

Exhibit A

by Ray C. Stedman

The opening chapters of Paul's great letter to the Romans are concerned with the introductory step of Christian life – justification by faith – faith in the death of Jesus Christ: Not faith in his life, but faith in his death. The alphabet of Christianity begins with the letter *A* – *Atonement*. And this is what we have in these first chapters – the place where God and man meet. As we see clearly from this, the only place where God meets man is at the foot of the cross – there God and man can meet.

The best way to impart truth is to illustrate it. If the speaker can put present truth in some graphic, pictorial form it makes it live. The writers of Scripture are very much aware of that fact, so Paul begins to illustrate now what he has already said to us. Romans 4 is nothing but one beautiful illustration.

Now, the best illustration is a living person, so Paul calls in Abraham as the illustration of what he means by being *justified by faith*. So, if you have had any problems about this doctrine, I suggest you pay close attention to the illustration because that should make it clear – as you see how it works in a living individual.

We will only read the first section of this, in order to get our bearings, and then we will dwell on the highlights of the rest.

Abraham is what we might call Exhibit A when it comes to justification by faith. This chapter is a closely-reasoned argument which was aimed at the Jewish mind, and, because it is so Jewish in its content and appeal, we don't have to spend time with the details, but, rather, we will look at the highlights, and then make the applications to our own hearts.

There are four points to Paul's illustration of Abraham here – four things that Abraham's life teaches us about justification by faith:

The first of them is **the fact of faith**. That is, the fact that justification is by faith, and no other

way. I'm going to read the full section here so you can see what I mean, beginning with Chapter 3, Verse 27:

Then what becomes of our boastings? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised because of their faith. Do we then overthrow the law by faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

What then shall we say about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

"Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin."

{Rom 3:27-4:8 RSV}

Now, the key to this portion of the illustration is Verse 28 of Chapter 3. Paul says, "For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law," and then he says that Abraham is a perfect illustration of that fact.

As you think of this, the question comes, "How did Abraham obtain such a high position of privi-

lege and favor with God?” Admittedly, Abraham is one of the great religious names of all time. His name is honored by three of the great religions of the earth: Judaism, Mohammedanism, and Christianity. They all hold him in the highest regard. And, in God’s sight, in the Scriptures, he is set forth in a tremendous place of favor – given the title, “The friend of God,” {Jas 2:23}.

Now, how did he get there? That is the question. Was it by a lifetime of good works and trying to please God? And Paul’s answer is: “No, of course not. For if that were the case, God would owe Abraham righteousness as his just due, and Abraham could boast in the fact that he had done enough good works to gain something from God.” Paul says that you can never achieve righteousness by working in that way – righteousness does not come that way – he had already proved that. So he quotes the Scriptures that tell us how Abraham gained such a place of favor in God’s sight: “Abraham,” we are told, “believed God,” {cf, Gen 15:6a}. That is all. God had promised Abraham something, based upon God’s own ability to perform; Abraham simply believed, and, when he believed, he obtained the righteousness that he sought {cf, Gen 15:6b}.

Now, this is proof, you see, that true righteousness is obtained only by believing – nothing else – by simply believing God.

I realize that this word “believe” has been stamped on, stretched out, and pulled, and twisted, and wrung dry until it has lost its meaning in the mind of modern man. It has been used to cover everything from soup to nuts:

- We have a popular song, *I believe*, and, if you listen to it, you find it’s “I believe in nothing,” really. All the way through, this word “believe” is pinned to every little thing in order to make it acceptable, without ever specifying what to believe about.
- This week, perhaps, you read of the death of Adolf Eichmann by hanging in Israel, and that just as he stood on the platform, ready to step into eternity, he said these words: “I have lived believing in God, and I die believing in God.” Now, that kind of belief resulted in the murder of six million people – and that is not the kind of belief that the Bible is talking about.

You see how this word “believe” is misused? I would like to use a modern equivalent for this word – a phrase that, perhaps, you don’t usually associate with the word “believe,” but I think it makes it clear and vivid to us as to what Abraham did that made him acceptable to God. Let me substitute this phrase: Abraham *made room for God* in his life. Now that is what believing is: Abraham *practiced* God. He didn’t become righteous and then go around looking for God. He simply, in his sin and failure, *made room for God* and God made him righteous.

