

## **Romans 4:1-5, 23-25      Abraham justified by faith**

We begin by summarising a few salient points. Paul has shown in chapter 3:

- That all have sinned: salvation cannot be earned on the basis of merit, ethnic identity or 'works of the law'.
- That a righteousness from God apart from law has been revealed, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.
- The Shema, the Jewish confession of faith that God is One (Deuteronomy 6:4) is the basis on which gentiles coming to faith don't need to become Jews, because God is also God of the gentiles. However this didn't mean that Jews needed to cease being Torah-observant Jews when they accepted Christ – but this wasn't even a question in the very early church.

In regard to the law we have seen:

- That the law is the expression of God's will (also see Romans 7:12,14)
- That the law itself isn't a system of legalistic works-based righteousness, even though it can be and was made into that, especially in Jesus' day.
- The law isn't nullified or abolished. But it is impossible to be justified by the law by thinking that we have lived a good enough life. Rather, like a mother and father who love their child, so God just loves us with a love that cannot be earned (Romans 3:28).

In Romans 4:1 Paul begins to discuss Abraham, as an example. *What did Abraham discover in this matter?* Discoveries, such as Newton discovering gravity, are exciting: Abraham discovered faith. This is a discovery we all need to make for ourselves.

Romans 4:2-3 mentions the phrase, *justification by works*. This can't refer to the law because the law hadn't yet been given, at least in any formal way. Abraham wasn't justified on the basis of merit, but by simple faith and trust in God.

In Romans 4:4-5 Paul gives a practical down to earth illustration. You may come home from a hard day's work and feel exhausted, but you expect to be paid. Your wage isn't a gift, but an obligation. But God isn't obligated to us; He doesn't owe us anything. In fact we are obligated to Him, but we are unable to pay. This is why justification can only ever be a gift. It comes from our gracious heavenly Father. And a gift can only ever be received gratefully, by faith.

**Romans 4:3** *What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*

Compared to David (last week), Abraham was a very different character. The Lord forgave David of terrible sins, but we don't read of any such descent into sin in Abraham's life. However Abraham still needed to be justified before God.

Abraham left his home in the Ur of the Chaldeans in response to God's call and he settled in the land of Canaan, living in tents. God promised to make him into a great nation, and through his Offspring all nations on the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). In Genesis 15 God confirmed His promise. But there was a problem. Abraham and Sarah were childless. Abraham said to the Lord,

**Genesis 15:2** *"Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."*

Then God promised Abraham a son as an heir, from his own body,

**Genesis 15:5-6** *"Look up at the sky and count the stars--if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*

Although this was humanly impossible because of Abraham and Sarah's great age, Abraham believed God, simply because God had said it. He believed because he heard. This is biblical faith, as for example in the parable of the sower (see Matthew 13:23). The religious leaders in Jesus' day were unable to hear God's word, even though some of them spent their whole lives studying it! (John 8:47).

Hearing faith is the same kind of faith we find in Romans. Paul describes the purpose of his calling to bring gentiles to the *obedience of faith* (Romans 1:5). The word translated *obedience* means 'to hearken' or 'to give ear to'. Remember, Paul saw Jesus as the fulfilment of the law, not as someone who started a new religion. This is the same kind of hearing faith as in the Shema, *Hear O Israel* (Deuteronomy 4:6). Interestingly there is no word for 'obedience' in Hebrew, but the word 'hear' is used. It is like this: if a parent calls a child, the expectation is that they would actually come over, and not just hear the words. So hearing God's word is the obedience of faith. The key question for every human being, as in the garden, is, *Who are we listening to?*

Abraham was listening to God, but what did he hear? He heard these words, *So shall your Offspring be*. This was a reference to the promise of a son, and nations who would come from him. But prophetically, it pointed to more than this: it pointed to the promised Redeemer Messiah, through whom all nations would be blessed. Commentator John Gill says,

*It remains then that it was the promised Seed, the Messiah, and his righteousness, which Abraham, by faith, looked unto, and believed in, that was made unto him righteousness by imputation.*

Paul's message in the 1<sup>st</sup> century wasn't so much about the nature of faith, as this would have been widely understood. The controversy, as remains today, was the object of faith. Paul's message was as simple as it is mind blowing: Jesus, son of Abraham and son of David, is this long promised Messiah. Abraham was justified because by faith he looked, from afar, to the Messiah, still yet to come, who would justify him and all men and women by faith. The message of the gospel is that Jesus is this Messiah, who justifies the wicked,

**Romans 4:23-25** *The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness--for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*

This is in accord with Paul's opening proclamation of Jesus at the beginning of His letter to the Romans (Romans 1:1-4).

Jesus died, Jesus was raised, and Jesus ascended into heaven where he is ruling and reigning above all rule and authority, and one day to return again. Every knee shall bow before Him and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen