

## **FAITH AND FATHER ABRAHAM**

### **Introduction**

1. Imagine yourself in a courtroom. On trial here is the almost unbelievable notion that a person can be justified (declared righteous before God) by grace alone through faith alone, with nothing added. In other words, a sinful person with no redeeming qualities at all may be declared righteous by God by merely exercising faith in Christ!
2. Here is the opening statement of the prosecution. "How could anyone be so naive as to believe that God would grant eternal life to someone who did absolutely nothing to deserve it. Can you believe it? And I am here today to show you just how absurd such a suggestion is!" That would be the challenge set forth by the prosecution, given to the defense!
3. Speaking for the defense is none other than the Apostle Paul. The defendant, whom Paul is representing, is quite prepared to admit failure and sin and guilt. The defendant is also quite prepared to acknowledge that absolutely no mercy is expected or deserved. However, the defendant is claiming full absolution from the charges, all without doing anything. The defendant is not asking for a pardon, but claiming that a pardon has already been given! And therefore the defendant should be found not guilty and thus free from any sentence! You can imagine how confident the prosecution is at this point, virtually certain to gain a conviction. He can hardly believe that the defense would take such a line or argument!
4. Basically the prosecution will present three arguments and after each, the defense will attempt to demonstrate that the argument is invalid. It is a monumental task to say the least. The overwhelming weight of public opinion is on the side of the prosecution. Ask around. It is almost universally assumed that there is no free lunch. You get what you pay for. God helps those who help themselves. When things go well, "I must be doing something right!" When things go bad, "What did I ever do to deserve this?" With the weight of public opinion and the admission of guilt already by the defendant, and the absurdity of the defense's argument, this should be a slam-dunk for the prosecution!

5. Let's see what happens. On the one hand, we are the judge and jury on this case. On the other hand, we are the one being defended. On trial is our salvation by grace alone through faith alone. The prosecution's case will be using essentially three pieces of evidence. I will give those to you now, but we are only going to look at the first piece of that evidence today. The prosecution will begin by presenting **testimony from Abraham** expecting to prove that some sort of work was necessary and in fact did occur in order for Abraham to be justified. The second piece of evidence will involve the **documentation to prove that work was actually demanded for justification**. The third piece of evidence will include the **precedent showing that the work was rewarded** in the birth of Isaac. After each piece of evidence is presented, the defense attorney, the Apostle Paul, will argue against the prosecution's case. The outcome of this case is of extreme importance to us. Our freedom in Christ or our mandatory incarceration meeting the demands of the law will depend on the verdict. The prosecution will begin opening arguments and then call his first witness.

## I. THE PROSECUTION'S ARGUMENT

### A. The chief witness

1. Abraham is called to the stand. Abraham was and is looked upon as the father of the Jews, in fact the father of the Jewish nation, even the father of many nations. It was through Abraham that the nation of Israel was born.
2. No one could charge Abraham with being anything other than a great man. Certainly if anyone deserved to be viewed as righteous in the sight of God it would be Abraham! Who could possibly build a case against Abraham to suggest that he did not in some way deserve the declaration of righteousness from God! (Abraham surely was the classic, "If ever there was a saint it was..."). Having introduced his star witness, the prosecution gives his summation before turning his witness over to cross-examination by the defense.

### B. The summation

1. If anyone deserved special recognition from God, this was the guy. He did what God told him to do. He even went where God told him to go, even though God was less than clear as to the destination when the journey began. He was the first to bear the covenant sign of circumcision. Because he did what God required him to do, he was rewarded with what God desired for him to have.

2. No wonder God gave him His promises and blessed him in such abundance. Abraham was a great guy! He deserved it. He earned it! Surely this argument is watertight! How could one argue against the testimony of Abraham? (With that, the prosecution smiles and calls for the defense to cross-examine – if he dares).

## II. THE DEFENSE'S REBUTTAL

### A. In regard to Abraham

1. It was not in what he did, but in whom he believed that righteousness was credited to his account. Look at verse 2 for the opening statement of Paul's argument. It could be paraphrased this way: "If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about. But before God such a thing is inconceivable." Would God, to whom all glory is due, design salvation in such a way as to open the door for men to boast of their ability to in effect save themselves?
2. Abraham was not perfect. In fact he was a sinner (a pagan - an idol worshiper). Abraham lived in Ur of Chaldeas when God first called him. These people were highly educated but they were also polytheistic, with their chief god as Nanna, the moon god. There is every reason to believe that Abraham was reared in paganism and no evidence to suggest any reason why God should have called him over any other pagan in Ur. Whatever he did, if anything, it was not enough to merit God's favor. Actually, like all others, Abraham deserved God's judgment.
3. And this brings us to another important point. If Abraham **was** justified because of what he did, then it was not a gift of God but an obligation from God. (We all understand wages. When we work we get paid in relation to what we do – at least something like that. Can you imagine working for your employer for 40 or more hours and having him/her come to you and say, "I am so happy you are my employee. I have a little gift for you. Enjoy!" And that gift is a check for your wages. You would say, "Hold on, buddy. This is not a gift. I earned this! I worked hard for this. You did not give me this. I worked for it and it is mine by merit, not by gift!" God cannot declare someone righteous based on His grace if that righteousness is owed based on what is earned and thus owed. Whatever can be said of Abraham, it cannot be said that God owed him justification. (The defense continues with evidence from another well-known character in the Bible).

