



The Epistle to the Romans

Lesson Number 12



ABRAHAM, JUSTIFIED BY FAITH

4:1 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^{NKJV})

INTRODUCTION

LESSON OUTLINE

- I. WHAT SHALL WE SAY? (4:1a)
- II. ABRAHAM OUR FATHER (4:1b)
- III. THE CONCEPT OF FINDING (4:1c)
- IV. IF ABRAHAM WERE JUSTIFIED BY WORKS (4:2)
- V. WHAT DOES THE SCRIPTURE SAY? (4:3)
- VI. ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD (4:4a)
- VII. FAITH COUNTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS (4:4b)
- VIII. GRACE VERSUS DEBT (4:4c)

In Scripture, extensive reasoning is always associated with foundational

teaching. This is remarkably consistent throughout the Word of God, setting it apart from all other words. The Spirit never deals with trivia, and is never known to provide humorous anecdotes for life. Levity and light-heartedness cannot be found in Scripture. This does not mean such things are of themselves sinful, unless they are colored by baseness. Triviality, froth, levity, and jesting, however, are never presented as the means to edification. They appeal more to the flesh, and are soulish in nature. For this reason, they are never to be exalted, or given prominence in things pertaining to life and godliness.

Because men "live by every word of God" (Lk 4:4), matters **unrelated** to spiritual life are totally absent in Scripture. This is particularly true of the

Apostolic writings, when insightful proclamation is brought to its apex.

In the text before us, the Spirit begins to probe into the matter of men being given the righteousness of God. He is going to confirm to our hearts the reasonableness of righteousness coming to us as a gift, and not a reward. Because this is difficult for men to grasp, the Spirit will reason with us extensively about the matter. This confirms the importance of the theme.

THE DANGER OF A RELIGION BASED UPON EMOTION

It is in order to make a few comments about the danger of an emotional-based religion. This is required by the nature of the times in which we live, particularly in the Western world.

Throughout church history men have arisen who sought to build the souls of men upon the shifting foundation of emotion. Much of this has occurred because religion had become lifeless and sterile. Men developed an inordinate thirst for religious experiences rooted in the flesh, and thus sought them aggressively. It was not long until entire religious movements were based upon experience rather than faith. This is a great tragedy in the history of the church.

Legitimate Experience

Let it be clear, those who live by faith are brought into the realm of great and legitimate experience – but the experience is not an end of itself–i.e., it is not the real point. You can search the Scripture with great care, and you will never find the Lord calling upon men to seek an experience based in the flesh. The body is the weakest part of our constitution, and has not yet been redeemed (Rom 8:23). **The greatest evidences, and the most lasting experiences are beyond the perimeter of the body.**

A fleshly sensation, or a overpowering experience, however lofty, is never presented as worthy of a whole-hearted quest. I say these things with great care, not wanting to leave the impression that personal and exhilarating experiences are to be held in disdain, or repudiated as false. Anyone even casually acquainted with the word of God knows it is filled with the remarkable experiences of God’s people. But nowhere are we

admonished to emulate those Divinely orchestrated experiences.

For example, we are urged to appropriate faith like Abraham, not become a father in old age as he did. Although becoming a father of many nations is not beyond possibility with God, that is not the point of this reasoning. Further, the various exploits accomplished through faith are not the point in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, but faith itself. Fleshly experience is NOT the highest form of blessing. It is possible to receive unprecedented benefits in the

comes to the culturing of the soul, building up the renewed spirit, and orientating the individual for glory, we are raised to the realm of faith. In that domain—where men believe “*with the heart*” (Rom 10:10)—a kinship with Jesus is developed that cannot occur anywhere else. This is the realm of perception and understanding. It is were cognitive fellowship with God is realized, and the knowledge of God is developed.

This is precisely the point of our text. When the Spirit brings home to our hearts the indispensability of

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body and be unthankful (Lk 17:12-19) and unbelieving (Heb 3:19). God does not confirm the richness of the New Covenant in the flesh. To do such a thing contradicts the very nature of the New Covenant.

The Domain of Faith

This does not suggest that God does not work marvelous experiences in the bodies of His people. However, when it

righteousness, and the means through which it is appropriated, He leads us to consider the **faith**, not the works, of Abraham. He will not leave us adrift on the sea of imagination, but anchor us in the safe haven of spiritual understanding. That is where Divine fellowship is realized, and where it grows and flourishes. It is where the indispensable knowledge of God is ministered, and acquaintance with the most High realized.

WHAT SHALL WE SAY . . . ”

^{4:1a} **What then shall we say . . . ”**

The Spirit will now reason with us concerning the preceding statements. Allow me to refresh your mind concerning those powerful affirmations.

1. The righteousness of God has been revealed “*apart from the Law*”(3:21).
2. Justification is given freely by grace and through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (3:24).
3. God has publicly presented His Son as

- the Propitiation for sin (3:25a).
4. The Propitiation is appropriated through faith in His blood (3:25b).
5. The subject of proclamation is God’s own righteousness (3:26a).
6. God is declared to just, or righteous, in remitting sin and conferring His righteousness upon men (3:26b).
7. The remission of sins and the conferment of righteousness is to the person who has faith in Jesus (3:26c).
8. Faith makes no provision for boasting

- (3:27).
9. The individual is justified by faith without the deeds of the Law (3:28).
10. Faith does not make the Law void, but rather establishes it (3:31).

These are not mere points to be codified and memorized. They are pillars of sound spiritual thought and reasoning—pivotal utterances upon which sound conclusions are to be constructed. Thinking spiritually is much like building

a solid edifice. It requires good materials and their proper correlation. Disjointed thought is always out of order in the heavenly kingdom.

GOING FURTHER

Spiritual life has a nature that is not commonly known. It has a forward posture that always finds the individual moving toward the Lord. It is never enough to simply acquiesce with, or assent to, the truth. We must become adept at drawing conclusions from it.

This is what I call "going further." It is allowing the truth to dictate the WAY,

from the Spirit into the flesh, and vice versa. But that is only an imagination.

If a person will martial their thoughts, casting down worldly considerations, the Spirit will cause the truth to be seen more clearly.

This is precisely what is taking place in our text. The Holy Spirit has elevated our thinking, bringing us into the heavenly realms. He has shown us the centrality of the Gospel, and glorious revelations it announces. He has established our need of a righteousness from God, and affirmed God is righteous

and minds.

GOD DEMANDS A CONCLUSION

God demands that we come to a conclusion concerning His truth. "What shall we say?" He does not want us to remain in a state of indecision, something that is altogether too common in the church world. "What shall we say?" Is asking, "What is our response to these things?" "How does this truth impact upon our understanding? Our views? Our approach to righteousness?"

This phrase is mentioned seven times in the book of Romans (3:5; 4:1; 6:1; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14,30). It represents a Divine summons into the activity of meditation and contemplation. It is here that the real benefit of truth is realized. If truth only lies on the surface of our minds, never getting into our thoughts, it will not produce fruit within us. The blessings of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit are wells springing up from within.

This rhetorical question—"What shall we say then?"—leaves the legalist behind. The person dominated by a law-mentality cannot probe into the truth, or draw water from the wells of salvation. Likewise, the person content to dwell on the surface of truth, satisfied with mere academic statements, is nonplused by the question. This is an interrogation that presumes interest—intense interest.

