

If Abraham was Saved by Faith, Then... **Romans 4:1-12**

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Two weeks ago, a dear senior saint in our church went to heaven. His name was Dick Bayshore (See his picture below).



He and his wife Medrith were faithful members here for around 15 years. His wife Medrith shared one thing I thought was very special and it had to do with Dick's thumb. At some point in his life he had an accident and he had the top part of his thumb cut off. Apparently, over the years, all his grandkids were fascinated with his decapitated thumb. Grandpa had fun with it and would tell them tales of how he lost the thumb—dragons that bit it off, etc. It was a fun part of his relationship with them.

At the funeral home, Medrith told me they carefully situated his hands in the casket so that the famous thumb was clearly seen. They did it for the grandkids. *Look, one more time, there's grandpa's thumb.*

That touched me. It just seems so human and real to how kids and grandpas get along. I never knew either of my grandpas. They were both dead many years before I came along. Those of you who have a grandpa, it's special.

Arguably, the most special grandpa to any family ever was Grandpa Abraham. There are millions of Jews and every Jew treasures the family tree of their heritage. All the branches of the tree eventually connect to Grandpa Abraham.

Paul introduces Grandpa Abraham into his lengthy but thrilling explanation of salvation by faith alone in Jesus. We saw last week that while everyone in every religion celebrates "faith," what is so radical about what Paul is teaching is that he is saying that Jews and Gentiles are saved by faith in Jesus *alone*. If there is any little bit of me in salvation, then I have something to boast about. But 3:27 says all human boasting is eliminated. Even our faith is a gift from God, so that we get all the good of salvation forever and forever, and God gets all the glory. He proceeds,

"What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?"
(Romans 4:1 ESV)

Grandpa Abraham was Saved by Faith Alone

Let's not assume everyone here knows Grandpa. Who was Abraham? Abraham's original name was Abram. Abram lived like everyone else in the fertile region of ancient Ur. But Genesis 12 tells us that one day God called Abram to go to a new land,

"Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will

bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1-3)

God changed Abram’s name to Abraham meaning, *father of many*. Abraham did as God told him. He moved his family to the land of modern-day Israel. He had incredible moments and some failures too. In other words, he was a lot like us. He famously saved his nephew Lot after God judged Sodom and Gomorrah. He obeyed when God tested him with the almost sacrifice of his son Isaac. But the key moment that Paul now focuses on was a very special moment in Abraham’s story.

“For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.’” (Romans 12:2-3)

Paul goes for the Jewish jugular. He doesn’t talk about Isaiah or Daniel or Esther, as important as they were. He goes for Grandpa. Why? If what he is saying about salvation by faith can be demonstrated even in Grandpa Abraham’s salvation, well then who are we to think we could do any different? If Abraham was saved from God’s wrath by God declaring him righteous rather than him in any way earning his righteousness, then nobody can claim ethnicity or righteous works can get us to heaven.

So where does he go? He goes to Genesis 15. Every Jew would be familiar with this story because Abraham is already an old man. He had no son through Sarah. He moans to God, *at this point my servant shall be my heir. I have no son!* (Genesis 15:3) God responds by saying, *Abraham, go outside your tent and look up.*

“And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:5-6) There it is. Abraham believed God’s promise and God counted it to him as righteousness. God reckoned. God declared him righteous. This was Abraham justified by faith.

I remember during my ordination council there was one question that I really tripped on. If you didn’t know, typically for an ordination they call in a council of pastors and theologian types to examine the candidate for pastoral ordination. It’s quite nerve-wracking as they are free to ask anything they want. I was getting along quite nicely until a man asked, “Steve, could you explain to us how people in the Old Testament were saved?” Somehow, despite seminary and studies, I didn’t have a solid answer. I hemmed and hawed and finally the man showed me mercy by saying something like, “Did you mean to say people were saved in the Old Testament the same way they are saved in the New Testament?”

