

WHAT ABRAHAM DISCOVERED (Romans 4:1-8)

Do you ever get stuck? I don't mean in the mud, or the snow, or traffic. I mean, do you ever encounter problems you can't seem to solve? While making plans, do you ever find yourself unable to figure out the next step?

When writers get stuck, they call it writer's block. I suppose, periodically, I suffer, from what might be called "preacher's block." I did this past week. Early in the week, I found the text from which I was to preach. I came up with the title and the major emphases of the message. The problem was that I couldn't figure out how to get the message started.

On Thursday night I drove to OKC. I was alone in the car for the better part of three hours. I do some of my best thinking while driving. I still couldn't figure it out.

Early Friday morning, I wrote these words in my prayer journal: "Help me, dear God, with preparing the message for Sunday. I pray the message would come freely. May it flow from my heart and my head and to my fingers as I type."

It wasn't two minutes later that a thought hit me. It had to do with a keyword in the message—*discover*. I discovered something about the word *discover* that I had never seen. This truth has remained hidden my entire life because of the way we pronounce the word. We say di-scover. The word is made up of the root word *cover* and the prefix *dis*. I looked up the meaning of the prefix *dis*. It means "not" or "the opposite of." So, if you *dislike* someone, you don't like them. If you *disobey* God, you are not obeying Him. *Dis* also carries the connotation of "remove." If you *disrobe*, you remove your clothes. If you *dis-cover* something, you remove that which had previously kept it covered.

If you discover a buried treasure, it's because you removed the topsoil and the dirt that covered it. Scientific and medical discoveries come about when researchers uncover whatever it is that is keeping those things hidden from our view. Whether it is a powerful microscope that peers into the universe within the atom or a space telescope that literally looks back in time at what our universe was like millions and even billions of years ago, either way, what was hidden is made known.

God has graciously given us five senses which we use to discover the world in which we live. With our eyes, we can discover sights we've never seen. With our ears, we can discover sounds we've never heard. With our nose, taste buds, and the sensory receptors in our skin, we can discover aromas we never smelled, tastes we've never experienced, and feel things we've never felt.

God has also given us a mind. The Bible teaches that believers have the mind of Christ. The Holy Spirit enables us to use our minds, and He reveals to us truth we've never known.

We've been studying the life of Abraham. So far, each message has come from the text of Genesis. Between Genesis 12 and Genesis 24, I have preached ten sermons on the life of Abraham. We come today to the last message. It, however, is going to come from the NT. Not only is Abraham a central character in the OT, but he is also a key figure in the NT. His name shows up no less than 70 times in the pages of the NT.

Of the nine times that Abraham's name appears in Paul's letter to the church in Rome, seven of those are from the same chapter—Chapter 4. That is where we will turn our attention to this morning. We will be looking at Romans 4:1-8.

Before we read our passage, let me set the context. In the first two and a half chapters of Romans, Paul presents his case that the whole world stands guilty before God. The Gentiles are guilty. The Jews are guilty. Everybody is guilty. Look at 3:9-11. The situation is desperate.

Romans 3:21 has been called the continental divide of Romans. This is the point at which everything changes. Notice the first two words of that verse—"But now." I love those words. It looks as though there is no hope. But now, God does something. Look at our singular hope (vv. 23-26). The only way you and I can find acceptance with God is through what Jesus accomplished on our behalf. We become recipients of His righteousness through faith in Him.

Paul wants to press forward his case; so, beginning in chapter 4, he holds up Abraham as prime evidence for his case. Why Abraham? First, Abraham is the founding father of the Jewish people. They can trace their lineage all the way back to him. Second, the Jews had a tradition that said that Abraham was justified by his works. They argued that since Abraham obeyed God when God called him to go to the land He would show him, and since he sought to obey God when God told him to sacrifice his son, God rewarded him. The Jews believed that Abraham earned approval with God through his obedience, i.e., by his works.

Paul essentially says, "No. That is not the case at all." And he turns to the OT Scriptures to prove his point.

With that as background, let's read our text—Romans 4:1-8. Verse 1 is variously translated. The version I regularly use, the ESV, mentions something that was "gained by Abraham." The NASB speaks of something that was "found" by Abraham. The NIV expresses the verse using the word "discovered." There was something Abraham discovered. The focus of this message is "What Abraham Discovered." As we move through this text, we will find that Paul taught what Abraham discovered. We will find that David expressed what Abraham discovered. He did so in the psalms he wrote. The real focus, finally, is that we need to learn what Abraham discovered. To that end, I want to show you two discoveries Abraham made.

Discovery #1: Acceptance with God is Not Attained by Our Own Effort.

