

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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**Sermon Title:** “Abraham: A Case-Study in Justification By Faith Alone”

**Sermon Text:** Romans 4:1-8

**Rom. 4:1 ¶** What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?

**Rom. 4:2** For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

**Rom. 4:3** For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

**Rom. 4:4** Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.

**Rom. 4:5** And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,

**Rom. 4:6** just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

**Rom. 4:7 ¶** “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,  
and whose sins are covered;

**Rom. 4:8** blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

**Main Point:** Abraham – the prototypical Jew – was saved through forward-looking faith in the promises of Christ, apart from works.

## Outline:

1. What Abraham Believed

## 2. What Abraham Received

### Introduction

Chronological snobbery is something very common in our day. Chronological snobbery is a term that was coined by C.S. Lewis. Here is how he described chronological snobbery in his book *Surprised by Joy*:

Chronological snobbery is “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that count discredited.” (C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, chapter 13).

Modern people tend to think this way. We tend to look down on something if it is very old and assume that what is old is ignorant and superstitious, and that what is new is sophisticated, wise, and advanced. And of course, this is incredibly foolish, but it is sort of the air we breathe. People just assume that newer is better.

I just want you to notice how very different Paul thinks when it comes to that. One constant problem you can see him pushing back on is this claim that he is preaching something new and innovative. In our day that would seem like a virtue. In Paul’s day it would have been a disaster. Because at no point was Paul innovating, creating new ideas, or preaching anything other than what was already always true.

Paul, in this section of Romans is at pains to say, “I’m being faithful to what came before. I’m staying the same gospel course that was set by Moses and David and all the prophets.” In other words he is anchoring this message to the past. He doesn’t thrive on innovation.

C.H. Spurgeon, the Baptist minister from London once said, “Be assured there is nothing new in theology except that which is false” (“The First Appearance of the Risen Lord to the Eleven” 1882).

B.B. Warfield, the theological lion of Princeton said, “He who begins by seeking novelties is likely to end by embracing heresies.”

Finally I remember one speaker in chapel while I was in seminary say in passing, “I hope to never say anything new in my whole ministry.”

I relate to Paul and Spurgeon and Warfield here. When I come into the pulpit, one thing I am always on watch against is that I would try so hard to be interesting and creative in the pulpit that I end up deviating from the truth once received. I do not want to create or innovate.

Paul tells Timothy, “Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me...guard the deposit entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:13-14). Paul does not want Timothy to invent anything.

Jude 3 reminds us to “Contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”

Later Paul will say that a faithful minister “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). “Titus, give us the old trustworthy message. Don’t get creative.”

Jeremiah 6:16 tells us of this command from the Lord: “Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.”

The Scriptural pattern is not innovation, but uncovering or blowing the dust off of the truth that is already there, but that may have been neglected. Even Jesus and his coming are not innovations but unveilings. Jesus is revealed, not invented. He is there all over the Scriptures.

For Paul, it is paramount that his listeners know: the message of justification by faith in Jesus Christ alone is not and has never been something invented by men. It is not even a New Testament development. Instead, it is a message that came from the very mouth of God. That’s why Paul says in Galatians 1:11, “For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel.”

You see, Paul knows that if it’s man’s gospel, then it can’t save. If it’s man’s gospel then it’s just something someone made up. But if it is God’s truth, we can stake

everything on it and know that we have a hope which does not disappoint. And he wants you to have that kind of confidence, too.

Here Paul is, in the midst of his gospel project in Romans making sure that we know... the gospel is not an innovation. It is the same ancient paths that God laid down even before Jeremiah. It is the same message of salvation that God has been preaching for thousands of years, beginning all the way back in the garden in Genesis 3:15.

We are not creators of the truth; we are merely stewards of the truth. And Paul wants us to see him and his message this way.

So the question is, how does he make this case that faith in Christ is always how God has saved sinners? He does it by going to the prototypical Jew: Abraham. He goes old. He goes back to square one.

And today Paul is setting before us two important things to help us not only understand the gospel, but to understand the antiquity of the gospel. Those two things are first, what Abraham believed. And second, what Abraham received.

## **1. What Abraham Believed**

First today is What Abraham Believed.

It's pretty common today for people to talk about "believe" in general. You'll see T-shirts that just say "believe," but in a sentimentalized age often there's no *content* to that belief. *What* are we supposed to believe? *Who* are we supposed to believe? "Just believe."