I wish I had said that. Romans 4 says that. There is, unfortunately, a common thought out there that Old Testament saints were saved by the Law and New Testament saints are saved by grace. No. Old Testament saints were saved by Jesus’ death and New Testament saints are saved by Jesus’ death. It’s just that Old Testament saints responded to the limited light of God’s promise. They looked forward, as Hebrews 11 highlights.

We have the incredible privilege of the full light of God’s revelation through Jesus and his cross. They looked forward to Jesus with a flashlight. We look back to Jesus with a floodlight. But neither are saved by works or obeying the law or animal sacrifices. All are saved by God reckoning us righteous through faith. Even Abraham was saved by faith alone.

Need another proof? Grandpa not enough? How about the great king of the Old Testament, David?

King David was Saved by Faith Alone

"Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.'" (Romans 4:6-8)

He quotes David's psalm that we call Psalm 32. David sings the blessing of the one whose sins are covered. We call that *atonement*. "Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." We call that *justification*.

David stands in a unique position of being possibly the most famous sinner in history. Only Judas rivals him. He was certainly the most famous adulterer in history and his murder of Bathsheba's husband Uriah is the most famous cover-up in history. If Abraham is the choir boy, then David is the bad boy. We see both ends of the sinful spectrum which ought to give hope to all of us. Maybe you are a goody two shoes and you need to see that even Abraham needed justification by faith. But perhaps you relate more to David and you have no delusion about self-righteousness. Then David should encourage you that even the worst of sins and sinners can be declared righteous by God through faith.

All Jews and All Gentiles Can be Saved by Faith Alone

"Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised." (Romans 4:9-12)

Here is the power of Paul's argument. He merely points out that Abraham was declared righteous before he was circumcised. There's no way to get through Romans without getting over the awkwardness of talking about circumcision. There. I acknowledged it. I won't again and hope we can see circumcision maturely and theologically. For the Jews this had become more than a sign of the covenant. It was a sign of God's favor and blessing; dare I say a guarantee of eternal forgiveness and life. Similarly, the lack of circumcision was seen essentially as a sign of divine disfavor. So, all the Gentiles were under God's wrath. They were uncircumcised.

What does Paul do? He points out the obvious. God reckoned Abraham righteous while he was uncircumcised. At least 14 years before, maybe 29 by some opinions. For up to three decades, the not-yet-circumcised Abraham lived declared righteous. Here is the skeleton in the Jewish closet: Abraham was saved without the sign!

Talk about awkward. The Jews in Rome read this and realized what Paul was saying. If the uncircumcised Abraham could be saved by faith, then the uncircumcised Roman, Corinthian, Spaniard, Indian, and anyone else could be too!

Paul goes so far to say that Grandpa Abraham isn't merely Grandpa to Jews by DNA, he is Grandpa by spiritual DNA to anyone who is saved by faith in Jesus alone.

This is why *"Father Abraham had many sons/Many sons had Father Abraham/ I am one of them, and so are you/So let's all praise the Lord!/ Right arm!/ Father Abraham..."*¹ Indeed, let's praise the Lord that in God's purpose, even saving Abraham communicated that his love and mercy are wide enough to include every tribe, tongue, language, and people! *"Red and yellow, black and white, they're all precious in his sight."*²

All that he is saying is summarized in verse 5. *"And to the one who does not work but believe in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."* (Romans 4:5) This is possibly the clearest statement in the whole Bible of where a sinner's trust must be placed in order to be saved.

"To the one who does not work." He is not talking about vocation or employment. He certainly isn't advocating laziness. No. "Work" here is any doing on our part that we are trusting in as a basis or condition for God declaring us righteous. *To the one who does not look to their apparently good and righteous doings. To the one who does not trust in their charity or church going, to their prayers or piety, to their positions or politics, to their duties or doings.* Why? Because despite all those things we are still sinners who fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We might as well reach up and touch the stars as think that we can work our way to heaven. No. God's righteousness is far beyond our reach.

