



## BY FAITH ALONE

*SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY*

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Romans 4:1-12  
Eighth Message  
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The book of Romans is one of the most influential books of all time. Romans has transformed millions of lives. It has been the force behind some of the most significant conversions in church history. The apostle Paul's letter is the clearest presentation of the gospel, the good news that God has found a way, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, to justify the ungodly. That includes all of us, because we are all ungodly, as Paul has clearly shown in the opening two and a half chapters of his letter.

In those chapters Paul divided humanity into two types. First, the irreligious, whom he identifies as the average Roman citizen. He is speaking of the sophisticated, intelligent, beautiful people of the world. They have knowledge of God from creation, but they have turned from that and exchanged worship of the living God for worshipping idols. Such people are without excuse. They know the truth, but they deny it.

The second type identified by Paul is the religious person, in particular the Jew who has the light of Scripture. The Jews know the truth, and they teach it, but they do not practice it. So Paul concludes that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Some people are better than others, but everyone falls short of the character of God. God's glory is what he is, and regardless of who we are or what we have done, we have fallen short of God's character. And Paul says that the Law does not help us. It only makes matters worse by defining sin for us. It makes the burden greater, making us feel more guilty and more responsible. The Law can't save us. That is the bad news.

But the good news is that in the person of his Son, God has done something about our problem: Jesus became the sin-bearer for us. Our sins were placed upon him and he bore them in his own body on the cross. By believing in Jesus we are delivered from our sins. We are declared, "Not guilty!" and given the gift of righteousness. Later Paul will say, "There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."

But as long as we remain self-righteous, we don't have a chance. That is hard for us to accept, because we have been taught from childhood that the way to succeed in this world is by working hard. All our lives we are told, "the early bird gets the worm"; "no pain, no gain"; "there is no such thing as a free lunch"; "you get what you pay for"; "don't let them see you sweat." But, the greatest discovery one can make in life is the grace of God.

The lesson we will learn in our study in Romans today is that salvation by grace, freely given on the basis of faith, has always been God's way of salvation. Never in human history did God save people by works. Some think that in the Old Testament people were saved by keeping the Law and in the New Testament we are saved by faith. Some of you probably believe that, but it's not true. People have always been saved by faith.

Paul has to establish that fact for some of his readers, particularly Jews who would take exception to the statement he made in verse 28 of chapter 3: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law." Hearing that, a Jew would ask, "What does this do to the Old Testament, to the Law?" Paul anticipates that question, in verse 31: "*Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.*"

In this letter, Paul uses the word "Law" in a few different ways. Here he is using it to refer to the entire Old Testament. He asks, "By preaching faith in Christ as the way of salvation, do we nullify the Old Testament?" In other words, are there two different ways of gaining God's favor? Is the first, found in the Old Testament, accomplished by keeping the Law, while the New Testament has another, different way to gain God's favor, based on faith? Does this mean we can put our Old Testament Scriptures away because we don't need them anymore? To that, Paul says, emphatically, "No! That is not true. On the contrary, we uphold the law. We establish the Old Testament Scriptures."

In chapter 4 now, Paul takes two examples from the Old Testament of men who were justified by faith. He could have selected from numerous others, but he picks these two because these are the most prominent people in the Old Testament, models to the Jews: Abraham, Israel's most illustrious patriarch, and David, Israel's most illustrious king.

Paul begins with Abraham. Verses 1-5:

**What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness... (NASB)**

Abraham, one of the great men of history, is honored throughout the world. He is revered by three faiths, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. He stands head and shoulders above most of the human race. Obviously, Abraham was held in high regard by the rabbis. To the Jews, he was the epitome of righteousness. He was the one who received the covenant and the promises. He was called the friend of God. The question Paul will answer is: How did Abraham get to be that way? The rabbis took it for granted that Abraham was justified by his works of righteousness, that he had earned his way into God's good pleasure. All the Rabbinic literature testifies to this point. In one place we read: "Abraham was perfect in all his dealings with the Lord and gained favor by his righteousness throughout his life" (Jubilees 23:10). The rabbis quoted the Scriptures where God promised to bless Abraham because of his obedience, neglecting to recognize that the very verses they were quoting referred to his life of obedience *after* he was justified.

What was it that made Abraham a friend of God? Here Paul says that the reason Abraham achieved his favored status is because God justifies the ungodly. Verse 5: "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness." Abraham an ungodly man? Yes! That is what he was!

Paul is assuming his readers have some knowledge of the story of Abraham's life. Abraham lived in the city of Ur of the Chaldees, in the Mesopotamian Valley. He came from a family of idolaters, probably moon worshippers. He apparently had a heart for God, but didn't know him. Then God appeared to him and introduced himself. God promised to show him another land, to give him a large posterity, and through him to bless all the families of the earth. So at 75, Abraham responded to the call and set out for Ur of the Chaldees, without a map. He trusted God to lead him to a land he had never seen, and God brought him over to the land that we call Israel.

