

## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ABRAHAM'S FAITH

Romans 4:1-25

Key Verse: 4:17

“As it is written: ‘I have made you a father of many nations.’ He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.”

In the last passage Paul explained the nature of the gospel. While all men were helpless under the power of sin and the condemnation of the law, God sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ into the world. Jesus became the Lamb of God who shed his blood on the cross and died for our sins. By faith in his blood, we sinful human beings can be declared not guilty; we are justified and made right with God. We gain a spiritual standing with God as his precious children with all its inherent rights and privileges. Still, God maintained his holy righteousness and absolute justice, for he poured out the full measure of his wrath on Jesus on the cross. When we simply accept Jesus' blood shed for our sins, we are justified to be righteous before the Holy God.

In today's passage, Paul goes on to explain the nature of our faith in Christ. In doing so, he uses father Abraham as the example and model of our faith. To the people of Israel, as well as to many other peoples of the world, Abraham is a revered man of God. There is something mysterious about Abraham that compels people to respect and admire him, sometimes without knowing why. The Jews liked to claim that they were great and they were justified because they were children of Abraham. But many of them did not understand Abraham's faith or follow in the footsteps of his faith. God did not raise Abraham as an object of admiration. God raised Abraham as a father of faith. It is amazing that his faith is the standard not only in the Old Testament, but in the New Testament as well. In this chapter, Paul expounds on Abraham's faith to explain the kind of faith that Christians must have. This faith is quite simple, but very deep. May God help us to learn this faith today.

First, Abraham's faith in God who justifies sinners (1-8).

In explaining Abraham's faith, Paul begins with the fact that Abraham was justified by faith in God alone; it was not by any good works he had done. To nail down this truth, Paul refers to Genesis 15:6, and says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” If we put this quote in the context of Genesis, up until that time, Abraham had done some great things. He left his home and people and father's household. He built altars to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. He fought a fierce battle with enemy soldiers to rescue his nephew Lot. But Abraham was not justified by any of these things. He was justified by God when he simply believed God's promise from his heart. The fact that Abraham was justified means that he was forgiven of his sins. We do not think of Abraham as a great sinner, but to God he was indeed a sinner. He needed forgiveness of his sins. When he believed in God's promise, God justified him and made him right with God.

It is significant that the word “credited” appears in Genesis 15:6. This means that the price had not yet been paid. Therefore, God's declaration of righteousness was on credit. In a sense, God piled up a huge debt by justifying Abraham and all other men of faith who lived before the time of Christ. But this debt was paid in full by Jesus at the cross. When Jesus said, “It is finished,” the heavenly ledger that had a huge debt was cleared. When Jesus died on the cross, he died for Abraham, too.

There was another great figure in Israel's history whom Paul refers to in order to explain that God justifies sinners by faith. Look at verses 6-8. “David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.’” David was a talented musician, a poet, a successful general and a king. What is more, everybody loved David—except King Saul. David had everything that a man could want in this world. But when he sinned against God and was cut off from God's love he was not happy. He was like Mel Gibson before he met Jesus. Mel had everything, yet was really miserable. After meeting Jesus, he was happy and made a great movie. When David cried out for God's mercy, God heard his prayer and forgave his sin. God restored his love relationship with David. That was the source of true joy for David that made him happy from deep in his soul. Here we learn that anyone is miserable without God, and anyone is truly happy when he receives the forgiveness of sins and restores his love relationship with God. The first step in having the faith of Abraham is to believe the forgiveness of sins by faith alone.

Second, Abraham believed God's great promise (9-16).

In verses 9-12, Paul explains that Abraham is the father of faith for both the Jews and the Gentiles. At that time, circumcision was a big issue. It divided Jews and Gentiles. But Paul points out that Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised. Clearly, circumcision is not necessary for justification. God justifies sinners by faith alone. In our time, some people claim that baptism is necessary for salvation and make a big dispute about how it should be done. Baptism, like circumcision, has a good purpose. But God justifies sinners by faith alone. Some people think that they must contribute something to their salvation through their good works or their penance before God. But these things add nothing to one's salvation. God justifies sinners by faith alone. This is what Abraham teaches us.

Look at verse 12. "And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised." Here Paul stresses that to be justified by God, circumcised people must also walk in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham. In other words, they must be circumcised in their hearts by the Spirit (Ro 2:29). This is far more important than physical circumcision. It is the cutting away of human desires and the sinful nature in one's heart to equip him or her to live fully for the promise of God. Circumcision of the heart is invisible, but real. When Abraham received the covenant of circumcision, he had been involved in a family-centered life with his son Ishmael for thirteen years. Abraham was too busy having backyard barbecues with Ishmael to spend time in prayer and Bible study. He lost God's great purpose for him and became a kind of noble father, according to his human desire. But when God visited him, God declared that he was a father of many nations. God challenged him to live up to God's greater purpose for him. God circumcised Abraham's heart. Abraham's outer life did not change much, but this circumcision of the heart changed him from a self-centered man, or a family-centered man, into a God-centered man.

