

Lesson 41 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 4:3, Continued

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

Last week we started looking at verse 3, and, as we so often do, we found Paul turning to the Old Testament for evidence to support his argument. And, again, we know that Paul did the same thing when he taught in the synagogues.

Acts 17:2-3 — And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days **he reasoned with them from the Scriptures**, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”

He reasoned with them from the Scriptures. That is the same thing that we see Paul also doing here.

The issue is whether Abraham was justified by works or by faith, and verse 3 tells us it was the latter. Abraham was not justified by his works — either by perfect obedience to the law (which we know was not true of Abraham) or by almost perfect obedience to the law (which many of the Jews, no doubt, believed was true about their illustrious forefather). But Abraham was not justified by his works, no matter how great some of those works may have been.

And what verse from the Old Testament proves all of that? It is, of course, the verse that Paul quotes.

Genesis 15:6 — And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

We looked at the background of that verse last week, and what we found is that Abraham was not at a spiritual high point in Genesis 15. Instead, Abraham was at a spiritual low point. But, even so, Abraham believed and trusted in God anyway.

Abraham believed in the promises of God, not based on what he was seeing, but despite what he was seeing. He was old and childless — could he still be the father of many nations? God said yes, and Abraham believed him. Abraham had faith in the promises of God. He trusted those promises, and he relied upon those promises.

And let's think about our own lives for a moment. When do we, like Abraham, experience the greatest times of faith? Is it when everything is going our way? Is it when it is easy to believe that God is with us? Or is it when everything goes wrong, and we are tempted to think that God has abandoned us, but when, even from those depths, we reach out to God in faith, trust, and reliance?

Have we ever experienced anything like that? Have we ever experienced some point in our lives when, from a very low point, we appealed to God in faith, trust, and reliance? Yes — we all have. Every Christian has. If you are a Christian, then that is exactly how you were saved — and Paul will tell us all about that very soon.

Romans 6:4 — We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

And Peter also describes it.

1 Peter 3:21 — Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

God does not save us on the mountain top; God saves us in the valley. God saves us when, from the depths of sin and bondage and death, we are buried with Christ in baptism as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is when we arise from that watery grave to walk in newness of life having put off the old man of sin!

And yet, incredibly, the denominations tell us that baptism is a meritorious work. Do you know one of the easiest and quickest ways to disprove that false belief about baptism? It is to look at the very next verse in Romans 4. Why? Because, although Romans 4 does not mention the word “baptism”, it most certainly mentions the word “works.” In fact, the next verse defines what Paul means by that word — and (as we will see) Paul’s definition differs from the denominational definition.

We often hear today that baptism, unlike belief, is a work — but does that make any sense? Yes, baptism is (at least in some sense) something that we do (we, like the eunuch in Acts 8:38, go down into the water), but baptism is much better described as something that is done **to us** than as something done **by us**.

And doesn’t the grammar itself tell us that? What are the steps of salvation? Hear, Repent, Believe, Confess, Be Baptized. Each of those steps is an active verb (a verb in which the subject does the action),

except one. Be baptized is a passive verb (a verb in which the subject receives the action). Why do the denominations pick out the one and only passive verb on that list and say that it alone is a work? Does that make any sense?

I like what Lipscomb and Shepherd had to say on this issue in their commentary on Romans, as shown on the Handout for Lesson 41:

Baptism is sometimes called a work of the person baptized, and it is sometimes claimed that if a man is pardoned in baptism it would be salvation through works; but baptism has fewer of the qualities of works of the person baptized than either faith or repentance. ... The person baptized gives himself up into the hands of the administrator, and is buried out of self, to be raised up in Christ... When a man dies and his friends take his body and bury it, no one could call it a work of the man buried. This is the true type of him who is baptized. And there is no more propriety in calling baptism the work of the man baptized than there is in calling a burial the work of the person buried. Baptism is a work of God performed upon the man baptized through his servant to bring him, dead in trespasses and sins, into the state of life with God. The life is imparted through faith; it turns from sin in repentance and puts off the body of sin in baptism.

Paul elsewhere describes baptism as a powerful working, not of man, but of God.

Colossians 2:12 — Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith **in the powerful working of God**, who raised him from the dead.