When famine struck the land, Abraham, deciding that he couldn't eat a promise, went down to Egypt. His ungodliness became evident at this point in his treatment of Sarah, his wife. The Scriptures say that Sarah was a beautiful woman. In fact, she was still turning heads when she was 90 years old. Abraham feared that if Pharaoh saw how beautiful she was, he would covet her and kill Abraham to possess her, so he told Sarah to say she was his sister. Thus Abraham jeopardized Sarah's life and character to save his hide. But God protected her, sending plagues on the house of Pharaoh until the truth came out. Pharaoh responded by giving gifts to the couple, and then sent them back to Canaan. Abraham followed this practice at least one other time in his marriage to Sarah. He almost threw away the promise that God had made to him. Abraham was an ungodly man. But the apostle's point is that God justifies ungodly men on the basis of faith.

Back in Canaan, ten years passed and Abraham still had no children to brighten his days. One night, God took him to the top of a mountain and showed him the millions of stars shining in the heavens. God said, "Can you count them?" Abraham said, "No!" Then God said, "You are going to have more children than these stars." At that point in his life, of course, Abraham had no children. And, to make matters worse, he was impotent. His body was "dead," according to the text. Furthermore, Sarah had already passed through the change of life.

What made Abraham a friend of God was not his good behavior. It was the fact that he believed what God had told him. He knew that God was able to bring something out of nothing, as Paul will say later in the chapter. God created the world out of nothing. Surely he could create a child out of nothing. Abraham knew the facts. He was 75 years old when God first made the promise. He was 85 now, and he would be 100 years old before the child was conceived. He faced the facts squarely, but he had confidence in God. The text says that when God gave him the promise, he looked up and said, in effect, "I believe it. I don't know how you are going to do it. But I believe it." And God said, "You are a righteous man."

Now, that sounds strange to us, because we think we have to do something in order to be right with God. But what Paul is trying to get us to see is that in the Old Testament, before there was even a Law to obey, Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. He was not counted righteous on the basis of works. How then were people saved in the Old Testament? It was by faith. That is the point the apostle is making.

That word "reckoned" (verse 5) is used five times in six verses in this passage and six more times in the verses that follow. It is translated "credited" in the NIV, or "count." "Reckoned" was used with regard to financial or commercial matters. It is an objective, non-emotional word. Our word "logical" comes from it. There is probably nothing more objective and non-emotional than accounting. Numbers don't lie, as they say. Accounting procedures are very objective. You don't know how your bank feels when it sends out your monthly statement. It doesn't matter really. The statement is totally objective. That is the term that Paul uses here.

My friend Dave Roper uses an illustration that communicates what Paul is saying. Almost all accounting is done by computers today. This makes accounting very objective. Now, imagine a computer, a celestial computer, that has your name on its screen. This is your ledger. Every rotten thing you have ever done, ever thought you ever had, everything you said is listed there. All your lies, your murderous and adulterous thoughts, your pride, arrogance and selfishness—it's all there. Another screen has Jesus' ledger, and all of his righteousness is listed there. Not a speck of sin is itemized, because he knew no sin. He never lived even one second

when he was anything less than an exhibition of the grace and glory, the very character of God. He never sinned once. All that is on his ledger, and all of our unrighteousness is on ours.

Now, according to Paul, on the basis of our faith, God makes a totally objective decision. He takes all of the unrighteousness in our account and credits it to Jesus' account. That's what Paul means when he says, "He made him to be sin for us who knew no sin." God takes all the righteousness out of Jesus' account and credits it to ours, "that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor 5:21). When we believe in Christ, all of Christ's righteousness is imputed, credited, reckoned to our account; and all of our wickedness, past, present and future, is taken out of our account and credited to Christ's account.

Salvation for Abraham, the model of models for the Jews, was by faith alone.

Having established that fact, that Abraham was reckoned as righteous by faith, before his good works, Paul now presents the experience of another great Old Testament saint, David, Israel's greatest king. Verses 6-8:

**just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works,**

**"BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN,  
AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED.  
BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT."**

There is more written about David than any other person in the Bible, apart from the Lord Jesus. Sixty-six chapters of the Old Testament are devoted to David's life. There are fifty-nine references to him in the New Testament. David possessed tremendous natural assets. Someone has said that he had the literary skill of Shakespeare, the musical ability of Beethoven, the military skill of Alexander the Great, the political savvy of Abraham Lincoln, and the hand-eye coordination of Joe Montana. It's no wonder that Michelangelo's sculpture of David stands 18 feet tall. David was a giant of a man. Now God said of David, "he is a man after my own heart." How did David get to be so close to God? Was it through a lifetime of good works? No. David was quite flawed in his origins. He was abused as a child, unloved by his parents, and at times was controlled by obsessions like pride, ambition, and lust. It is interesting that the passage which Paul quotes comes from Psalm 32, words written by David after he had committed adultery, murder, and mass murder.