Well, for "belief" to be meaningful it has to have some kind of content to it: something that we *are* believing, or someone whom we are believing. What was the actual content of what Abraham heard and believed? We do find the answer in the text of Scripture. God doesn't leave us to guess.

Think of most of Abraham's life up until the promise is given to him Genesis 15. Abraham lived around 2000 BC, which places him in what is sometimes called the middle bronze age. And Abraham's was a hard life. Here he was, just another gentile from modern day Iraq, living in a pagan culture. Joshua 24:2 tells us that

Abraham's fathers "served other gods," so Abraham is from a pagan background. He is called by God to leave that place, he experiences famine, conflict, homelessness, danger, separation from his nephew, military threats, and childlessness. And by the time Genesis 15 comes, he and his wife are elderly and heartbroken that they have no children and no one to inherit all that they have. "All of this, for what?" they think.

We find real expression of Abraham's faith in Genesis 15:5-6. Because what happens is, God makes a promise to him and his descendants at a time when he was old and had no descendants. He and his wife were childless. In other words, in themselves they had no life or hope remaining, and yet God comes to them with a promise. Here is what Genesis tells us that God says to Abraham in this moment:

"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness."

So here God is telling Abraham, "you will have a child, and you will have offspring, and your offspring will be as numberless as the stars." And notice what we're told in the passage: "He believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness." Here we're seeing *what* Abraham believed (grace and promise) and we see *how* he received it (faith, not works).

When Paul is extolling the doctrine of justification by faith alone in the book of Galatians, he makes a point about what Abraham was really hearing at this moment. Listen to Paul:

"The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' ... Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ."

So there Paul is commenting on this moment in Genesis 15 and Paul saying this to us:

“When God said to Abraham, ‘So shall your offspring be,’ you might be tempted to think this was about his son, Isaac, or even all of Isaac’s children, but actually the offspring being preached to Abraham was Jesus.”

That is Paul’s inspired interpretation of Abraham’s faith.

So God preached the gospel to Abraham, telling him two things: I’m sending an offspring who will make all my promises come true, *and* that offspring will produce a people who are your children who will be as numberless as the stars. It’s a double-fulfillment. I’m creating offspring, and I’m creating *offspring*.

So Paul is telling us that this gentile, uncircumcised man from the desert was chosen for this promise and had the gospel preached to him. It was this gospel that he believed. This is the content of Abraham’s faith that Paul is going to spend the rest of Romans chapter 4 extolling to us.

And you might think that this is Paul just getting a little too creative for his own good. But Jesus sees the *exact* same thing in Abraham. Look at John 8:56-57. In this text Jesus is telling the scribes and Pharisees that if they want to be real sons of Abraham they should have the same faith as Abraham. Listen to what Jesus says:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”

This is basically just what Paul was saying, but it’s Jesus saying it now. Abraham may have lived 2000 years before the birth of Jesus, but because of God’s promise to him, Abraham knew about Christ. He heard the promise, and believed the promise, and because of it he had a *forward-looking* perspective and he awaited the coming offspring who would be born in Bethlehem, of the virgin Mary. Jesus says, “Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day.”

Think of the sorts of things that make people rejoice.

Israel rejoices because God saved them from slavery.

David rejoices over answered prayer when he says, “You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound” (Ps. 4:7).

David rejoices when he gets delivered from his enemies in Psalm 31: “I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love.”

Hannah receives her firstborn son and says, “My heart rejoices in the Lord; my horn is exalted in the Lord” (1 Sam. 2).

The sort of things that make a person rejoice in Scripture are big things, incredible things. Life-changing things. And that’s exactly what the *promise* was. “Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day,” Jesus says.

Now, here is something else that makes the faith of Abraham so important. Both the author of Hebrews, and also Paul later in this same chapter of Romans will say that when the promise came to Abraham, his own body “was as good as dead” since he was about a hundred years old. It is at the point when he and Sarah seem maximally incapable of having children that God gives him the promise.

So in the moment when it would have been hardest to believe, Scripture tells us that Abraham did believe. Sarah laughed at the promise, but she still seems to have believed. Sarah is a good example of weak faith that is still faith.

The *quality* of their faith in the promise might have varied between the two of them, but the object of their faith is the same: the promise of Jesus Christ.

