

Sermons through

Romans

What Abraham Found

Romans 4:1-4

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com*

What Abraham Found

Romans 4:1-4

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has *something* to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? "*Abraham believed God, and it was* accounted to him for righteousness." ⁴ Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt (Romans 4:1-4).

Introduction

I recently had the great honor of introducing Louis Zamperini who was a speaker at a men's breakfast. Louis was an Olympian in the 1936 Olympics (the Hitler Olympics) and a WWII veteran who survived 47 days on a life raft in the Pacific Ocean only to be rescued by those who would imprison and torture him for two years. Shortly after the war Louis came to faith in Christ and, according to him, that is when the real story begins and it continues to this day.

While writing this introduction, I received a phone call from an old friend who is an offensive coach for the Baltimore Ravens who just won the Super Bowl. He is a strong Christian man who was anxious and excited to inform me of the faith and faithful actions of many of the members and coaches of that team. Following the example of godliness is prescribed in Scripture. Paul writes:

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us (Philippians 3:17).

In the passage before us this morning, Paul brings up the ultimate example, Abraham. Abraham's example of faithfulness far exceeds anything most of us could possibly imagine. The Apostle James brings Abraham's act of faithfulness as the acme of fruitfulness:

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar (James 2:21)?

Of course James is not contradicting Paul, or the rest of Scripture himself for that matter (James 2:23). **“Justified”** in the context in which James writes means that something is shown to be legitimate by what it produces. We see Jesus using the word in a similar manner when He says, **“Yet wisdom is justified by all her children” (Luke 7:35)**. Jesus here does not mean that wisdom is forensically declared righteous, but that wisdom is shown to be wisdom by what it produces. And there is, perhaps, no greater example of faithfulness than Abraham’s willingness to obey God in the matter of Isaac.

So let us look at this passage recognizing that in Abraham, we have the ultimate example.

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son,¹⁸ of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,”¹⁹ concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense (Hebrews 11:17-19).

Abraham is listed among those **“of whom the world was not worthy” (Hebrews 11:38)**. What an astonishing statement about the faithfulness of any person! It is with this high estimation of Abraham that we enter into our text.

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh (Romans 4:1)?

Father Abraham

There is some debate as to how Paul is framing this particular question. Some argue that Paul is asking “What shall we say that Abraham, who is our physical ancestor, has found?” Others argue that it

could be interpreted “What shall we say that Abraham found out when he examined his own physical actions?” Is “**according to the flesh**” who he is or is “**according to the flesh**” what he did? Let me reverently suggest that for our purposes in examining this passage, it may not matter because Paul will make his point quite clear.

Suffice it to say that appealing to an ethnic connection to Abraham was utterly unimpressive to John the Baptist who said:

And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham (Matthew 3:9).

And when Jesus was confronted with Israelites who took comfort in their physical relationship to Abraham, His words were quite dismantling:

They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, ⁴⁰ but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. ⁴¹ You are doing the works your father did” (John 8:39, 40).

Jesus then goes on to inform them how they would respond to Him if God were truly their father, followed by pointing who who their actually father is:

Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. ⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. ⁴⁴ You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (John 8:42-44).

Apparently the truth can be a bit severe! Later in this chapter in Romans Paul will point out that Abraham is the father of all who have faith (Romans 4:16). Or has Paul will write:

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (Galatians 3:29).

So what did Abraham actually discover?

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has *something* to boast about, but not before God (Romans 4:2).

What Abraham Found

If anybody had something to boast about on account of their works, it was Abraham. What Abraham discovered and what we subsequently discover is that, no matter how good the works, no one can boast before God. What we will see in verse five is that when it comes to standing before God, both Abraham and David (and the rest of us and plainly taught in the first three chapters of Romans) are “ungodly”—a word meaning to live without regard for religious belief or practice—to live in the world as if there is no God!

What is very interesting, especially when we get to David, is that he appeared to have faith as a child (Psalm 22:9). He was a man who followed after God with all his heart (1 Kings 14:8), yet here is referred to as “ungodly.” In today's Latin lesson we would refer to this as *Simil iustus et peccator* meaning, “Simultaneously saint (or justified or righteous) and sinner.”

So we learn that Abraham (and the rest of us) have no place for boasting *kauchema* when it comes to human behavior before the face of God. We may think this is quite obvious, but since God's opinion of us should be the governor of who we are, our pride before each other becomes a symptom of our sense of entitlement before God.

