

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Romans 4: 1-3

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it's time to read the bible again. This week, we will read Romans 4:1–12. Today, we will read verses 1-3.

Last week, we studied the truth of justification by faith—that the righteousness of God is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. We must recognize that man does not naturally have faith; rather, the ability to believe comes because the faith of Jesus is sown into man's heart through the gospel. The faith of Jesus is like a seed of life; if this seed can take root in the spirit of a person, it can enliven the human spirit, and that person is then born again.

Most of the time, when a person is born again, he himself does not realize it. Instead, after being born again, the spiritual life begins to operate and begins to influence the soul, causing the mind to understand and the emotions to become joyful. At this point, a person is able to decide, "I want to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and accept Him as my Savior for life." Therefore, a person's believing is the result of Jesus Christ's faith having entered his heart. For some people, this process is very quick—just a matter of a few hours. But for most people, it takes some time—anywhere from a few weeks to even several years. For a few individuals, it can even take decades. Usually, this is because there are some large stones in their hearts that are hard to remove, making it difficult for the seed of life to take root in their spirit.

In the truth of justification by faith, Paul tells us that once a person believes, he is justified by God. Paul then says that God set forth Jesus Christ as a propitiation—meaning that through the blood of Jesus, God established a realm or category through which man can, by faith, enter into this realm of grace. All who enter into this realm become a new kind of people—a people of the faith of Jesus, a people justified by God. This new kind of people comes into being based on faith, not on

works. If it were based on works, then one would have something to boast about. But no one can boast in the matter of salvation. Whether it be the circumcised Jews or the uncircumcised Gentiles, all are justified by faith. Then Paul, in chapter 4, uses an example from the Old Testament to illustrate justification by faith.

Verse 1: “What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?”

“What then shall we say”—this is a transitional phrase, showing that chapter 4 continues the discourse on justification by faith from chapter 3. The truth has already been presented in chapter 3, and now Paul is going to use the example of Abraham to confirm the truth he has just stated.

“Abraham our father”—this is a very special title. First of all, the word “father” in Greek is Pater, which directly translates as “Father,” that is, our father Abraham. Paul himself was a Jew, yet he was an apostle to the Gentiles. The recipients of this letter were the Roman church, which consisted of both Gentiles and Jews. Yet Paul says “Abraham our father”. This indicates a very important fact: whether Jews or Gentile believers, all are descendants of Abraham. The Jews are Abraham’s physical descendants, and the Gentile believers are Abraham’s descendants by faith.

Adam was the first man created, and from Adam came the created race; all people on earth are descendants of Adam and are members of the created race. After the flood, the created race united in rebellion against God by building the city and tower of Babel. Its top was intended to reach heaven, and its purpose was to make a name for themselves. Because man was unwilling to be scattered across the earth according to God's will, people collectively rose up to rebel against God’s command—to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.” So God came down and confused their language, which caused them to stop building the city of Babel and begin to scatter across the whole earth.

Because of this collective rebellion, God did a new thing: He called people out from among the created race to form a called race. Abraham was the first person called

in this way, and he became the father of the called race. After Abraham was called, God repeatedly promised him numerous descendants, sometimes using different metaphors. In Genesis 13:16, God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. This refers to Abraham's earthly descendants, or his physical offspring—that is, the Jews. In Genesis 15:5–6, God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of heaven. This refers to Abraham's heavenly descendants, or his descendants by faith—that is, the New Testament believers. This is why Paul would say to the Roman church, “Abraham our father”— “our” includes both the Jews and the Gentile believers.

“What did Abraham our father find according to the flesh?” “According to the flesh” refers to actions that come from one's own strength. Paul raised a very crucial question: What did our common father Abraham gain through his own fleshly efforts? Some Bible interpreters narrow the meaning of “according to the flesh” to refer to the physical sign of circumcision. The reason is that at the end of chapter 3, Paul said that both the circumcised and the uncircumcised are justified by faith. This interpretation is not incorrect, but in verses 9–12 of this chapter, Paul specifically discusses the issue of circumcision. Therefore, here we take “according to the flesh” in a broader sense—what did Abraham gain through his fleshly efforts?

The story of Abraham begins in Genesis 11:26 and goes through to 25:11, spanning 15 chapters. He is the first person in the Bible to be introduced in such detailed fashion. We hope that the saints can quickly review this portion of Scripture in order to better understand Paul's argument.

Abraham was called to enter the good land of Canaan and to live a life of the altar and the tent. Although he is called the father of faith, he was not a man of strong faith at the beginning. Rather, after his calling, he followed God stumblingly—just like you and me. But Abraham had a unique characteristic: at every critical moment, he would seek God. And God's appearing would become the source of his faith. Or we could say that every time God appeared to him and spoke, his faith was strengthened so he could take the next step to follow God. He followed God throughout his life, and by his old age, he had become a man full of faith and was

called the father of faith. So Paul asked: What did Abraham gain by his actions in the flesh? Paul did not give an immediate answer. Let us follow Paul's line of thought and see how he answers.