As we said when we started this chapter, many people rely on it for their view of baptism — which is odd. Why? Because Romans 4

doesn't mention baptism! And what is doubly odd is that those same people seemingly ignore Romans 6, where Paul describes exactly how we are saved at the point of our baptism.

Given that, some might wonder why we are having so much to say on the topic of baptism in a chapter that doesn't mention the word. And the answer, of course, is that we need to refute the false views of baptism that come from their false views of Romans 4. We can't do that without mentioning baptism.

Moving on, verse 3 tells us something very important about justification: justification is a process rather than a single event. Yes, justification involves events in my life, but justification is much more than just any single event in my life.

Baptism, for example, is the moment at which we begin our walk with Christ — but baptism is the starting point for that walk; baptism is not the ending point. We find the ending point of our walk of faith described elsewhere.

Revelation 2:10b — Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

The starting point of our walk of faith is a **watery** grave, and the ending point of our walk of faith is an **actual** grave — when faith becomes sight.

But how does verse 4 tell us that? How does this verse about Abraham teach us that justification is a process?

Paul just quoted Genesis 15:6 to show that Abraham was justified by faith rather than by works. **But when?** When was Abraham justified by faith? Did Abraham's justification by faith begin in Genesis 15?

No, it did not. We can see Abraham's faith in God in Genesis 12. In fact, we can see Abraham's faith in God even before Abraham lived in Haran. Stephen describes that faith in Acts 7, as does the Hebrews writer.

Hebrews 11:8-10 — By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

And so we can see the faith of Abraham **prior** to Genesis 15, but we can also see Abraham's faith in God **after** Genesis 15. In fact, when James quotes Genesis 15 in James 2:21-23, he points us to the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 for its fulfillment. The only way to explain that is to see justification as a lifelong walk of faith rather than as a single event. We will have more to say about that later in verse 10 when Paul himself asks this same question: when Abraham was justified by faith — “was it before or after he had been circumcised?”

And so where are we when it comes to Abraham? What have we learned so far?

- We have learned that Abraham was not justified by his works. If he had been, then he could have boasted about all that he had

done for God. But Abraham was not justified by his works, and so his boasting was excluded.

- We have learned that Abraham was justified by faith. That is what Genesis 15:6 told us. Paul will return to that fact later in this chapter and ask when it happened.
- We have learned that Abraham's justification by faith was a process rather than an event. Yes, we see that great faith in Genesis 15, but we also see that great faith in Genesis 12 (as Stephen tells us in Acts 7) and in Genesis 22 (as James, the brother of Christ, tells us in James 2). Abraham's saving faith in God was not a **moment** of faith, but instead was a **walk** of faith.

The denominations tell us that justification by faith occurs the moment when we have some particular thought about God, and that once we are justified by having had that particular thought about God we are justified forever without regard to anything we ever do or think from that point forward. But is that what we see with Abraham in the Old Testament? It is not, and it is also not what we see in the New Testament.

Justification by faith is a process. Our walk with God begins when we arise a new creation from the watery grave of baptism — but that cleansing is the first step of a walk of faith that continues until we die, faithful unto death, and we receive the crown of life.

But do we earn our salvation by that lifelong walk of faith? We do not. Our salvation is a gift freely given by God to his faithful children — it is not something we earn. And there is no explanation of that fact anywhere in the Bible that is more clear than the very next verse.

Romans 4:4

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

What does Paul mean when he uses the word “works”? Is he referring to just any physical action of any sort? Is he contrasting our works with our thoughts? Is he saying that you can’t work your way into heaven, but you can sure think your way into heaven? Is he contrasting a system based on doing with a system based on believing? Paul answers all of those questions here in verse 4.

What is the meaning of the word “work”? We commonly use the word ourselves in at least three different ways.

First, we sometimes use the word “work” to refer to any physical activity or exertion that we do, such as working in the yard or working out at the gym.

Second, we often use the word “work” to describe what we do to earn a living such as going to work every day so we can get paid and provide for our family. We “work” 9-to-5, but we hope we don’t have to “work” on the weekends.