Paul uses an important word in v. 2, the word "justified." We need to stop and consider what the word means. It was a legal word. It was used in law courts. If an accused man stood in a court of law and the court justified him, that meant the court declared him "not guilty." Then, as now, a court cannot declare someone innocent. The court can only find a person either guilty or not guilty. The fact is that if we who are believers in Jesus stood before God, He could not declare us innocent because we aren't. All of us have offended a holy God with our sin. We are most certainly guilty, but God declares us "not guilty" because there is Another who was punished on our behalf.

We have said before that the word *salvation* is a big word that carries with it several ideas. The word itself means *rescue*. When a person is saved, that person is rescued. If you put your faith in Jesus as your Savior and Lord, you are rescued in several ways. This rescue involves the past, the present, and the future. It means you were saved; you are being saved; you will be saved.

The moment you trusted Jesus you were declared “not guilty.” That is what the Bible calls *justification*. You were saved—past tense.

The Holy Spirit has come into your life. He indwells you. He teaches you. He helps you to overcome sin. He is at work fashioning and shaping you to look, and act, and think, and be more like Jesus. He is saving you—present tense. The Bible calls that *sanctification*. It is a process, a life-long process. You are being saved.

Finally, one day, Jesus will return. When He returns, the dead in Christ will rise. All believers will be given a resurrection body. It will be a body that never ages, that never shows the ravages of time, that never gets sick, and that will never die. It is a body fit for eternity. We call that Bible doctrine *glorification*. That has not yet happened. It is in the future. We will be saved.

You were saved. You are being saved. You will be saved. Here in Romans 4, Paul is focusing on our justification. When we trusted in Jesus, we were made right with God.

No matter how hard you try, no matter how many sins you overcome, no matter how many good deeds you do, you cannot make yourself right with God.

Back in 2005, Dan Rather interviewed Jack Welch on the show *60 Minutes*. Jack Welch was the retired CEO of General Electric. When Welch became the CEO of GE in 1981, the company was valued at \$12 billion. When he retired in 2001, the company was valued at \$420 billion. He was widely viewed as the greatest businessman in the last half of the 20th century.

At the end of the interview, Rather asked Welch, “What’s the toughest question you have ever been asked?”

Welch answered, “Do you think you’ll go to heaven?”

When asked how he answered that question, Welch said:

It’s a long answer, but I said that if caring about people, if giving it your all, if being a great friend counts—despite the fact that I’ve been divorced a couple of times, and no one’s proud of that. I haven’t done everything right all the time. I think I got a shot. I’m in no hurry to get there and to find out any time soon.

In March of 2020, Welch found out. He died at the age of 84. I hope in the 15 years between his interview with Dan Rather and his death that Welch worked on his answer because I heard nothing of Jesus in it. All I heard was what he had accomplished. It was all about him. In his view, it was all about his performance.

We cannot attain acceptance with God based on what we do. Justification is not a matter of our own effort. If that was the case, Jesus’ death on the cross was unnecessary, and God could be charged with cruelty for giving Him that work to do if we could have handled it on our own—thank you very much.

Paul made it clear that Abraham had no room to boast about his own salvation.

Neither do you, and neither do I. Look at v. 2.

That is hard for us as 21st-century Americans to grasp. We are used to expecting rewards for hard work. If we work hard in school, we will get good grades. If we get good grades, we can go to a good school. If we work hard in that school, we can graduate and get a good job. If we work hard in that job, we will get noticed, and we will be promoted.

We say, “The early bird gets the worm.”

Henry Ford said, “Chop your own wood and it will warm you twice.”

There are all kinds of sayings about hard work and perseverance. They don’t apply, however, when it comes to finding acceptance with God. How, then, does one attain acceptance with God if it is not by his or her own effort? That brings us to Abraham’s second discovery.

Discovery #2: Acceptance with God is Obtained Through the Channel of Faith.

After holding up the example of Abraham, Paul turns to the OT Scriptures to make his case. Look at v. 3. Paul quotes Genesis 15:6. This is one of the most important verses in the entire OT. There is a keyword in this verse that is variously translated as *counted*, *reckoned*, *credited*, and *imputed*. It is used at least five times in the first eight verses of this chapter. It is used another six times in the balance of this fourth chapter.

Whereas *justification* was a legal term, this is an accounting term. I have had jobs in which I either rarely or never saw a physical paycheck. On payday, my pay was deposited into my checking account digitally. Money from the company or the business was taken from their account and credited to my account. This was not a matter of the business being gracious and putting money into my account because I am a nice guy. No. This was money I worked for. It was money I earned. It was a debt owed to me by the company for what I had done.