Verse 2: "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God."

Paul returns to the doctrine of justification by faith. If Abraham was justified by works, then he would have something to boast about. Paul had already said in the previous chapter that if a person is justified by works—by the principle of works—then he has reason to boast. Now Paul brings up Abraham, the father of faith, as an example. Every person who loves the Bible is familiar with the life of Abraham. So Paul asks: Did Abraham have anything to boast about before God? Paul's answer is: No. Abraham had nothing to boast about before God.

The Jews might object. They may cite Genesis 26:5, where God promised to bless Isaac and his descendants. The reason for the blessing is given in Genesis 26:5: "because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws." God told Isaac that He would bless him because his father Abraham had listened to God's voice and kept His commandments, statutes, and laws. Does this not refer to Abraham's works?

Gentile believers might also cite James 2:21: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?" These two passages both seem to emphasize Abraham's works. So why does Paul say that Abraham was not justified by works? Where does he base this on? Let's see how Paul responds.

Verse 3: "For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.'"

Paul quotes Scripture—Genesis 15:5–6, "Then He brought him outside and said, 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.'

And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.” At that time, Abraham was still called Abram. God had not yet changed his name from Abram to Abraham. Paul quotes this passage to say, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” The word “accounted” in Hebrew is *logizomai*—the verb form of “logic”—meaning it’s a conclusion reached through a process of reasoning. Faith in God is accounted as righteousness. Why did Paul arrive at this conclusion?

To understand Paul’s logic, we must look at Abraham’s life as a whole. Tomorrow we will examine Abraham’s experiences in detail. Today we will simply present a few key points. As the father of faith, the source of Abraham’s faith was God’s appearing—or more precisely, every time God appeared and spoke to him. Throughout Scripture, there are ten recorded times that God appeared to Abraham. With each appearing, Abraham’s faith increased, until it was complete and God praised him. Tomorrow we will carefully examine those ten appearances and Abraham’s growth at each stage, so that we may see the trajectory of his life of faith.

Abraham was originally called Abram, meaning “exalted father.” God justified Abraham by faith during the fifth appearing of God to him. God brought him outside to look at the heavens and count the stars, and He promised that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. At that time, Abram still had no children. But Abraham believed God, and God accounted it to him for righteousness. By then, Abraham had already followed God for some time, making many mistakes along the way. His faith in God had gradually increased. Only at that point did God justify him for his faith and immediately make a covenant with him. In modern terms, that was when he was saved. Even after being saved, he continued to make mistakes.

At the sixth appearing, God changed his name from Abram to Abraham—meaning “father of many nations”—and established the covenant of circumcision with him. All his descendants were to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth. The true spiritual meaning of circumcision is the cutting away of the flesh. The covenant of circumcision corresponds to the baptism of New Testament believers. At that time,

God clearly told Abraham that he would have a child through his wife Sarah and that his name should be called Isaac. God then appeared to Abraham several more times. Through this process, Abraham did indeed receive Isaac as his son. His faith also grew, until it reached the point where he could offer Isaac on the altar. At that very moment, God appeared to Abraham for the tenth time and gave him abundant blessings.

This is exactly what James 2:21 refers to—Abraham was justified by works when he offered Isaac on the altar and received God’s approval. So what James means by “justified by works” is that Abraham’s faith had grown to the point where it could drive his actions, and through these actions, he received God’s approval. We can see it as his faith being perfected through his works. In other words, his works were the evidence of his justifying faith. Justification by faith came first, and afterward his works completed it. Perhaps if James had written “perfected by works,” it would be easier to understand and not lead to confusion. As for God’s blessing on Isaac, it also came after Abraham had been justified by faith and later perfected through works. There is no contradiction.

Dear brothers and sisters, today we have simply followed Paul’s discourse to explain that when Abraham was justified by faith, he had nothing to boast of before God. Tomorrow we will look in detail at the ten appearances of God to Abraham. We will then better understand the growth of Abraham’s faith and see more clearly that justification comes by faith, not by works.

Let us pray together: Dear Lord Jesus, because You completed the great work of redemption on the cross, we can now be justified by God the Father through simple faith. The truth of justification by faith was already revealed in the Old Testament, and through the life of our father of faith, Abraham, it is clearly shown to us. Abraham simply believed that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars of heaven, and God accounted it to him for righteousness.

Today we are Abraham’s heavenly descendants. Our very existence confirms Abraham’s faith and testifies to God’s grace. Because of Abraham’s faith, God justified him. And in the process of justification, Abraham also received God’s

righteousness. This produced the act of offering up Isaac. May this confirmation of his faith help us understand this truth. Our good works do not originate from ourselves, but from our faith and from God's justification. Only then can we be perfected. Bless my daily life to begin with reading Your Word. Through daily Bible reading, increase my faith in every way. Through faith, help me to live a life that is pleasing to God, so I may be a good testimony and lead my family and friends to come before You. We pray in the Holy Name of Jesus Christ.