

Marks of Justifying Faith

Romans 4:18ff

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OPENING PRAYER:

Our Heavenly Father, we praise you as we stand here together for the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus Christ. For the new life that you have given by your Holy Spirit. For adoption into your family. For redemption by the blood of Jesus Christ. For deliverance, from our bondage, to sin and death, to Satan, and to hell. We pray, as we come to you as those who have been brought from death to life, to praise you and to know you, that as we study Your Word together, that you would engage our minds by your truth, that you would touch our hearts by the power of your Holy Spirit, that you would transform our lives by the impact of the gospel. And that you would draw out our affections in praise and admiration, for your divine way of salvation. And that by the privilege of an audience with you, as we see your face in your Word, we may go at the end of this day from this place, as those who have been in Jerusalem and have seen the face of the king. So we ask that You would help us and that you would teach us by your Word and Spirit. We pray this together for Jesus our Savior sake. Amen. Please be seated.

SCRIPTURE READING:

Now, our scripture reading this evening as we continue our studies in Paul's letter to the Romans from Romans chapter four, and we're reading the last section of Romans chapter four, as the Apostle Paul continues his discussion of Abraham. And we begin to read in Romans chapter four, and from verse 18. Romans chapter four, verse 18, if you're using the Pew Bible, it's on page 942. Let us hear God's word.

In hope, Abraham, believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about 100 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. That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." But the words, "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in Him who raised from the dead Jesus, our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

SERMON:

I wonder if I were to ask you this evening, as you look back through the great history of the United States of America, who has been in the USA, who has been the greatest theologian. I'm fairly sure that some of you without thinking, and mark those words without thinking, would say, Why, the answer is obvious. The answer is Jonathan Edwards. You could hardly -- you could hardly be more mistaken. Hardly more mistaken. That is entirely wrong. Well, Jonathan Edwards was a great theologian. Why do I speak so disparagingly of him? I said, it may come unthinkingly to your mind that the answer to the question, Who is the greatest theologian that has ever been in the United States of America? -- Jonathan Edwards, was actually British. Jonathan Edwards lived and died before what the British called, before the language was used in the south, the recent unpleasantness. And so my trick question really uses a kind of historical argument to, to uncover that certain assumptions that most of us carry around without thinking a great deal because we live in the United States. And most of us in the room this evening, with a few exceptions, are Americans. And because Jonathan Edwards, we regard as a great theologian, it's so easy for us to, to look back and to make false assumptions. And to need that argument from history in order to see Jonathan Edwards as the theologian he really was. He really was, and thought of himself as a British theologian, and not a theologian of the United States of America. And I play with you a little this evening, just to underscore for us, and to remind us of the fact that the apostle Paul in Romans chapter four is using a great historical argument.

Up until this point, his great emphasis has been that since we are all sinners, and there is nothing we can contribute to our own salvation, we stand in need of a divine work of grace. Christ coming, as the propitiation for our sins. As the redemption price, who will bring about our justification. And the great emphasis he has made and obviously kept on making is that this salvation comes without prior conditions. Grace is free. There are no qualifications except the need of salvation. And indeed, he has emphasized that although the Old Testament points forward to this salvation, this salvation comes entirely apart from the law of God. And obviously he imagines that he has stirred up many questioners just as he himself was stirred up before he became a disciple of the Lord Jesus. And so at the end of chapter three, as he displayed the gospel of grace, he really asked a series of questions that he must have asked time and time again before he became a Christian. You are taking away all possibility from us that we can boast as the Jewish people who are God's people. You are taking away the role of the law of God. You're taking away circumcision from us. You are actually repudiating God's ethical commandments. How can you do this? And as we've been seeing in Romans chapter four, which I think I said last week, may not at first sight seem to be the most exciting chapter in Romans, the apostle Paul has brought Abraham on the scene. And everybody in his imagination is cheering: Now we've got Abraham on the scene, we can settle the matter once and for all. And he has demonstrated from scripture, he's expounded scripture, what sayeth the Scripture, he asks? And he shows how the Scriptures teach us that Abraham was justified by faith, not by works, he was justified by grace, not by the law. He was justified by God's gracious justification, not by his circumcision. He was justified long before the law. He was justified before he was circumcised. And so if Abraham is going to be the great father of the faithful, then we need to listen to how Abraham thought about himself as an ungodly sinner, who was saved entirely by God's grace, which he seized by faith and was justified in His sight.

But then there's a last question that Paul had raised here at the end of chapter three, that I think in a sense, he now comes to answer. That last question was: Look if you say this kind of thing, you are

overthrowing the law by faith. And we've already seen in Romans especially in Romans chapter three, verse eight, the apostle Paul was accused of preaching the gospel of such free grace that if people received this gospel, they would turn their backs on God's commandment -- they would live licentious lives -- they would be utterly disobedient to all of God's will. And they would do exactly what they wanted to do. Interestingly, that was one of the great arguments that the Protestant reformers of the 16th century constantly faced. You tell people that they can be justified by God's free grace, and they will live any way they please. Paul will return to this later on. When he returns to it later on, he says, if you say that kind of thing, you haven't begun to understand how God's saving Grace really works. And now earlier on, he is saying, if you think that faith nullifies the law of God and overthrows the law of God, and leads to a life of indifference to God's desires for our holy living, you haven't understood what faith really is. And so it's interesting and indeed important to notice the way he phrases the question in chapter three, verse 31: "Do we then overthrow the law by THIS faith?"

