there. And it is interesting. If you read Moses’ historical account you will see that he includes within this account a level of suspense in the story of Abraham. He kind of keeps the reader guessing. Is Abraham going to be unfaithful? The answer is yes. He is going to pull some real stunts here. And is God going to forsake him and forsake his covenant promises? And the answer is: Absolutely not, because God’s promises to him are unconditional. They were unilateral. They were irreversible.

Now as we study the history we see that there was a famine in Canaan and at that point Abraham could have returned back to Ur of the Chaldees. He could have gone back to Haran, but instead he chose to go to Egypt. You will remember the story there where Pharaoh saw the beauty of his wife Sarah and wanted her for his harem and, of course, that would have sent panic to Abraham, because not only did he not want to lose his dear wife, but also he is thinking, no wife, no son, no fulfillment of the covenant. And so, you know, he lied, told the Pharaoh that she was his sister. And, of course, God sent a plague in judgment against the Egyptians and they finally said, “Take your wife and your family and they were escorted out of Egypt. You remember that great story.

And since they had no children and yet there was a covenant promise here, Abraham I am sure wondered, well, how is this going to happen? We are getting older? But Abraham had his nephew Lot with him and according to the culture that would have been the heir apparent. But God removed that obstacle when Lot chose to settle on the plain toward Sodom and move his clan there. And so at that point, indeed, all the rest of the land would now belong to Abraham and his descendants if he could have a son.

Well, another potential heir is introduced in Genesis chapter 15, Eliezer. He was the head of Abraham’s household, but God removed that temptation, that possibility telling Abraham, “No, no, no. I am going to give you an heir. This heir is going to be your own.”

Well, a third alternate heir is presented in Genesis chapter 16. You will remember, again, Sarah was unable to have a child and so she suggested that her husband follow the customary procedure of the culture of that day and have a child through a substitute wife, one of the servants in the house, a woman by the name of Hagar. Because Abraham’s faith was beginning to get a little weak, at the age of 86 he committed adultery and

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 12:7.

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through that union with Hagar she had a son Ishmael who would have been a full and legitimate son of Abraham by the customs of that day, but, of course, that was a sin that brought unimaginable heartache for Abraham and his posterity because, as you know, Ishmael became the father of the Arabs and they have fought against the descendants of Abraham, the descendants of Isaac, the son that Sarah finally had some 13 years later just as God had promised.

And as the story unfolds, again, you keep asking the question. Will God abandon Abraham for having so little faith in the promises of God? But, ah, then the greatest test of all came. In Genesis chapter 22 God comes to Abraham and he says, “I want you to take this son that was so long in coming, this son that you love, Isaac, and I want you to sacrifice him to me.”

But it is interesting. Instead of saying, “God, if I do that, I will forfeit the promise,” he said, “Yes,” believing that somehow God would find a way and perhaps his son would be raised from the dead. And, indeed, as you know, God did provide a way.

Before the knife pierced Isaac God stayed his hand. He preserved the covenant by providing a substitute, a marvelous picture of the Lamb of God who would one day come through that very lineage, the Lord Jesus Christ, the substitute who would die in the place of all who would place their trust in him.

The writer of Hebrews gives us further insight into this account in Hebrews chapter 11 beginning with verse 17. There we read:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type.<sup>9</sup>

So through Abraham's son Isaac was born Jacob and Esau and through Jacob you eventually have the 12 tribes of Israel.

So by the illuminating power of the Spirit of God Abraham believed God. He trusted in him even though at times his faith would be weak. However, God did not allow Abraham to ever own any land in Canaan except one tiny little field in a place called Mamre. Later that became Hebron. We read about this in Genesis 23 verses three through 11. And there we read that Abraham purchased the cave of Machpelah in which he buried his beloved wife Sarah. And later the biblical record tells us that Abraham and Jacob and Rebekah and Leah were all buried there at that place according to Genesis 49. And eventually, according to Genesis 50, we read that even Joseph buried his father Jacob in that same cave.

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<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 11:17-19.



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but think about it. It was 700 years after God first promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land that Joshua would begin the conquest of Canaan. And it took 100 years for that conquest to be complete.

Now with this brief overview of the history of Abraham and his early descendants, we begin to have a better grasp of the thinking of the Jews even though in many ways it was distorted. And this is crucial, dear friends, in understanding what Paul is going to communicate here with respect to how does God justify the ungodly.

Now, remember Paul was a skilled Pharisee. He understood pharisaic doctrine. And he knew very well that his opponents would immediately bring up Abraham as proof of how works can justify a man before God.

So we come to the text. How did Abraham receive his righteousness? Number one, we see it was not by his works. Notice verse one of chapter four.

