

Father Abraham

Father Abraham -- Part I

Romans 4:1-3

Introduction

I want to invite your attention today, to Romans, chapter 4. Paul has completed the introduction of his letter to the Romans, as well as stated his major premise that, the just shall live by faith. Now, in chapter 4, he momentarily moves out of the theological classroom and goes outside for a breath of fresh air. He will move from the proposition of truth to the illustration of truth.

Ralph Lauren wrote,

The great truth of justification is presented [now] not by principle but by personality . . . it is not [simply stated] but it is now lived out in a great man's life. We see justification in the laboratory of experience rather than the classroom of ethics.¹

Abraham – The Illustration of Justification By Faith

Turn to Romans, chapter 4, verse 1.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?

Paul will now use Abraham as the key illustration of justification by faith. But, why Abraham? Why would Paul use him? Weren't there other men of faith in God in the Old Testament?

Five reasons Abraham was an illustration of justification

There are a number of reasons that I believe Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, selected

Abraham as his living illustration of justification. Let me give you five of them.

Abraham lived two thousand years before the letter to the Romans was written

1. Abraham lived two thousand years before Paul wrote this letter to the Romans.

In other words, Paul will use Abraham to counter the claim that the gospel of salvation by faith alone in the redemptive plan of God was some new creation; some imaginative fabrication of a Pharisee-turned-follower of Christ.

The truth of the matter was, according to Galatians, chapter 3, that Abraham was given special revelation from God about Jesus Christ. Paul writes, in verse 8,

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham . . .

This occurred hundreds of years before the Law was given; hundreds of years before the prophet:

- Micah told us where the Messiah would be born, in Micah 5:2,
- Isaiah wrote of what He would be like, in Isaiah 53, and
- David told us how the Messiah would die on a cross, in Psalm 22.

Hundreds of years before any of this was written down, Abraham had received the gospel of the coming Messiah. That is why Paul, in Galatians, chapter 3, verse 9, wrote,

So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

The gospel has not changed in these four thousand years. The gospel of the Old Testament believer was that the Messiah was coming; the gospel of the New Testament believer is that the Messiah came. The Old Testament believer looked forward to the cross; the New Testament believer looks backward to the cross.

What Paul will show by using old Father Abraham, is that the gospel remains the same. In other words, we are all saved by the grace of God by means of faith in the Messiah, independently of good works.

Abraham was the forefather of God's chosen people

2. The second reason Paul uses Abraham is because Abraham was the forefather of God's chosen people.

Abraham was the first Jew and from his loins would come the Hebrew race. So, what was true regarding his relationship with God, must therefore be true of all of his descendants.

Paul himself, says in Galatians, chapter 3, verse 7,

Therefore [you can] be sure that it is those who are of faith who are the sons of Abraham.

In Romans, chapter 4, verse 11, Paul writes that Abraham is,

... the father of all who believe ...

In other words, we had better find out what Abraham believed.

Abraham was known as the "friend of God"

3. The third reason Abraham is the perfect example of a genuine relationship with God is that Abraham was known as the "friend of God".

Three times, in the Scriptures, Abraham is referred to as the "friend of God".

- King Jehoshaphat prayed, in II Chronicles, chapter 20, verse 7,

Did you not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel and give it to the

descendants of Abraham Your friend forever?

- God is quoted by the prophet Isaiah, in chapter 41, verse 8, saying,

But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham My friend

- The third time is in James, chapter 2, verse 23, where we read,

*... **Abraham ... was called the friend of God.***

Can you imagine having that title? We get caught up in who our friends are. Everyone drops names; they know this person and they are a friend of that important person. Imagine going down in world history as the man who had God for a friend!

Is this title just for Father Abraham? No. In John, chapter 15, verse 13, we are told that Jesus Christ came to,

... lay down his life for his friends.

When you, like Abraham, place your faith in the Redeemer, you become the friend of God too! God can say of you and me, "Stephen is my friend. Bill is my friend. Susan is my friend."

And, guess what you can say. You can say, "God happens to be a close personal friend of mine."

The point that Paul is making, in Romans, chapter 4, verse 1, is that, if anyone deserved to go to heaven, Abraham was the man. God even called him His friend.

The question is, "How did Abraham become God's friend?"

If we can figure that out, then we can discover how we can become God's friend as well!

Abraham was revered as the model of faith

4. The fourth reason that I believe Paul chose Abraham as an illustration of justification by faith alone, is because Abraham was revered as the model of faith.

John MacArthur wrote this powerful summary, *By using Abraham as the supreme scriptural example of justification by faith alone, Paul was storming the very citadel of traditional Judaism ... For if Abraham [could be shown] as not having been justified by keeping the law, then no one could be. Conversely, if Abraham was justified solely on the basis of*

*his faith in God, then everyone else must be justified in the same way.*ⁱⁱ

Abraham was considered, by the nation, as a man possessing righteousness

5. The fifth reason follows the fourth, Abraham was chosen as the example of justification because he was considered by the nation as a man possessing righteousness.

This is one of the key issues that Paul wanted to clear up! By the time of Paul, the Jews and their Jewish leaders believed that Abraham was made right with God simply because Abraham was already righteous.

