

Sola Fide: Good News for Every Age

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It's been a pleasure to be with you today at your Global Missions Conference and to have the privilege of preaching this morning and then tonight a passage out of the book of Romans which was just read a few minutes ago in Romans 4, and we'll be looking at that on this whole matter of faith and faith alone.

A preacher long departed from the truth of the Gospel told this story to summarize the faith that he preached. It seems that a frog one day fell into a pail of milk and though he tried every conceivable way to get out of the pail of milk, he always failed. The sides were simply too high and floating in the milk, he couldn't find any leverage. A bad situation. So he did the only thing that he could do: he paddled and he paddled and he paddled and he paddled and he paddled more, and paddled more, and then voila! All that paddling had churned a pad of butter from which he was able to launch himself into freedom. So this preacher's message was this: just keep paddling, just keep on working, just keep on doing the best with what you have and you will make it. Great Gospel.

Now, we smile at the exaggerated simplification but this is actually where our American civil religion is out on the street. I think we could say that the unofficial national anthem of America as it is sung is "Amazing Grace." Well, most people think that if you do your best, somehow you will make heaven; that amazing grace is seen as a reward for those who just keep paddling. It doesn't sink in. In fact, modern man is deeply hostile to the concept of justification by faith through God's grace; much more comfortable with the frog paradigm: justification through hard working, good life. That is what computes in people's minds today.

Now, that kind of thinking is, of course, nothing new. It plagues the human nature and it's characterized religious thinking from time immemorial. In fact, if you look at the world's great religions, it is at the root of all those great religions and it was the received wisdom, the conventional thinking of most of the Jews in the day of Jesus and Paul. For them, Abraham was the prime example of a man who was justified by works and so the rabbinic literature eloquently testifies of this. The Mishnah's third division, Kiddushin 4:14 if you want to look it up, makes the specious argument of Genesis 26:5, wrongly concluding and I'm quoting the Mishnah, "And we find that Abraham our father had performed the whole law before it was given." The earlier book of Jubilees around 100

BC similarly says, "For Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord and well pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life." So perfect was father Abraham thought to be that another prayer in the Book of Manasseh concluded that Abraham never had need of repentance and I quote again, "Thou therefore, O Lord, that art the God of the righteous, has not appointed repentance unto the righteous, unto Abraham."

Incredible claims. Abraham performed the whole law before it was written. He was perfect in all of his deeds. He had no need of repentance. So the rabbinic conclusion about Abraham was that Abraham was justified by his works and he is an example to follow. Case closed. Well, closed for some, but not for the Apostle Paul, the lawyer of grace, because the Apostle Paul acknowledges that Abraham was righteous but he denies that the Jews had any grounds to present Abraham's righteousness as an example of righteousness which come by the works of the law and so right here in Romans 4, Paul takes Abraham away from the proponents of works and righteousness and brilliantly sets him forth as an example for those who were saved not by works, but by faith.

So in talking about Abraham, the apostle begins in the opening verses,

1 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

Now, he's quoting Genesis 15:6 and Paul's point here is that Abraham was justified by faith before he did any of the great works for which he is famous and so in order to catch this, you need to frame it in the context of Genesis 15:6 which reveals that Abraham had just come from a great military victory in which he and 318 of his men had rescued Lot, defeating four kings in battle, Genesis 14, and like Elijah after him, after his great victory over the prophets of Baal, Abraham was suffering a post-victory letdown. Perhaps he had drifted off to sleep and he was reflecting with a weary negativism on his having been in the land for ten years and he still had no son to carry on as he was childless. He was down. But then, in a vision, God spoke, Genesis 15:1, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." Rousing words spoken by God, nevertheless, still discouraged, Abraham recited his plight. "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? Behold, you have given me no offspring." And it was at this point of hopelessness as he described his situation to God that the promise of God came to him. Genesis 15:4-5, "'This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.' And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him," God said to him, "'So shall your offspring be.'"

We don't know whether Abraham's response was immediate. We don't know if he took some time, some thought, but we do have the immortal record and you see it in 15:6, "And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." Though Abraham had been childless all his 80+ years, though Sarah had been infertile all of her

years, though she was beyond childbearing years, Abraham truly believed God that he would have an heir come from his own body and because of this, before his great works, it was accounted to him as righteousness. Astonishing faith. That's the clear teaching of Genesis and we're meant to mark it. That's meant to be in our lexicon and in our heads. And God was so pleased with Abraham's faith that he not only credited him righteousness but that night, God appeared as a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch which passed between the pieces of sacrifice, signifying that his promise to Abraham of children of blessing was unconditional, unbreakable.

Now that word in Genesis 15:6, "counted," appears 11 times in Romans, the fourth chapter, and has the idea of crediting one's account regardless of the way that it's translated. It can be translated "credited; reckoned; considered; imputed; computed." They all mean that righteousness was credited to Abraham's account because of faith, not works. So the Apostle Paul in these sentences has done away with the wrongful use of Abraham as an example of conventional works salvation and he did it using the sacred text of Genesis, Genesis 15:6. Salvation for Abraham, father Abraham, the model of models, was faith alone. He believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness.

