Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

If you have listened to sermons for any length of time then you will appreciate a good illustration. A little story or a metaphor or an example of someone who did what is being talked about really helps us understand or feel what is being explained. And you probably know that some sermon illustrations come from outside the Bible and some from inside the Bible. And this is because we find these two types of illustrations in the Bible. For example, in 1 Cor. 9, to make his point about how we are to pursue godliness, Paul uses non-biblical illustrations of a sprinter and a boxer. But here in Romans 4 Paul uses the biblical character of Abraham to illustrate the point he made in ch. 3. And the point he made in ch. 3 is that salvation is not about anything that we do but about what Jesus has done, which we receive by faith.

* Look at 3:24-25, we are *“justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith*.”

Now, we will say more about what this means within the sermon but if you look at v21 you will see that Paul says that “*the law and the prophets* [*meaning the* OT] *bear witness*,” to what he has said about justification by faith alone. And Paul knew that his Jewish readers would immediately ask where the OT bears witness to this. And **Paul does that in ch. 4 by using** **Abraham as an illustration of** **justification by faith alone**. And he makes his case by showing that Abraham was not justified by **works**, or by **circumcision**, or by **the law**, butby **faith alone**. They will be our four points.

But before we get into ch. 4, we need to understand that the average devout Jew of Paul’s time did not think of himself as a sinner who needed to be saved. He **saw himself as righteous**. He believed that because he was a Jew and because he had and obeyed God’s law, when he eventually stood in front of God he would be given the big thumbs up.

And in the minds of the Jews, **Abraham** was the premier example of this, for Abraham was the Father of the Jews and he obeyed God’s call to leave Haran and go to Canaan, and he got circumcised, and he was even prepared to sacrifice Isaac when God told him to. So it was these things that made Abraham righteous in God’s eyes.