In all the history of the world, that is the only way that men ever become righteous before God – to start with making room for God in the life. And, *when* men do this, when they let God into their daily experience, and believe God enough to make room for him, *then* God begins to take over and make the life righteous. That is what happened to Abraham. Abraham *believed* God, he *made room for him*,

- He began to *talk* to him,
- He began to *walk* with him,
- He began to *listen* to him,
- He began to *pay* attention to him,

and the minute he did, God credited him with righteousness, and began to make it real in his experience.

Then David is called in as a witness – a confirming witness to the same thing. And, of course, these two names, Abraham and David, would carry a great deal of weight with the Jewish mind: Abraham was the great father of the nation, and David was its greatest king. Here are two of the greatest names in all of Israel testifying to the fact that nobody is made righteous before God *by good works*, but, rather, *by believing what God says*. Here we come to David’s testimony. It is interesting the passage that we have quoted here is the 32nd Psalm. From that Psalm are taken these words:

**“Blessed is he whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.
Blessed [or happy] is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin.”
{Rom 4:7-8 RSV; cf, Psa 32:1-2}**

If you look back into the history of David, you will find that he uttered these words at a time when his hands were red with the blood of Uriah, the Hittite. He had murdered a man. Also his heart was black with the sin of his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. He had fallen into moral iniquity, and at the time that he committed this terrible double sin of murder and adultery, when everything in his being cried out to run away and hide from God, David did not try to brazen it out, but, instead, *made room for God*, and came to him, and flung the whole dirty mess before God, and asked to be forgiven. He wrote these words: “Blessed is he whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed (or happy) is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin.”

St. Augustine, that great leader of the early church, had these words engraved on a plaque, and hung at the foot of his bed, so that every night he could look at them. Here was another young man with a checkered past. Until his dying day, the last thing his eyes fell upon were these words of David: “Blessed is the man upon whom the Lord will not impute iniquity.”

Now, you see, this is justification by faith. And it shows that righteousness begins with the fact of faith – making room for God in our lives.

Now, this isn’t all, because there is also the question of **the time for faith**, Verse 9:

Is this blessing pronounced only upon the circumcised, or also upon the uncircumcised? We say that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it reckoned to him? Was it reckoned to him before or after he was circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. {Rom 4:9-10 RSV}

Now why does he bring all this in? Well, you can see the argument, can’t you? The Jew thought that circumcision was what made a man acceptable to God, just as today many people think that baptism is what makes a man acceptable.

There are millions of people today in this country who have been taught as children, and who, even as adults, think that the thing that makes them acceptable to God is the fact that they were baptized, or that they joined a church, or some other thing.

But Paul points out that Abraham was declared righteous *years before he was circumcised*, and that circumcision was only a sign of righteousness which he had already by faith. This is simply saying (we won’t trace the whole argument because it applied mostly to the Jewish mind) that it is not only necessary to *make room for God* in your life, but it is necessary to make room for God *first* – this is the first thing! This is what makes blessing from God possible, and everything else follows from it. In other words, God must be *the most important* and *the most evident* fact of your life.

I was impressed recently, in teaching through the opening chapters of Genesis, to read again the story of Noah and the flood. One thing struck me as remarkable: When Noah came out of the Ark after the flood (remember it landed on the top pinnacle of Mount Ararat in Armenia, a mountain that is some 16,000 feet high), and stepped out into a different world than he had left, a world that must have been drastically changed in all its outward appearance, the *first* thing that he did was to *build an altar* and *give thanks* to God. Now, I think that is remarkable, because, if you remember, there were emergency conditions – this was the only surviving remnant of the race, stepping out into a different world than they had left before. It would be something analogous to the landing of the first human being on the moon, or some distant planet of the solar system. These are conditions in which life is at stake. When they came out of the Ark all their place of safety was left behind. There was nothing but mud, and chaos, and debris everywhere around.

