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JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ILLUSTRATED, PART II

Series: Righteousness Revealed

Romans 4:13-25

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We are two days away from October 31st. October 31st is a day that most people associate with Halloween. However, for many Christians and especially Protestants, it is better known as Reformation Day. It's a day which commemorates the day that Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the castle church door in Wittenburg, Germany in 1517, protesting against and seeking to reform the Roman Catholic Church. Now, as a disclaimer, I'm dissatisfied to say the least when everyone who is not a Catholic is labeled as a Protestant because throughout all of history there has been a faithful remnant of autonomous, regenerate churches who were persecuted and executed and their writings and sermons destroyed because they did not join the Roman Catholic Church. They were by no means perfect, but they were always mischaracterized and the worst about them was emphasized.1 They often couldn't buy or trade or sell, but those dissenters are what really sparked the Reformation. And when men like Luther and Calvin became popular, they established their own state-churches and persecuted and executed what we today understand as Bible churches. Protestants themselves developed their own state churches and persecuted the faithful remnants of believers like the Anabaptists. I say that because it's Reformation week and a lot of evangelicals don't understand that. I am thankful for what the Reformers contributed to the study of soteriology and their positive influences on western culture, but I'm thankful in a very limited sense.

But what the Reformers sought to do was to reform the Roman Catholic Church and bring them back to the Scriptures, and especially on the doctrine of justification. Soteriology (the systematic study of salvation) was their focus. They taught that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to Scripture alone, for the glory of God alone (we call those the 5 solas). They were heavily influenced by the book of Romans and what it had to say about justification, and rightly so. Nowhere do you find such careful and articulate discussion of the doctrine of justification as in the section of Romans that we are in (3:21-4:25). To be justified means "to be declared righteous" or "right" before God. If you are justified before God, you are saved. His wrath against your sin has been propitiated/satisfied. And the question we've been addressing is, "Is justification by Law through works or by grace through faith?" As unrighteous sinners (3:9-20) before a holy God, every one of us should *desperately* want to know how God's Word answers that question because it's a heaven-or-hell question of eternal destiny.

As we discussed last week, most people and the religious teachings of men will tell you that justification is a process—that it is like a payment plan where you pay for your justification little by little over the course of your life through your religious works and good works. But as the Apostle Paul has been teaching, and the Reformers rediscovered, and the dissenters always taught, Scripture teaches justification is a one-time act, or declaration, of God whereby He acquits the believing sinner of all unrighteousness. He declares the believer *in Christ* "not guilty!" They are forgiven of sin and righteous in His sight, imputing (crediting/reckoning) that person with the

perfect righteousness of Christ as a free gift. As 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "we become the righteousness of God in Him."

And in chapter 4, Paul uses the Scripture's teachings about Abraham, the first Jew and father of the faith, to illustrate this manner of justification. He is demonstrating from Genesis that justification has always been by faith and that no man—not even Abraham—man has never been justified by works—by what he has done in obedience to any law, even God's. And God has recorded in Genesis, the archetypal model of justification by faith in Abraham, giving us a clear, chronological, and historical illustration of justification by faith. So far we have seen:

I. ABRAHAM JUSTIFIED BY <u>FAITH</u>; NOT WORKS. (4:1-8)

God declared him righteous in Genesis 15:6 the moment he believed God's promise—as Andy Woods says, "at the very nanosecond" he believed. *"Abraham believed God and it was credited to Him as righteousness."* God considered him righteous right then and there with an eternally unfading righteous status. He didn't have to get circumcised or baptized or walk an aisle, say a prayer, practice almsgiving or make any sort of pilgrimage. He didn't do anything but believe God's promise to Him. He said "amen" to God's promise. He believed it; trusted it; considered God wholly reliable. We find this same principle in operation in the New Testament accounts such as Acts 10 and in the clear teaching of Paul in Ephesians 1:13. We hear the gospel; believe it; are instantly sealed by the Spirit, being adopted as God's children; are granted an eternal inheritance in the kingdom of God; and it's all to the glory to God. It is to the glory of God because He saves us by grace through faith. We do not save ourselves through our works and therefore cannot boast.