1. Well, Paul starts pealing away the layers of this wrong idea by first of all demonstrating that Abraham was **not justified by works**, as we see in vv1-8.
   1. Paul begins with a question in v1 about what Abraham gained by the flesh, meaning by his own efforts. And his answer in vv2-3 is that nothing Abraham did counted for anything, in terms of salvation. And he cites **Genesis 15:6** as proof of this or there it says, “*Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness*.” So there it is, in black and white, in the OT – Abraham’s righteousness was not about his obedience but about **belief**.
      1. And that word “**counted**” is very important. It is used 11 times in this chapter and in English Bible versions it is rendered as ‘counted’ or ‘credited’ or ‘reckoned’ or ‘imputed.’ It is a word that comes from the world of banking. Literally, it means ‘to put into an account.’
         1. And so, if you buy something on TradeMe and you pay by internet transfer, you open up your online banking page, you fill in the details of the other person’s bank account, and money from your account is put into or counted or credited or imputed to their account. So before you did this their bank account had this much in it, but now because of what you have credited to their account, their account has this much in it.
         2. And what Paul is saying here is that righteousness was credited to Abraham’s spiritual bank account. So before he believed, there was no righteousness in his spiritual bank account. In fact, it was full of guilt. But after he believed, the guilt was gone and it was full of righteousness.
   2. And in case someone mistakenly concluded that the righteousness that was put into Abraham’s spiritual bank account was a ‘payment’ or a ‘reward’ for his act of believing, Paul continues in vv4-5 to illustrate his illustration using the familiar concept of **wages**.
      1. Boys and girls, when dad asks you to wash the car and promises you $5 for doing so, when you have washed the car and dad comes over and gives you $5, are you surprised and astonished that he should give you $5? Of course not! You earned it. It’s not a *gift*;It’swhat you are *owed*. But if he asked you to wash the car and you did not, and he still gave you $5, that would be an underserved gift.
      2. And in the same way, if Abraham was justified by God because of anything he did it would have been like a wage that he deserved. But Abraham understood that what God was promising him was an underserved gift.
      3. In fact, as v5 explains, **God justifies “*the ungodly***.”
         1. God made His covenant promise to give **Abraham** a son in Genesis 15. But do you remember what Abraham did next? In ch. 16 he sinfully sought a son by marrying Hagar, Sarah’s maid – God justifies the ungodly.
         2. And we have just seen the same with **Adam and Eve** in recent weeks. When God came to them in the Garden and promised to send His Son as Saviour, they were hiding form Him and blaming others for their sin – God justifies the ungodly.
         3. And when God repeated His covenant promise to **Noah**, what happened next? Noah got roaring drunk and naked – God justifies the ungodly.
         4. And when God gave the **people of Israel** the law of the covenant on Mt Sinai, what were they doing down below? Making and worshipping a golden calf – God justifies the ungodly.
         5. And God promised **David** that a Son of his would be Messiah in 2 Sam. 7. Just four chapters later though David committed adultery and then murder – God justifies the ungodly.
      4. Is there anyone here this afternoon who is hearing that God justifies the ungodly and smiling inside? It’s good news for you and me, isn’t it, because we too are ungodly! We are not law-keepers; we are law-breakers. What we need is God’s grace – an undeserved salvation. And that is the salvation of the Bible!
      5. And with all of these OT saints, they were justified by believing in the Messiah that God *promised* to send – they looked forward, in faith, to the One who would come to save God’s people. They did not know who He would be or exactly how He would save, but they believed; they trusted. And God counted the person and work of Messiah to their spiritual bank account.
   3. Now, if you know your OT, you will know that truth must be established by the **testimony of at least 2 witnesses**. So Paul knew that quoting Genesis 15 alone would not convince his Jewish readers. So in vv7-8, Paul quotes **Psalm 32**. And Psalm 32 was a Psalm that David wrote after he had committed adultery and murder.
      1. And look at David’s focus: “*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.”* Is he celebrating his own obedience there? Not at all. It is all about the Lord and His grace and His mercy.
      2. And note the same word “*count*” that we saw in v3. And David is celebrating the fact that **when God forgives, it is a spiritual transaction that He never reverses**.
         1. I was once looking at my credit card account and I saw a $200 payment that I knew should not have been there. So I rang the bank and they explained that it was a pre-emptive withdrawal that is put through when you pay for petrol at the pump that is usually reversed before it appears on your statement. And sure enough, it was gone the next day. Phew! But imagine if it was there again the next day! That would be awful.
         2. Well, when God takes sin and guilt out of your spiritual bank account, He will never put it back in; not today, not tomorrow, and not even on Judgment Day. If you have believed in Jesus, you are and always will be a forgiven sinner in God’s sight!
2. Well, it almost seems sad to continue on, doesn’t it. But Paul must also address the Jewish belief that Abraham was justified by **circumcision**, which he does in vv9-12.
   1. And his point here is very simple and will not take many words to explain. The words Paul quoted about Abraham being counted with righteousness because of faith are recorded in Genesis 15:6. So Paul’s question is: Were those words spoken about Abraham **before** **or after** he was circumcised? And the answer is that God did not demand Abraham be circumcised until chapter 17. And this point is important for two reasons:
      1. It is important, first of all, because it means that Abraham became the father of all believers when he was **an uncircumcised Gentile**! Look at v11, “*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*.” So God never intended that salvation be just for the Jews; Gentiles were always part of His salvation plan. And that is good news or for you and me who are not Jewish!