Third, we sometimes use the word “work” to describe purely mental activity such as “brain work” or “mental labor.” We “work” on a crossword puzzle. We “work” out a solution to a difficult riddle. We “work” out the meaning of a difficult passage. We “work” on learning a new language. (And, yes, thinking is certainly hard work! If it weren’t, I suspect more people would do it.)

And which of those meanings, if any, do we find here in verse 4? Let's read it again: "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due."

That is the second meaning on our list — working to get paid our wages. Verse 4 is not any and all physical activity, but only those activities for which we are owed wages.

And verse 4 is not just about *physical* activities. Verse 4 would include mental activity if you are paid for that mental activity. The key point in verse 4 is the *payment* for the work rather than the *type* of work. I did the work, and so I am owed my wages for having done that work. That is the work we find in verse 4.

So what about the common belief today that the word "work" in Romans refers to just any physical action that we perform? That view is wrong for at least two reasons.

First, it is wrong because Paul is very clearly talking only about the work for which we are owed wages. But second, that view is wrong because it excludes mental work. (And, yes, that wrong argument about work often comes from professors who receive wages just for thinking about the text!)

And maybe those people who loudly shout that baptism is a meritorious work and that all we need to do is believe should look in the mirror. Are they treating their own belief as a meritorious work?

After all, Jesus called belief a work in John 6:29, and Paul talked about working out your own salvation in Philippians 2:12. If I believe something about God and then demand my salvation, isn't that belief a meritorious work?

Again, and as Paul tells us here, the key is the payment for the work rather than the type of work. The issue in determining whether something is meritorious work is not **what** we are doing, but rather is **why** we are doing it. If I am doing or thinking something to earn wages, then that thing I am doing or thinking is a work as Paul defines the term here in verse 4.

I did something or thought something, and then, because I did or thought that thing, I am owed a wage. I earned that wage. I can demand that wage. I merited that wage. And if I don't get that wage, I'll see you in court!

I think we all know what that means because I suspect we all view our own jobs that way. We don't view our paycheck as a gift; we view it as our due — something we earned; something we are owed; something we can demand.

If I do anything (physical or mental) and then believe that God is in my debt, then I am treating that thing I did (either physical or mental) as a meritorious work. And I am not saved by any meritorious work.

But if I do something that God has commanded me to do to be saved, and after doing that thing God freely gives me the gift of salvation — meaning that I did not earn that gift and that I cannot demand that gift and that I was not owed that gift — then I am saved through my obedience to the gospel of Christ.

And isn't that exactly what we see in Acts 2? People who were cut to the heart by the terrible things they had done, people who asked what they must do to be saved, people who were told what they must do,

people who did what they were commanded to do, and then people who were saved by God and added to the body of Christ by God?

We see all of that in Acts 2. Has the gospel changed since that time? It has not. And Paul is not proclaiming a different gospel here in Romans.

Romans 4:5

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

“And to the one who does not work.” Does that mean to the one who does not perform any physical action of any sort? Is this verse contrasting doing with believing? Of course not! Paul just defined “work” in the previous verse — why don’t we use the definition here that Paul just gave us in the previous verse?

“And to the one who does not work.” When we look at the previous verse for the meaning of “work,” what do we find? What we find is that “the one who does not work” means “the one who does not work for wages that are his due.” That is how Paul just defined the word.

A saving faith is an obedience faith that trusts completely in God and that relies completely upon God. A saving faith never says to God, “you owe me.” A saving faith is grateful to God for the free gift of salvation.

That is the contrast that we see in these verses — the one who works for wages versus the one who believes in him who justifies the ungodly. The contrast is not doing versus thinking. The contrast is

boasting in what I have done for God versus boasting in what God has done for me. The contrast is earning righteousness as wages versus receiving righteousness as a free gift.

And, again, a contrast between doing and thinking makes no sense here. If I believed what God told me, and then I thought God owed me my salvation because I believed what he told me, that belief of mine would be just as much of a meritorious work as anything else I might have done.

If I try to *earn* my salvation by *thinking* all of the right things, I am just as wrong as if I tried to *earn* my salvation by *doing* all of the right things. And when the denominations draw a line between thinking and doing, they are drawing a line that finds no support in the Scriptures.

Oh, but some might say, “that line is right here in verse 5! The one who does not work but believes! Right there is a line between thinking and doing!”