“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?”<sup>10</sup>

The phrase, “What then shall we say...”<sup>11</sup>

In other words, in light of the previous things that I have said in the previous chapter where I have made it very clear that sinful man can only receive the righteousness from God apart from the law, it is acquired by faith. It is available to all, even the Gentiles. And it is accomplished by redemption, a gift from God. All of this has been stated in the law and the prophets. So what shall we say about all of this? What was Abraham found as... or what has Abraham found as pertaining to the flesh, in other words, with his human works? What has that accomplished? This great prototype of a man that was declared righteous. Was it through works?

Verse two he says, “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God.”<sup>12</sup>

And, my friends, what follows now is a compelling defense of the proposition that justification is by grace through faith and not of works.

Now before we look at this in more detail, I want to digress for a moment. Has it occurred to you that the Holy Spirit is spending an enormous amount of time making sure that we get this? He is going over and over showing it in every different direction, trying to make sure we grasp it. Well, why is that? Well, I believe the answer is clear. When you realize that throughout history Satan has used this doctrine I am sure more than any

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 4:1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Romans 4:2.

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other to distort the truth about salvation. In fact, every single religion in the world except biblical Christianity teaches salvation by human works. Think about it. Judaism, Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, on and on it goes, all false religions. And one of the things that I have encountered a great deal even here in this area is another false religious system that is called Free Masonry. Some of you are familiar with it. It is very popular in our culture. You will see the Masonic parades with the little clowns riding the little tricycles and what not, men wearing the little red hats, the fez, I think they are called, collecting money. They do a lot of really great things in terms of raising money for children and what not. But it is a false religious system disguised as a fraternity. It is a unique blend, if you study it, as I have in detail, a unique blend of the occult, of paganism, Satanism, demonology and, perhaps worst of all, it teaches a system of salvation by works.

Despite the fact that the Southern Baptist Convention essentially endorsed it in 1993, stating that although some of Free Masonry is incompatible with Christianity, membership in the lodge is a matter of individual conscience. One study estimates that in the Southern Baptist Convention alone there are between 500,000 and perhaps 1.3 million masons.

The first degree includes a discussion of what is called the lambskin apron. This is the most important emblem in freemasonry and each candidate receives an apron in the first degree. And their official textbook, the monitor, says this about the apron.

Quote, "The lamb in all ages has been deemed an emblem of innocence."

Let me stop there. I want you to notice now how subtly Satan will distort the truth.

"The lamb in all ages has been deemed an emblem of innocence. He, therefore, who wears the lamb skin as the badge of a mason is continually reminded, catch this, of that purity of life and conduct so essentially necessary to his gaining admission into the celestial lodge above where the supreme architect of the universe presides," end quote.

I have been at a number of funerals where masons have been buried and at the end of the portion that I have done or if I have been a part or have just been someone in the audience, they will dismiss the people and it will be time for the masons to do their thing. They will have a ritual with this apron and other things.

And I remember one very specific conversation I had with a man that I knew at the close of that whole ceremony which we are not allowed as a non mason to see or participate in. He came out and he was talking to me and one of the things that he said—and I wrote it down so I would never forget it.

Quote, "Well, one thing is for sure. If he doesn't make the cut, no one can. He was a good man and a good mason."

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But, dear friends, if purity of life and conduct, as they say, is necessary for admittance into heaven, then none of us will ever be admitted.

You see, we need the purity of the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter says in 1 Peter one verse 18, “You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

So, indeed, knowing exactly how God justifies the ungodly is of paramount importance because Satan is ingenious in his deceptions and we must know the truth in order to spot the counterfeit.

So we come back to the text. How did Abraham receive the righteousness of God? If, number one, it was not by works of the flesh, then what is it? That is number two. It was through faith in God.

Notice verse three.

“For what does the Scripture say?”<sup>14</sup>

And how here he quotes Genesis 15:6.

“AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.”<sup>15</sup>

Now, again, as I hope you saw in the historical overview that I gave you, Abraham was not seeking after God. No man seeks after God. He was an idolater, but God was seeking him. And through the uninfluenced choice of a sovereign God, God reaches down and chooses to reveal himself to Abraham and Abraham hears the Word of God and he responds in faith and obedience. He believes God.

It is interesting. In Galatians chapter three verses six through seven Paul expands upon this very text from Genesis 15:6. And he says, “Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.”<sup>16</sup>

Notice he says those who are of faith, not of works who are sons of Abraham. And then in verse nine he describes the great Jewish patriarch as “Abraham the believer,” not Abraham the worker, Abraham the believer.

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<sup>13</sup> 1 Peter 1:18-19.

<sup>14</sup> Romans 4:3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Galatians 3:7.