      2. But it is important, secondly, to demonstrate that **salvation was never about physical circumcision but about faith**. Look at v12, “*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*.” So it was faith that brought Abraham into God’s family and his circumcision was then administered as a sign of belonging. So anyone who relied on their circumcision as the basis of their justification in God’s sight had it all wrong. It was faith in Messiah that justified, not circumcision.
      3. And in the same way, today, when we preach the gospel we do not call on people to be baptized but to believe. And when they believe, then they are to be baptized as a sign of belonging. So anyone who relies on their baptism as the basis of their justification in God’s sight has it all wrong. It is faith in Christ that justifies, not baptism.
      4. And we should add here that just as Abraham circumcised his sons and then called on them to believe in the promised Messiah for their justification, so we baptize our children and then call on them to believe in Jesus Christ for their justification.
3. And we see a similar point being made in the third part of Paul’s Abraham illustration as he explains in vv13-15 that Abraham was **not justified by the law**.
   1. For when did God give His people His law? Was it before what we read in Genesis 15:6 or after? It’s in Exodus, isn’t it; in fact it was over 400 years after what we read in Genesis 15 that God gave His people the Ten Commandments. So it simply cannot be that Abraham was justified by having the law.
   2. But this is not just a timing thing. Look what Paul says in v15, “*The law brings wrath*.” And this truth will be explored as Romans continues – the purpose of the law is not to save but to reveal our sin and guilt. In the OT faith was about the ***promise*** of Messiah, and in NT times, faith is about the ***gospel*** of who Jesus is and what He has done. So to seek justification from the law is to seek justification from the wrong place.
      1. Let me illustrate what I mean: Over 100 million people participated in the Hindu festival of **Kumbh Mela** this year. It is held for 55 days, from January into March, every 12 years. And as part of the festival, people bathed in the waters where the Ganges, the Yamuna and the Saraswati Rivers meet. And they do this because it is believed that the gods spilled nectar there after the sea was churned and bathing there will cleanse you.
      2. But do you know what is actually in that water? The bugs that cysentery, cholera, hepatitis, and severe diarrhoea, because the Ganges is one of the top 5 most polluted rivers in the whole world. So this means that Hindus are seeking cleansing from one of the filthiest rivers in the world!
      3. And it is the same when a person seeks salvation by trying to obey the law. The Law cannot make you ‘clean’; it can only show you how ‘dirty’ you are. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ alone that can save.
4. So, Abraham was not justified by works, or by circumcision, or by the law. He was justified, as we see in our last point, from vv18-25, **by faith alone**.
   1. He begins, in v16, by explaining that faith makes salvation a matter of grace for the “*adherent of the law*,” meaning the Jew, and “*the one who shares the faith of Abraham*,” meaning the Gentile who did not have the law.
      1. And the perfect illustration of this illustration is **Rahab**. Do you remember the story of Rahab, boys and girls? We looked at Rahab in our home group Bible study this week. You see, Rahab was a Gentile and she was a prostitute and she told a lie to try and protect the two spies. But at that time in her life, Rahab did not have God’s law. But she had heard about what the Lord had done to deliver His people and she said that she believed that He was “*God in the heavens and one the earth beneath*.” And it is her faith that is commended in Hebrews 11. Justification is about faith! And faith rests on grace – it is not something we deserve; it is God’s free gift.
   2. And as a picture of God’s grace and power, Paul illustrates his illustration in v17 by describing God as the God “***who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist***.”
      1. And while this reminds us about the resurrections in the Bible and how God created the world out of nothing, Paul is actually speaking here about Abraham. You see, for from the usual age, Abraham and Sarah would have expected children. But then their 20’s went past, and then their 30’s, and 40’s, and 50’s, and 60’s, so as they entered their 70’s, they would have long ago abandoned the hope of having children. But somewhere around his 80th year, the Lord appeared to Abraham and promised him a child and Abraham believed God’s promise.
         1. But if that is not astonishing enough, Abraham was 86 years old when Ishmael was born, and Sarah was 10 years younger than him. And it was another 13 years before the Lord came to visit them again to remind them of His promise to give them a child, telling them that at that time next year Sarah would give birth. So Abraham would be 100 and sarah would be 90 when Isaac was born.
         2. Do you think that 100 year old husbands with 90 year old wives talk much about having children? What would they be talking about? What tablets they have to take each day, doctor’s appointments, funeral plans, and wills, right!
         3. And Abraham’s body was, as we read in v19, “*as good as dead*.” And this was no accident. This was God’s deliberate design in order to magnify His grace and His power and His promise.
         4. So, what Abraham could ***see*** was his own as good as dead body and Sarah’s barrenness, as v19 explains. And all he had on the other side was the promise of God. But what is faith? **Hebrews 11:1,** “*Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*.” And Abraham had faith. As v21 says, he “*was fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised*.” And “*that is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness*.”

So Abraham was not justified by his obedience, or by circumcision, or by the law, but by faith. Paul’s Abraham illustration has proven his assertion that justification is and always has always been about *faith* alone, which trusts in *Christ* alone, which is of *grace* alone.

And that brings us to **v23 and our conclusion**. For you did not see all of the miracles that Jesus performed, and you did not see Him die and rise again. All you have is the Bible’s record of these things and God’s promise that all who believe that Jesus was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification will have the righteousness of Jesus counted to their spiritual bank account.

* And with the righteousness of Jesus in your spiritual bank account, as our confession article says, you do not have to be like Adam who hid from God because he was ashamed of what he had done. No, you can draw near to God with confidence and without fear! Your security and your claim is Jesus and His obedience! Amen.