Now, having set the record straight, Paul next states that the faith principle in terms that are shocking to the traditional ear. He says in verses 4 and 5,

4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. 5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,

Now that was shocking, shocking first because Paul discouraged working for salvation. In other places, the Apostle Paul lauds work, he says, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." He talks about doing that. Philippians 4, Philippians 2:12-13. Another place in 1 Corinthians he says that it was by grace, 1 Corinthians 15:10, that he worked more than all the rest, but not here when the doctrine of salvation is at stake and he startled everyone. It was shocking.

Second, what Paul said was shocking because the description of God as one who justifies the ungodly assaulted traditional sensibilities. In the Old Testament, the acquittal of the wicked is repeatedly denounced. In fact, to discourage the acquitting the wicked, God presents himself as an example, Exodus 23:7, he says, "I will not acquit the wicked." God says it, thus to say that God justifies the wicked was outrageous to law abiding Jews. I mean, how can this be? Well, the answer lies in the difference between law and grace. God forbids in law what in fact God does in the Gospel and that is offensive.

The doctrine of faith alone offends our natural sensibilities. We naturally think that justification ought to go to the good, those who are trying, those that are paddling, doing their very best. Certainly to those people, those good people that are doing their best, but not to the ungodly. We can perhaps understand how Abraham was justified by faith because he was a God fearer but the wicked? Well, the truth is shocking. We are all ungodly and wicked. None of us is good enough and the shocking truth is that salvation

will be by faith or it simply will not be. Paul says in Romans, "While we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly." Again, grace has the power which the law never had.

So Paul in lawyering this whole matter of faith and grace, moves on from Abraham and having established that Abraham was reckoned as righteous by faith before God and having stated the faith principle, Paul presents the experience of another great Old Testament saint and that is King David, and here he refers to David's blessedness in relief in having had the sins against Bathsheba and Uriah forgiven, and then having undeserved righteousness bestowed upon him as described in the 32nd Psalm, the opening two verses which he quotes in verses 6 through 8. So speaking of David he says,

6 just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: 7 Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; 8 blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.

Now ostensibly, Paul turned to this Psalm, Psalm 32, because the rabbinical principle of interpretation that when the same word is used in two biblical passages they refer to each other, and indeed they do. Genesis 15:6 is translated "count," Genesis 32:2 has the exact word and each can interpret the other, but the deeper reason that David turned here is that he had unmerited righteousness credited to him because of faith. And here's the thing: David had broken three of the Ten Commandments outright when he coveted Bathsheba, committed adultery and murdered Uriah, and the Old Testament sacrificial system made no provision for such premeditated sins. They were called sins of the high hand, Numbers 15:29-30. Nothing could be done for a premeditated sin. There was no sacrifice that he could offer. That's why in Psalm 51:161-7 David says to God, "For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering."

So David's case was hopeless. There was nothing that King David could do because of those heinous sins of adultery and murder. There was nothing he could do but cast himself on God's mercy. Nothing. The very careful, metered scholar F. F. Bruce who never overstates anything says this, he says, "And if we examine the remainder of the Psalm to discover the ground on which he, David, was acquitted, it appears that he simply acknowledged his guilt and cast himself upon the mercy of God and he was forgiven." This is a phenomenal thing.

And Paul calls David blessed and here in these verses, David twice calls himself blessed because there was no work that could possibly atone for his sins: he was forgiven on the basis of his faith like Abraham. And so the principle of faith alone was mightily established and illustrated in the life of Israel's greatest king. Nothing that you and I can ever do can atone for our sins. Our only hope is as we saw this morning in Romans 3:22, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

Now, this is an intensely Jewish argument. Abraham was justified by faith, David was forgiven and justified by faith, and the intense Jewishness of that argument could leave

some at this point to assume that salvation through faith is for Jews only. After all, Abraham is the grand patriarch of Israel and so Paul asks the question in verse 9,

9 Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

Then what he does is he answers his own question in favor of the Gentiles in verses 10 and following.

10 How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. 11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, 12 and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Now what's going on here? Paul indicates that Abraham was credited as righteous 14 years before he was circumcised. Genesis 15:4-6 records the promise to Abraham that he would have an heir. Genesis 16:16 records that he was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael as a result of his attempting to help God bring the promise. And Genesis 17:24 indicates that Ishmael was 13 when he, 99 year old Abraham and his whole family was circumcised, so that the space of some 14 years existed, assuming that Hagar became pregnant soon after Abraham's faith in Genesis 15:6. In fact, the gap may be even greater because traditional Jewish chronology places Abraham's circumcision 29 years after Genesis 15:6.

So here's the point: that Abraham was declared a righteous man while a Gentile. He was a righteous Gentile then for 14 to 30 years before he became circumcised and a Jew, therefore salvation by faith was a Gentile principle long before it was a Jewish reality, that sola fide is for everyone, Jew and Gentile. So that Abraham is the father of the uncircumcised believers and the father of the circumcised believers, not on the ground of circumcision but on the ground of faith and through the solidarity of faith, Jews and Gentiles are brothers and sisters in Christ. Astonishing.

