

Intro:

The title of our message today is:

What about Abraham?

I suppose a message about ‘father Abraham’ is appropriate for Father’s Day, especially since he is referred to in our text as ‘our forefather’. But, with no regret, that will be my last reference to Father’s Day in this message!

A year ago, in March and April, I took two entire months to preach from Romans 1.16-17. I wanted to make these verses prominent in your mind.

Let’s look back at them now.

- Rm 1.16: the title verse for Romans
- Rm 1.17: the sub-title

Everything else in Romans is really an expansion on the themes of these verses.

- Rm 1.18-3.20, the ‘sin chapters’ show how the power of God in salvation by showing us what we must be saved *from*.
- Rm 3.21-26, the key paragraph on justification by faith shows the power of God in sending a new kind of righteousness to every one that believes
- Rm 3.27-31, shows ‘certain advantages’ that the power of God in saving men provides

As we enter chapter 4, we are going to see Paul’s proof of his key idea: justification by faith alone as it is witnessed in the Law and the prophets.

In our country, we have a fairly short history. And what little we have, we aren’t taught very much of it anymore in school. Keeping in mind that limitation, what men from Canada’s past would you think we would look to as ‘Fathers of our Country’ if they *were* teaching us history in our schools?

[I have five on my list, the more obvious ones through our history.]

- Samuel Champlain
- John A. MacDonald
- Sir Wilfred Laurier
- William Lyon McKenzie King
- Pierre Idiot Trudeau

Why would we name men like this in this kind of category? They are men who in some sense define us. They have made Canada what it is today. We have an historical debt to their ideas and ideals about what kind of civilization we should have.

Our heroes, as I say are all relatively recent. Who do you think people in Iraq, for example, look back to?

- Nebuchadnezzar, the first emperor of the known world (about 2600 years ago)

Now, who would the Jews look back to?

- Abraham (about 3800 years ago)

In Abraham, we are going to see God's answer to the question that arises from the Garden of Eden?

- How do we get back there? How do we get back to fellowship with God?

Read Rm 4.1-5

Proposition: Abraham's testimony proves Paul's proposition: the just shall live by faith alone.

I. The monumental place of Abraham (1-2)

A. The place of Abraham Scripturally

1. Abraham's place in Genesis

- a. Gen 1-11 = 2500 years (or perhaps a bit more) giving us foundational material in very brief form

- 1) Two chapters for creation

- 2) Three chapters for Adam and his family (fall to succeeding generations)

- 3) Five chapters for Noah and his family

- 4) One chapter for the nations

- b. Balance of the book about Abraham and his family as a patriarchy

- 1) Abraham directly (12-25)

- 2) Abraham's son (25-26)

- 3) Abraham's grandson (27-36)

- 4) Abraham's great-grandsons (37-50)

2. Abraham's family forms into a nation (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)

3. Abraham's family settles into Abraham's land (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel)
4. Abraham's family under the Davidic kings (2 Samuel to 2 Chronicles)
5. The Songs of Abraham's Family (Psalms to Ecclesiastes [omit Job])
6. The preaching to Abraham's Family (Isaiah to Malachi)

Am I exaggerating? Consider Gen 12.1-3, God's initial call and covenant with Abram

- Go from your country
- I will make you a great nation
- I will bless the whole earth in you

Abraham is God's solution to Eden: the whole Old Testament revolves around this promise (and so does the New Testament!)

B. The place of Abraham in Jewish consciousness

1. Consider these quotations from the Apocrypha (non-inspired Jewish writings dating before Christ)

Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life. (*Jub.* 23.10)¹

^{KJA} **Prayer of Manasseh 1:7** Thou therefore, O Lord, that art the God of the just, hast not appointed repentance to the just, as to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, which have not sinned against thee; but thou hast appointed repentance unto me that am a sinner:

^{KJA} **Sirach 44:19** Abraham was a great father of many people: in glory was there none like unto him;

^{KJA} **1 Maccabees 2:52** Was not Abraham found faithful in temptation, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness?

¹ As quoted in Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 256.

2. Consider the attitude of the Jews when Jesus discussed their paternity (Jn 8.39-41, 47-53)
 - a. The Jews insist that Abraham is their father (they have spiritual standing because of Abraham)
 - b. They then turn to claiming that God is their father
 - c. Finally, they ask Jesus if he is greater than Abraham, their father

“Abraham was revered by the Jews as their ‘father’ and his life and character were held up as models of God’s ways with his people and a true piety. ... Abraham was held up particularly as a model of obedience to God. His righteousness and mediation of the promise were linked to this obedience, it even being argued that he had obeyed the law perfectly before it had been given.”²

C. The place of Abraham in Paul’s argument

1. The only divinely revealed religion up to the time of the New Testament was Judaism
2. Judaism had devolved into two errors:
 - a. The error of justification by doing religious ritual
 - b. The error of justification by personal pedigree (sons of Abraham)
3. Paul, by arguing for justification by faith alone argues against both errors and intends to prove his argument by using Abraham
 - a. Paul acknowledges the significant place of Abraham (1)
 - b. Paul denies that Abraham himself was justified by works (2)
 - 1) Verse 2 leaves some things ‘understood’. The argument Paul disproves goes this way:
 - a) If a man is justified by works he has grounds for glorying. (2a)
 - b) Abraham was justified by works. [assumed by the text, the basic notion of the Jews]
 - c) Therefore Abraham had ground for glorying. (2b)

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 256.