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Now think about it. How would have... how would Abraham have even known what kind of works to perform, especially given all of the paganism that he was involved with? Moreover, think about this. He lived 600 years before the law was given to Moses at Mount Sinai. See, the key is he believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

The writer of Hebrews clearly explains this, Hebrews chapter 11 beginning in verse eight. We read, “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed...”<sup>17</sup>

Let me pause there. He was called in the original language is a present participle. It could be translated when he was being called. In other words, what the text is saying is immediately as Abraham understood what God was asking him to do, he began packing. He said, “Honey, come here. Get ready to go.”

He responded obediently, immediately without hesitation, without argument.

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed [I love that] by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.<sup>18</sup>

The Christian life is an adventure, isn't it? It is a glorious adventure. He was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. In other words, his ultimate hope was in heaven. He knew that he would never enter there apart from faith in a merciful God, faith that would be proven by his obedience and his longing to be accepted by God and to dwell in his presence.

And it is interesting as you have studied the life of Abraham, you see that throughout his entire life, even along with Isaac and Jacob, he struggled with this land of promise that he would never personally possess, but his descendants would many generations later. What kept him going? It was faith in God.

Later in Hebrews chapter 11 verse 13 we learn that Abraham saw the glorious day of Christ it says from a distance. I love that. He saw it from a distance. In other words, he could see the continuing seed of Isaac one day producing the fulfillment of all that God had promised. And for this reason, over 2000 years later Jesus said to his Jewish opponents, John 8:56, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.”<sup>19</sup>

Isn't that precious?

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<sup>17</sup> Hebrews 11:8.

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 11:8-10.

<sup>19</sup> John 8:56.

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So in verse three because Abraham believed it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

What does this word reckoned mean? It is *logizomai* (log-id'-zom-ah-ee) in the original language. It means to impute or to count. It is a legal bookkeeping term meaning to put one, to put something into one's account.

It would be like me coming along and putting a trillion dollars into your bank account. Only, my friends, in this case the righteousness of Christ is infinitely greater than that. Abraham did not deserve this. He did not earn this. It was a gift of God as a result of his faith.

The question is: Do you believe what God has told you? He has told you that you are a sinner, that you will never come into his presence unless you trust in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ who died as a substitute for sinners. Do you believe that? Will you trust God? If so, you will be justified.

You see, the proper object of saving faith in the Old Testament was the Word of God. We see this, for example, in Genesis 15:6. And in the New Testament age it is the person and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament. And it is important for you to understand that it is not the act of faith that saves a man. Faith is not the basis or the reason for justification even when that faith is focused on correct object. But rather it is the object of a man's faith that saves him. God the Father who has sent his Son and ministered the gospel through the Holy Spirit, it is that object, our merciful God who responds to the act of faith and justifies the believer.

You see, faith in and of itself has never saved anyone. It is merely the channel through which God justifies the ungodly.

Think of faith as the conscious, deliberate act of placing one's confidence in the gospel of God. And solely by the power of God's sovereign and redemptive grace, he saves that person whom he has chosen in eternity past, an amazing and profound mystery.

But Paul continues his argument by explaining in verse four, "Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due."<sup>20</sup>

In other words, if a man were able to pay his debt to God, then grace and righteousness and the glory of God demonstrated in the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ would all be unnecessary. And that is precisely what Satan wants you to believe, that Christ is not necessary, that you can do this on your own. Who needs Christ if a man can save himself?

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<sup>20</sup> Romans 4:4.

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Of course, this plays well into our self righteous pride, doesn't it? Try telling a man that he is so sinful, so unacceptable to God and so totally unable to do anything to be reconciled to God, that his only hope in salvation, only hope for salvation is in the substitutionary atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ and just watch his reaction. People don't like to hear that. They much prefer, do you know what? Hey, you are a pretty good person. Look at all the things you do. I mean, compared to these other people, man, if anybody will make the cut you will.

We love to hear that. You don't need the Christ of Christianity. You can pay the debt yourself. And all false religions offer you all manner of things you can do to somehow pay that debt which is a fool's journey.

Verse five Paul goes on.

“But to the one who does not work,...”<sup>21</sup>

Oh, this is different.

“But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly...”<sup>22</sup>

Oh, we have got to stop there. There is that terrible offensive epithet, the ungodly, *asebhv* (as-eb-ace') in the original language. Oh, that is a terrible word, ungodly. It means impious. It means irreverent. It means wicked, the one who is utterly bereft of any reverential awe of God who has no fear of God, who condemns God.

“But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly...”<sup>23</sup>

In other words, I have to first of all believe that I am that vile wretched person. Are you kidding me?

