

**Text: Romans 4:1-12**

**Theme: Righteousness is by Faith Alone**

**Sermon delivered by Dele Agbelusi on 08/06/2008 at 10.30am.**

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After asserting that both Jew and Gentile are justified by faith (3:30), the apostle brings Abraham into the picture because he knew that this greatest of Jewish patriarchs, their forefather according to the flesh, was used by the rabbis as the ultimate example of man's being justified by works. Paul will demonstrate that, to the contrary, Scripture clearly teaches that Abraham was saved by his faith alone. Paul begins by asking, What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? He is asking, in effect, "Because we agree that Abraham is the peerless example of a justified man in God's sight, why don't we look at him carefully in order to determine the basis of his justification?"

In this context what then is the equivalent of therefore, tying the discussion of Abraham to all that Paul has said in the preceding chapter.

Abraham was the human forefather of God's first covenant with His chosen people. He was therefore, **according to the flesh**, the human standard of a genuine Jew and of a man who is right before God. The whole Hebrew race came from his loins, and what was true regarding his relationship to God must therefore be true of all his descendants.

What do we make of the phrase 'according to the flesh?'

According to the flesh refers first of all to physical lineage. But in this context it also suggests human effort in regard to justification. Paul has already asserted that Jew and Gentile alike are justified by faith (3:30) and in 4:2 he refers to the traditional Jewish idea of Abraham's justifying himself by good works.

**(Verses 1-3) Abraham was not justified by works, but declared righteous through faith.**

What then shall we say: In building on the thought begun in Romans 3:31 Paul asks the question, "Does the idea of justification through faith, apart from the works of the law, make what God did in the Old Testament irrelevant?"

Generally, the Jewish teachers of Paul's day believed that Abraham was justified by his works, by keeping the law. Ancient passages from the rabbis says: "We find that Abraham our father had performed the whole Law before it was given" and "Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord." The rabbis argued that Abraham kept the law perfectly, even before it was given, in that he kept it by intuition or anticipation.

The Apostle Paul does not say that Abraham was made righteous in all of his doings, but God accounted Abraham as righteous. Our justification is not God making us perfectly righteous, but counting us as perfectly righteous. After we are counted righteous, then God begins making us truly righteous, culminating in our resurrection.

“Counted is *logizomai* in Greek. It was used in early secular documents to mean; ‘put down to one’s account...Thus, God put to Abraham’s account... righteousness . . . Abraham possessed righteousness in the same manner as a person would possess a sum of money placed in his account in a bank.” (Wuest)

Remember that righteousness is also more than the absence of evil and guilt. It is a positive good, meaning that God does not only declare us innocent, but righteous.

**(Verses 4-5) A distinction made between grace and works.**

God is not praising laziness but showing that Righteousness can never be accounted to the one who approaches God on the principle of works. Instead it is given to the one who believes on Him who justifies the ungodly.

It isn’t as if God is happy with our ungodly condition. We are not justified because of our ungodliness, but despite our ungodliness.

By this we understand that there are not two ways of salvation - saved by works or law-keeping in the Old Testament, and saved by grace through faith in the New Testament as though because God’s plan A of salvation by works failed, he then introduced plan B which is salvation by grace through faith. No! No! Everyone who has ever been saved - Old or New Testament - is saved by grace through faith. Because of the New Covenant we have benefits of salvation that the Old Testament saint did not have, but we do not have a different manner of salvation.

**(Verses 6-8) David and the blessedness of justification through faith.**

King David of the Old Testament knew what it was like to be a guilty sinner. He was instrumental to the death of Urias after committing adultery with his wife, just because he wanted to cover up his detestable deed. When confronted by the prophet of God, Nathan, with a scenario of a very rich man in David’s domain with hundreds of sheep who had taken the only sheep owned by a poor man in order to entertain his guests, David was so outraged that he passed the death sentence on whoever did such a horrible act. Little did he know that he was the rich man at the centre of the story. With his own lips, David pronounced the death sentence on himself.

If David were judged on works alone, the righteous God must condemn him. Nevertheless he knew by experience that blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven (Ps. 32:1, 2). God forgave David and even called him a man after his own heart! Can you take that in! David agrees with Abraham regarding the idea of an imputed righteousness, a goodness that is given, not earned.