What would you and I do if we were back in those conditions? Wouldn’t we say: “Well, now look, let’s find a place where there is some dry ground and see if we can’t get a little shelter erected here. Let’s see if we can find some dry wood, and get a fire going, and get some supper on.” Maybe, *after* we had taken care of our need for food, raiment, and shelter, *then* we’d say, “Let’s have a thanksgiving service, and give thanks to God.” But, the remarkable thing is that Noah knelt down in the mud, with all his family, and the *first* thing they did was to give thanks to God. That is why Noah was saved – because he made room for God as the most important thing in his life.

I think that is a very revealing thing for us today. Why is it that we think that we have to do everything ourselves in our lives? Isn’t it because we have forgotten, by and large, this great truth –

that God is the first and most important fact in human life – and we put him way down on the list somewhere (as I've said before) somewhere after our second heart attack – *then* we have time for God.

- We have to get an education first,
- We have to make our living,
- We have to educate our children,
- We have to see the world,

and *then*, as we come to the close of life, then it is time for faith, then it is time to discover God.

Isn't this what Jesus was hitting at when he said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" {Matt 6:33 KJV}, and then, with a little touch of contempt, he said, "and all these things" you are struggling after will "be added unto you."

Well, that is the time when faith should come – *first* – before any rituals, or ordinances, and even before some of the other necessary things of life.

Now, in Verse 13, we have **the effect of faith**. We read:

The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. {Rom 4:13 RSV}

Here is something new. Paul points out that righteousness couldn't come through the Law, because it had to be by faith. The key phrase here is "inherit the world." The promise to Abraham and his descendants is "that they should inherit the world."

Many of you have thought, perhaps, that the Christian life was a narrow, drab, colorless affair. There are many people who think of Christians as being narrow-minded, rigid people who live in a tightly restricted area that has no enjoyment, no liberty, and no freedom. This is far from the case.

We are told that Abraham lived in the land of Canaan as a sojourner; that is, he never owned a square foot of the land, but he was free to have the entire land. As you read the life of Abraham, it is remarkable to see that though the Hittites, and the Canaanites, and Perizzites, and all the other "ites," dwelt in the land, that wherever Abraham wanted to move, he could go – they all moved out of the way

when he got there. In other words, he had the right to go and use the whole land, though he didn't own any of it. "And some day," Jesus said, "men will come from the east and the west and the north and the south and sit down with Abraham and Isaac in the kingdom of God" {cf, Matt 8:11 KJV}, and he will have the whole world. This promise is literally true. Abraham will own the world, and all his friends will enjoy it with him. Jesus said so.

This is exactly what the Christian life is like. The Christian appears to renounce the world and turn his back upon the immediate advantages of the world, but, in so doing, he finds himself free to use it as he will. And, someday, all of it will be his. Let me read this promise to you from Paul's letter to the Corinthians,

So let no one boast of men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's. {1 Cor 3:21-23 RSV}

Communists speak of themselves as the wave of the future. How wrong they are! Paul says that "the world, or life, or death, or the present, or the future, all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's." One day this promise will be literally fulfilled, in the day when the sons of God are manifested and the whole creation (which is now straining and groaning, waiting for the day when the curse shall be lifted) shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into glorious liberty of the sons of God, and shall break forth into bloom {cf, Rom 8:18-25}, and we shall see the fulfillment of this promise.

Somebody has said that life is like a funnel: There are two ends to a funnel; you can enter it at either end. The non-Christian, the worldling, enters at the broad end and wants life to be at its broadest. He is constantly seeking to fling back the bars and to enjoy life at its fullest. So he enters the broad end of the funnel, and, as he proceeds, he finds that, inexorably, it grows narrower and narrower and more limited and restricted, until, at last, it is nothing but a tiny narrow aperture where there is hardly room to live, and it not worth the effort. This is why so many finally blow their brains out – take their own life – because life is no longer worth living, it has become so restricted and narrow and

limited. But the Christian life is like entering the other end of the funnel. At first it seems narrow. At first it seems like you are being denied some things. But, as you go on, it begins to broaden out, becoming wider and wider, until, at last, as the apostle says, “all things are yours” – the universe and all that is in it. As John says, “The world passes away and the lusts thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever” {cf, 1 Jn 2:17 KJV}.

That is the effect of faith.