Look at verse 13. "It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith." Abraham did not receive God's great promise because he earned it by keeping the law. Abraham received God's great promise by faith alone. The promise was that Abraham would be a blessing to all peoples on earth. In verse 13, the word "heir" has deep meaning. Primarily it refers to a child who is designated to receive an inheritance at a certain time. An heir does not gain his inheritance by virtue of his accomplishments. Rather, an heir receives his inheritance because of his relationship with the giver. When God justified Abraham by faith, he made Abraham his precious child. As a child of God, Abraham was an heir of God's promise.

In verse 13, Paul uses the phrase "heir of the world." This does not mean that we can expect lots of honor and wealth in the world. Rather, it refers to the spiritual inheritance that we receive from God. God promised Abraham, "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3). This promise was fulfilled by Jesus when he died on the cross to bring forgiveness of sins to all who believe in him (Gal 3:8). Ultimately, it refers to the coming of the kingdom of God. When we accept the gospel by faith we become heirs of the kingdom of God. We begin to live in the kingdom of God while on this earth. We find our place in God's redemptive history where God wants to use us greatly for his own purpose. The faith of Abraham is not just for personal salvation. It is faith that leads us to God's greater purpose for our lives. It is faith that holds on to God's great promise of world salvation and the kingdom of God. We must have this great promise in our hearts by faith.

Look at verse 16. "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all." Abraham's faith was in God's great promise. It was to believe that God made him the father of many nations. Many Christians do not know this faith very well. Many are satisfied to live a mediocre life, just getting by. But to have the faith of Abraham we must realize that God is Almighty God and that God wants to save all people on earth from their sins and restore his kingdom. We must believe that God wants to use each one of us as a father of faith or a mother of prayer for the whole world. We must believe that God will establish a kingdom of priests and a holy nation through us.

We thank God for blessing our fellowship Easter Bible Conferences. We especially thank God for raising many young messengers who accepted the gospel and declared it with boldness and power. We thank God for the spiritual growth of our leaders, both young and old. For example, there is a person who attended his 21st UBF Easter Bible Conference. When he attended his first conference, he was a very handsome young man. He was artistic and

talented, but in his heart, he only wanted to be a third-class rock musician. A servant of God decided to help him out by first giving him music training through intense cello practice. This young man began to love classical music more than cheap thrills. He began to learn how to work hard. He studied the Bible deeply and the word of God changed his heart. Now he gives his whole heart to the work of God. God entrusted him to be the leader of the largest fellowship in Chicago UBF. During the Easter Conference, he had to lead an intense program. Yet he was fully devoted to the task and full of spirit. In spite of a bone-crushing schedule and having to meet the personal demands of several needy sheep, he gave clear prayer topics and spiritual guidance to the conference from beginning to end. Under his leadership, his fellowship brought twelve more attendants than last year, while many other fellowships made a minus. To see him grow as a spiritual leader is to see the glory of God. We thank God for his work in Shepherd Rhoel Lomahan. Of course, this is largely due to Shepherdess Elena's earnest prayer.

Now we must begin preparation for the 2004 UBF International Summer Bible Conference. What can we do? Most importantly, we must believe God's great promise that he wants to use us as a blessing for his world salvation work. With this promise in our hearts, we must receive spiritual circumcision, also known as sanctification. It is different than trying to change ourselves. It is accepting the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, who can truly change us from selfish and family-centered people into God-centered people. For this to happen, we must study the word of God deeply and meditate on it day and night. We must repent before God's word. Then God will work mightily in our hearts.

Above all, we must consider the motive of our hearts. The great problem of many is their desire to share God's glory equally. But we must be purified in our motives until we desire to glorify God alone. When each of us has a pure desire to glorify God, there is no coworking problem. There is no division. We can be one in spirit and pray together.

Third, Abraham believed that God raises the dead (16-25).

To have real faith that God will fulfill his great promises, we must know the God of Abraham. Look at verse 17. "As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations.' He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were." The God of Abraham gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. Abraham believed this God. Abraham had resurrection faith. Without resurrection faith, we remain under the power of sin and death. We cannot but give in to the social consensus to live a hedonistic and materialistic lifestyle. But with resurrection faith, we have victory over the power of death. There is no sorrow or fear or despair or failure for those who have resurrection faith. Abraham had resurrection faith.

Abraham's resurrection faith was not just a matter of theory. It was something that he experienced in his practical life. Look at verses 18-21. "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised."

When Abraham was 100 years old, his body was as good as dead. His wife Sarah's womb was also dead. Humanly there was no hope at all for them to have a son. But God had said to Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abraham believed that God had the power to do what he had promised. Abraham had hope in God. This hope nurtured his faith in God's promise. Faith did not make him an escape artist. Nor was he blindly optimistic. He realized that there was no human hope in the situation. But he had hope in God. He had faith in God. He did not doubt that God could give him a son and that God could make his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. This is the kind of faith that gives glory to God. When we say that we believe in God, we must have faith in God who raises the dead. We must have faith that God can call things that are not as though they were. With this faith, we must overcome the world and render glory to God in our personal lives.

Look at verses 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." In other words, God wants us to have the same faith as the faith of Abraham.

In today's passage we learned the faith of Abraham. Abraham was justified by faith. Abraham accepted God's great and glorious promises by faith. Abraham won victory over his impossible human situation by faith in God who raises the dead. We must believe that God justifies us to be his holy children. God uses us in his great plan of world salvation. God gives us eternal life through resurrection faith.