

# Lesson Eight

(4:1-25)

## ABRAHAM, THE ILLUSTRATION OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

### FAITH AND WORKS

1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, hath found according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not toward God. 3 For what saith the scripture? And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness. 4 Now to him that worketh, the reward is not reckoned as of grace, but as of debt. 5 But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness.

To the Jewish mind, Abraham was the epitome of all that a Jew was supposed to be. How often they said with pride, "Our father is Abraham" (John 8:39). Paul introduces to his readers the person whom the Jews idolized and says in effect, "Let's learn a lesson from 'Abraham, our forefather'" (v. 1). The reference to Abraham as "father" is not proof that Paul was writing mainly to Jews. Later Paul speaks of Abraham as the "father of many nations" and the "father of us all" if we have faith

like that of Abraham (vv. 16, 17). The question for Jew and Gentile alike was not, "Of what people was Abraham the forefather?" Rather, the important questions were, "What did Abraham learn about human merits, and how did Abraham become the father of all the faithful?" If he were justified by works, (this would involve sinless perfection) he could boast about his accomplishment. Such boasting or glorying would not be founded in God's grace and love but in Abraham's ability to will correctly and to perform according to his will. There is no room for boasting about an obedient faith. There is a sense in which faith is just as much a work as any other act performed by man. Jesus called faith a work (John 6:28, 29). Charles Hodge agrees that "Faith considered as an act, is as much a work as prayer, repentance, almsgiving or anything of the kind." *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 109. Typically, Paul turns to the Word of God for authoritative support of his argument and asks, "What saith the scripture?" He quotes one of the classic Old Testament passages which deal with man's attaining righteousness through faith. Another such passage (Habakkuk 2:4) has been introduced in the theme of Romans at 1:17. The reader would do well to read the Habakkuk passage and to notice how human pride and faith in God are contrasted in the words of the prophet.

Paul returns to logic and introduces the illustration of the employer-employee relationship (v. 4). One who works for a specified wage places his employer in his debt. When the employee has been hired at a certain wage and has labored to the end of a predetermined work period, he has a right to expect a pay check. The employer is in debt at that point to the employee. If the employer will not fulfill his part of the bargain, he may be sued, brought into court, and forced to pay. Who can so work as to put God in his debt? If men would burn out their lives in constant service to the Lord, they would still confess, "We are unprofitable servants" (Luke 17:10).

God does not justify one who trusts in his own godliness but rather, He justifies the man who believes in the God who justifies the ungodly. Salvation is of grace and not of works and you can't have it both ways. "If it is by grace, it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace" (11:6). Salvation is not "by works . . . which we did ourselves but according to his mercy he saved us" (Titus 3:5). The phrase "worketh not" in verse five does not condone spiritual indolence, or lethargic or disobedient faith, nor does it rule out God's expectancy of the Christian to be "zealous of good works" (Titus 2:14). What Paul attempts to do through this statement about works is to turn men's minds away from some kind of a "Brownie Point System" in which a man gets points in God's records for each good deed done, and if he does enough of these good works which earn merit, he will be saved. People who may

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never attend church and do not know true Christian doctrine frequently arrive at the conclusion that in the final day of judgment God will add up good works and bad works and if the good works outnumber the bad, they will be saved. That such a view is held by non-Christians surprises no one, but it is amazing that many Christians are in total agreement that works will be the determinative factor when men give account of their lives to God. Sometimes it appears that preachers inadvertently lead the people of the pew to believe in some such point system. The preacher talks to the congregation about being present at all the services and performing duties related to the church program, all of which are worthy, laudible, and should be done, but none of which can save anyone. A preacher had presented a sermon on II Chronicles 7:14 calling the hearers to repentance and to a greater devotion to God. Following the service an elder of the congregation complained to the preacher, "I go to church Sunday morning and night. I attend Sunday School and the Wednesday night Bible Study. I have been baptized and partake of the Lord's Supper every Sunday. What more could God expect of me?" Obviously that elder was working on some kind of a meritorious point system which had been instilled into his thinking and by which he thought he would be saved. His entire complaint centered in "I" and personal accomplishment. Not one word was heard about faith, love, mercy, or grace.

### GOD'S CALCULATOR

6 Even as David also pronounceth blessing upon the man, unto whom God reckoneth righteousness apart from works, 7 saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, And whose sins are covered. 8 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not reckon sin.