[Application] By the way, some Christians do feel like their faith is weak. Maybe that is you. If so, you may relate more to Sarah here. You look around you, and it feels like your faith is shaky, it comes and goes. Belief comes hard, not easy to you. You may be tempted to really fixate on your faith, think about it a lot, focus on it and so on. Here is a much better alternative. Focus on Christ as the object of your faith. Don’t stare at your faith and obsess over your faith. Stare at and hope in Christ, not your faith. Faith is the hand by which we take hold of the promise, but faith is not the promise. It is Jesus who saves, and he is a powerful and perfect savior. Let your hope rest there, not in how strong you perceive your own faith to be.

Perhaps you relate to Sarah here.

We *may* be similar to Sarah. We are *definitely* similar to Abraham in this sense: God also calls us to believe Christ and his promise. Do you rejoice at Jesus' day? The substance of that joy is the same as Abraham's, no matter which side of the cross we're on. But even still, just think of the privilege we have: we know Christ this side of the cross.

We know his name.

We know what he did.

We know who he was.

We know that he wasn't just a man, but the God-man – God with us.

We know that in seeing him, He revealed the father to us.

We now have the full story of the cross and resurrection.

We have the full canon of Scripture giving us the complete revelation of God's work.

We live in the age of the Spirit's fulness.

We've seen the gospel expand into the nations of the earth.

Things that were only a promise then can actually be seen by us as a reality.

Abraham saw only the promise of this... He saw the seed. He saw the tip top of the glacier, and that was enough for him to grab hold of by faith. But there was so much beneath the promise that as far as we know still hadn't been given to Abraham. Abraham knew so little compared to us, and yet he grabbed hold of it for dear life and believed. Think of how incredibly blessed we are! You and I are like Abraham, but do you rejoice at the immense privilege we have living in the time in which we live, and knowing what we know? Seeing so much more than he saw, and yet he rejoiced at that little modicum of revelation and he hung his whole life on it.

What an incredible privilege we have to live in the age of the Messiah!

Paul's point is that Abraham had nothing to boast about because all he did was rely on and believe the promise of Christ. The gospel was preached to him, he believed it, and he lived in that promise for the rest of his days.

This is what Abraham believed: the promise of Christ.

## **2. What Abraham Received**

But this takes us to our second point today: what Abraham received.

Now, up until this point I've somehow avoided using a word that needs to be mentioned, which is covenant. In the last point we saw that Abraham believed in the coming of Christ. What he actually received was what we call the covenant of grace.

When we're talking about covenants, what we're talking about is the primary way that God has chosen to relate to mankind. Because God is so different and other than mankind – because he is the creator and we are mere creatures – he doesn't relate to us as equals. Anything he does, any promise he makes, is him condescending from his high and glorious throne to relate to us.

[So when God does relate to us, he does it through what the Bible calls covenants. Harrison Perkins is a modern Reformed theologian who has done excellent work on covenants. If you want to read an excellent book that goes deep on on the topic, I highly recommend his new book *Reformed Covenant Theology*.]

A covenant, according to Harrison Perkins, is – in its simplest form – “a formal relationship” where “people become bound to one another in some fixed way.”

The first covenant we see in the Bible is made between God and Adam. We call it the Covenant of works. Adam was given a job, to keep the garden. And he's given a prohibition: don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He was given an implied benefit for himself and his children if he obeyed. But the covenant calls on him to obey fully and perfectly, and from the heart.

Now, we all know, Adam failed in this covenant. He did not keep his side of the covenant. He didn't guard the garden, and he did eat from the forbidden tree.

Now, Adam failed to keep the covenant of works, but that covenant of works is still binding on us. We are still supposed to obey God perfectly and fully and from

the heart. The covenant of works is not gone. It is alive and well. We've seen that works principle repeated here in Romans.

Notice how Romans 2:6 says "He will render to each one according to his works." It is still true of mankind that if we were to perfectly obey that we would stand justified in God's sight.

Romans 2:13 says, "The doers of the law will be justified." That's a works principle. Even after the coming of Christ, it's still true that the covenant of works hangs over us – all mankind, actually – with its promises if we were to obey fully and perfectly.

Now, because of our sin, we cannot and will not keep this covenant of works. We've already broken it but the obligation still remains over us. God did not rescind this covenant after Adam, and it's always remained.

If we could fast forward to Abraham's day, mankind still lived under this covenant of works and they were failing horribly at it. Around 2000 B.C. in a little corner of Iraq, God of his own grace and kindness calls this man, Abraham, to leave his family and to have Yahweh as his God.

