

**BY FAITH ALONE, PT. 2**  
**ROMANS 4:17-22**

This week I read this statement by John MacArthur in *Justification by Faith Alone*: “No doctrine is more important to evangelical theology than the doctrine of justification by faith alone.” That’s a strong statement. J. I. Packer affirmed that statement when he wrote, “Martin Luther described the doctrine of justification by faith as...the article of faith that decides whether the church is standing or falling. By this he meant that when this doctrine is understood, believed, and preached, as it was in New Testament times, the church stands in the grace of God and is alive; but where it is neglected, overlaid, or denied, as it was in mediaeval Catholicism, the church falls from grace and its life drains away, leaving it in a state of darkness and death.” [“Preface,” James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*.]

If those statements about the priority of justification through faith alone are true, then one of the most significant chapters in the Bible is Romans 4 — because it defends the doctrine of *sola fide*, even from the OT and particularly from the life of Abraham.

As we come to this topic, what do we mean by the phrase, “justification by faith alone?” There are four emphases in those words:

- ✓ **Justification by faith alone** — the believer in Christ is declared righteous and imputed with the righteousness of Christ; Christ’s righteous life and propitiating work on the cross is accounted to the sinner though he is not righteous himself. (This is in contrast to the RC teaching that the believer is *infused* with righteousness when he is saved and that “faith is the beginning of salvation.” [Counsel of Trent] If we are infused with Christ’s righteousness, then on the basis of 2 Cor. 5:21, He must also be infused with our sin, and if Christ has infused sin, then He would be inherently evil and unable to atone for either His own sin or ours, and both He and we would remain under God’s eternal, condemning wrath).
- ✓ **Justification by faith alone** — faith does not save, but faith is the means or instrument of justification; faith is the hand that receives the gift of justification, but faith itself does not procure justification. “We are not saved *for* believing but *by* believing.” [Beeke, in *Justification by Faith Alone*, 62]
- ✓ **Justification by faith alone** — the significance of faith is the object of what we believe, Christ alone: “Faith = Forsaking All I Trust Him.” “Strictly speaking, the true Christian church does not teach justification by faith. It teaches justification by Christ.” [Gerstner, *Justification by Faith Alone*, 110.] There is work involved in this saving faith, but the only work that counts is the work of Christ for us as our substitute. There is no work that any man can do that can effect his salvation.
- ✓ **Justification by faith alone** — the only One that can produce our justification is Christ and we believe in Him and Him alone to justify us. In contrast, RC teaches that faith is only the beginning of our salvation, received not through faith, but baptism.

Because pride and self-righteousness are so pervasive, this debate about justification is not a new one; so in this chapter, Paul emphasizes the truth that we have come to summarize in the statement, *sola fide*. Paul's theme in these verses is that —

**JUSTIFICATION IS RECEIVED ONLY BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH.**

In these verses we will find 7 attributes of justifying faith — the kind of faith that leads to justification:

1. **Justifying Faith Trusts in the CHARACTER of God (v. 17)**
  2. **Justifying Faith Persists in HOPE (v. 18)**
  3. **Justifying Faith Trusts God in Spite of CIRCUMSTANCES (v. 19)**
  4. **Justifying Faith Does Not DOUBT God (v. 20a)**
  5. **Justifying Faith ENDURES (v. 20b)**
  6. **Justifying Faith GLORIFIES God (v. 20c)**
  7. **Justifying Faith is CONFIDENT in God's Character and Ability (v. 21)**
- Conclusion: This kind of faith (and ONLY this kind) produces justification (v. 22)**

And Paul will say that the things written about Abraham were “for our sake also” (v. 24) — that is, the way that Abraham came to be justified by God is the same way that we come to be justified.

So if we want to understand the doctrine of *sola fide* — justification by grace alone *through faith alone* in Christ alone — then we must understand the life of Abraham. Nothing about how people are justified has changed from the Old Testament until now; it's always been by grace through faith. It was that way for Abraham and it is that way for us as well.

So how is one justified?