King David's testimony agrees with the experiences of Abraham (vv. 6-8). Psalm 32:1, 2 is cited. This beatitude does not pronounce blessing on those who have earned salvation but upon the one whom God forgives and calculates to be righteous. "Reckon" is a favorite word of Paul as is evidenced by its appearance twenty-seven times in his epistles, exclusive of quotations. The word is found only four other times in the rest of the New Testament.

The word "reckon" (*logizomai*) means to impute, calculate, take inventory, or to put to one's account. Basic in this section of Scripture is the idea that Abraham and David did not conform to God's righteousness anymore than God committed the sins of the patriarch and king.

Because of their personal faith God's approval rested upon each of them and when God totaled up their accounts in the light of their faith, the sum total was "righteousness."

We return now to expand upon a thought which was introduced in a previous lesson but which deserves much more careful consideration than that which could be incorporated into its earlier brief mention. Faith which is reckoned for righteousness, and secures God's approval is not only an isolated act of believing, but must be considered comprehensively to include all which faith apprehends for the believer. There are three other views of faith or the act of believing, none of which are free from major problems:

1. Faith is counted as complete obedience to the law. This suggests that something done by man, comparable to obeying the law, is the basis of salvation. Faith cannot be the ground (foundation) of our acceptance with God but only the means of access (5:1, 2) into the true ground of our salvation, which is the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

2. The act of faith is viewed as being "right" and thus "approved" by God. So God's approbation is secured by a just and rewardable act. Those who hold this view would have difficulty in denying that faith is for them tantamount to being a meritorious work.

3. Moral character is determined by the condition of the heart and not by external actions. The idea is that God accepted Abraham because of inward piety which motivated his entire life. This view is the equivalent of the claim that one is saved because "he was a good man" or because "he lived on a high moral plane," or because "his heart was right."

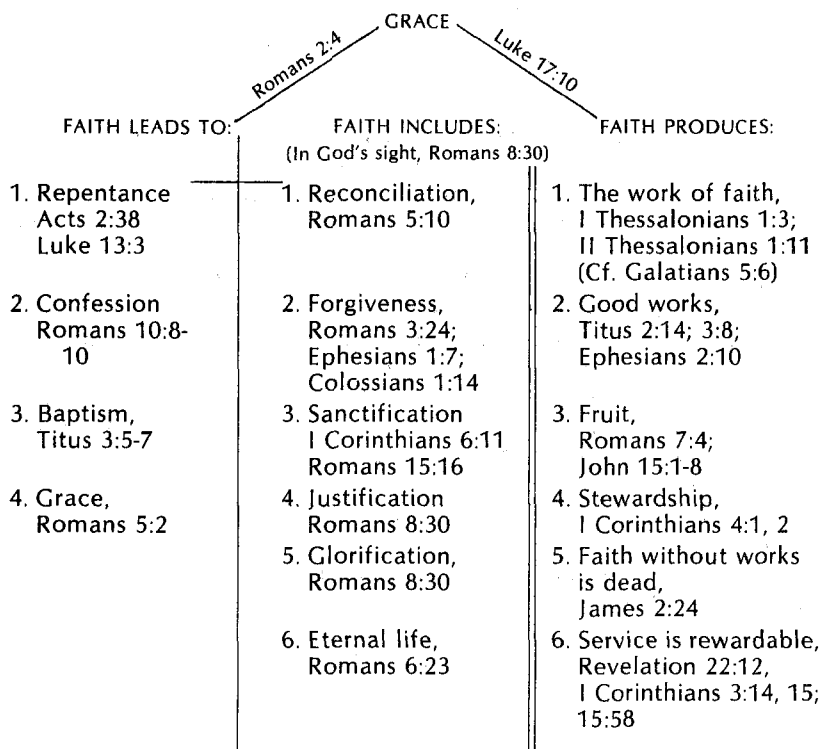
The following outline and graph should help one to formulate a correct view of faith and its operation.

#### God's View of Faith

1. Romans 1:18 — 4:25 All under sin; justified by grace through faith
  - a. Gentile under the condemnation of sin, 1:18-32
  - b. The Jew under the condemnation of sin, 2:1 — 3:20
  - c. All fall short of moral perfection, 3:23
2. Abraham is an example of one justified through faith, 4:1-25
  - a. Not by circumcision, 4:10
  - b. Not by law, 4:13 (law came 430 years later)
  - c. Seen by God to be acceptable because he believed, 4:3, 22
  - d. Paul indicates this was written for us, 4:23, 24

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3. How does God view faith?
  - a. Does it have merit?
  - b. Can one boast of faith? 4:2
  - c. When one believes, does God owe something? Is God obligated to reward one who believes in Him? 4:4
4. God sees faith not simply as an isolated act which has merit within itself, but rather He sees faith as including all that faith apprehends for us and all that faith motivates us to do.