### B. Support from King David

1. We jump ahead in history to another great Jewish man, King David to make the case of righteousness apart from works. Consider what David said in Psalm 32. He was guilty of adultery, conspiracy, murder, obstruction of justice and abuse of power. But in spite of these horrific sins, he wrote in Psalm 32:1, *Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven whose sin is covered.*
2. What David wrote then as the sovereign king of Israel, would have applied equally to Abraham, the father of the Jews! What was David saying? David was admitting that he had sinned and deserved the judgment of God but God had blessed him by forgiving his transgressions and covering his sins. Rather than God counting iniquity against David, God counted righteousness for David – not because of something David did but in spite of what David deserved! If David had been given what he deserved, it would have been the death sentence! (The prosecution is starting to squirm, but there still was the matter of the works that Abraham did do, and the fact that what he did seemed to have been counted to him as righteousness. Perhaps there was a case still to be made). The defense returns to Abraham and his deeds.

C. In regard to what Abraham did

1. It is true that Abraham was circumcised), but an important part of the argument is attached to when that surgery occurred? It was in Genesis 15 that God told Abraham he would have a son to be born to him and his wife Sarah. And the descendants from that birth would be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and Abraham believed God. It was then and there that God credited Abraham with righteousness. In other words, the righteousness credited to Abraham was on the basis of faith, but did it not also include Abraham's actions of obedience?
2. The sign of circumcision did not come for another 14 years or so as recorded in Genesis 17! So how could Abraham have been justified by his works, which included circumcision (and is clearly the point of discussion here), when he was justified by faith years before the sign was ever given? Tough question for the prosecution! The logical conclusion is that circumcision, nor any other work had anything to do with Abraham's justification. And the point could be expanded that no work of the sinner has anything to do with God's declaration of righteousness whether that was for Abraham or anyone else. Paul continues.

- D. The reason for the example of Abraham. The defense now drives home the point.
1. "Abraham believed God..." That means that Abraham trusted God; he was banking on God's free mercy; he was looking away from his own ungodliness and hopelessness to God's grace. And that faith that Abraham had extended toward God "was credited to him as righteousness."
  2. Verse 5 may be the most important statement in the NT on justification by faith alone. Note these three phrases: "to the one who does not work"; "who justifies the ungodly"; "his faith is counted (credited) as righteousness." Justification is the verdict that God delivers in a moment. He declares, not guilty, acquitted, accepted, forgiven. Paul says it happens to one who "does not work"! That means it comes by faith alone. And it comes to the ungodly! This is utterly shocking. It makes us cry out, "How can this be?" And the answer is, of course, that "Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). God can justify the ungodly because His Son died for the ungodly. In the beginning of the Christian life - where justification happens - we are all ungodly. Godly works do not begin until we are justified. And all of this happens by faith. We are declared righteous by faith alone while we are still ungodly. It is not our works or our love or even the fruit of our faith, but faith - faith alone - that is credited as righteousness. And with that Paul takes his seat.

## **Conclusion**

1. It took a long time, but centuries later we learned that Abraham's experience was not merely for Abraham. As Abraham believed against all hope, and did not waver in his unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was fully persuaded that God had the power to do what He promised, so we believe, against all hope, and without wavering in our faith regarding the promise of God, that God has the power to do what He promised, namely to grant to us power over death - eternal life ... that is why it is credited to us as righteousness! He declares us righteous because we believe in Him.
2. The issue of justification and the issue of imputation are not just interesting theological chitchat for seminary students to pass the time. The issue of justification - that of being declared righteous by God, and the issue of imputation - that of God imputing our sin to Jesus and His righteousness to us - is at the heart of the Christian faith. There are very few questions in life that we could ask that are more significant than the question, 'What makes a person right before God?' What is it that causes God to accept a

person, to embrace a person and redeem a person? What can cause a person to be able to stand with confidence before the judgment of God? And that is the question that has been before us today.

3. The prosecution is wrong! Dead wrong! And Abraham would concur. We are justified by faith, not by works. We are justified by grace, not by law. We are justified by resurrection power, not by human effort!
4. Take it by faith. That's the way we are pardoned. We deserve hell. He offers heaven. We deserve judgment. He grants grace. As someone has said, *What's more incredible, Sarah telling Abraham (when she was 90 and he was 100) that he was a daddy, or God calling you and me righteous? Both are absurd. Both are too good to be true. But both are from God!*
5. You want a pardon? Take it by faith! It is the only way that you can be credited with God's righteousness, and thus the only way you can be set free from sin and death and granted eternal life!
6. Now you could ask, "So what?" And I would like to address that with one phrase from this section of Scripture. Verse 2 – "If Abraham was justified by works he has something to boast about..." God designed salvation for His glory, for our good, but also to shatter our pride. We are such an arrogant bunch! We think we deserve so much! Even if we give a nod to justification by faith, we remain arrogant, somehow thinking that God is blessed to have us in His family. As long as we hang on to pride in whatever form or measure, we will miss out on the blessing of God's great grace. I need what He gives, but if I remain in my proud state, God will resist me and withhold His grace from me. If I remain proud, I will not be able to worship for I will be unaware of the enormous gift of God on my behalf. May God break us of our pride and humble us before His majesty and then pour out His abundant grace so that we might have all we need in Him! Is that what you want – or would you rather keep your pride? We are justified by grace alone through faith alone – and we must live that was as well. May God change us and break us so we will do just that!