But is that right? Is that what we see in the Bible? More to the point, is that what we see with Abraham? No, it is not.

First, and we should keep this fact in mind all throughout our study of Romans, the word “believe” here in verse 5 is just the verb form of the word “faith.” If the English language had a verb form for faith, that is what we would see here: “The one who does not work but *faiths*!”

But most people don’t know that. They see that word “believes” in verse 5, and they think about it as being just a purely mental action. I believe that God exists. I believe that 2 + 2 equals 4. I believe that the world is round. But that is not the saving faith that we find in

the Bible. Instead, that sort of belief in God is simply how we identify fools (Psalm 14:1)! According to the Bible, belief in God is a very low bar!

A saving faith is always a doing faith. Don't we see that in Hebrews 11, the great faith chapter?

- By faith Abel **offered**.
- By faith Noah **built**.
- By faith Abraham **went**.
- By faith Moses **refused**.
- By faith the people **crossed**.

A saving faith is always a doing faith. James tells us that as clearly as it can be told.

James 2:14-26 — What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? **Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his**

son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” — and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

How can we make sense of James 2:21 and Romans 4:1-5? On the surface it seems as if James is saying that Abraham was justified by works while Paul is saying that Abraham was not justified by works. Is there a contradiction? No, there is not. We know that there is not. If we think we see a contradiction between James and Paul, then the problem is our own misunderstanding of what they are saying. And the solution is not to toss James out the window (as Luther and many others have done), but rather is to understand James and Paul together.

The denominations teach that Paul is contrasting doing with thinking, but as we see in verse 4 that is not what Paul is doing. But does anyone in the Bible do that? Does anyone in the Bible contrast doing with thinking? Yes, that is what James does.

When we look at what James tells us, what we find is that James is describing the exact sort of faith that the denominations loudly trumpet on TV — the sort of faith that never leaves your head — the sort of faith that is purely mental.

Paul and James are doing two different things. Paul is contrasting a salvation that is earned with a salvation that is freely given. James is

contrasting a salvation that involves only thinking with a salvation that also involves doing.

And do you know really interesting part of all of that? James and Paul do those two different things by looking at the same example — Abraham.

When we think about the great faith of Abraham, I think we all think first of God's command to sacrifice Isaac. From a purely human perspective, that command made absolutely no sense. All of God's great promises to Abraham hinged on the birth of Isaac, and now God was commanding Abraham to kill Isaac.

And, yet, Abraham believed. Abraham had faith in God. Abraham continued to trust in God and rely upon the promises of God. Abraham obeyed God.

And here is the million-dollar question: **when?** When did God know that about Abraham? Was it when Abraham thought something, or was it when Abraham did something? If Abraham's belief about the command to sacrifice Isaac was counted to him as righteousness, when did that happen? Let's read about it.

Genesis 22:1-12 — After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." **So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to**

the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.” And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. **Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.** But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, **for now I know** that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

When did God know that Abraham had faith in him? Was it when Abraham heard God’s command and then rose early the next day to take Isaac to the place of sacrifice? And I think that word “rose” is important there. Abraham did not **wake** up, but rather he **rose** up. Does anyone think Abraham slept at all that night?

God knew every thought that Abraham had, and God knew the decision that Abraham made. And if that sort of purely mental assent was enough, then why didn’t God tell Abraham to quit packing his bags?

Abraham had already made the right decision — he was on his way to obey God! What more did God need to know?

And yet the text we just read tells us that Abraham's mental decision was not enough. God did not say "for now I know" when Abraham rose up that morning. Instead, we do not find that statement until later — not when Abraham raised himself up from the bed, but when Abraham raised the knife! It was then, and not before, that the angel of the Lord said, "**for now I know** that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, **from me.**"

For now I know. That statement was made, not after Abraham **thought** something, but after Abraham **did** something. For **now** I know!

Now, let's go back to what James tells us about that same event.

James 2:20-24 — Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? **Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?** You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" — and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

James is not telling us that Abraham earned his justification. Instead, James is describing Abraham's faith — and James is telling us that Abraham's faith was not just something that lived inside Abraham's head.

There is nothing in James that contradicts anything Paul tells us, and there is nothing that Paul tells us that contradicts anything in James.