Here is a question that, to faith, has an obvious answer. Yet it must be expounded, for in it there are rich morsels to be had for the soul. Indeed, this is fertile soil for spiritual fruitage. As we are brought to ponder the appropriation of righteousness, we will be blessed.

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or manner, in which we think. Faith will move us to think in a godly way, bringing us to specific God-honoring conclusions. For some time, I have noted how swiftly men can forget the great declarations of Scripture. Some, after being exposed to the mind of God, can quickly degenerate into worldly thought. They leave the citadel of truth to slough about in the cesspool of things pertaining to life in the body. The truth does not seem to make much of an impression upon them. Such people imagine they can move quickly

in meeting that need by grace through faith. But it is not enough simply to make that point. It must be fixed firmly in our thinking. True preaching does not leave bits and pieces of truth floating about in the mind. It does not simply add a few facts to an arsenal of information. The power of truth is unleashed in its affirmation. The realization of that power comes through contemplation and consequent understanding. Like a skillful Builder, the Spirit will now fasten the truth of justification by faith to our hearts

ABRAHAM OUR FATHER

^{4b} . . . that Abraham our father, pertaining to the flesh . . . " In Romans, this is the first of nine references of Abraham (4:3,9,12,13,16; 9:7; 11:1). It opens a line of reasoning that is foundational, and must be grasped by the human spirit. A word concerning Abraham will be helpful. He is a pivotal person in Scripture.

INTRODUCTION TO ABRAHAM

Abraham was first known as Abram, who was of the generations of Seth, whom Adam begat "in his own likeness, after his image" (Gen 5:3). This was a godly generation, as indicated by Eve's statement concerning Seth. "For God has appointed another seed for me instead of Abel, whom Cain killed" (Gen 4:25). Adam

was one hundred and thirty years old when Seth was born. With the birth of Seth's first recorded son Enosh, "Then men began to call on the name of the LORD" (Gen 4:26). Within that generation, Terah lived seventy years and begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran died before his father Terah in his native land, Ur of the Chaldees. Nahor begat Lot,

but Abram remained childless because Sarah was barren (Gen 11:26-29). The eleventh chapter of Genesis closes by saying, *“And Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there. So the days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in Haran”*^{NKJV} (Gen 11:30-31).

God Calls Abram

At this point, God called Abram. The call was unparalleled. *“Get out of your country, From your family And from your father’s house, To a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”*^{NKJV} (Gen 12:1-3).

Joshua later apprized the children of Israel that Terah had *“served other gods”* (Josh 24:2). We have no record of God revealing Himself to post-flood generations until Abram. Nevertheless, as soon as Abram was called, he *“departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him.”* He was seventy-five years old at the time (12:4). With dispatch he *“took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan”*^{NKJV} (12:5). Although it has become fashionable for ministers to criticize the patriarch for taking Lot and the people they had acquired, the Holy Spirit never does so.

God Appears to Abram

The first record of God “appearing” to anyone is found in Genesis 12:7. *“Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I will give this land.’ And there he built an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.”*^{NKJV} This was the first of at least four Divine

appearances to Abraham (Gen 12:7; 17:1; 18:1). In each of these, God made certain commitments to Abraham. They were all of an epochal nature.

1. In the first appearance God said, *“Unto thy seed will I give this land”* (12:7).
2. **The second appearance** came in the form of a vision. At this time, the Lord said to Abram, *“Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.”* At that time the Lord revealed Abram’s seed would be as multitudinous as stars of the heavens. This is the occasion when Abram *“believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness.”* God also ratified His covenant with Abram over

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a sacrifice. He also unveiled the future to the patriarch. *“Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete”*^{NKJV} (Gen 15:1-16).

3. *“And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. . . behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations”*^{NKJV} (17:2-4). During this **third appearance**, Abram’s name

was changed to *“Abraham.”* *“Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”*^{NKJV} The covenant of circumcision was also established with

Abraham at this time. Sarai’s name also changed to Sarah. *“And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her”*^{NKJV} (17:1-16). This occurred twenty-five years after the Lord’s first appearance to Abraham. Then he was seventy-five, now he was one hundred years old (17:17).

4. **The fourth appearance** took place in the plains of Mamre. At this time it was confirmed that Sarah would bear a son. God also divulged to Abraham the appointed destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:1-33).

The Defeat of Chedorlaomer

On one occasion, when Chedorlaomer and a confederacy of kings soundly defeated the surrounding nations, he took *“all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. They also took Lot, Abram’s brother’s son who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed.”* When word of this reached Abraham, *“he armed his three hundred and eighteen trained servants who were born in his own house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. He divided his forces against them by night, and he and his servants attacked them and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus. So he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his brother Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the people”* (Gen 14:14-16). When he returned from that battle, he was blessed

by Melchizedech, one of the great types of our Lord Jesus Christ (Gen 14:18-20; Heb 7:1-10).

Apart from this occasion, Abraham's association with God is his only distinction.

The First Man Called a Prophet

Abraham is the first person in Scripture who is called "a prophet" (Gen 20:7). We know from Scripture that Enoch, who lived considerably before Abraham, "prophesied" (Jude 14). However, the Word first refers to Abraham as a prophet. I gather this is because of his close association with the coming Messiah.

The First Said to Believe

The word "believe," from the Hebrew word **אמין** / **h,w** > (a-man) is **first** mentioned in relation to Abraham. "And he believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness" (Gen 15:6). In fact, in all of the book of Genesis, this word is used only three times. It is first used in Genesis 15:6 in reference to Abraham. It is also used in Genesis 42:20 in the account of Joseph dealing with his brother. There, the word is translated "verified." "But bring your youngest brother unto me; so shall your words be verified, and ye shall not die." This presents an aspect of believing, or having faith, that is also confirmed in Hebrews 11:1: namely that of persuasion or verification. The last use of this word in the book of Genesis refers to Jacob, when his sons gave him the report that Joseph was alive. "And told him, saying, Joseph is yet alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt. And Jacob's heart fainted, for he **believed them not**" (Gen 45:26). Apart from these references "believing," in any of its varied forms, does not occur in the book of Genesis. This is true in every major translation of Scripture.

Genesis is the book of beginnings. While men of faith are said to have existed before Abraham (Abel–Heb 11:4, Enoch–Heb 11:5, and Noah–Heb 11:7), believing God is first related to Abraham.

So far as Scripture is concerned, Abraham is the very first person said to have "believed in the Lord."

WHY MENTION THESE THINGS?

Why take the time to introduce Abraham? There is a good reason for doing so. If you are familiar with the record of this patriarch, you are aware he is not known for exploits like David and Samson. He built no temple like Solomon, nor did he have an extensive kingdom like him. The things that distinguished Abraham are of no value when viewed according to the flesh.

This man is distinguished by Divine

hold of justification.

OUR FATHER

"Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh . . ." Other versions read "Abraham, our forefather,"^{RSV,NASB,NIV} and "Abraham our ancestor."^{NRSV} The phrase "pertaining to," or "according to" "the flesh" has two possible meanings. First, it can mean from his personal viewpoint. It would be like saying, "What was Abraham's personal experience?" Second, "pertaining to the flesh" can refer to the word "father." In my judgment, this is the preferred meaning, as brought out by the other translations: "our forefather according to the flesh," and "our ancestor according to the flesh."