II. ABRAHAM JUSTIFIED <u>BEFORE</u> CIRCUMCISION. (4:9-12)

Many Jews in Paul's day, like the RCC with their sacraments, combined faith and works for salvation. They taught that unless you were circumcised, you could not be justified. But as Paul correctly taught from Scripture, Abraham was justified 14 years before he was circumcised—*while he was still a Gentile!* Paul called circumcision simply a sign or seal of the righteousness he had by faith *while uncircumcised* so that he could be the father of all who have faith. So Paul the faith of Abraham excludes works and circumcision. Now Paul explains how it must exclude Law.

III. ARBAHAM JUSTIFIED APART FROM L<u>AW</u>. (4:13-16)

13 For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if those who are of the Law are heirs, then faith is made void and the promise is nullified; 15 for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.

So Paul now brings up the subject of heirship, being an **heir of the world**, and how it couldn't have anything to do with the Law. Abraham and his "**seed**" or **descendants**, God said, would inherit the earth, or world. God promised Abraham the promised land of Israel we know, but also through the prophets and the nature of the promise—that he would be the **father of many**

nations—it was also understood to mean more than that. The promise in Genesis 12:3 had a universal dimension to it: "All the families of the earth would be blessed" through him and his seed. Jesus said, "The meek shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5). So it went beyond the land of Israel.

The **seed** aspect is another widely applied part of the promise. At times, it will refer to his physical seed *by blood* (Israelites/Jews); at times it refers to those who are his seed *by faith* (believers); and at times a reference to the singular "**Seed**" that is Christ. It can have a both/and aspect to it. And the world has been blessed through Abraham's seed since then. But the prophets wrote about how when national Israel repents and the kingdom comes and Jesus sits on His throne, the whole world will be blessed: a national redeemed Israel (Rom. 11), believers from all ages (including us), and the nations. Isaiah says that "in that day," after the tribulation period, the "vineyard" of Israel will take root, blossom and sprout, produce wine, and fill the whole world with fruit (Is. 24-27). The borders of Israel extended as promised, the curse on creation lifted, believers ruling and reigning with Christ (Rev. 2:26-27) and all the nations come to Jerusalem to worship the King of kings. It's going to be a glorious Millennial kingdom reign for 1,000 years (Rev. 20) and that's just the front porch to eternity on a New Heaven and New Earth (Rev. 21-22).

But think about that promise of being an heir of the world. Now think about that promise being conditional—based on your performance keeping the Law! If that promise is based on your keeping of the Mosaic Law, you're out of luck! You and everyone else! Because as Paul demonstrated in Romans 1-3, none of us can keep the Law. James says if you've broken one commandment, you've broken the whole thing and thus you can't be justified by it. Therefore, it must be by faith and if by faith, not by Law because faith and Law don't mix. They are polar opposites. Law would **void** faith and the promise would be **nullified** because Law can't save and thus grant this inheritance. All it can do, Paul says, is bring about **wrath**.

And that's something Jews should understand. Their failure to keep the Law is what drove them into exile and why they're so frustrated today. They didn't keep the Law and should know that no one else could either. The purpose of the Law, like Paul says, isn't a system you keep to you're your justification. It's main purpose was to reveal sin (Rom. 3:20). It was to show people their sin and their need for a Savior so that they would turn to the promised Messiah and be justified. When we look at the commandments in the Law and compare our lives to them, we see that we are sinners in need of a Savior. That's why Paul calls the Law "a tutor to lead us to Christ" in Galatians. The Law, then, is not basis of the promise, but the promise is the basis for the Law. The Law was to point men back to the promise—to stir up faith and reliance upon God grace.