**(Verses 9-12) Abraham was counted righteous before he was circumcised; therefore he was not counted righteous because he was circumcised.**

The ancient Jews jealously guarded the phrase: “Our Father Abraham”. They did not allow a circumcised Gentile convert to Judaism refer to Abraham as “our father” in the synagogue. A Gentile convert had to call Abraham “your father” and only natural born Jews could call Abraham “our father.” Paul throws out that distinction, and says that through faith, all can say, “our father Abraham.”

It must have been a shock for the Jewish readers of Romans to see that Paul calls Abraham the father of uncircumcised people! Faith, not circumcision, is the vital link to Abraham. It is far more important to have Abraham's faith (and the righteousness imputed to him because of it) than it is to have Abraham's circumcision.

On the positive side of his argument, Paul first appeals to Scripture, the divine and infallible truth upon which all of his arguments are based. Quoting Genesis 15:6, he declares, and Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Like Paul, who wrote this epistle to Rome, Abraham was sovereignly and directly chosen by God. Neither Abraham nor Paul was searching for God when they were divinely called and commissioned. Abraham had probably never heard of the true God, whereas Paul knew a great deal about Him. Abraham was seemingly content with his idolatrous paganism, and Paul was content with his traditional, but false, Judaism.

After commanding Abraham to leave his country and his relatives and to go to the land that would be shown to him, God sovereignly and unconditionally promised, "I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2-3).

With no guarantee but God's word, Abraham left his business, his homeland, his friends, most of his relatives, and probably many of his possessions. He abandoned his temporal security for a future uncertainty, as far as his human eyes could see or his human mind could comprehend. The land he was promised to inherit was inhabited by pagans perhaps even more wicked and idolatrous than those of his home country. Abraham may have had only a remote idea of where the land of Canaan was, and it is possible that he had never heard of it at all. But when God called him to go there, Abraham obeyed and began the long journey. We are unable to go into the details of Abraham's call this morning.

Although faith is required for salvation, it has no power in itself to save. God only saves the person who does not trust in his work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly. Until a person confesses that he is ungodly, he is not a candidate for salvation, because he still trusts in his own goodness. That is what Jesus meant when He said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). Those who are righteous in their own eyes have no part in God's redemptive work of grace.

A simple acrostic, using the letters of the word faith, may help in understanding the elements of saving faith. "F" could represent facts. Faith is not based on a blind leap into the unknown and unknowable, but on the facts of God's redeeming work through His Son Jesus Christ.

The letter "A" could represent agreement. It is one thing to know the truth of the gospel; it is quite another to agree with it. The believing heart affirms the truth it receives from God's Word.

The letter “**I**” could represent internalization, the inner desire of a believer to accept and apply the truth of the gospel to his own life.

The letter “**T**” could represent trust. In some ways and in some contexts, trust is a synonym for faith. But trust also carries the idea of having unreserved confidence in God, of trusting Him to keep His promises to never forsake us as His children and to provide all our needs.

The letter “**H**” could represent hope. Every believer is saved in the hope of going to live eternally with God, although he has never seen heaven or seen the Lord in whom he believes.

The story is told of a poor farmer who had saved his money for years in order to buy an ox to pull his plough. When he thought he had enough saved, he travelled a great distance to the nearest town to shop for an ox. He soon discovered, however, that the paper money he had been saving had been replaced by a new currency and that the date for exchange from the old to the new had long since passed. Because he was illiterate, the man asked a neighbour school boy to write a letter to the president of their country, explaining his dire situation and asking for an exemption. The president was touched by the letter and wrote back to the farmer: “The law must be followed, because the deadline for exchanging bills has already passed. The government can no longer change your bills for the new ones. Even the president is not exempt from this rule. However,” the president continued, “because I believe that you really worked hard to save this money, I am changing your money for new money from my own personal funds so that you will be able to buy your ox.”

Before God, every person’s good works are as worthless as that farmer’s outdated money. But God Himself, in the Person of His Son, has paid the debt. And when a confessed sinner casts himself on God’s mercy and accepts in faith the Lord’s atoning work in his behalf, he can stand forgiven and divinely righteous before Him.

What then are you waiting for? God’s call? He has already called you and He wants you to respond trustingly in the offer of His Grace. His Son died on the Cross so that you can live. His death is the guarantee of God’s righteousness which is given to you as a gift.