FREE GIFT OF GOD --- ETERNAL LIFE,  
Romans 6:23

REWARDS  
(Never to be confused  
with the free Gift of God)

WHAT IF ABRAHAM HAD ... Remained in Ur?  
Refused circumcision?  
Rebelled at offering up Isaac?

WOULD HE EXAMPLE FAITH?

Paul does not exclude Christian works; James does not exclude faith; faith is made perfect by works (James 2:20-26)

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Clues to help identify the kind of works (meritorious) which Paul rules out as being a basis for the hope of salvation:

1. Works in which man may glory, v. 2
2. Works which put God in debt, v. 4
3. Works which void man's faith and God's promise, v. 14

When Paul speaks in opposition to salvation by works he refers only to some kind of a legalistic, meritorious system (like the Jewish law) by which men think that through compliance with certain requirements they will save themselves. He does not exclude Christian works as being essential to please God; James does not exclude faith when he states that "a man is justified by works" (James 2:24); faith is made perfect by works; "faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26). An American Beauty Rose is grafted to a wild or mediocre rose bush. The fruit of the graft is the lovely, praiseworthy bloom of the American Beauty. But if the bush is not pruned and the basic care essential to roses provided, the old rose root and bush will soon produce its common wild bloom. God will reward for each labor performed in His behalf and for all the fruit that is resultant from faith in Him and His righteousness. Rewards, however, must never be confused with the "free gift of God" which is eternal life.

### THE FAITH-RIGHTEOUSNESS CALCULATION APPLIES UNIVERSALLY

9 Is this blessing then pronounced upon the circumcision, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say, To Abraham his faith was reckoned for righteousness. 10 How then was it reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision: 11 and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be in uncircumcision, that righteousness might be reckoned unto them; 12 and the father of circumcision to them who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our Abraham which he had in uncircumcision. 13 For not through the law was the promise to Abraham or to his seed that he should be heir of the world, but through the righteousness of faith.

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Salvation through grace and conditioned upon faith is available to both Jew and Gentile (vv. 9-21). In this section Paul is not discussing either the proper use of nor the abuse of circumcision. He is setting forth the brute fact of the universality of salvation by faith. Long years before circumcision was practiced Abraham was counted to be righteous by God. Long after Abraham was called from Ur, before Isaac was born, when Ishmael was thirteen years old and Abraham approached the century mark in age, he was circumcised (Genesis 17:24). Paul states in verse eleven that circumcision was a "seal of the righteousness of faith," therefore, circumcision cannot be construed to be "mere" ceremony. Alfred Barnes asserts that, "Man's justification is entirely apart from ceremony." Any rite ordained by God involves moral duty, and it is sinful to minimize or ignore any demand by God. What if Abraham had taken the view that obedience to God's commands, ceremonial or otherwise, were matters of choice? What if Jesus had taken that view of baptism or of the cross? On either count we would lose a Savior. If Jesus had not been baptized, He would have sinned because it was the will of God that He should do so. Such disobedience would have disqualified Him from becoming the perfect lamb of God with the potential of taking away the sin of the world. The whole scheme of redemption would have fallen if Jesus had not learned obedience "even unto death" (Philippians 2:8).

Just in passing, it may be well to note that the Scriptures do not once declare that baptism is a sign or seal as is claimed of circumcision. It is not Biblical to contend that baptism is a sign that one's sins have been previously forgiven or that one should be baptized because he has been saved. Neither is it Biblical to say that "baptism stands in the room of circumcision." Colossians 2:11-13 is the only passage in the New Testament in which baptism and circumcision are discussed in the same context. This Scripture makes it clear that the cutting referred to is "not made with hands" (Colossians 2:11). It is God's scalpel which cuts away sin as is explained in Colossians 2:13, where it is affirmed of God that He has "forgiven us all our trespasses." Such a cutting away of sin is the equivalent of "be baptized for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38) or "be baptized and wash away thy sin" (Acts 22:16). This spiritual "cutting" of sin is the only analogy made by Paul of baptism and circumcision. More comparison than that made by the apostle is highly speculative.