It's also important to note that Law came *after* the promise, not to replace it, but to support it. Paul mentions this in Galatians: Abraham couldn't have been saved by Law because the Law wasn't around for another several hundred years (Gal. 3:17). Thus at one point there was no Law. He says in verse 15 **where there is no Law there is no violation (or transgression**). That doesn't mean that without the Law there was no sin. There was always sin. But God gave the Law so that we would be more aware of our sin through our obvious transgression of the law. Transgression and sin are not synonymous terms. **Sin** could be defined as anything that goes against God's character.

Transgression (*parabasis*) could be translated as "overstepping" or defined as the violation of a clearly revealed law or commandment. Sin is always present even if there is no law. One may or may not know they are sinning. Transgression implies that a specific law was given and that it has been broken.

Think of it this way: while your children are growing up, they are going to do a lot of things that are wrong, but they don't know it yet. Before they are disciplined, they need to be instructed first. You teach them why what they did was wrong. Now that you've taught them and given them an expressed command not to do it again, if they overstep that command (transgress it), then your "wrath" is stirred up and you discipline them. Before the command, you were more merciful. They didn't know. They weren't thinking. But once they do know where the line is drawn and overstep it, then it stirs up your discipline. It brings consequences. That's what happened with the giving of the Law. It stirs up wrath because it brought greater accountability for Israel. Not only that, it stirs up the sin nature as well. Tell a kid or anyone not to do something and they do it. In Romans 7, Paul will reveal how the sin nature uses the Law as a base of operation to increase transgressions. If the Law says, "Thou shall not…" the sin nature says, "Oh yes I will…" If the Law says, "Thou shall…" the sin nature says, "I don't think so." Tell someone not to do something and they will do it. So this distinction between sin and transgression is important for understanding the purpose of the Mosaic Law: It was given to *increase transgression* (5:20), not to save.

16 For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

Since the Law only increases transgression and wrath, we must look to the promise of God in Christ by faith. This way, the promise will be **guaranteed** to all who are of the faith of Abraham—be it Jew (to those who are of the Law) or Gentile.

IV. ABRAHAM JUSTIFIED APART FROM SIGHT. (4:17-25)

17 (as it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations") in the presence of Him whom he believed, that is, God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that do not exist. 18 In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "So shall your descendants be." 19 Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; 20 yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. 22 Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness.

So Paul concludes his exposition by focusing on the nature of Abraham's faith: it had nothing to do with **sight**. There are three descriptions of his faith that make it sightless.

1. Abraham believed in an all-powerful God's promise. (v. 17)

This is the invisible-to-us Creator God who **gives life to the dead** and **calls into being things that do not exist**. In essence, his faith was in the Creator God of the Genesis 1-2 account who could create everything from nothing. He creates *ex nihilo*—out of nothing. I've told you the story before of the scientist who challenged God. He told God he could create a better human than God could. God said, "Okay, let's see what you've got." So the scientist reached down to grab some dirt and God said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa…. Get your own dirt." Why would He say that? Because man can only "create" by working with what God has already created. God created everything from nothing. He speaks and things come into existence. He breathes and they live.

2. **Abraham believed despite <u>impossibilities</u>. (vv. 18-19)**

When God promised Abraham that many nations would come from him, he was well passed the child-bearing years. His name means, "father of many nations" but he had no children. People probably made fun of him because when they asked him what his name was, he said, "Father of many nations." They said, "Really? How many children do you have?" Answer: none. At age 75, none when God made the promise, none. In his mid-80's when God reaffirmed it, saying "I *have made* you a father of many nations": none. Notice the confidence of God using past tense before it happens. At age 99, when his body was "as good as dead" coupled with the "deadness of Sarah's womb" all those years—being doubly dead—he still had none. Yet, **in hope** (believing), **against hope** (against all human reasoning or reason for hope humanly speaking), he believed. Even more impressive is that as time went on in Abraham's life, his faith only grew stronger.

3. **Abraham's faith <u>grew stronger</u> over time.**

yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.

