

10. Faith from the beginning

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The foundation is the most important part when you build a building. Whether it is a high rise building that reaches to the sky or a play house, if you don't have a proper foundation, the building cannot stand and last any time.

The foundation of Christianity is, of course, Jesus Christ. NO questions asked. But what about the foundation of individual Christian's living? Would it be daily devotions? Memorizing Scriptures? Praying fervently to the Lord? Fellowship with believers in the Lord? Evangelizing to unbelievers? They are all important, very important. We cannot ignore one for another. We need them all. But to do all of these, we need FAITH in our great God from the beginning. I am not talking about silly faith that you believe God exists. God exists whether we believe it or not.

I've quoted this verse so many times that you guys memorize it by now.

Hebrews 11:6 But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Without faith in Christ, we cannot pray to Him, understand the Bible and do what He says. Consequently, faith is a requirement of Christian living.

Many cults insist that we need to do something for God because having faith in Christ who died for our sins and rose again for our justification is not good enough. That is why they are knocking on doors diligently. They are trying to earn their salvation with their work.

Unfortunately, even Pope Benedict declared not very long ago, "Any good people can go to heaven." I don't know how I ended up on their e-mail list, but I receive frequent e-mails from Catholic Online that claims the same thing Pope says. That is wrong and unbiblical.

The Bible we have clearly defines that the salvation through Jesus Christ plus anything equals no salvation. Some people who don't know the Bible would say, "Well, that is the New Testament concept." For those people, apostle Paul is going to systematically explain about faith in Jesus Christ alone gives us true salvation.

A. ABRAHAM'S FAITH

Romans 4:1-4 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found 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 accounted to him for righteousness." 4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

Jewish tradition insists that Abraham had been chosen by God for his unique role in history because he was the only righteous man alive at the time. And they claim that he was the Jews' premier example of righteousness through works. But Paul discovered something else.

See how apostle starts his second verse of chapter 4 with 'if'. If any ordinary person can live a perfect righteous living to be accepted by God's standard, that is something to boast and brag about. However, we all know that Abraham was not a perfect man.

Let's list a few of his shortcomings:

- 1) In Genesis 12, God told him to leave his family. But he took his nephew Lot with him in his journey.
- 2) He lied twice in claiming his wife Sarah was his sister to save his own skin.
- 3) God promised him a son through his wife Sarah, but he chose to have a son by his maid Hagar.

So much for a perfect record. In spite of his imperfection, God chose to put His righteousness in Abraham's account because of his faith in Him.

In v3, we underlined the word "accounted". In Greek, it is "logizomai". It is a banking term and it means "to put to one's account."

Let's say you are completely bankrupted. You don't have a penny in your pocket and you don't know where your next meal is going to come from. Then, here comes a person whom you hated his guts for no good reason, and opens an account in your name at the bank you used. Then he transfers \$10,000,000 from his account to yours. He smiles at you and says, "It is yours now." That is what our God Jesus did for us.

God is perfect. He is holy. Righteousness has its origin in Him. We only know good because of Him. How, then, can a finite, fallible and frail human being like us possibly stand and boast of one's goodness in God's awesome presence? Even at our best, we are riddled with flaws, and the very act of boasting would reveal the sin of pride! If we have to depend on ourselves, we are without hope.

Abraham believed God in His promise of having a son. God instituted His covenant with Abraham and made him righteous in His eyes. The righteousness is more than the absence of evil and guilt.

Wage is an obligation from your employer to you, not a gift from him. You earned it. But the righteousness in our account from Jesus is not an obligation from Him to us, but a pure gift.

B. DAVID'S FAITH

Romans 4:5-8 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, 6 just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: 7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; 8 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin."

To further amplify his point, apostle Paul turns to the man after God's own heart, Israel's greatest king and recipient of another covenant and messianic promise from God, David.

You have to hand it to Paul. He is so methodical and so thorough that there is not a room to wiggle out. He could have made one great lawyer if he was born now and live in the United States.