Genesis is the book of beginnings. While men of faith are said to have existed before Abraham (Abel–Heb 11:4, Enoch–Heb 11:5, and Noah–Heb 11:7), believing God is first related to Abraham. So far as Scripture is concerned, Abraham is the very first person said to have "believed in the Lord."

Primarily, this accents Abraham being the father of the Jewish nation, which sprang from him. God promised, "And I will make of thee a great nation" (Gen 12:2). And again, "And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth" (Gen 13:16). Once the Lord said, "Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation" (Gen 18:18). Zachariah recognized Abraham as the father of the Jewish nation (Lk 1:73), as well as Stephen (Acts 7:2), and the Lord Jesus Himself (John 8:56).

Not Limited to Israel

The fatherhood of Abraham is not limited to Israel. He is also a father to those "who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham," as stated in Romans 4:12. Verse sixteen of this chapter sums up the matter by saying Abraham "is the father of us all" – i.e., those who believe in Jesus.

In Christ Jesus, we become Abraham's "seed," or offspring, and are thus qualified to receive the promises made to him. This is expressly stated in Galatians 3:29. "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." This is an especially pungent thought. Verse sixteen of the third chapter of Galatians sets the stage for this statement. "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as

appearances and believing God. Aside from his defeat of Chedorlaomer and the five kings with him, we are at a loss to show anything great in the eyes of men accomplished by Abraham. His record is carefully set before us in such a manner as to leave us thinking about his faith. His background is not notable like of Moses. His childhood is not distinguished like that of king Josiah.

That is, indeed, the point of this text!

Before God, faith distinguishes men, not works! Without faith, it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6). This section of Romans will establish the superiority and indispensability of faith in the matter of salvation. There will be no justification without faith. It has a value of its own, and towers over all other benefits. Faith is the heart of spiritual life. It alone can take

of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ.^{ⁿNKJV} After establishing the singularity of Abraham's "Seed," affirming it to be Christ, the Spirit declares that those in Christ are "Abraham's seed." They are, in fact, joint heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17).

It was in this sense that Jesus was identified with humanity. Rising into heavenly places, the Holy Spirit speaks of the incarnation of Christ in this manner. "For verily He took not on Him the nature of angels; but He took on Him the seed of Abraham" (Heb 2:16). The NKJV, and other contemporary versions, read, "For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham." Here Christ's birth is viewed from the standpoint of its effects. The benefits of His life, death, and intercession, are passed on to all who believe. That is a pivotal point of Scripture. Those believers are "the seed of Abraham." Others times, Christ's entrance into the world is declared in view of its purpose: "to save sinners" (1 Tim 1:15), or "to take away the sins of the world" (John 1:29).

There Is A Higher Genealogy

There is a higher form of human genealogy—i.e., "pertaining to the flesh." There is a pedigree that can be traced back to Abraham, making him our father.

To put it another way, there is a faith experienced today that is precisely like that found in Abraham. Thus, it is said of Abraham, "that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also" (Rom 4:11). Whether Jew or Gentile, therefore, Abraham, is the father of those who believe on Christ Jesus. The type of faith that justifies is first seen in Abraham.

Faith is personal, but it is not unique to the individual. True faith is common among those possessing it, having the

When, therefore, we marvel at the faith of Abraham, let us not forget that this is the same faith we have in Christ Jesus. Abraham's faith was not extraordinary, leaving your faith to be ordinary. Faith itself is extraordinary, and all who possess it are extraordinarily blessed by God. In Scripture, believing is never considered ordinary. It is always blessed of God, and those who believe are declared to be accepted by God.

In declaring justification by faith, therefore, the Holy Spirit takes us back to Abraham. In Abraham, the kind of faith

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same essential qualities. Paul referred to it as a "common faith," or "the faith we share"^{ⁿNRSV} (Tit 1:4). Peter called it "like precious faith," or "a faith of equal standing with ours"^{ⁿRSV} (2 Pet 1:1). It is, in a very real sense, "the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all" (Rom 4:16).

that saves is first seen. The Spirit will show us that faith has connected us with Abraham, and with the promises made to him. It has made you unique, just as surely as it did Abraham. Faith always elevates the one possessing it, bring the blessing and commendation of God.

THE CONCEPT OF FINDING

"^{lc} "What shall we say then that Abraham our father . . . has found . . ." Other versions read, "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter?"^{ⁿNIV} "What then are we to say was gained by Abraham . . ." ^{ⁿNRSV} "What were his experiences concerning this question of being saved by faith?" ^{ⁿNLT} The word "found" is translated from the Greek word εὑρηκέναι. The word means to find after a deliberate search. It also is used to denote coming upon something for which a search was not made. The meaning here is "to experience for oneself, or obtain."^{Robertson} It is not an intellectual word, but a heart-word, speaking of taking hold of something, as compared with simply coming to know about it. The

question can be stated this way. "What was Abraham's experience in this matter of justification?" Or, "What was realized by Abraham?" Or, "What did Abraham come to appropriate?" Stated yet another way, our text means "As a man, what advantage has Abraham obtained?" we will find it was not in any exploits he performed, or in any fleshly distinction. His advantage will be seen in what he found by believing.

REALITY THAT ALREADY EXISTS

Scriptural finding assumes the existence of the reality BEFORE it is actually found. This is particularly relevant in the consideration of appropriating the righteousness of God, or being justified. Righteousness, in this

case, is not a condition that is developed, but one that is found. "Finding," in this case, equates to receiving, or appropriating from God.

Jesus portrayed the Kingdom of God, which is necessarily wed to God's righteousness (Matt 6:33), as something to be "found." It is like a treasure hidden by God within in a field, waiting to be "found" (Matt 13:44). It is also like a superior pearl of great price, to be "found" by the earnest inquirer (Matt 15:45-46). Everything we need for justification is already in place. It only needs to be received by faith. Further, faith, or believing in the Lord, always moves the individual to obey. Faith is never disobedient! Faith itself never draws back

or withholds from God. Disobedience is always the offspring of unbelief.

A KEEN INTEREST

“Finding” also assumes a keen interest on the part of the finder. Once the heart is persuaded of the reality in question, it will engage in a fervent quest to obtain it. It is the peculiar prerogative of faith to compel earnest seeking on the part of the one possessing it. For this reason, an unqualified promise is given to

all who seek. *“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened”* (Matt 7:7-8). How the hungry soul needs that blessed promise!

It is axiomatic, or goes without saying, that once the heart is convinced of the promises of God, the individual will enter into a zealous effort to obtain them.

All reluctance to obey the Lord comes from a failure to believe Him.

This is precisely why Abraham “found” the blessing of the Lord. Once the Lord had revealed Himself to Abraham, the patriarch is noted for his involvement with and obedience to the Lord. Everything else about him is incidental to that fact. Remove the consideration of God and His righteousness and Abraham loses all distinction among men.