Look at vv. 4-6. God does not owe us anything. He is not in debt to us. Anything we receive from God we receive as a gift freely given, not as a due.

When I graduated from high school, I had the good fortune of having a dad who was willing to pay my way through college. He didn’t have to do that. He wasn’t legally obligated to do so. He did so willingly and freely. While I was in school, I had a checking account to which he had access. I would pay my bills from my account. Then, I would submit to him a monthly report of the money I had spent, and money from his account would be credited to my account. When I graduated there was no expectation on his part that I pay him back, and I didn’t.

My father graciously paid my way through school, not because he had to do so. This was not a debt he owed. He did so graciously. He did that for me and for my three siblings.

Our heavenly Father gave all His children something of greater value and at greater expense to Himself. He gave us righteousness.

What does this statement in Genesis 15:6 mean? When Scripture says, “Abraham

believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness,” it does not mean that God looked upon Abraham’s faith as a substitute for righteousness. It is not as though God was saying, “I really wanted righteousness. You didn’t have it; so, I’ll settle for your faith instead.”

No. Look at it this way. Everyone is saved by works. If a person is saved, that person is saved by works. If you are saved you, are saved by works. The question we must answer is, “Whose works?”

It is not my works. It is not your works. It is what Jesus accomplished on our behalf.

I also want you to understand that faith is not the ground of your salvation. God does not save you because of your faith. It is not as though God is up in heaven, and He sees a person who has faith, and He says, “I like that person’s faith; I am going to save her because she has faith.”

If he were to do that, our faith would become a work, and our salvation would be a reward for our faith.

We are not saved **by** faith. We are saved **through** faith. We need to remember what Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works.”

Faith is the channel through which the grace and goodness of God flow into our lives.

I know virtually nothing about cars. I am doing good to start my car and drive it from point A to point B and back again. As time goes by, I pick up some knowledge, a little here and a little there. I emphasize the word *little*. Recently, Milton worked on the suspension of my wife’s Jeep Liberty. He replaced the ball joint on the front, right side. He had done the other side a few months ago. This work had to be done so that we could get a front-end alignment. Milton told me to make sure they greased the ball joint. He didn’t have his grease gun when he came.

A local shop did the alignment, but they said they were unable to grease either ball joint. They reported that when they attached the grease gun to the ball joint, the grease would spurt out, but the grease wouldn’t go in. They decided there must be a problem with the zerk. This was a new term for me. I asked them to explain what a zerk is and to use small words so I could understand. I was told it was like a nipple. The grease gun was supposed to fit into the nipple, and the zerk would act like a channel for the grease to flow into the ball joint.

They ended up replacing the zerks on each side. After doing so, the grease was able to go into the ball joint, and now we can drive the Liberty without it squeaking.

I think there are a lot of church members in our world who go around squeaking because the oil of the Holy Spirit has not penetrated their hearts. You see, a pretend faith will not act like a true channel. If your faith is inauthentic, if it is not genuine, you will not be able to receive the Holy Spirit and all that God offers. Your life will be closed off to His grace and His righteousness.

Having used Abraham, the esteemed Father of the Jewish people to teach about justification by faith, Paul then turned to David, the beloved King of the Jewish

people. He quotes from Psalm 32:1-2. Let's read that from the OT account. David agrees with Abraham and repeats what Abraham had discovered.

We find the word *counts* in v. 6 of our text and *count* in v. 8. I said that another word for *count* is the word *impute*. This week I heard a Bible teacher talk about the doctrine of imputation. Early on in man's history, Adam and Eve sinned. Their sin was imputed to our account. From them, we receive a sin nature. Then, when Jesus died, our sin was imputed to Jesus' account. Our sin was laid on Him. Now, when we receive Jesus by faith, God imputes to us Jesus' righteousness.

I close by dealing with a question. Why did Jesus live on this earth for 33 years? Why did he come as a baby boy, grow up in a cruel world, and then die after having lived here for more than three decades? Why didn't Jesus just come as an adult man, die on the cross, and get it over with quickly?

You and I need to understand that we are saved as much by Jesus' righteous life as we are by His death on our behalf. It is not enough to have our sins forgiven. We also need a righteousness that we don't possess. We have not obeyed the Law of God perfectly. Jesus did. He lived a completely righteous life. Now, when we receive Jesus by faith, we receive His righteousness. It is His righteousness that gives us standing before His Father.

The author of Hebrews wrote in Hebrews 12:14, "Without holiness, no one will see the Lord." Through faith in Jesus, we receive what only He can provide and what we desperately need.

There is much to discover in this world, but don't leave it without learning and acting on what Abraham discovered.