One spring during David's reign, his army went off to battle against the country of Ammon. It was normal for kings to accompany their armies into battle, but for some reason David stayed home. Then one night while he was walking on the rooftop of his house he saw Uriah's beautiful wife, Bathsheba, bathing. Uriah was one of David's best friends. He was one of the mighty

men who left their secure positions in Saul's army when the future king was in exile, fleeing from Saul. The fact that Bathsheba was his friend's wife should have stopped David on this evening, but his motor was running. He called for Bathsheba. She became pregnant, and to cover up his adulterous affair, David arranged to have Uriah murdered. Many others died in battle that day, and he covered that up, too. Then he married Bathsheba, thinking he had concealed everything.

A year later, the prophet Nathan came to David with a story he had concocted. Nathan said that as he traveled through the countryside he happened upon a situation that required David's judgment. He came upon two men, one wealthy, with vast herds, the other, a poor man who had only one ewe lamb. The wealthy man took this poor man's only lamb, his pet, and served it up for dinner to a traveling stranger. David stopped Nathan at that point. He was outraged. "The man deserves to die," he cried. David got a little carried away. Stealing sheep was not a capital offense in Israel. Nevertheless, that was how he felt. His own guilt was getting to him. Nathan looked at David and said, "David, you are the man!" David became unraveled. He put his face in his hands and cried out, "I have sinned against the Lord." He confessed his sin, and shortly thereafter wrote Psalm 32, from which Paul quotes these words, in verses 7-8:

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN,  
AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED.  
BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT.**

Paul uses a double negative for emphasis in verse 8. That is not good English, but it is perfectly acceptable in Greek. "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not, by no means, take into account." In other words, he will never, ever, count his sin against him. So David was justified. But not without consequences. Sin always has consequences. Much pain and heartache would follow in David's life as a result of his bad choices. But he was justified freely through God's grace. He didn't deserve it, but he served a God who justifies the ungodly. We may not have committed murder or adultery, but we are all ungodly. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," yes, but the Lord justifies us freely on the basis of faith.

In the remainder of this paragraph Paul goes on to establish that this salvation that Abraham found in the Old Testament is available to us today. Verses 9-12:

**Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS RECKONED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of**

**all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.**

Paul is saying that Abraham was declared righteous while he was a Gentile. Back then, there were no Jews in the world; there was just Abraham and all the other Gentiles. When God revealed himself to Abraham and gave him that promise, Abraham believed it. Fourteen years would pass before he was circumcised. Therefore the rite of circumcision does not have any saving value. That is not what imparted righteousness to Abraham. He was already a friend of God years before he was circumcised. Paul says that circumcision was a seal which confirmed the righteousness Abraham already possessed.

And Paul is saying that God's grace is available to everyone, both Jews and Gentiles. It doesn't make any difference whether you are circumcised or uncircumcised. Your religious background is irrelevant. It makes no difference whether you have been confirmed or baptized or even belong to a church. The issue is not even the state of your moral life. Those things may be confirmations of a relationship with God, but they don't make the relationship. A relationship with God is established by one thing: faith alone, nothing more and nothing less. That is why Paul can say that we are justified freely by faith.

Paul concludes by saying that what matters is not whether we are circumcised or uncircumcised, but whether we are walking in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had. That is the point. Are we fol-

lowing Abraham in our faith? Do we understand our need for God's grace? Do we know how radically sinful we really are, and how much we need the righteousness that comes from God alone, through faith in Christ? It is faith alone that saved Abraham, that saved David, and that saves us as well.

Horatio Bonar captured this thought beautifully in this poem which he wrote in 1861:

*Not what these hands have done  
Can save this guilty soul;  
Not what this toiling flesh has borne  
Can make my spirit whole.  
Not what I feel or do  
Can give me peace with God,  
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears  
Can bear my awful load.  
Thy work alone, O Christ,  
Can ease this weight of sin;  
Thy blood alone, O lamb of God,  
Can give me peace within.  
Thy grace alone, O God,  
To me can pardon speak,  
Thy power alone, O Son of God,  
Can this sore bondage break.  
I bless the Christ of God;  
I rest on love divine;  
And with unfaltering lip and heart,  
I call this Savior mine.*

This is the wonderful good news of the letter to the Romans. Christ bore all of our unrighteousness on the cross, and through our faith, God imputes his righteousness into our hearts. Our part is to believe what God has said and Christ has done.

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