If there is another person who gets attention and respect from the Jewish people, that would be king David. Even though he was a hero and great king, he committed a sin of adultery, a sin of murder and a sin of conspiracy. When he cried out to God for forgiveness, he received it. Does it mean he got off scott free? Absolutely not. Until he died, his family was riddled with one disaster after another just as the Lord prophesied.

V7-8 came from Psalm 32. I like the way Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian Holocaust survivor who helped many Jews escape the Nazis during World War II said:

"When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a Scripture for it, I believe God then places a sign out there that says, NO FISHING ALLOWED."

In bringing together Abraham's and David's examples, apostle Paul is showing us that justification involves a double counting, crediting, or reconciling. Negatively, God will never count our sins against us. Positively, God credits our account with righteousness, as a free gift, by faith, altogether apart from our works.

In v5-8, God is not promoting laziness. Rather He is telling us that righteousness can never be accounted to the one who approaches God with the idea of works. Instead it is given to the one who believes in Him who justifies the ungodly. We are not justified because of our ungodliness, but despite of ungodliness.

C. NAAMAN'S FAITH

So far we saw two examples of great Jewish men. But what about Gentiles? Were they doomed and hopeless? I'd like to make one example.

His name is Naaman in 2 Kings 5. He was an uncircumcised heathen commander with leprosy. From the Jewish point of view, he had nothing to be righteous to God.

2 Kings 5:1 Now Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Syria, was a great and honorable man in the eyes of his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Syria. He was also a mighty man of valor, but a leper.

This man had everything the Jews would despise. He was a Gentile commander who invaded Israel. Naaman worshiped his false gods and to make the matter worse, he was a leper. He came to Samaria because he was told that there was a prophet who could heal his leprosy. When he came to Elisha's home, this prophet had an audacity not to come out to the door, but he sent out his servant to tell the commander to dip himself in the Jordan River seven times.

The commander was furious and left the place to return to Damascus. Let's pick up the texts from v13.

*2 Kings 5:13-16 And his servants came near and spoke to him, and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do something great, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, 'Wash, and be clean?'"
14 So he went down and dipped seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. 15 And he returned to the man of God, he and all his aides, and came and stood before him; and he said, "Indeed, now I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel; now therefore, please take a gift from your servant."*

I know what you ladies are thinking, "Is the water from the Jordan River the fountain of youth? Can we market this?" No, it was for Naaman the leper only.

I want you to notice what the servant said to Naaman. That is a typical mindset of ours. We want to make our way to heaven, we want to earn our salvation so that we can boast. God would have none of that. He wants a simple obedience and trust

from us like Naaman did. What happened to him? He became a believer of the God of Israel and he received salvation.

D. WHAT ABOUT THE CIRCUMCISION?

Romans 4:9-12 Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. 10 How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. 11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, 12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.

As we already have studied and learned from chapter 2, the Jewish people believed that circumcision was one of the requirements to be saved. This is not just past history but it still goes on. Many people and many religious groups believe that you have to do certain things, such as baptism, communion, speaking in tongues and other religious rituals, to be saved.

When God told Abraham that he was righteous in Genesis 15, he was not even circumcised. Thirteen years later God instituted the covenant of circumcision in chapter 17.

Some of you are thinking, "OK, preacher, how did you come up with thirteen years?" I don't know, it sounds about right. No, just kidding. Because following God's promises in Genesis 15, Abraham fathered Ishmael through Sarah's handmaid, Hagar in chapter 16. When Ishmael was born, Abraham was eighty-six years old, and when Abraham obeyed God's command to be circumcised, he was ninety-nine years old in chapter 17.

The conclusion is obvious: circumcision had nothing to do with his justification. Then why was circumcision given? It was a sign and a seal. As a sign, it was evidence that he belonged to God and believed His promise. As a seal, it was a reminder to him that God had given the promise and would keep it.

Believers today are sealed by the Holy Spirit of God. They have also experienced a spiritual circumcision in the heart, not just a minor physical operation, but the putting off of the old nature through the death and resurrection of Christ. Circumcision did not add to Abraham's salvation; it merely attested to it.

Ephesians 1:13-14 In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

E. APPLICATION

Salvation starts with faith.

It has always started with faith. Faith has been God's plan from the very beginning. And it will be His plan to the very end.