The connection is made when Jesus ferrets out this disposition in His parables addressed to those who **“trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (Luke 18:9)**. No doubt, the seat of our deplorable behavior toward one another is often based upon a hidden

sense that we have somehow merited the favor of God. We embrace that we are saints *iustus* but forget that we are sinners. One cannot overestimate how this would affect every aspect of every one of our lives.

This is what Abraham found or discovered—he found that if he were **“justified”** *edikaiothe* by works, which here means to be declared or pronounced righteous, he would have something to boast about before God. The very thought would be the acme of absurdity if presented to any individual in Scripture who had the opportunity to encounter a holy God at any level. Any reasonable creature would respond more like Peter:

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8).

For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness” (Romans 4:3).

Scripture

In a remake of *Inherit the Wind*, a movie chronicling the Scopes monkey trial and extolling the virtues of teaching evolution in school, Jack Lemon engages in a speech where he condescendingly grants that the Bible is a good book followed by the conjunctive “but...there are other good books.” By this he means other good books of equal or greater credence and veracity. In light of this common, progressive, yet foolish supposition—a supposition that has gained a foothold in the church, it always comforts my soul and affirms my convictions when I see Paul appealing to the Scriptures.

Accounted

And what does the Scripture say? The Scriptures that Abraham **“believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”** It could be put this way: Righteousness was credited to the account of Abraham through believing God. “Accounted” *elogisthe* is a mathematical term. The righteousness of Christ is put in our banks and with it the riches of heaven

itself:

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ (Ephesians 1:3).

This righteousness was not given to Abraham when he faithfully brought Isaac to the altar. At the altar we see that Abraham's faith was made manifest:

And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only *son*, from Me (Genesis 22:12).

But the knowledge or evidence of someone's faithfulness is not synonymous with the faith itself. The quote from Scripture which Paul seizes to make his point is an event where Abraham does nothing but believe. Abraham (Abram) is bemoaning his lack of offspring (an offspring who would be Savior) in recognition of his and his wife being past child bearing age. God walks Abraham outside and tells him to look at the stars and count "if you are able to number them"

And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶ And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:5, 6).

We must be careful when we associate any human action (baptisms, sinner's prayers or any faithful obedience) with our righteousness before God—which comes by a God-given faith in God's given Son. God walks him outside, shows him the heavens and makes him a promise. Abraham believed God and the righteousness of Christ is credited to his account. God has made a promise that whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved and calls men to believe—and it is through the instrument of that faith that we receive the righteousness of Christ. As Paul will later write:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).

Paul then states the logical alternative to salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone:

Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt (Romans 4:4).

God in Debt?

We should not conclude by this statement that Paul is against living a life in obedience to the law of God—that is, that we should do no works—may it never be! The context makes the reading “Now to him who works *to be justified before God.*” Paul is about to do a *reductio ad absurdum* with the opposing view. He will reduce to absurdity the idea that a person can, in any way, at any level, add one iota to their own righteous standing before God based upon their works.

This may appear to be an unnecessary point until we hear our friends and neighbors (many of whom are Christians) give their take on how they will stand in judgment. It is shocking how many will say something to the effect “I am not as bad as most” or “I have never done anything terrible” or “I always try to do the right thing” or “God knows my heart.” Every one of these answers (and those like them) argue for the wages (here to be understood as the payment of heaven) to be a result, not **“as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24)** but as wages due!

Can any man look at himself, then look at God and utter the words “you owe me” and have that sentence be completed by any words other than “death and judgment?” What is God’s opinion of you? Does God love you? If so, why? Perhaps it would be best to conclude with this sterling observation of Calvin:

Only let us remember this, — that those to whom righteousness is imputed, are justified; since these two things are mentioned by Paul as being the same. We hence conclude that the question is not, what men are in themselves, but how God regards them? not that purity of conscience and integrity of life are to be separated from the gratuitous favor of God; but that when the reason is asked, why God loves us and owns us as just, it is necessary that Christ should come forth as one who clothes us with his own righteousness.¹

Questions for Study

1. Is the idea of role models biblical? Explain (page 2).
2. Does James contradict Paul on the topic of justification? If not, how are they different (pages 3)?
3. In what way is Abraham a father (pages 3, 4)?
4. What did Abraham find (pages 5, 6)?
5. Explain what it means to be accounted righteous (pages 6, 7)?
6. What are religious ways people can try to make God in debt to them (page 8)?

¹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 4:3). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