Several Jewish apocryphal books taught that Abraham was justified because he kept God's Law. In Ecclesiasticus, chapter 44, verses 19 through 21, Abraham is said to have become right with God because of his obedience.

The book of Jubilee, written in 100 BC, recorded, "For Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life."ⁱⁱⁱ

So perfect was Abraham considered to be, by the Jewish people, that in the Prayer of Manasseh, it was recorded that Abraham never needed to repent.

The legend of Abraham's righteousness had far surpassed reality by the time of Paul. In fact, some rabbinical writings claimed that Abraham was so inherently good that he began serving God when he was three years old and that he was going to be one of seven perfect men who would bring back God's shekinah glory to the Tabernacle.^{iv}

By the time of Paul, the majority of Jews believed that Abraham was chosen by God to be the father of God's chosen people simply because of the life that Abraham lived. So, Paul is choosing perhaps, the leading candidate of human history to be considered worthy of salvation! If anybody could work his way into heaven, it would be the friend of God!

What Does the Bible Say?

So, Paul writes, in Romans, chapter 4, verses 2 through 5,

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Now to the one

who works, his wage is not credited 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 credited as righteousness

Would you underline a very critical string of words? This phrase is one that will put to death all of the heresies and imaginations. It is the question that Paul nearly shouts, in verse 3a,

For what does the Scripture say? . . .

What does the Bible say?!

- How do you become the friend of God?
What does the Bible say?
- How are your sins forgiven and forgotten by God?
What does the Bible say?
- How do you have your conscience cleansed from guilt?
What does the Bible say?
- How do you get to heaven?
What does the Bible say?

I was in the grocery store last night to pick up some aspirin. As I was standing in line, I looked at all the tabloids. There was incredible stuff; such as, "dear baby born to couple," accompanied by a picture of a little boy with antlers growing out of his head!

Near the counter, as well, were a number of smaller booklets. My eye caught the name "God," as I spotted a little booklet with a cover that read, "How to Find God". I picked it up, opened it, and read, "There is no one formula for finding God . . . he is everywhere and in everyone."

There is no one formula for finding God? What does the Bible say?!

The biggest problem I have with that sort of nonsense is not that the world thinks that way, I expect them to want to find God in any way they please; the problem I have is that the church is continually moving toward biblical illiteracy as well. If you ask the average churchgoer what he or she thinks about nearly any religious topic, they will more than likely give you an opinion. Then, if you ask them, "But what does the Bible say?"

They will say, "I really don't know. I'm not a biblical expert."

Today, the average Bible study is a scenario where people sit around in a group, read a verse or two and then, spend an hour talking about what it

means to them. My friend, it does not matter what it means to you, until you first know what it means! If you do not know what it means, you might make it mean something for you that God never intended it to mean.

I have had homosexuals, lesbians, adulterers, and fornicating single people tell me, at some point in my brief years of ministry, that God was on their side! They have told me that God was blessing them; that God was in their lifestyle; that God was confirming, in their heart, that their choices were not sinful.

I remember one woman who was involved in an immoral affair with a married man. She admitted to me, after repenting, that they had been so self-deceived that when they would sneak away to meet somewhere, they would bring their Bibles, read them and pray together, and then, thank God for their relationship and turn off the lights.

What does the Bible say?!

The further you get away from what the Bible says, the more open you are to the roaring lion who roams about seeking someone to discredit; to destroy; to devour. Will you justify cheating, lying, promiscuity, and, in general, a rebellious heart, or will you live by what the Bible says?

Sir, who dictates your financial dealings? Who directs your business deals? Who governs your telephone conversations? Who is honored by your plans?

What does the Bible say?!

God tells us that every believer is to study His Word. We are told in II Timothy, chapter 2, verse 15, to be workmen in the Word, so that we will not be ashamed, rightly interpreting the word of truth.

I remember, some time ago, a woman came into my office with an armload of books on divorce. She was in the middle of an immoral affair with a married man and was convinced that God wanted his marriage to end so they could get married. This woman, who did not attend this church, wanted me to confirm her point of view and then, encourage the wife of the man to leave him, so the two of them could get married. The wife of this man was a faithful member of our church. The woman wanted me to look at these books that encouraged divorce. The books were written by clergymen and scholars, who gave every reason in the world why God would not mind.

Eventually, I got around to showing her what the Bible said. Although she had claimed to be a Christian, it was obvious to me that she did not know

the Lord. The real need in her life was not the man, but the Lord. An hour after sharing the gospel of Christ with her, she, with tears of repentance streaming down her cheeks, said she wanted to give her heart and life to Christ. She did and left that immoral relationship. I recommended a church to her that was near her home and there, she was baptized and discipled.

Paul is saying to his audience, "Listen, you have all of these fanciful ideas that sound good and make you feel good, but they are dangerous beliefs. They are, in reality, leading you away from the God of Abraham, not towards Him. So, what does the Bible say?"

What does the Bible say about Abraham's justification

In the last part of verse 3, Paul quotes directly from the Old Testament scriptures, and writes,

. . . Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

This is the act of God in justifying the sinner. He credits to the account of the believing sinner, the righteousness of Christ. When you give to God your sinful heart, He gives to you the righteousness of Christ.