Paul's first point of argument then, was that Abraham was chosen in uncircumcision, so that he might be the father of all them that believe, Gentile as well as Jew (v. 11).

## SALVATION APART FROM LAW

13 For not through the law was the promise to Abraham or to his seed that he should be heir of the world, but through the righteousness

of faith. 14 For if they that are of the law are heirs, faith is made void, and the promise is made of none effect: 15 for the law worketh wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there transgression.

Paul next presents the argument that Abraham was counted to be righteous apart from the law (v. 13). The law came four hundred and thirty years after God covenanted with Abraham (Galatians 3:17, 18). In verse fourteen Paul raises two arguments against salvation being available through the law. If that be true, he says first of all, faith is empty, void and meaningless. Secondly he argues that the promise made to Abraham is utterly useless if it is the law that saves man and not the promised seed of Abraham, even Christ (Galatians 3:16).

Verses 15 and 16 contain an extremely condensed argument and may be augmented both negatively and positively.

Negative: If there were no law, there could be no transgression and no penalty. If there were absolutely no law, there would be no God, no revelation and hence, no moral universe.

Positive: There is a God, law and revelation. Men do transgress the will of God. If God maintained a moral universe, apart from Calvary, he would be forced to immerse men in His wrath. God's wrath is removed by Christ and through grace, apart from law, man is saved.

### EVIDENCE OF FAITH

16 For this cause it is of faith, that it may be according to grace; to the end that the promise may be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all 17 (as it is written, A father of many nations have I made thee) before him whom he believed, even God, who giveth life to the dead, and calleth the things that are not, as though they were. 18 Who in hope believed against hope, to the end that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, So shall thy seed be. 19 And without being weakened in faith he considered his own body now as good as dead (he being about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb; 20 yet looking unto the promise of God, he wavered not through unbelief, but waxed strong through faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully assured that what he had promised, he was able also to perform.



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The conclusion of Paul's lengthy argument based in the life of Abraham (vv. 16, 17) is that salvation is "of faith . . . according to grace" for all people who are of Abraham's spiritual genealogy (Acts 15:9; Galatians 3:23-29). Added is the evidence of Abraham's amazing faith in God: He believed that God gives life to the dead (v. 17; Hebrews 11:19); God orders things that did not exist as if they were present (v. 17); He hoped when there was no hope that he would be the father of many nations (v. 18); "Without being weakened" (v. 19), "he wavered not" (v. 20); he was fully assured that God could perform that which he has promised (v. 21).

### CURRENT APPLICATION

22 Wherefore also it was reckoned unto him for righteousness.  
23 Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was reckoned unto him; 24 but for our sake also, unto whom it shall be reckoned, who believe on him that raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses, and was raised for our justification.

The practical application of this entire illustration is that all the information given in God's Word about Abraham's faith and specifically the truth that God reckoned his faith for righteousness was written for those of Paul's day ("for our sake"), and, we conclude, for those of every generation who believe in the justification which is received through faith in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### READER'S REVIEW:

1. Why was Abraham chosen as an example of one whom God counted to be righteous because of his faith?
2. In what sense may it be said that faith is a work?
3. Cite two Old Testament books which are quoted by Paul in support of his contention about the function of faith.
4. List three clues given by Paul which help one to identify meritorious works. The clues are found in verses 2, 4, and 14.
5. What distinctions should be made between meritorious works and Christian works?
6. How is it that Paul can put his approval upon "him that worketh not"?

7. In what way is King David used to support Paul's contention that righteousness results from faith, not works?
8. What is the evidence that the word "reckon" is a favorite in Paul's vocabulary?
9. Define the word "reckon" as used by Paul in this chapter.
10. Four views of faith which secure God's approval are given in this chapter. State these views with the strength or weakness of each.
11. How is the subject of circumcision introduced into Paul's argument that one is justified by faith?
12. Express your agreement or disagreement with Barnes who claims, "man's justification is entirely apart from ceremony."
13. Circumcision is said to be a "sign" and a "seal." Is it proper to say also that baptism is a "sign" or a "seal"?
14. What are the two things which are void of any meaning if a person is saved by law?
15. Cite at least four evidences that Abraham did possess an amazing faith.
16. What is the practical and current application of this entire illustration based in the life of Abraham?