The first attribute of justifying faith is —

### 1. Justifying Faith Trusts in the **CHARACTER** of God (v. 17)

- Abraham believed in the God’s spoken word and promise; when God promised in Gen. 17:5, **A father of many nations have I made you**, Abraham believed because it was God who spoke. He believed in the trustworthy character of the God who spoke to him. He believed in the character of God who made the promise and in the ability of God to fulfill the promise.
- Abraham also believed in the power of God. Specifically, he believed in two manifestations of God’s power:
  - ✓ Abraham believed in **God who gives life to the dead**. That belief would be seen again about 15 years later when he was willing to sacrifice Isaac (Heb. 11:17-19). But it was first demonstrated when he considered his body and his wife’s body to be “dead.” He believed God could still work. To give life to the dead is the unique prerogative of God (Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:22). And an essential attribute of justifying faith is the belief that I am spiritually dead and God can raise me.
  - ✓ Abraham also believed in God who **calls into being that which does not exist**. Paul uses the word **calls** as a summons: God is calling up a new nation of people that does not yet exist, but will. This is God’s effectual call to salvation of those who don’t believe — even Gentiles. It is another reference to the worldwide spiritual progeny that will come from Abraham (Gen. 12:3).
  - ✓ What both these statements at the end of v. 17 point to is Abraham’s explicit trust in the power of God to accomplish what he promised. That’s what justifying faith looks like; it believes in the power of God to accomplish what seemingly can’t be accomplished — the salvation and transformation of sinners. We have justifying faith when we acknowledge, “I know I cannot change myself, but I trust the power of God to change and transform me.”
- So there were truths about God’s nature that informed Abraham’s belief — this was no “blind” faith; it was a faith in God because of certain true realities about God. He believed in the integrity of God’s promise and he believed in the power of God to accomplish His promise. If you and I are going to have a faith that justifies, this is where it begins — a fundamental trust in the word (promise) of God to punish sinners eternally and reward believers with salvation and Himself eternally. And that He has the power to carry out what He promises.

### 2. Justifying Faith Persists in **HOPE** (v. 18)

- Paul speaks about **hope** more than any other NT writer. But biblical **hope** is not like our “secular optimism.” Rather, hope is confidence in God’s provision (5:2, 4-5; 15:12-13).
- And Paul notes that Abraham’s faith was **in hope** and **against hope**.

- ✓ **In hope** means just what it sounds like — Abraham was confident in God and his ability. Abraham believed, “it will be done!”
- ✓ And **against hope** means that Abraham’s hope was against every worldly perception of hope; according to the way men might think about it, his situation was impossible. Abraham’s hope is in against every kind of human reasoning; there was nothing in the world that would affirm his confidence in God; but he still believed.
- ✓ Calvin said, “when he had no grounds for hope, Abraham still relied in hope on the promise of God.”
- ✓ And that is a perfect picture of the faith of the redeemed sinner: when we have no hope for ourselves and our sin problem, we rely on God. We affirm, “I am nothing, and I can do nothing to be right with you, so I trust Christ and Christ alone and confidently trust that is enough.”

The third attribute of justifying faith is —

### 3. Justifying Faith Trusts God in Spite of CIRCUMSTANCES (v. 19)

- Justifying faith is never confident because of external circumstances; justifying faith is the kind of faith that trusts in God despite what we see externally (e.g., Heb. 11:1ff; Rom. 8:24-25).
- Notice that Paul says about Abraham that **without becoming weak in faith, he contemplated his own body** — that is, he did a realistic evaluation of his own physical condition (and Sarah’s). And that contemplation wasn’t a weakness of faith.
  - ✓ **Contemplated** is a careful contemplation of his situation. And he realizes that he is deficient.
  - ✓ But Abraham’s inability and Sarah’s **dead womb** were no impediment to God. Within a year, Isaac was born (Gen. 17:19; 18:14; 21:5).
  - ✓ This is what justifying faith does — it considers one’s circumstances and says, “This is no impediment to God. God is in the business of making dead things alive:
    - The widow’s son at Zarephath (1 Kings 17:17-24)
    - The son of the Shunammite (2 Kings 4:32-37)
    - The man whose dead body was cast into Elisha’s grave (2 Kings 13:21)
    - Jairus’ daughter (Mark 5:35-43)
    - The widow’s son (Luke 7:11-17)
    - He raised Lazarus from the grave (John 11:30-44)
    - He raised many at the time of Jesus’ death (Mt. 27:52-53)
    - He raised Dorcas from the dead (Acts 9:36-43)
    - He raised Eutychus from the dead (Acts 20:9-12)
    - He raised Christ from the grave (Mt. 28:1-20; Mk. 16:1-8)
  - ✓ So He can raise me from the grave of my sins as well. I may be dead in my sins, but God can make me alive in Christ (Eph. 2:1-7).”