IF ABRAHAM WAS JUSTIFIED BY WORKS

“2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.” At this point we enter into a most controversial text of Scripture. The controversy, however, is not driven by the text itself, but by the traditions of men with which it conflicts. It is never wrong to say things precisely as God says them. Equally true, it is never right to adopt a theological position that does not allow the individual to accept God’s word as it stands. Men may say there is a requirement to blend the various texts of Scripture on a given subject. And, indeed, there are some matters in which this is true, such as morality and human response. **But when it comes to the foundation upon which faith is built, there is no blending, or combining of thoughts.**

There is a vast difference between developing the implications of the foundation, as James did, and the laying of the foundation itself. In our text, the foundation is being placed before us—the BASIS upon which Divine acceptance is realized. The implications of being upon that foundation will be expounded in chapters six, seven, and eight.

If one imagines there is a conflict between James and Paul, that imagination will be dissipated in those chapters. Paul affirms the necessity of obedience with a power that makes James’ reasoning sound almost

elementary. This by no means denigrates James, who wrote as he was moved by the Holy Spirit. But James’ purpose was different. He was correcting hypocrites, showing how pointless their profession was. Paul is confirming the saints, unveiling the role and power of their faith.

Lest we miss the point, there does appear to be a conflict between James and Paul, even though such does not really exist. James says, *“Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had*

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offered Isaac his son upon the altar?” (James 2:21). Our text is going to dogmatically affirm that is NOT the case. James does not question that Abraham’s justification took place before the offering of Isaac. He refers to precisely the same passage as our text. *“Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness”* (James 2:23). His point is that faith compelled Abraham to obey, regardless of the largeness of the demand. The obedience of the patriarch confirmed

his faith. Where obedience is not rendered faith is not real, but is feigned. *“Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone . . . But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? . . . For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also”* (James 2:17,20,26). **Faith without works is no more “faith” than a dead body is a person.**

JUSTIFIED BY WORKS?

By saying *“If Abraham was justified by works,”* the Spirit is not suggesting the possibility of such a thing. In fact, He will overthrow such a notion by Divine affirmation and strong arguments.

“Works,” in this case, are not the response of faith. They are not the *“good works”* for which we have been created in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:10). Strictly speaking, they are not the *“good works”* for which faith makes us *“zealous”* (Tit 2:14), but those that are independent of faith.

These are *“works”* that **precede** Divine acceptance, or experiencing the conferment of righteousness. They are *“works”* that are thought to be the means of becoming righteous.

These are *“works”* proceeding from *“the flesh,”* whether moral or ceremonial (like those commanded under the Law). They are *“works”* resulting from a fleshly pedigree, human discipline, or any result of purely human ingenuity. They are

“works” wrought without God, apart from Divine influence, and in the energy of the Adamic nature. They are the kind of “works” beheld in the remarkable achievements of Nebuchadnezzar. Remember his words? *“Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty?”* (Dan 4:33).

But the “works” of reference are not limited to tangible projects like cities and buildings. They also include wisdom, scholarship, and keen philosophy and reasoning. As it is written, *“Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe”*^{NIV} (1 Cor 1:20-21).

There is no room before the Lord for any work or achievement of men that was wrought independently of Him. Rather, as Jesus said, *“But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God”*^{NIV} (John 3:21). Such works will never be the basis for human boasting. That is precisely why our Lord said those who do them *“come into the light,”* acknowledging it is God who *“works in us both to will and to do of His own good pleasure”* (Phil 2:13).

A Reason for Self Confidence?

No man has reason for confidence in himself. However, let us suppose that Abraham was, in the sense of our text, *“justified by works.”* Which ones would be included? What is said of Abraham BEFORE God appeared unto him? What works had he accomplished, and what confidence could he have in such?

The Scriptural record is given in order to establish our faith and reveal to us the mind of the Lord. What does this record have to say about Abraham

BEFORE God confronted him?

1. Terah, who *“served other gods,”* was his father (Gen 11:26).
2. Nahor and Haran were his brothers, and Lot his nephew (Gen 11:27).
3. He took Sarai as his wife, who was barren (Gen 11:29-30).
4. He left Ur of the Chaldees with his father, his wife, and Lot, to go to the land of Canaan. God’s call to him came **after** this departure (Gen 12:1-4). Some have concluded it came before this, due to the wording of Genesis 12:1: i.e., *“Now the Lord HAD said . . .”* However, nothing in the text suggests this call came prior to him leaving Ur of the Chaldees with his father.

This is the sum total of our knowledge of Abraham prior to his call from God. It is evident there is nothing there in which Abraham could boast. God has revealed the life of this patriarch to make this abundantly evident to us.

The Lord will not allow us to think in this way—not even in a theoretical manner. “NOT before God!” If boasting is legitimate, it must be allowed before God. If it is not allowed before God, it cannot be lawful, for God always allows what is right before Him.

If Abraham was justified by works, he would have a basis for making a boast: *“he has something to boast about.”*^{NKJV} The truth of the matter, however, is that there is not a record of a single work done by Abraham before he was justified—not a single one! We know more about the life of obscure Cornelius before he was justified than we do of Abraham’s (Acts 10:1-2). Yet, Cornelius is not the father of us all, nor is his justification set before us as the supreme example. He is not our father, in any sense. Our father, according to the

faith, is Abraham, and he is the revealed pattern of justification.

BUT NOT BEFORE GOD

The Holy Spirit is dogmatic on this point. Though glorying in ones own achievement may appear legitimate from every earthly vantage point, it is not allowed before God. The Lord will not allow us to think in this way—not even in a theoretical manner. **“NOT before God!”** If boasting is legitimate, it must be allowed before God. If it is not allowed before God, it cannot be lawful, for God always allows what is right before Him.

The Divine nature will not allow fallen beings to boast in His presence. Salvation, or being justified, is so ordered by the Lord as to exclude boasting. As it is written, *“But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence”*^{NKJV} (1 Cor 1:27-30). It is not that such boasting is not advisable, but that it is impossible!

Legitimate boasting, or glorying, can only be *“in the Lord.”* We are saved in such a way as to shut us up to that alternative. *“But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord”* (1 Cor 1:30-31). God will not allow men to glory in anything or anyone but Himself.

A religion that permits men to glory in their own works, whether it be an individual or a movement, is not from God. Neither, indeed, is a purported gospel from God if it leaves those embracing in it glorying in men or having confidence in the flesh.

A SUMMATION OF THE VERSE

With the foregoing comments in

mind, this verse affirms that justification is NOT by works. The question posed does not suggest Abraham could have been justified by works—not even in the eyes of men. The answer, “*But not before God,*” applies to the whole of the sentence. Not just the part referring to glorying. The idea is that before God Abraham was NOT justified by works, and thus could

being able to trace their religion to patriarchs of the past. John the Baptist said to Pharisees and Sadducees, “*And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham*” (Matt 3:9). Hear the Jews say to Jesus, “*We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in*

If God will not allow men to boast in tracing themselves back to Abraham, who was His “*friend,*” what will He say to those who glory in a Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Campbell, or even some lesser luminary? If it was vain and contemptible to boast in being a Jew, how much more is it abhorrent to glory in being a Reformationist, Restorationist, Adventist, or some other movement? We do not deny that many good things were given to the sons of men through these men and movements. However, they are not ground for boasting. It is what “*the Lord hath wrought*” that is the only ground for glorying (Isa 26:12). That is not simply a tenet of the faith. It is a truth that must be received and confessed by the people of God.

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not glory before God in such.