I had a very interesting opportunity a few years ago to speak for six weeks at one of the most liberal Methodist churches in the Nashville area. I won't get into all the details of how they invited me, but suffice it to say that it was an inside job. And they told me that we want to hear a Bible expositor. And I preached on the believer's armor in Ephesians six. And the first night, it was on Wednesday night, a series of Wednesday nights. The first night there were about 100 people. The next night there were about 50. The next night it had gotten down to about 25 and it kind of hung in there. But I remember one man coming up to me after I was speaking.

He said this. “Why would anyone want to love a God who sees them as ungodly?”

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<sup>21</sup> Romans 4:5.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

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And I said to him, in essence, “You know, that is a great point. Because no one would ever admit that they are vile, wretched, ungodly.”

And he is kind of shaking his head.

Unless God in his grace would come upon him by the power of the Holy Spirit who alone can convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment and expose to him the wretchedness of his sin and cause him to cry out to God for mercy.

And at that point I remember him turning his head, throwing up his hands and walking away.

But, dear friends, that is exactly Paul’s point here. Verse five.

“But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.”<sup>24</sup>

Yes, God, I see my sin. I agree with you. I confess my sin. I am guilty as charged. Only you can declare me righteous based upon a righteousness that is not my own, but the righteousness of Christ that is imputed, that is reckoned to me.

And then Paul offers another great example of one who understood, taught justification by faith alone, Israel’s greatest king, King David.

Notice verse six. He says, “Just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works.”<sup>25</sup>

And then he quotes Psalm 32 verses one and two that we read earlier this morning.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT.<sup>26</sup>

Oh, what a magnificent truth, dear friends, one that David knew so well. Think about it. Having been confronted by Nathan the prophet over his sin, his adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband Uriah, David had no hope of any righteousness of his own. All he could do would be to plead for the mercy of God and to cry out for God to grant him forgiveness.

We read more of this in Psalm 51 verse one. David says, “Be gracious to me.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Romans 4:6.

<sup>26</sup> Romans 4:7-8.

<sup>27</sup> Psalm 51:1.

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In other words, “God, show me your grace.”

“O God, according to Thy lovingkindness...”<sup>28</sup>

Again, not my works. I don’t have anything to offer.

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; According to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, And my sin is ever before me.<sup>29</sup>

Notice he says, “Blot out, wash, cleanse. God, only you can do this.”

Later on in verse 16 David says:

For Thou dost not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; Thou art not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, in the brokenness of his heart over his sin David acknowledges that the divine prerequisite for even giving an animal sacrifice has to be inner loyalty. It has to be heart obedience. It has to be a desire to cast one solely on the mercy and the grace of God.

It is when we are living in unrepentant sin and we see that God is unimpressed. He doesn’t care about all of our religious externals. He is looking for a broken heart over sin. He is looking for one who has a broken spirit, a, contrite heart. In fact, as we read all through Scripture, God is literally sickened by religious externals. God is looking for one who will believe that only he can justify the ungodly.

I pray that you believe that. I pray that you have humbled yourself before his great mercy and grace. Again, oh, what a blessed doctrine is this justification by faith. What an amazing truth to think that faith is the channel by which God both imputes as well as imparts righteousness to those who trust in him, to think that he not only declares us to be righteous and treats us in such a way, but he actually infuses his righteousness into us. That is an amazing thought.

Again, never forget, beloved, that God redeems us that he might inhabit us. And as the Spirit of God comes within us and dwells within us, there is this magnificent process of sanctification. Justification is being declared righteous. Sanctification is that process whereby we gradually are conformed to the image of Christ and really are made

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Psalm 51:1-3.

<sup>30</sup> Psalm 51:16-17.



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righteous. And herein is the great blessing that David describes as Paul quotes in verses seven and eight of Romans four.

Well, Abraham and David and Paul all understood what the lyrics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century hymnists Wolfe and Gray said in that great old hymn *Complete in Thee*.

They said this.

Complete in Thee! no work of mine  
May take, dear Lord, the place of Thine;  
Thy blood hath pardon bought for me,  
And I am now complete in Thee.

You may remember the refrain. It says:

Yea, justified! O blessed thought!  
And sanctified! Salvation wrought!  
Thy blood hath pardon bought for me,  
And glorified, I too, shall be!

Let's pray together.

*Father, thank you for these glorious truths. My, how our hearts soar with joy and overflow with doxologies because of what you have given to us. Lord, may we all humble ourselves before this great doctrine and see to it that whenever we preach the gospel we make it very clear that you justify the ungodly solely by grace through faith. And, Lord, if anyone does not know you today, if they have never cast themselves upon your mercy, Lord, how I pray that by the power of your Spirit you would cause them to believe the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved this day before it is too late. We thank you, we love you and we praise you in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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