Was Abraham made righteous before God because he deserved it? What does the Bible say?

Turn to Genesis, chapter 12, where Abraham was called by God to leave his homeland. He obeyed and went. Then a famine came along and presented Abram with an excellent opportunity to trust God. Look at verses 10 through 13 to see what he did.

Now there was a famine in the land; so Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. It came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, "See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; and when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, "This is his wife"; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you.

Now, this was not really a lie, because Genesis, chapter 20, verse 12, will tell us that she was his half sister. They had the same father, before God gave the penalties for marriage within the family, so she was his half sister. And, he was clever, as he said,

“I’m not really lying, I’m just telling a half truth. Tell them you’re my sister, and everything will be okay. We’ll stay here. We’ll get all the food we need. We’ll survive. We’ll slip back into Canaan. Everything will be all right.”

So, she does. And, what an embarrassment to the Jew who considered Abraham the man of perfect faith. What does the Bible say?!

You cannot help but sympathize, though. We know that the common practice in that day was that, if the Pharaoh wanted a married woman, he respected marriage enough to kill the husband to get her.

Continue to Genesis, chapter 12, verses 14 through 15.

It came about when Abram came into Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. Pharaoh’s officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house.

Abraham did not necessarily anticipate this. He did not think that it would go that far.

Now, the custom of the Pharaoh’s harem was to allow twelve months for preparation, during which, the Pharaoh would not touch the woman. After twelve months, however, she would become an official member of the harem and brought to the king.

In the meantime, Pharaoh is loading gifts on Abraham of cattle, fabric, and servants. I can just imagine another shipment of cattle arriving, with a note from Pharaoh saying, “Thank you, Abram, for coming to Egypt. And oh, that sister of yours, only three more months and she’s mine!”

The great father of faith miserably failed, by his dishonesty and lack of trust in God.

Hope comes in the very first phrase of verse 17. Would you circle the words,

But the Lord . . .

If it had not been for the Lord’s intervention, there would have been no hope. What was Abraham going to do? Go up to the Pharaoh and say, “Pharaoh, I lied. I’d like my wife back.”?!

No way. So, the Lord intervened, as the last part of verse 17 through verse 19 tell us, and,

. . . struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife. Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, “What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took

her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go.”

Now, do not get the idea that everything is back to where it was; that Abraham is off the hook. No. Abram sinned and would eventually, return to Bethel and the altar, where he would confess his sin to God.

The consequences of Abraham’s sin

There are several consequences of Abram’s sin. Let me give them to you.

Missed experiences of faith

1. First, Abram missed experiences of faith.

If he had stayed at the altar at Bethel; if he had called to God because his needs were not being met, God would have responded miraculously, or in some way, to provide for him, just as He did for Moses, the children of Israel, Elijah, and all of the others. The angels were standing ready with their recipe for manna; there were rocks ready to burst forth with gushing, clear water. Abram missed all of that. He lost the blessing of seeing God provide for his need.

Marked increase in possessions

2. The second consequence was a marked increase in possessions for Abram.

When he left Egypt, verse 2 of chapter 13, tell us that he was very rich. How is this a consequence? These riches would cause the dispute among the herdsmen of Abram and the herdsmen of Lot, such that they would finally have a family split.

Do not ever think it is inevitable that when you grow rich, it is the blessing of God. In Canaan, in the will of God, Abram was living hand to mouth. In Egypt, out of the will of God, he was getting rich.

Maid added to the household

3. There was one more consequence of Abram’s sin and that was that a maid was added to his household.

When Abram and Sarai left Egypt, Sarai brought along an Egyptian maid, named Hagar. Later, in another moment of unbelief and distrust in the promise of God to provide a son, Abraham would take matters into his own hands, have relations with Hagar, and she would bear a son. That son would grow up to be the father of the Arab peoples, who,

five thousand years later, even to this day, remain the troublesome enemy of the Israelite.

Conclusion

Why was Abraham justified? Because he was perfect? Sinless? In no need of repentance? Continually faithful? Rabbi or no Rabbi, what did the Bible say?

None of these, according to Paul, in Romans, chapter 4. Abraham was justified because God chose him and called him, and Abraham believed in God, so that God, by His own grace, credited to Abraham's sinful account, the righteousness of God through Christ. Father Abraham is a wonderful illustration of the grace of God in calling, redeeming, and forgiving a sinful man.

One of the authors, whose books I have been reading, included a poem that aptly describes the faith of one who truly believes in God. Written in 1861, the poem says,

*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 Anointed One of God;
I rest on love divine;
And, with faltering lip and heart,
I call this Savior mine.^v*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 8/11/2002 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Ralph Laurin, Romans: Where Life Begins (Grand Rapids, MI, Kregel Publications, 1988), p. 129.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur Jr., Romans (Chicago, IL, Moody Press, 1991), p. 233.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, Romans: Righteousness From Heaven (Wheaton, IL, Crossway Books, 1991), p. 90.

^{iv} MacArthur, p. 233.

^v Hughes, p. 95.