If there is a single trait of corrupt religion that is particularly reprehensible, it is its lack of glorying in the Lord. The Jews of old were not the last ones to glory in their heritage, and make a boast in

bondage to any man” (John 8:33). Indeed, they were technically correct. As Jesus replied to them, “*I know that ye are Abraham’s seed; but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you*” (John 8:37). They had external credentials, but no inward ones.

The apprehension of this reality is what causes praise to issue forth from the saints of God. As it is written, “*Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name*” (Heb 13:15). There is no theological position that can produce such a sacrifice of praise.

WHAT DOES THE SCRIPTURE SAY?

“*3 For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*” In order to buttress his argument, the Apostle to the Gentiles appeals to the Scripture. He has reasoned with us, but will not leave us with reasoning alone. **Sound reasoning must begin and end with Divine affirmation.** Holy men of God through whom God gave us His Word (2 Pet 1:21) never fastened their thoughts with human illustrations, oratory, or other forms of human wisdom. They fastened their teaching with the nail of Scripture—a “*thus saith the Lord.*”

For many, the acid test of truth is whether or not it harmonizes with a preconceived theological position. For others, the touchstone is what they have been taught from their youth. For others, the measure is the fleshly ability of the speaker. However, there is no substitute for the Word of God.

When Israel was faced with the impressive words of spiritual mediums who claimed supernatural powers, they were told to resort to the Word. “*And when they say to you, ‘Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter,’ should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them*” (Isa 8:19-20). This word is still true! If the message we hear, regardless of the speaker, is not “*according to this Word,*” it is because the speaker is in darkness.

You will find a remarkable consistency in this matter. David, the Prophets, John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus, the Apostles, and other Scriptural writers, **ALWAYS** spoke in harmony with the Scriptures. They cared nothing for being at variance with the traditions of

men, but they consistently honored the Word of God. Thus our text asks, “*For what does the Scripture say?*”

SCRIPTURE SPEAKS

Because the Word of God is living and powerful, Scripture is said to “*speak.*” There are some who seek to distinguish between Scripture and the Word of God. Such positions reveal a level of ignorance that is altogether unacceptable.

The Word of God and Scripture

During the days of king Josiah, they discovered “*the book of the law in the house of the Lord.*” After due consideration of this wonderful discovery, the king commanded certain men to inquire of the Lord concerning the matter. In his decree he said, “*because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD, to do after all that is written in this book*” (2 Chron 34:21). The Word and the book are thus equated.

Jesus also equated Scripture with the Word of God. *“If He called them gods, unto whom the **word of God** came, and **the scripture cannot be broken**”* (John 10:35).

It should not be necessary to further establish this fact. We are called to consider the Scripture—what is written. Scripture *“speaks”* to us because it is vitalized by the Holy Spirit. Thus we read, *“So the Scripture was fulfilled **which says . . . And again another Scripture says . . . For the Scripture says to Pharaoh . . . For the Scripture says . . . Or do you not know what the Scripture says . . . Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? . . . For the Scripture says . . . Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain**”* (Mk 15:28; John 19:24,37; Rom 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; Gal 4:30; 1 Tim 5:18; James 4:5).

The point in all of these, and similar, texts is that the authority was in the Scripture itself. What was written carried all of the power of an utterance from heaven. Sixty-seven times, the New Testament Scriptures say *“It is written”* (Matt 2:5; 4:4,7,10; 11:10; 21:13; 26:24,31; Mk 1:2; 7:6; 9:13; 14:21,27; Lk 2:23; 3:4; 4:4,8; Lk 7:27; 10:26; 10:26; 19:46; 20:17; 22:37; 24:46; 6:31,45; 12:14; 15:25; Acts 1:20; 7:42; 15:15; 23:5; Rom 1:17; 2:24; 3:4,10; 4:17; 8:36; 9:13,33; 10:15; 11:8,26; 12:19; 14:11; 15:3,9,21; 1 Cor 1:19,31; 2:9; 3:19; 4:6; 9:9,10; 10:7; 14:21; 15:45,54; 2 Cor 4:13; ; 8:15; 9:9; Gal 3:10,13; 4:22; Heb 10:7; 1 Pet 1:16).

What is *“written”* is not open to question. It has sufficient power to repel the advances of Satan and thoroughly equip the saints. The *“Scriptures”* are the Divine repository by which the validation of every message purporting to be from God is to be tested. Those who test sayings by Scripture are acknowledged by heaven as being noble in that endeavor. As it is written of the Bereans, *“These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether*

those things were so” (Acts 17:11).

The Scripture Must Have Integrity

All of this assumes the absolute integrity of the Scriptures. If they are not reliable, we are cast upon the sea of human opinion with neither sail nor oar.

All of this may seem very apparent—at least to faith. Thus some might consider it useless to make such a point. We are, however, living in a time when the integrity of Scripture is being questioned by those who claim identity

portions, of Scripture, based upon human analysis. An inordinate value was placed upon original manuscripts, and men felt free to sit in judgment on what was written.

However innocent all of this may appear, it has resulted in a near disdain for the Word of God in many circles. With alarming confidence, any portion of Scripture that clashes with preconceived notions can be dismissed. Plausible explanations are offered, ranging from language considerations, to social customs

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with Christ Jesus.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, a movement began referred to as “the enlightenment,” or ‘the age of reason.’ It was a reaction against the powerful effects of the Reformation movement, which had exalted Divine reasoning above that of men. This movement was “committed to secular views based on reason or human understanding only, which they hoped would provide a basis for beneficial changes affecting every area of life and thought.”^{Grolliers Encyclopedia} It was not a godly movement, and “emphasized the right to self-expression and human fulfillment, the right to think freely and express one’s views publicly without censorship or fear of repression.”^{Grolliers}

The approach to Scripture was greatly impacted by this misnamed “age of reason.” Higher criticism was introduced during this time. This was an approach to Scripture that allowed men to accept or reject statements, and even

and variant manuscript readings.

However you choose to approach the Scripture, it must leave you free to accept its statements without question or modification. If this is not done, the words *“The Scripture says,”* or the question, *“what does the Scripture say?”* carry no weight. To me, it is inconceivable that the massive and complex universe in which we reside could be maintained by the Word of Christ’s power (Heb 1:3), yet His Word has become distorted and untrustworthy. It is utterly foolish to imagine we can acknowledge we live in a world that is strictly maintained by Christ, yet cannot rely unquestionably upon His Word, by which we live.

When, therefore, we read *“For what does the Scripture say?”* let us prepare to accept it without question. Refuse to allow doubt to enter your thinking. Let us determine to shape out thinking by its affirmations. If we will believe it, Scripture will confirm the truth to us. Then we will gain confidence before God.

ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD

“³ For what does the Scripture say? | ‘Abraham believed God, and it was | accounted to him for righteousness.’”

Here is a most arresting statement. The *“Scripture”* says this in Genesis 15:6. This was the second time the Lord appeared to Abraham. On this occasion, *“the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision.”* This occurred approximately twenty-five years after the Lord’s initial appearance to the patriarch (Gen 12). In the vision extensive revelation was given to Abraham—revelation that far exceeded the things made known in the Lord’s first appearance. In the beginning the Lord said, *“I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”*(Gen 12:2-3). Now, twenty-five years later, much more is made known.