Rather than trusting in my doings, what must I do? *"But believes in him who justifies the ungodly."* That's an amazing statement. *"Justifies the ungodly."* This is God. He justifies the ungodly. Not the clean-up-their-life people or believing-in-Jesus people. God saves us in our sins and in our unrighteousness. He does not turn to us because we turn to him. No, we turn to him because he turns to us. *He justifies the ungodly.*

But see the result, *"his faith is counted as righteousness."* Where have I heard that before? It's the same thing that happened to Abraham. Abraham believed God's promise and God declared him righteous. For us, we don't look at the stars and wonder if God can and will fulfill his promise. We don't look at the stars, we look at the cross and place all our hope for ever being declared righteous in what Jesus did for us. God declares us righteous and we are righteous in his presence forever, time without end.

So, what does this mean? I have two things and I want to give both to you and then explain.

If Abraham's Works Couldn't Save Him, Yours aren't Even Close If God Could Justify David, God Can Justify You

Abraham and David represent two extremes and possibly exceptions to the rule. Abraham is the father of the entire Jewish nation. He is therefore the greatest Jew of all. His story includes God's direct revelation, covenant, and promises. If there was ever a person in the story who maybe could get to heaven without justification, Abraham is it.

¹ "Father Abraham," Author & Date Unknown.

² "Jesus Loves the Little Children," Written by: Donna J. Krieger, George F. Root. Lyrics © Warner/Chappell Music, Inc., Music Services, Inc.

David is the most famous sinner in the whole story. His sins are the worst kind—sexual sin, violence, murder, deception and cover-up. If there is someone in the story who you could think is beyond the possibility of God declaring them righteous, it's David. Yet both are righteous in God's sight, not because of good works or bad works, but because of God's mercy to them and their trust in God. They are not exceptions but ultimate examples of God's sovereign grace. We should be glad there are no exceptions.

I had an experience during our recent England and Scotland Reformation Tour. Our tour took us to St. Andrews, Scotland. John Knox ministered there. George Wishart died as a martyr there. We saw the religious sites, but I had my own religious-type experience as I made my way to the most famous golf course in the world, *The Old Course*.



It's called that because it was the first place golf was played. I had tried for months to figure out how to play while we were there, but it didn't work out. However, I was able to visit. One reason I was not able to play is that you have to have a reservation or be in the queue.

This was confirmed when we went into the clubhouse to look around and one of the course supervisors was friendly and we got to talking. Actually, it was a last-ditch effort to beg my way onto the course to play. He showed me the schedule for the day and why it would not be possible for me to play. He said, "*In the whole history of the course there is only one person to my knowledge who has been able to walk up and play without a reservation.*" Of course, I said, "*Who?*" He said, "*Barack Obama.*"

Ah. So, if you are the sitting president of the United States, if you buzz the course in Air Force One, and if you arrive surrounded by Apache helicopters and Secret Service, then they will make an exception. The oldest and most prestigious golf course in the world will make an exception IF you are the most powerful person in the world.

You know what Romans tells us today. Even the most powerful, influential, godly, famous, and righteous person who has ever lived couldn't save himself. His only hope was God declaring him righteous. With God there are no exceptions. Not even Abraham. If Abraham required justification, how much more not-very-famous, not-mentioned-in-the-Bible, not-a-founder-of-a-world-religion, never-promised-descendants-like-the-sand-of-the-sea people like you and me need to realize our desperate need is for God to make us righteous.

How much more people like you and me should read, "*him who justifies the ungodly*" and think, *those are the most precious words I have ever heard*. If Abraham needed to be justified and David could be justified, then eternal salvation is available to even little old me.

Is your trust in God and his son Jesus like Abraham's was? Might today be the day you put it there and are made righteous? If your trust is there, and has been there for years, rejoice that from Abraham to David and all of us sinners in between, God justifies the ungodly not because of who we are or what we've done, but according to his saving mercy and grace. O let us love him all the more as we realize more fully his love and grace to us.

Father Abraham had many sons and many daughters had Father Abraham, are you one of them?

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