Well, if circumcision had nothing to do with Abraham's justification, then Paul argue, the law even had less to do with it, and Paul explains in verse 13,

13 For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

And the historical fact is this: as Paul had written in Galatians 3:17, the law came 430 years after Abraham was made heir to the promise by faith. So to make the promise conditional on obedience to the law which was not even hinted at when the promise was given would nullify the whole promise that righteousness has always come by faith and has promised benefits to those who believe by faith.

Pursuing righteousness by both the law and faith are impossible. Verses 14 and 15,

14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Law makes the promise worthless because if we have to keep the law to receive the promise, the promise will never be fulfilled. Moreover, the law promotes transgression and wrath. No one can keep the law, so the law acts to enhance one's sense of transgression and failure in the sense of being under God's wrath. The law promotes defeat and pessimism, but faith brings joy and assurance of promise in a life of optimism. So the Apostle Paul says, "Don't be fooled. The principle of faith transcends the law. Abraham was credited as righteous because of his faith, so was David. Salvation by faith existed before they were Jews. It preceded the law. It is for everyone."

Then Paul draws this magnificent conclusion in verse 16,

16 That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring - not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

The universal principle of grace and salvation is that it comes by faith alone. Amazing grace. Oh, how our dog paddling frog, paddling world needs to know this.

You know, today it's fashionable to derive our prescient agendas from felt needs of men and women, the man on the street, but do you know what? I am convinced that the average person doesn't know what he needs; that the populace consensus is that, "I've got to do better, at least be as good as others." But what today's person needs is a clear understanding of the opening chapters of Romans. I'm convinced that this is what the church needs more than it needs advice on how to raise children and how to handle money, which I have preached on and written on.

Oh well, but we need to understand just how radically sinful we are; how sin affects every part of us so that we're totally unable to live up to God's standards and affect our own salvation; that we are lost in ourselves. We need to understand that we are in need of the radical righteousness revealed from faith for faith in Romans 1:17, and that the righteousness of God is manifested through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. We need to understand that we need to be found in him, not having a righteousness of our own which comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the

righteousness from God that depends upon faith. We need to believe with all of our hearts that he saved us not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. Here it is: it was faith alone for Abraham; it was faith alone for David; it was faith alone for the Gentiles; it is faith alone before, during and after the law. It will always be by faith alone.

As I conclude tonight, I want to talk about my own experience of faith alone. It goes back to 1955. That's a long time ago. I wish I had a 55 Chevy. I was 12 years old. I had been baptized as a boy at Vermont Avenue Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles. I think my first sort of spiritual stirring that I can remember was sitting at the Lord's Table in about 1948 with my widowed mother in the Scottish Kirk ambience of Vermont Avenue Presbyterian and sensing, not understanding that something very important was going on. I believe that God began to work in my life as a little boy.

I moved out to the suburbs away from Vermont Avenue into a church that didn't have the Gospel and my mother moved us out of that church into one that was just starting. There were about 40 people in the church and I was the only boy in that church. They were vibrant believers. Loved Jesus. Loved me, this little guy that was running around. And I can remember thinking as I observed that fellowship that I couldn't be like that. I couldn't know Jesus like they knew Jesus. I thought it could never happen to me. I felt like I was on the outside of a well-lighted church looking in through the windows but it could never happen to me.

Well, it was in the summer of 1955 I heard the Gospel clearly preached. Twelve years old, and I was kindly taken aside and my Bible was open to Romans 10:9-10 in the King James and the language of salvation is in the King James for me that, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in thine heart, thou shalt be saved." And I remember looking at those verses and then my own tears falling upon those verses and it was like they came right up out of the page into my eyes, into my mind, into my heart, and I was radically regenerated as I believed the word. There were no works. It was faith alone. My life utterly changed in 1955 by faith alone in Jesus.

As I went in my sleeping bag that night, I underlined Romans 10:9-10 and I still have that little tiny Bible underlined in red, Romans 10:9-10. It was in my sleeping bag with a flashlight on. You know what a 12 year old boy's sleeping bag smells like at the end of a week? Whenever I smell anything like a locker room, it's the smell of salvation to me. Indelibly printed on my heart.

It has never changed. It has never been by works. It's been by faith alone and that is the Gospel we have to preach. It was faith alone for Abraham, faith alone for David, faith alone before there was the law, during the law, after the law and always faith alone. That's the missionary Gospel that changes lives. So I'm not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the power of God to salvation to every one who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. Every person group in every language, the Gospel, faith alone. May we hold it, cherish it because we're going to sing about it for all eternity. All glory to God.

Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank you for the beauty of the Gospel and for its simplicity. We thank you that it has been equally available to all through faith. We pray, our Father, that the Gospel will permeate our lives, that we will be Gospel intoxicated people taking the Gospel out to a lost world. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.