There is a fourth attribute of saving faith...

#### 4. Justifying Faith Does Not DOUBT God (v. 20a)

- Paul says that Abraham **did not waver in unbelief**. That is, he wasn't divided in his mind. He was not, as James says, doubting (1:6) to the place where he was "double-souled" (Js. 1:8).
- Additionally, the word "unbelief" doesn't just refer to not believing, but it suggests an active rejection of the faith. And that wasn't Abraham. He did not move toward rejection.
- Now with this, Scripture does acknowledge that Abraham didn't understand how God was going to fulfill the promise. So in Gen. 15:2 he asks, "what will you give me since I am childless...?" And in Gen. 17:17 he **laughed and said in his heart, 'Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old...?'** When Paul says that Abraham didn't waver, he doesn't mean that Abraham believed perfectly without ever wondering or questioning (Abraham was a sinner, too). But Paul is focusing on the overall heart attitude of Abraham — in his heart **with respect to the promise** (note the beginning of the verse) — he was unwaveringly confident: "God will do what He promised." Abraham was single-minded in his trust.
- John MacArthur is helpful here:

"...struggling faith is not doubt, just as temptation to sin is not itself sin. The very fact that Abraham was trying to understand how God's promise could be fulfilled indicates he was *looking* for a way of fulfillment, although he could not yet *see* a way. Weaker faith might have simply succumbed to doubt. Sincere struggling with spiritual problems comes from strong, godly faith. Such faith refuses to doubt and trusts in God's promises, even when no way of fulfillment is humanly imaginable." [Romans 1-8, 265.]

- When Abraham believed God for an heir, he remained confident in God's ability to provide that heir.
- This is the kind of faith that justifies — it is confident that regardless of the situation, God will work His salvation in us. He will complete what He has begun (Phil. 1:6)
- Just one more word about not doubting. There are always some who question the reality of their salvation — they "lack assurance." That does not mean they are not saved. It means that they are not confident in the salvation that has been given to them through the imputation of Christ's righteousness. And that happens most often when they look at themselves and suppose that they are responsible to keep themselves saved (which is why Abraham laughed in Gen. 17:17). But as soon as they look at God, and His responsibility to justify them and keep them justified, they can be confident. Listen to this:

"Christian assurance is not self-assurance and self-confidence. It is the reverse: confidence in our Father, trust in Christ as our Savior, and joy in the Spirit as the Spirit of sonship, seal of grace, and earnest of our inheritance as sons and daughters of God. When these are the hallmarks of our lives, then the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ has come home to us in full measure." [Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 226.]

- If you doubt your salvation this morning; make certain that you are looking to Christ alone for your justification. He *alone* is the basis of our justification; when we are confident in Him, we will not waver.