1. Abraham was told not to fear (Gen 15:1a)
2. God was Abraham’s *“Shield”* (15:1a).
3. God was Abraham’s *“exceeding great Reward”*(15:1b).
4. Abraham’s heir would come from his own body (15:4).
5. God would make his descendants as numerous as the stars of the heavens (15:5).
6. God revealed Abraham’s descendants would be in a strange land as servants for four hundred years (15:13).
7. God would judge the nation served by Abraham’s progeny (15:14a).
8. He revealed Abraham’s seed would come out of the foreign land *“with great possessions”*(15:14b).
9. Abraham would live long and be buried in a *“good old age”*(15:15).
10. In the fourth generation, Abraham’s descendants would return to Canaan (15:16a).
11. The Amorites, then in Canaan, would not yet be judged, because their *“iniquity”* was *“not yet complete”* (15:16b).
12. God made a covenant with Abraham, to give the land of Canaan to his descendants (15:18a).
13. The borders of the promised land were specified (15:18b).
14. Ten nations would be dispossessed of the promised land (15:19-21).

This was a remarkable revelation in both nature and extent. What would Abraham’s response be? At very beginning of the vision, Abraham confessed he remained childless, and had been given no heir. This appeared to contradict the promise. He had even asked God to let the steward of his household, Eliezer, be appointed as his heir (15:2-3).

God said this would not be the case. Abraham would have offspring—not one or a few, but a multitude that could not be numbered. The circumstance of the patriarch conflicted with this promise. Every facet of human wisdom rejected the

God said this would not be the case. Abraham would have offspring—not one or a few, but a multitude that could not be numbered. The circumstance of the patriarch conflicted with this promise. Every facet of human wisdom rejected the possibility of such a thing. The whole course of nature could allow no such fulfillment.

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What will Abraham do? Will he ask further questions? Will he shrink back in unbelief? Will he appeal to statistics and the laws of probability? Will he continue to bring up his childless condition, the barrenness of his wife, and even his older age? Will he think like the churchmen of our day?

Ponder for a moment the age in which Abraham lived. He did not have a Bible. He possessed no Scripture replete with faith-building examples, or Divine promises to nourish the soul. There were no kindred prophets who could substantiate the Word of the Lord. There were not a multiplicity of counselors on

whom, he could rely. There is not a shred of human knowledge, wisdom, or example that can strengthen the promise of the Lord. The commitment of God went beyond the perimeter of human understanding, and higher than the range of man’s powers of reason.

Now comes the edifying proclamation. *“And he believed in the LORD!”* Faith was equal to the occasion. It could take hold of a word wholly unsupported by anything in this world or the natural man. The promise was too big for reason, but not for faith. It would have crushed emotion, yet caused faith to rise in a man to whom little had been revealed before.

Abraham did not require an orientation course. He did not have to learn to believe, or be tutored in trusting. *“He believed in the Lord.”* He reckoned on the Lord’s ability, not his own.

The Circumstances

A promise of this magnitude had never been given before. There were no prior works of God that could confirm the probability of nations coming from an old man with a barren wife. Prior to this, a righteous man had been murdered by a child of the devil. An entire world had been cursed, with only eight souls surviving. A global effort to build a tower that reached into heaven had been dashed to the ground in Divine judgment. A holy nation did not exist. An inspired book had not been written. There was no record of signs and wonders. Idolatry was prevalent—even in his own family.

In spite of all of this, Abraham *“Believed in the Lord!”* His faith reached up, and anchored itself in the God of heaven. God said it, Abraham believed it.

THE RELATION OF PROMISE TO FAITH

There is no record of anyone believing God until a promise was given. Our text refers to the very first record of such believing. Abraham did not decide what he wanted to do, then believe God for the fulfillment of it. There is altogether too

much of this kind of thinking today. While it is true, *“All things are possible him that believeth”* (Mark 9:23), believing is never more possible than when God delivers a promise.

of lions” (Heb 11:33).

It is by means of God’s *“exceeding great and precious promises”* that we become *“partakers of the Divine nature”* (2 Pet 1:4). That very text is preceded by

The people of God need to hear the promises of God. It is essential that faith be nourished by Divine commitments! It is not enough to command people to believe, they must be given a promise to believe—a word from the Lord of glory! It is no wonder that faith is so sparse in our day. It is a time when the people of God are being served intellectual trivia, current events, and religious novelties.

Is it not written, *“That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises”* (Heb 6:12). And again, *“By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son”* (Heb 11:17). And again, *“Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths*

a reminder that we have *“obtained like precious faith”* (2 Pet 1:1). That faith feeds upon the promises of God, just as surely as Abraham did.

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wonder that faith is so sparse in our day. It is a time when the people of God are being served intellectual trivia, current events, and religious novelties. Faith shrivels in an environment like that! Trust cannot be nourished by demands, and *“unfeigned faith”* cannot rise under the sound of law.

HOW ABOUT YOU?

It is one thing to read about Abraham, it is quite another to become identified with him—to be his *“seed.”* Do you *“believe God,”* or *“believe in God?”* God has made certain commitments that pertain to you. You can respond to them in a way that fulfills the word of Jesus. *“If ye were Abraham’s children, ye would do the works of Abraham”* (John 8:39).

If you sense a beginning of faith in your soul, yet lack confidence, thinking you are unequal to the demands of faith, be encouraged to present your case to the Lord. *“Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief”* (Mark 9:24). Take Abraham as your example. He believed God and was blessed. You will be also. God always honors faith.

FAITH COUNTED FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

“³ For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’” Other versions read, *“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,”*^{NIV} *“AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,”*^{NASB} *“And Abraham had faith in God, and it was put to his account as righteousness,”*^{BBE} *“Abraham believed God, so God declared him to be righteous.”*^{NLT}

The word *“accounted,”* or credited, is a word of exchange. Literally, it means “to take an inventory, and give an estimate,” to “conclude,” “esteem,” or “impute.”^{Strong’s} It has the idea of sharing or crediting someone’s account, and to give an official evaluation of the thing reviewed. To “account to” or “credit” someone, is to take something belonging to another, and give it to one who has none of that

commodity himself.

THE WEIGHT OF THE CONSIDERATION

This Text must not be viewed as a mere historical event, or as the statement of an official theological position. We have already been told that the Gospel announces a righteousness from God that is realized by faith (Rom 1:16-17). What is more, this righteousness is needed. In fact, no person can be received by God without possessing it.

To accentuate the human dilemma, the Gospel affirms *“the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men”* (Rom 1:18). This cannot be averted. It will happen! The only hope is to be moved out of the category of *“unrighteous,”* for it is not possible for the unrighteous to inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9). These are circumstances that are cast in stone, so to

speak, and cannot be changed. They involve the very character of God, who *“cannot deny Himself”* (2 Tim 2:13).

To further complicate the matter, lest any person imagine they have managed to achieve righteousness, it is written, *“There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one”* (Rom 3:10-12). This is man in his natural state, with nothing more than resources obtained from Adam. It is man in the unregenerated state—under the *“power of darkness”* from which he must be *“delivered.”* This is the person who has not been *“translated”* into the kingdom of God’s *“dear Son”* (Col 1:13). It is the one who has not been *“washed,” “sanctified,”* or *“justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God”* (1

Cor 6:10).

Within this category of people there is not one righteous person! All such people are “*strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world*” (Eph 2:12).