- 2) But, Paul says, Abraham has no more ground of boasting than any other man (2c – ‘but not before God’)
 - a) The minor premise of the argument is not true — Abraham is *not* justified by works
 - b) But Abraham *is* justified

“The point in dispute was how justification was to be obtained. Paul proposes to decide the question by reference to a case about which no one could doubt. Everyone agreed that Abraham was justified.”³

- The Jews would agree with that: Abraham is justified.

So key question: how is Abraham justified?

II. The pivotal testimony of Abraham (3)

- A. “For”: Paul is going to give us the reason for his argument concerning Abraham
- B. The appeal is made to Scripture ‘it is written’
 1. This is the only ground of appeal
 2. There is no room for contradiction here, no room for appeal
 3. The Scriptures settle everything

This is true in every issue under dispute in the world today. When the Scripture addresses a topic, no matter what men may say, the Scriptures are true and every man a liar.

- C. The Scripture cited is absolutely clear how Abraham is justified
 1. Citation of Genesis 15.6, the testimony of Abraham’s faith “Abraham believed”
 - a. Abraham had no heir, he came to God in prayer about it (1-3)
 - b. God reiterated his promise by showing Abraham the stars – shall your sons be (4-5)
 - c. Abraham believed (6a)

³ Charles Hodge, *Romans*, p. 100.

“The Hebrew word translated *believed* means ‘to say amen.’ God gave a promise, and Abraham responded with ‘Amen!’”⁴

“When Abraham believed God, he did the one thing that a man can do without doing anything!”⁵

2. The consequence of Abraham’s faith: God imputed righteousness (‘reckoned’)
 - a. To ‘impute’ or ‘reckon’ is a banking term: ‘to charge to one’s account’
 - 1) If I go in and take some money and put it in the bank, it is charged to my account, it is reckoned
 - 2) If you go in with some money to my bank, and say, ‘charge it to Don’s account’, it is done, it is reckoned to me

This is *mostly* just an illustration, not a suggestion!

- b. The concept is used in various contexts in the Bible
 - 1) Lev 17.3-4 – if someone kills a sacrificial animal outside the tabernacle precincts “bloodguiltiness” (*i.e.*, murder) will be charged to him.
 - 2) Lev 7.18 – if someone eats any part of the sacrifice on the third day, the benefits of the sacrifice he made will not be charged to him.
 - 3) Philemon 18 – Paul asks Philemon to charge Onesimus’ debts to Paul.
 - 4) Rm 5.18 – sin is not charged against someone when there is no law against the particular action.
- c. The Jews conception of Abraham overthrown by this one verse
 - 1) Abraham did no work to obtain righteousness
 - 2) Abraham believed – and God charged his account with righteousness
 - a) ‘Without-law’ righteousness

⁴ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right*, p. 41.

⁵ William R. Newell, *Romans: verse by verse*, p. 132.

b) Not of works

“Abraham’s faith was credited to him ‘as righteousness,’ which means that faith itself is not righteousness.”⁶

“The ‘reckoning’ of Abraham’s faith as righteousness means ‘to account to him a righteousness that does not inherently belong to him.’ Abraham’s response to God’s promise leads God to ‘reckon’ to him a ‘status’ of righteousness.”⁷

D. The conclusive point in citing Abraham

1. The Jews were wrong about Abraham – Abraham was justified by faith not works
2. The Jews were wrong about works – Abraham was justified by faith not works

Conclusion:

Proposition: Abraham’s testimony proves Paul’s proposition: the just shall live by faith alone.

The Jews held Abraham up as their great example, as their ticket into God’s blessing.

Abraham *is* a great man in God’s economy, in God’s working in the world.

Earlier I said Abraham is God’s answer to Eden. That’s correct only in this way: Abraham is God’s answer to Eden as the one man from whom would come the True Man who would in himself bear all the penalty for all the sins of every man for all time.

Just as Abraham was declared righteous by virtue of his faith in God’s promise, so too can you be declared righteous by virtue of faith in God’s Son and his work on the cross.

- You cannot work.
- You cannot earn.

But you can believe.

⁶ Everett F. Harrison, "Romans" in *Expositor's*, vol. 10, p. 48.

⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 262.