And when he calls Abraham, he makes promises to him.

In Genesis 12, we are told that God promised land, seed, and blessing to Abraham. In Genesis 15, we are explicitly told that God made a covenant with Abraham. There we actually see the word covenant. This appears to be the moment where he ratifies the promises he already made back in chapter 12. And then in Genesis 17, which we will see next week, he confirms his promises with a covenant sign of circumcision, and he calls circumcision "my covenant."

Reformed theologians have commonly called God's gracious and saving covenant that he made with mankind, and formalized here with Abraham the Covenant of Grace. That is a promise which is still live and real and saving even today. Just as the covenant of works is alive and well, the covenant of grace is also alive and well.

If you are a Christian today, you should thank the covenant of grace. It's a very old promise, and there's a reason why we tend to speak so much about the covenant of grace. Because it's the way that God saves sinners! If you have broken the covenant of works (and we all have), then the only way you can have peace with

the God whose law we have broken is if he graciously extends his hand of rescue. That is what the covenant of grace is. It is Christ fulfilling the covenant of works for you, which you and I could never do.

The covenant of grace is a saving promise that is rooted in God's kindness toward sinners, in which God promises that he will himself fulfill the very covenant of works that doomed us in Adam. But the covenant still comes with a condition. And that condition is faith. Our own Westminster Confession says in chapter 7 says this:

“Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant [of works], the Lord was pleased to make a second covenant, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; *requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved...*”

Even Abraham had the condition of faith placed on him. Even though promises had been made in Genesis 12 and 15, it was only in Genesis 15:6 that we're told, “[Abraham] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” When Abraham believed, he benefited from Christ through the covenant of grace.

Why am I telling you all of this? Because I want us to see what it is that Abraham receives from God in this covenant, because *it's also what we receive* through faith in Christ. The substance of this promise is Christ (that's what we saw in our last point). But what did Abraham receive when he believed the covenant promise? When he believed in Jesus, what did he get?

Well we just saw the answer in Genesis 15:6: “[Abraham] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”

This man was a sinner. A trickster. He was imperfect. Scripture never presents him as a hero. He is deeply flawed and he sins. And yet there it is. He believed, and God gave him Righteousness. That's what he got. Paul interprets this as Justification by faith (Gal. 3:6; Gen. 15:6). Abraham has had the gospel preached to him. Even though he is a sinner, and has failed repeatedly, and distrusted God, and even though he is frail and fallen, God says to him, “An offspring is coming who will bear

your sins, carry your sorrows, and stand in your place.” And Abraham believes it, 2,000 years before it is fulfilled.

In this faith, Abraham is united to Christ, and receives the benefits of the covenant of grace: justification and sanctification. Abraham had peace with God through faith and was a changed man because of the gospel.

This is no New Testament novelty. That’s why Paul then goes on to quote David in Psalm 32 where it says, “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity” (Ps 32:1-2).

David knew this blessing well. The same blessing as Abraham. He was someone whom God looked at and said, “I will not count your sin against you. You shall not die.”

Paul wants us to know, this is not a novelty. God was saving people through faith in his son in Genesis, in the Psalms, and yes, he keeps doing it in the New Testament era, too.

Over and over again Paul says, this is how you receive the benefits of God’s saving covenant: not by doing, not by ceremonies, not by any works or merit of your own. The hope of sinners is in the son who obeyed and laid his life down for us. And this is always how our God has saved sinful people.

## **Conclusion**

Many things have changed since Abraham’s day. And it’s always tempting to think that in our own day people are somehow different than these patriarchs and Old Testament figures. But really we have the same nature as them, the same basic problems as them, the same fallen tendencies as them. We stand in need of the same gospel and grace that they needed.

Paul takes what for him would have been a 2000 year old story (for us it’s 4000 years old), and he says, “Abraham is very very important. He’s still relevant. He shows us how we can be saved.”

You see, God in his word wants us to emulate the faith of Abraham by believing in Christ, and knowing that this was no New Testament invention. Justification by faith alone is an evergreen and timeless truth that we can rest everything on.

The only difference between Abraham's faith and ours is timing: our faith looks back to what was done by Christ in a specific time and place. Abraham's faith looked forward to a future promise that had yet to be completed.

If you would be a son of Abraham, then the call is simple and straightforward: believe in the same son that Abraham looked forward to and rejoiced.

*Let's pray.*