Given this context, the sensitive of heart become keenly interested when they hear about Abraham being reckoned righteous! Such a person knows righteousness is imperative, and that they are not capable of producing a righteousness of their own. To hear about a righteousness that is given is, therefore, a glad sound. Further, to hear that it is the very righteousness of God causes the heart to leap with joy.

NOT A MERE FORMALITY

The righteousness of reference is not ceremonial, or a mere formality. God did not simply CALL Abraham righteous, while he remained in an unrighteous condition. Although there are people who view righteousness in this manner, it is the height of absurdity to do so. God does not accept people by pretending they are righteous. His character will not allow such a thing. The righteousness reckoned to Abraham was real, and stood the test of Divine scrutiny. Even when the most exacting commands were given to Abraham, he obeyed without hesitation. His obedience was the result of having righteousness credited him.

WHAT IS THE “IT”?

What is the “*it*” that is mentioned? “*Abraham believed God, and **IT** was counted unto him for righteousness.*” The next verse will clarify that “*it*” is the faith Abraham possessed—the fact that he “*believed God.*” Thus we read, “*his faith is accounted for righteousness*” (4:5).

Herein is a marvelous thing! God regards faith as righteousness itself. Believing God outweighs all of our sins,

and removes all of our guilt and uncleanness. That is why it is written, “*and by Him everyone who believes is **justified from all things** from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses*” (Acts 13:39). That is another way of saying “*accounted righteous,*” for being justified is the same as being made righteous.

Because this truth is expounded extensively in the next few verses, it will suffice to just touch upon it here. Reliance upon, or trust in, the Lord compensates

to Abraham as righteousness.

God took inventory, so to speak, of Abraham. He evaluated him, scrutinizing his person with His omniscient eye. When He saw faith in Abraham, and took note that the patriarch believed Him, he wrote “**righteous**” upon Abraham’s person. That is what our text says, and that is what it means.

The dominating thing that Abraham did was believe God. That is what changed his status, and made him acceptable to God. The fact that he did not

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for the alienating consequences of sin. This is because faith is actually a greater accomplishment than all of the exploits of men. To believe God is not natural! To trust Him requires resources men do not have by nature. While men can intellectually assent to the fact of God, and conclude from His creation that He exists and is powerful, that is not sufficient to save the soul. If it is “*the work of God that you believe in Him whom he sent*” (John 6:29), believing cannot be a mere exercise of the intellect.

The Scriptures declare the grace of our Lord is “*exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus*” (1 Tim 1:14). While believing God involves the human will, it involves more than the human will. Those who believe are said to have “*believed through grace*” (Acts 18:27). Faith is “*obtained*” (2 Pet 1:1), and it is “*given*” to us to believe (Phil 1:29). To be sure, whatever God gives must be received and acted upon. But it was faith itself—believing God—that was accounted

stagger at God’s promise, and obeyed God’s commands, confirmed that he was, in fact, righteous. His faith had made him so, and his works proved that was true.

A FINAL WORD

One final word on this passage. The text of reference (Gen 15:6) is also mentioned in Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23. The fourth chapter of Romans reasons extensively on this passage, confirming its centrality in understanding the salvation of God. This is not a tangential doctrine, but a foundational one. It must move us to place a high value on believing God. If God regards believing Him so highly, what can be said of the person who regards believing as elementary, or a mere initial step in appropriating the salvation of God? Let it be clear that **men cannot be blessed by God while placing a low priority on a response He honors above all other reactions to His word.** That response is believing God—taking Him at his word, and moving out upon it.

GRACE VERSUS DEBT

“⁴ **Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.**” Other versions read, “*Now to*

him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt,”^{KJV} “*Now to the one who works, his wage is not*

reckoned as a favor, but as what is due,”^{NASB} “*Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift,*

but as an obligation,^{ANIV} “When people work, their wages are not a gift. Workers earn what they receive,^{ANLT} and “Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due.”^{ANRSV} It should be apparent that this is a central consideration.

A FUNDAMENTAL CONSIDERATION

There is a fundamental consideration to be seen here. It is the background to this text. **God will NOT be placed in debt to fallen men!** This is affirmed in the eleventh chapter of Romans. “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen”^{NIV} (11:35-36). The same truth was expressed by young Elihu, whose counsel God upheld: “If you are righteous, what do you give to Him, or what does He receive from your hand?”^{NIV} (Job 35:7). God Himself supported that word by saying to Job, “Who has a claim against Me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to Me”^{NIV} (Job 41:11).

God does not honor what He does not initiate! If man renders back to God something he has not received from God, it simply is not acceptable. This is a major tenet of Scripture, and is at the root of the reasoning to which we are being exposed (Rom 4:1-4).

This is why man “*must be born again*” (John 3:3-7). It is ever true, “*The flesh profiteth nothing*” (John 6:63). If this were not the case, God would be obliged to recognize the goodness of the flesh. **Those requiring deliverance cannot boast before the One delivering them.**

Man, who comes “*short of the glory of God,*” cannot cause God to be indebted to him. If there is any legitimate difference among men, it is because of what the Lord has done. Thus it is written, “*For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?*” (1 Cor 4:7). That is why Paul, after

acknowledging he had labored “*more abundantly than they all,*” said, “*yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me*” (1 Cor 15:10). He was glorying in the Lord. **Salvation is arranged so as to allow only that kind of boasting.**

HIM WHO WORKS

It is again vital to understand what the Spirit means by “*him that worketh,*” or “*him who works.*”^{NKJV} Work is here compared with faith. As a basis for becoming righteous, “*work*” is the antithesis of faith. In this sense, it is not the complement of faith, but its competitor.

“*Work*” is not to be equated with obedience, for obedience is integral to faith. In fact, Jesus is said to be “*the Author of eternal salvation unto all them*

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that obey Him” (Heb 5:9). In our text, the person who “*works*” has not yet entered into God’s rest. Such imagines that entrance into Divine favor depends upon human accomplishment. Scripture speaks on this wise. “*For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us labor therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief*” (Heb 4:10-11). Entering into rest is here equated with salvation.

The idea of ceasing from our own works means refraining from **reliance** upon our own works. Once faith “*comes*” (Gal 3:25), however, the believer becomes a prodigious worker. That is because faith opens the channel, so to speak, for God to

work in the individual. As it is written, “*Now the God of peace . . . make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen*” (Heb 13:20-21). Thus, the person who is justified does not cease to work any more than God ceased to work after creating the world and the fulness thereof. What ceases is an attempt to gain Divine favor by ones own work.

By devoting ourselves to believing, we are brought to rely upon Christ’s achievements for our acceptance.

The one “*who works*” does so in the energy of the flesh, and is quite satisfied with his work. Like the vain Pharisee, he thinks himself worthy of the commendation of God. “*God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess*” (Luke 18:11-12). Such a person imagines he deserves to be called righteous. However, as long as our works are imperfect (and all of them are), they cannot be the basis for the conferment of righteousness. **You cannot receive a perfect righteousness upon the basis of imperfect works.**

Here, “*works*” have to do with appropriating salvation, not walking in the will of the Lord, or laboring in His vineyard.

