

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

Romans 4: 3-5

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank the Lord, it's time for our Bible reading again. We will continue reading Romans Chapter 4, and today we will read verses 3-5.

Abraham is our father of faith, and his lifelong journey of following God is the best example of the growth of faith. Paul uses Abraham as an illustration of justification by faith.

Verse 3: “For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.’”

Paul is quoting 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 had not yet had his name changed by God; his original name was Abram. Abram had no son at the time, yet God promised that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. At that moment, Abram believed God, and God accounted it to him for righteousness. This is the origin of justification by faith, and it was the most significant turning point in Abram's life.

To understand Paul's discourse on justification by faith—that it is not by human works but solely by faith—we must examine Abram's journey of following God to grasp Paul's argument. Abram first appears in the Bible in Genesis 11:26, “Now Terah lived seventy years, and begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran.” Abram's father was Terah, and he had two brothers, Nahor and Haran. Remarkably, God's first appearance to Abram is not recorded in Genesis but in Acts 7:2-4, in Stephen's testimony before his martyrdom to the Jews who were about to kill him: “And he

said, 'Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, and said to him, "Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you." Then he departed from the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran.'"

At that time, Abram was still living in Ur of the Chaldeans. The God of glory appeared to him. Chaldea later became Babylon, the area around modern-day Baghdad, Iraq, a place of idolatry at the time. Yet the God of glory appeared to Abram. Unless a person sees God's glory, no one can rise to follow Him. God not only appeared to Abram in His glory but also spoke to him personally, telling him to leave his country and relatives and go to the place God would show him. Where that was, God did not specify, nor did He provide a map. Abram saw God's glory and heard His voice, but he lacked the ability to follow, so he remained in the idolatrous land. However, he did share what he saw and heard with his father, Terah.

While they were still in Chaldea, Abram's brother Haran died. Abram felt little, but his father Terah took it as a warning. They were a large, wealthy family with many possessions, cattle, and sheep, making relocation difficult. But Terah, having heard Abram's words and experienced the pain of losing a son, led the entire family to leave Chaldea, traveling north along the Euphrates River to a city called Haran, coincidentally the same name as his deceased son, and they settled there. We see that God called Abram, but Abram could not follow; instead, his father Terah took the lead, bringing the whole family to Haran.

Later, Terah died in Haran, and God appeared to Abram a second time. This is recorded in Genesis 12:1-3, "Now the Lord had said to Abram: 'Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'" What a great promise! This time, God told Abram to leave his country, his family, and his father's house. The first time God appeared, He asked Abram to leave his country and family, but Abram could not follow, and his father led the family to leave their country and

family. Now, with his father deceased, God called Abram again, this time to leave his country, family, and father's house.

We see that God's calling is unique. From a human perspective, if someone fails to follow the first call, the second might be expected to be easier, but God's calling is the opposite. When Abram couldn't follow the first time, the second call was higher and stronger, requiring him to leave not only his country and family but also his father's house. By then, Abram was married to Sarai but had no son. This time, Abram responded to God's call, though he still couldn't fully obey God's command. God told him to leave his father's house, but he took his nephew Lot, Haran's son. At the time, Abram was 75 years old and wanted a young helper by his side, feeling uneasy about going to an unfamiliar place alone.

Abram took Sarai and Lot, left Haran, crossed the Euphrates River, and entered the beautiful land of Canaan. In the Bible, the Euphrates is called the great river. They had lived east of the river, but now, crossing it, they entered the promised land, becoming the first Hebrews, meaning "the river crossers" .

After entering the promised land, they reached their first stop, Shechem, where God appeared to Abram a third time, as recorded in Genesis 12:7, "Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land.'" God's promise to Abram was always about land and descendants. With such a promise, Abram built an altar there to offer sacrifices and pitched a tent, beginning a life of altar and tent in the promised land.

God's promise to Abram consistently involved descendants and land. In the discourse on justification by faith, the focus is on descendants. God's promise of descendants would be fulfilled in Abram's lifetime, while the promise of the land would be fulfilled 400 years later in Moses' time, so we focus on the promise of descendants. Saints interested in the land can refer to the daily readings in Genesis. The land is very significant, prefiguring today's church life, but our focus now is justification by faith, so we concentrate solely on the matter of descendants.

After God's third appearance to Abram, he experienced many events and moved several times. Once, during a famine, they went to Egypt. Because his wife Sarai

was very beautiful, Abram feared someone might kill him to take her, so he called her his sister. As a result, Pharaoh took Sarai into his palace and gave Abram many possessions. God intervened, protecting Sarai by sending plagues on Pharaoh and his household, allowing Abram to return to the promised land with Sarai, Lot, and much wealth. In this process, God protected Abram and his wife but did not appear to him.

Now, with the wealth gained from Egypt, they returned to the promised land with many cattle and sheep. Consequently, Abram's herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen began to dispute over water and grazing land, as their wealth made peaceful coexistence impossible. Abram had to part with Lot, letting Lot choose first. Lot chose the fertile Jordan plain and gradually moved south, settling in Sodom, while Abram remained in Canaan.