Sometimes when we are waiting on God to do something, our faith grows weaker. We question God and become cynical. We quit praying and looking forward by faith. But Abraham's faith grew stronger as his circumstances became more dismal. The less possibility there was that he would have a kid, the more he believed God in His grace could and would provide for them. And that's what happened. At the ripe old age of 100, he bore his first son, Isaac. Do you know what Isaac means? Laughter. Because when God promised them this son, Sarah laughed cynically in her heart. She laughed at the thought that she would bear a child in her old age after having a barren womb all her life. But the God would creates from nothing and gives life to the dead did just that!

Now, some of you are thinking, what about Hagar and Ishmael? Sarah once talked Abraham into trying to have a child through her maidservant Hagar. By their own efforts they tried to fulfill this promise on their own. What happened was that Ishmael was born and it created a mess. He too became a great nation but one that would persecute the sons of Isaac. God said he would be a wild donkey of a man and he would live in hostility towards his brothers. Interesting thing, Muslims claim to be the descendants of Ishmael who they think is the true promised child. What we see in Israel today with holy/terrorist war is between the sons of Isaac and the sons of Ishmael.

But when Abraham tried to present Ishmael to God—"Oh that Ishamel might live before you!"—but God said no. That was not His plan. I always think that some people will try to stand before God and say the same thing—"Let my religious works and good works live before you!"—and they will be denied as well. Why? Because natural human effort to obtain the promise is not enough. The promise requires supernatural power and grace. This is why God waited until they were as good as dead and there was no way physiologically that they could've born children on their own. He wanted to make it unmistakably clear that the power to **guarantee** the promise belongs to Him. He gets all the **glory**. What a wonderful illustration of justification **by faith**. It requires the supernatural work of the Spirit by God's grace and man just resting by faith in God's promised Son, Jesus Christ, who also was born supernaturally and died for our sins.

The story of Abraham and Sarah, by the way, is paradigm of how God works with people to strengthen their faith.2 He will strip you of things—relationships, jobs, savings accounts, health, possessions, things you are relying on—to test your faith and to grow your faith. Sometimes we wonder why we go through difficulties and unpleasant circumstances and why God is taking so long—it's to demonstrate His power. He brings you to a place where you must rely on Him to stir up and grow faith. He realizes your faith is more important than your comfort. Do you still trust Him in your trial? Do you still say to yourself, "God is good. He never leaves me nor forsakes me. He will accomplish His will in this." Or have you grown cynical? If your trial ended today, would you be satisfied with how you responded to it? That's a question I've been asking myself. And be challenged by Abraham's example: Abraham waited 25 years for Isaac to be born… and not once did he *possess* the promised land or *see* the nations blessed through him in this earthly life. But like Scripture predicts, one day he will rise from the grave and he will inherit the earth with Christ and his saints. At the end of this section on justification, Paul applies Abraham's faith directly to believers in Christ.

23 Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

God credited His righteousness to Abraham when Abraham believed in God's promise (Gal. 3:8). Abraham knew the good news of a Savior who would come through his line (Gal. 3:8). But while he looked forward to that by faith, we look backward to by faith. We look back to Jesus, the Seed who was born supernaturally, conceived through the work of the Holy Spirit in virgin Mary, who was **delivered over for our transgressions** by dying on the cross for our sins, and **raised** to life from the dead for our **justification**. The resurrection is God's stamp of approval on justification by faith.

And for the most part, that's the end of this section on justification. We start to move into the benefits of that. But I trust we see more clearly now what Paul means in Romans 1:16-17: "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to*

faith; as it is written: "But the righteous one will live by faith." He gives His righteousness to men who believe in Christ. Do you believe? Are you trusting in Him alone for your salvation? If so, the Bible says, you have become an heir with Christ. You have eternal life (John 3:16: 1 John 5:11-13).

I'll close with a benediction from Jude 24-25: *"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you sand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.*

[1] See E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church*.
[2] Rene A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked: Power to Deliver* (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2005), 97.