## 5. Justifying Faith ENDURES (v. 20b)

- Not only did Abraham not waver in unbelief, **but** (a strong contrastive) in fact, he **grew strong in faith**.
  - ✓ Instead of destroying his faith in God, his circumstances deepened (strengthened) his trust in God.
  - ✓ The verb **grew strong** is significant — it doesn't mean that he made himself grow strong; it means that as he demonstrated faith (and lived by faith), God strengthened him.
  - ✓ So he believes and he trusts, and God makes him strong in that process.
  - ✓ Paul himself is an example of this kind of growing and enduring faith. Notice **Phil. 3:8-9**. He is justified on the basis of faith (v. 9). And the result of that justification is conformity to Christ (v. 10).
  - ✓ This is another way to affirm that genuine faith is not a faith without works. Justifying faith has works, but they are not the cause of justification; rather, they are the result of justification. And Abraham is also an illustration of that principle:
    - **James 2:21** seems to suggest that Abraham was declared just on the basis of his works.
    - But v. 18 makes clear that James is talking about the evidence of faith that is given as the result of works; works do not precede faith, but they always do follow faith.
    - And this is made clear if we look carefully at James' argument: v. 21 happened when Isaac was approximately 13 and Abraham 113 (Genesis 22); but Abraham was declared just in Gen. 15:6 (Js. 2:13), at least 25 years prior to that (and maybe as much as 40 years). So the justification James speaks of in v. 21 is the *evidence* of Abraham's enduring faith. He believed and then he gave evidence of his faith through his works of obedience to the Lord.
  - ✓ So we say that justification is by faith alone, but that faith is never alone — true faith always produces good works as the fruit of our faith.
- For Abraham to be strong in faith is another way of saying that he persisted. He kept trusting and as he trusted (for perhaps as many as 25 years without the birth of Isaac), he became increasingly stronger in his faith. (Note **Heb. 11:8-12**.) A true faith isn't a perfect faith; but it is a faith that doesn't leave God (**2 Tim. 4:10; 1 Jn. 2:19**).

## 6. Justifying Faith GLORIFIES God (v. 20c)

- Then Paul notes that Abraham, through the strength of his faith, was **giving glory to God**.
- Everything in life is about the glory of God (Josh. 7:19; 1 Sam. 6:5; **1 Chron. 16:28-29; Is. 42:12**; Jer. 13:16; Acts 12:23; **Rom. 11:36; 1 Cor. 8:6**; Rev. 19:7). Everything is about the glory of God because only God is glorious. And that means that our justification is ultimately about God's glory as well — our justification does not exalt us, but it exalts God.
- "No greater honour can be given to God than by sealing His truth by our faith." [Calvin]

- When Abraham trusts God for some 25 years for the first part of the fulfillment to the promise and doesn't waver and only grows in trust of God, and then God fulfills the promise, who gets the glory? Not Abraham. No one says, "Wow, Abraham, you did it!" They say, "Wow, Abraham! You persisted in believing in God and *He* has done it!" When we persist in faith towards God, He gets the glory, not us. And that's exactly the way it should be. Note the example Jesus offers in **Lk. 18:9-14**.
  - ✓ What this phrase implies is that one of the things that glorifies (reveals) God is our faith in Him. When we trust His goodness, truthfulness, reliability, and promises, then people are pointed to Him.
  - ✓ The fundamental sin of unbelievers is not giving glory to God (**1:21-23**). When they deny God His glory, they will look to *anything* else to find their pleasure (vv. 24-28). But faith is just the opposite: it gives up *everything* else in order to find pleasure in God and trusting Him.
  - ✓ Real faith is focused pre-eminently on God — who He is and what He has done. "Godly faith glorifies God; the one who gives faith receives all the credit. Conversely, any faith that does *not* glorify God is not of or from Him." [MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, 265.]
- It seems redundant to say it, but a justifying faith is a faith that focuses on God and His glory and denies any ability in man to be righteous before God. I'm not only incapable of saving myself, but I am spiritually bankrupt (Mt. 5:3) and dead (Eph. 2:1-3). So only God can save me. That glorifies Him.

"Either I bring something to the acceptance of God by grace or I do not. If I bring nothing, then I am saved by, or through, *faith alone*. If I bring anything to God's acceptance of me as a guilty sinner, then I have some room for boasting. If I bring nothing then all I can do is rely entirely on Christ and His righteousness." [John Armstrong, in *Justification by Faith Alone*, 141.] *And then (and only then) God is glorified!*

## 7. Justifying Faith is **CONFIDENT** in God's Character and Ability (v. 21)

- And all these truths point to one reality — only God can justify sinners. No sinner can justify himself.
  - ✓ Despite the circumstances, the delayed fulfillment of God's promises, and the likely comments of derision from his friends, Abraham was **fully assured**. He was completely, fully convinced. His mind was filled with one compelling thought and idea: God can do this. He promised. And He will fulfill His promise.
  - ✓ So Paul notes also that Abraham was confident that God **was able to perform...** As we've seen throughout these verses, not only was Abraham's faith in the promise, but his faith was in God who made the promise. He believed because *God* had spoken.