After parting with Lot, God appeared to Abram a fourth time and spoke to him, as recorded in Genesis 13:14-17, "And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: 'Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered. Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you.'" God specifically promised that Abram's descendants would be as numerous as the dust of the earth. God did not call Lot; Abram brought Lot because he had no son and felt uneasy, so God particularly promised that his physical descendants would be as numerous as the dust.

Though Abram had God's promise, he still had no son. Among his servants was a capable man from Damascus, Eliezer, whom Abram regarded as a son. Despite God's promise of descendants, Abram struggled to believe. While living in Hebron, a war broke out between four kings and five kings. Lot, living in Sodom, was caught in this international conflict and captured by the four kings. When Abram learned of it, he took his trained household servants, rescued Lot, and recovered the plundered goods. God sent Melchizedek, king of Salem, as a priest to bless Abram and lead him to know God as the Lord of heaven and earth, the Most High God.

God's fifth appearance to Abram, recorded in Genesis 15, was a pivotal moment, and God spoke many words to him, all recorded in Genesis 15. We can only briefly discuss matters related to descendants; saints who wish to pursue further should refer to the daily readings in Genesis 15. In Abram's dialogue with God, he complained that he had no son and would have to let his servant Eliezer inherit his estate. At this point, God clearly told Abram that only one born from him could be his heir to inherit his estate.

At that moment, God brought Abram outside to count the stars in the sky, promising that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. This was the first time Abram truly believed God, and God accounted it to him for righteousness. From God's first appearance, calling him to leave his country and family, we see Abram repeatedly failing to follow God's call. It was God's repeated appearances and words that enabled Abram to follow step by step with God's strength.

We should thank the Bible for honestly recording Abram's failures and weaknesses. Only through God's repeated appearances and words could Abram keep up. Since our father of faith was like this, so are we, especially regarding the matter of descendants. Abram simply could not believe, repeatedly seeking substitutes—first Lot, then Eliezer—until God pointed to the stars, and Abram truly believed. God accounted it to him for righteousness; this is the origin of justification by faith.

Did Abram immediately have descendants after being justified by faith? No. We'll explore these details when discussing circumcision. God's fifth appearance to Abram brought justification by faith, a significant milestone.

After justification by faith, God specifically made a covenant with Abram. Genesis 15:9-10 says, "So He said to him, 'Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.' Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two." This was the covenant God made with Abram after justifying him by faith. There were five sacrificial animals: a three-year-old heifer for a peace offering, a three-year-old female goat for a sin offering, and a three-year-old ram for a burnt offering.

These three animals were cut in two and placed opposite each other, prefiguring the crucified Christ. The number three signifies death and resurrection. Additionally, there was a turtledove, a bird of love, and a young pigeon, a symbol of faith, which were not cut, prefiguring the resurrected Christ. The sin offering prefigures Christ paying the price of redemption for us, the peace offering signifies peace between man and God, and the burnt offering represents Jesus Christ willingly offering Himself to satisfy the Father. The turtledove and young pigeon prefigure the resurrected Christ, supplying love and faith to the saints.

We see that immediately after justification by faith, the text records the covenant sacrifices, which prefigure Christ's death and resurrection. This shows that justification by faith is free grace for us, but for God's Son, Jesus Christ, it required a great price—His death and resurrection—to establish the mercy seat, a realm of grace. Saints can come to God through faith, be justified, and be reconciled with Him.

Verse 4: "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt."

The wages of work mean that if a person, through their own efforts, keeps the law and behaves well, they could earn God's justification. This would be wages they earned, not grace, but something they deserve. Thus, Paul uses Abraham, the father of faith for both Jews and Gentiles, as an example. When Abraham was justified by God, it was not by his works, for he repeatedly failed. Instead, God repeatedly appeared to him and upheld him with His words. Abram did not earn God's justification through good works; after many failures, he believed God's promise that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars, and God accounted it to him for righteousness.

If our father of faith was like this, how much more so for us. Therefore, our justification by God is entirely due to Jesus Christ's redemptive grace, unrelated to our works. We can only believe, and the source of belief comes from God's gospel, so everything is from God. After believing, our service in the church is also by

Christ's grace, which becomes the motivation and strength for our service; we have no merit of our own.

Verse 5: "But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness."

Not working means not relying on deeds or accumulating merit but believing in the God who justifies the ungodly; such faith is accounted for righteousness.

Dear brothers and sisters, every Lord's Day when we come to church to worship, we must recognize that we are merely sinners saved by grace, enabling us to offer thanks and praise to God. We are always unworthy sinners, with nothing of our own to stand before the righteous, holy, and glorious God. We are sinners, yet we can be clothed with Christ as our robe of righteousness. God sees the redemptive price Christ paid and justifies us. This is every one of our stories—a sinner saved by grace.

Let us pray together: Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for Your redemptive grace, enabling us to stand boldly before the Father. We are all sinners saved by grace, so every Lord's Day we can come to worship, not by what we can do, but entirely by Jesus Christ's grace. Standing in the position of grace, the Father justifies us—what a commendation. Thus, we have nothing to boast about; all we have is received. Help us live daily in the realm of grace. I pray in the holy name of the Lord Jesus Christ.