There is one more thing here – **the nature of faith**. This comes to us from Verse 17 to the end. Paul says about Abraham:

as it written, “I have made you the father of many nations” – in the presence of God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your descendants be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. {Rom 4:17-21 RSV}

This was, of course, concerning the promise that God had given him that he would he would have a son; and, though he was 100 years old, and his body was now dead in that sense, and Sarah’s womb was barren, Abraham believed God.

Remember those opening words of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, the great faith chapter? Here we are given the only definition of faith in Scripture. In the modern version, it reads, “Now faith is the confidence of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” {Heb 11:1}. That is, faith is the feeling of confidence that we will obtain what we hope for, based upon a conviction that there are things unseen that will bring these things to pass. Abraham counted on the unseen God.

If we believe in God at all, we must believe that he is the God who can do the impossible. And, as we read here, he is the God who calls into existence

the things that do not exist, who gives life to the dead. Obviously, he is the that kind of God or he is not God at all. Now, if we have to do with a God like that, then, obviously, we can expect that he can do things, even though, apparently, it seems as though he is making no progress in it. Faith, then, is the confidence that things you hope to be yours will come, despite all the present difficulties, and contrary to all the immediate evidence.

That is what Abraham experienced. As he went along, nothing seemed to be happening:

- No child came into their family,
- His own body grew older and older, deader and deader, and
- Sarah’s womb remained barren.

But Abraham wasn’t looking at these things. He was looking at the God who calls life out of death, and calls into existence the things that do not yet have existence. Because he had confidence in that kind of God, it didn’t bother him a bit what was happening in his own life. In the course of time, as you know, the record stands that promise was fulfilled.

Let me say this to you: This is the way a man comes to Christ. This is the way that I came to Christ. I read the Bible, and heard quoted from the Bible, some wonderful promises. I read of One who spoke as no other man spoke, I heard him speak enticing words to my heart, words like these:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. {Matt 11:28-29 RSV}

I heard him say,

... he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. {John 8:12b RSV}

I heard him say,

I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. {John 10:9 RSV}

As I heard these, hope flamed in my heart because this is what I longed to find, as it is what you long to find, and what every man and woman longs to find today – rest, fulfillment, supply, companionship, blessing, light in place of darkness. These are the things hoped for.

And then I heard the story of some unseen things: I heard the story of the cross in all its wonder and mystery. I heard that simple story of how they lifted up the Son of God, how in the darkness of that scene, God accomplished some strange and mysterious transaction: Somehow the sin of the human race was lifted off men and laid upon Jesus Christ, that his righteousness might be imparted to them. I couldn't understand it fully – I was only a boy of about ten years of age when I heard this story, and believed it. But I realized that here was a God who could do something about my problem, and I believed his Word.

When I did so, the course of my life was altered – the direction of my life changed. I didn't look any different on the outside, and I didn't act very different for awhile, but the course of my life was changed from that moment. I found a new capacity to love. I had a new dimension in my life – new attitudes that I didn't have before.

Though there has been stop-and-go progress along the way, the course and direction of my life from that time has never altered. My life's direction has been changed. It now moves in a different way.

That is what we call "conversion," and it comes simply as a result of faith.

Abraham is the great example that, when a man stands upon what God says, all that God promises will be fully paid out to that man. That is what faith is: Abraham is Exhibit A. I stand in the

alphabet somewhere down around X, Y, or Z, but it is the same story. A man who believes what God says can walk through the world, and though he walks contrary to the course of the world, though, perhaps, there are many things that he must say "No" to as he goes along, the direction of that walk is:

- Into the ever-broadening life of liberty and glory and blessing,
- Into the wonder of the fulfillment of manhood and womanhood,
- Into all the richness of an eternity with Jesus Christ, and
- Into all the fulfillment of the marvelous promises of God.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for faith. We know that faith, in itself, is of no value, except as it simply lays hold of the promise. We thank you, therefore, for the promise, that wonderful promise that these things will become true for us, as we, in the 20th century, hear the story of Jesus and believe what is written. Thus we enter into a new realm, and are changed; our life becomes different, Christ becomes real, and we rest upon the assurance that that which is begun in us will be perfected until the day of Jesus Christ. We thank you for it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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