"...the doctrine of justification by faith is like Atlas: it bears a world on its shoulders, the entire evangelical knowledge of saving grace. The doctrines of election, of effectual calling, regeneration, and repentance, of adoption, of prayer, of the church, the ministry, and the sacraments, have all to be interpreted and understood in the light of justification by faith...."

“A society like the Church of Rome, which is committed by its official creed to pervert the doctrine of justification, has sentenced itself to a distorted understanding of salvation at every point. Nor can these distortions ever be corrected till the Roman doctrine of justification is put right. *And something similar happens when Protestants let the thought of justification drop out of their minds*: the true knowledge of salvation drops out with it, and cannot be restored till the truth of justification is back in its proper place. When Atlas falls, everything that rested on his shoulders comes crashing down too.” [J. I. Packer, in the “Preface” of James Buchanan’s *The Doctrine of Justification*.]

- This is the essence of saving faith: it has no confidence in self, and it has every confidence in God. Abraham’s faith in God was “complete and unqualified” [MacArthur]. And that is what justifying faith is.

“Such faith in God should not be confused with breezy optimism, nor does it involve a denial of external reality. The promise that Abraham believed was that he would be the father of many nations and have many descendents...What sustained Abraham in his faith, then, was a vision of the God who could do the impossible, not a confidence that he himself could faithfully bring the promise to pass.” [Schreiner, 235-6.]

### **CONCLUSION: This kind of faith (and ONLY this kind) produces justification (v. 22)**

- Here is the conclusion that Paul draws from Abraham’s life:
  - ✓ **Therefore**...that is, because of all these qualities of faith in Abraham’s life, God acted on his behalf. Here is the result of Abraham’s faith.
  - ✓ **It was also credited to him as righteousness.** This is where the chapter began (v. 3); and now for the third time Paul quotes Gen. 15:6 (see also v. 9). Abraham was not righteous on his own, but he was declared to be righteous by God because of his faith. And it is still this kind of faith — and only this kind of faith — that will justify sinners.
- What kind of faith must one have to be justified? Let me simplify these seven attributes:
  - ✓ You must have the kind of faith that repudiates any ability to save yourself — you must have an accurate understanding of your spiritual deadness (as Abraham’s body was reproductively dead).
  - ✓ You must have the kind of faith that trusts completely and only in God’s ability to make you alive, even though you are now spiritually dead.
  - ✓ You must have the kind of faith that persists in trusting, even when circumstances are different than what you desire — Abraham demonstrated the reality of his faith by persisting with God through decades of unanswered promises and prayers.
  - ✓ Said even more simply, you must have the kind of faith that says, “I can’t; God can (and must).”

- Friends, this text is asking all of us this morning about the kind of faith we have.
  - ✓ What have these truths revealed about your faith? Do you have the kind of faith Abraham did?
  - ✓ Do you have the kind of faith that rejects your ability to justify yourself?
  - ✓ Do you have the kind of faith that trusts only in God's ability to make you alive?
  - ✓ Do you have the kind of faith that has persisted in trusting God?
  - ✓ If you answered "yes," then you are demonstrating saving faith.
  - ✓ If you answered, "no," then friend, you may well be self-deluded and not a follower of Christ. You cannot save yourself; the only way to be just before God is to appeal to God for the righteousness of Christ to be imputed (accounted) to you, even though you aren't righteous. And when you believe in faith that God will do that, then He will save you.
  - ✓ If you do not have saving faith today, will you begin trusting in Christ alone for your justification today? If you are unsure, I'd love to talk to you more after the service this morning.
  - ✓ All men are sinners, under the wrath of God (3:9). Our only hope is to trust Christ alone for our justification and salvation.

**BENEDICTION:** Jude 24-25