THE WAGES

If, in fact, we earn justification, then God cannot give it to us freely by His grace. God would then be obliged to give us wages. However, Scripture has already affirmed that God CANNOT be put into the position of a debtor to man. When it comes to “*wages,*” such do exist. “*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*”^{NKJV} (Rom 6:23). **Eternal life can only be received as a gift!**

It is to be understood that we are not deserving of the great salvation we have

received. Every believer can confess with **Jacob**, *“I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast showed unto thy servant”* (Gen 32:10). If that is true of “the least of all” God’s mercies, what about the superior *“gift of righteousness”* (Rom 5:17)?

Abraham, the friend of God, once approached God in this manner. *“Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes”* (Gen 18:27). If the *“friend of God”* spoke in this manner, how ought we to speak?

Recognizing the blessing of the Lord, **David** said, *“Who am I, O Lord GOD? and what is my house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?”* (2 Sam 7:18). If this could be said of the man after God owns heart, the sweet psalmist of Israel for whom, God built a house, what should we say?

Righteous **Job** stood before the Lord and said, *“I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes”* (Job 42:5-6). If a man described as *“perfect and upright”*

said this of himself, what can we say of ourselves?

Whatever you have received from the Lord, beginning with your justification, it has been given to you **because you have**

Grace, like faith, is contrasted with works. As it is written, *“And if by grace, then it is **no longer** of works; otherwise grace is **no longer** grace. But if it is of works, it is **no longer** grace; otherwise work is **no longer** work”* (Rom 11:6).

Whatever you have received from the Lord, beginning with your justification, it has been given to you because you have believed, not because you worked. It was a gift, not a payment! Good works proceed from faith, and are never the cause of it.

believed, not because you worked. It was a gift, not a payment! Good works proceed from faith, and are never the cause of it.

THE MARVEL OF GRACE

“Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.” When it comes to the imputation of righteousness, grace is not an option, but a necessity. In the Divine economy, it is impossible to receive eternal benefits upon the basis of human accomplishment. Salvation in all of its aspects is *“By grace through faith”* (Eph 2:8).

In the text just quoted, as well as the one on which I am commenting, a reward for working removes the possibility of a gift for believing. Both cannot exist simultaneously. They are mutually exclusive.

Thus, the Spirit has reasoned with us concerning our father Abraham. He has made clear to us how he was made righteous, declaring that is precisely how we are made righteous. Now salvation is within our reach.

CONCLUSION

The Holy Spirit has opened a thread of reasoning to us that is not common in many church circles. It is not a mere novelty, but is the very foundation of spiritual understanding. The imputation of righteousness upon the basis of faith, and *“without works,”* is a reality settled in heaven. Although the book of Romans spends considerable time expounding this truth, its power is in its affirmation. Those who communicate in the name of the Lord must have these things at the center of their proclamations. Receiving the righteousness of God through faith is a foundation upon which obedience is realized. Confidence and assurance are also attained when this truth is perceived.

Where the proclamation of this text is not known and embraced, there can be no satisfactory advancement in the faith. At some point, the heart must be able to say, *“I know whom I have believed and am*

persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day” (2 Tim 1:12). As long, however, as a person believes Divine acceptance is the result of our works, such a frame of mind will not be realized. The very nature of the heavenly kingdom forbids *“the full assurance of understanding,”* the *“full assurance of hope,”* and *“the full assurance of faith”* until the cause of our righteousness is known (Col 2:2; Heb 6:11; 10:22).

I am going to wax bold and say the absence of spiritual confidence is directly owing to a basic ignorance of the cause and nature of salvation. Further, that unfamiliarity is the result of failing to comprehend the Gospel of Christ. *Where the Gospel is not the major thrust of preaching and teaching, faith cannot flourish.* Faith, as it is written, *“comes from what is heard, and what is heard*

comes by the preaching of Christ”^{RSV} (Rom 10:17). Nothing in the text suggests this is limited to an initial hearing of the Gospel, or the inceptive believing of the Gospel. That is precisely why Paul said to the Corinthians, *“For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified”* (1 Cor 2:2). Their faith had waned, and only the hearing of the Gospel can correct that condition.

The Epistles are actually expositions of the Gospel of Christ. In them, the implications of the Gospel are declared, and the Gospel itself is reaffirmed. All of this is designed to enable the saints of God to obtain boldness to come into the presence of God, knowing they are accepted in Christ Jesus. Mercy and grace to help in the time of need cannot be appropriated if we are afraid to come to the throne of grace. What is more, we

cannot confidently approach God if we are not sure we are accepted by Him, and reckoned to be righteous.

Throughout this discourse, strong statements are made that cannot be controverted. The Spirit accents what IS, not what can be! A few of them will serve to confirm their unusual power.

1. The Gospel is God's power in order to salvation (Rom 1:16).
2. A righteousness from God is made known through the Gospel (1:17).
3. God's wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness (1:18).
4. Eternal life will be given to everyone who, by patiently continuing in well doing, seeks for glory, honor, and immortality (2:7).
5. Those who are contentious and do not obey the truth will experience Divine indignation and wrath (2:8).
6. No one is righteous of themselves (3:10).
7. No one understands God of

themselves (3:11).

8. No one does good of themselves (3:12).
9. By the deeds of the Law, no flesh will be justified in God's sight (3:20).
10. The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus to all who believe (3:22).
11. We are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (3:24).
12. God has set forth Jesus as a covering, or propitiation, for sin (3:25).
13. God not only justifies sinners, but is proved righteous in doing so (3:26).
14. Boasting is excluded by the law, or principle, of faith (3:27).
15. The only valid conclusion is that we are justified by faith without the deeds of the Law (3:28).
16. In this way, believers establish, rather than make void, the Law of God (3:31).
17. Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness (4:3).

All of these affirmations can be grasped by faith. None of them are mere possibilities. All of them are realities.

They bear no similarity to the approach of the Law. The Law identified what was wrong, and specified what was right. Men were then commanded to fulfill both without any deviation whatsoever. Perfect and consistent obedience would cause the doer to live. All others were cursed: "*Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them*" (Gal 3:10).

Thus men are faced with two alternatives. (1) Fulfill all requirements of the Law in the energy of the flesh. (2) Believe God. Which course will you take? I exhort you to throw yourself into believing God. Ponder His exceeding great and precious promises, determining to believe them "*without wavering*." In so doing, you will be made righteous.

Our next Hungry Saints Meeting will be held on Friday, 6/30/2000. Continuing in our studies on Romans, we will cover 4:5-8, "DAVID DECLARES IMPUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS." Obtaining the blessing of the Lord is a preeminent matter throughout Scripture. While the word "blessing" is a panoramic word, presenting a large and impressive vista of Divine benefits, the blessing of being righteous rises above them all. The glory of this condition is powerfully proclaimed by David, a man after God's own heart. Our meeting will convene at 7:00 P.M. You are invited to bring your family and friends for fellowship around the Word of God. Refreshments are served following the meeting.

The Blakely Family: Given, June, Benjamin, Jonathan, and Eva

406 South Sergeant Street, Joplin, MO 64801

Telephone: (417) 782-3063, Email: Given (GivenB@aol.com) June: (JuneE01@aol.com)
Benjamin (Bensvison@aol.com), Jonathan (Jonstalk@aol.com), Eva (Evablakely@aol.com)
Adah Hutchcraft (jahutch@planetdirect.com)
WORD OF TRUTH Website: <http://wotruth.com>

WORD OF TRUTH FELLOWSHIP Website: <http://wotruth.com/wotf/wotindex.htm>