And now as he comes to the end of chapter four, having answered all of the other questions and illustrated it from Abraham's life, and from the scriptures, he really comes to this last question: Does this faith mean that we go and live any way we please imagining that we are still saved? And Paul is saying, not this faith, the faith that brings us justification -- the faith that Abraham had is a diameter removed from the kind of disposition that says I believe in God's free grace and so I'm going to live for myself and merely do my own pleasure. No, he says, actually, if you want to see the law of God, the design of God fulfilled in your life, then the way to see that design fulfilled, as in the case of Abraham, is by justifying faith.

And so as we come to the end of Romans, chapter four, I want us to notice several things that the Apostle Paul says here, about what he calls in chapter three, verse 31, "this faith." He's not speaking about any kind of faith. He's not saying make up your own definition of faith. He is saying "this faith", the faith that brings us justification. We see that faith and Abraham, so let's put it under the microscope on Abraham and learn what this faith that justifies is really like. And there are, I think, three things for us to notice.

The first is this, that faith takes its character from its object. Faith takes its character from its object. That is to say the nature of faith is not so much dependent on the individual who exercises faith but the object in which that faith is exercised. Perhaps we can follow Paul along here by putting this negatively because sometimes putting things negatively helps us to think more clearly. Notice, for example, that he is saying that faith is not dependent on circumstances. Faith is not dependent on circumstances. Abraham, he says, "didn't weaken in faith when he considered his own body which was as good as dead since he was about 100 years old or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb." His faith was not dependent on his circumstances. And his circumstances were twofold. He was 100 years old, and his wife had been barren all the way through their marriage. And if his faith had depended upon the circumstances in which God was calling him to trust in the Lord, his faith would have fallen through the floor. So his faith is not dependent on his circumstances. Now I have a confession to make. When people say to me, how are you doing? And I say to them, okay, and then they asked me another question. I quite often preface the next statement by saying, "under the circumstances." And Alas, nobody has said to me Ferguson, that is the last time I ever want to hear you saying, as a Christian, under the circumstances. Because Christians are never to be under the circumstances. If Abraham had said that -- God had said, Now Abraham, I'm going to make you the father of a great nation. And Abraham had said the Ferguson thing Well, under the circumstances, Lord, -- don't you think the

heavens would have opened and God say to him, Abraham, the point of faith is that it never focuses on your circumstances. Never! It focuses elsewhere, namely, on the promise and character of God.

And that's why the faith that doesn't focus on circumstances is never intimidated by obstacles. You know our problem as Christians is, we're so used to this book that we can hardly take in what this book says. 100 year old man, and his wife almost the same age. And God says, you're going to have a baby Sarah. And she thinks the idea is so ridiculous, that she can't stop laughing. And you remember, the visitors from heaven said to her, "You were laughing". And she said, "I wasn't laughing." You jolly well were laughing, says the Lord to us, you were laughing in unbelief. Because the whole idea, as far as you're concerned, was absolutely ridiculous -- because the obstacles were totally insuperable. And Paul is saying, saving justifying faith does not focus either on its circumstances, nor does it linger on the obstacles.

Now, simply with those two things in place, you could go badly wrong. And many people do. Faith is not simply a matter of not focusing on your circumstances. It's not simply a matter of not being intimidated by the obstacles. Faith now follow this because it's absolutely of central importance: Faith is always focused on what God alone has promised to do, and to accomplish.

So faith is not me making something up out of my own imagination. Great Faith is not great imaginative powers to think what God might do if my faith became great. Faith, like a magnet is drawn exclusively to the promises that God has given to His people. And it's from those promises, ultimately, of course, as we see here in this chapter, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, but it's as faith focuses on the promises of God, faith begins to take its character from its object.

You know, people say to me, I have great faith, and I believe God is going to do this, and God is going to do that. Forget about it. Unless there is a promise that He has given. Faith rests in the promises of God -- in the Word of God. Not in my imagination about what God is or what God might do, but exclusively in what God says about himself. Which again, you see, we've said this already in this chapter. And I think that's what's one of the reasons that such a helpful chapter -- it's why we need to know our Bibles. When somebody says, you know, I have great faith about what God is going to do. You say to them, how well do you know your Bible? Because that's where God tells you what he is prepared to do. And he is not the victim of the flurries of your spiritual imagination. And if ever there was an illustration of this, it was in Abraham because everything that Abraham was being promised, was totally contrary to the best of Abraham's imagination. He wasn't lying in bed at night, 100 years old, dreaming of what would happen if Sarah had a baby. Actually, if he'd woken up after a dream like that, he probably would have thought he'd had a nightmare. Abraham's faith took its character from its object. And you see, this is the great thing that the weakest faith can hold on to the strongest promise.

I was driving somewhere. I don't know. I can't remember now where it was, although it was only two days ago, but I'm sure I was in my car when I was thinking about this. It's a black Honda. And I've noticed since last Sunday morning, more people than usual, looking into my black Honda to see whether it's really me or not. You know what I was thinking? The weaker believer, the weakest believer, gets into exactly the same heaven, by the justifying grace of Jesus Christ, as the strongest believer whose ever lived. Isn't that amazing? The weakest believer gets exactly the same Christ as the strongest believer. Now, what's the point? It is that our faith is not something that self determined. I am a - you know, It boggles my imagination when I hear people say, "It'll be okay because I have strong faith." When what they mean is, I have a high view of myself. I'll get through it. Strong faith takes its

character exclusively from the sheer strength of God's promises. And that's why poor pagan, ungodly, Abraham, with his weak faith took hold of this startling promise of God: "You will be the father of many nations and through your seed, ultimately, the Lord Jesus Christ, the nations of the earth will be blessed." This man is a total pagan. He didn't have even the first 11 chapters of the Bible. Although he lived at the end of the 11th chapter, he had nothing! He might have had some, some, some indications here and there. But this is a man who lives in the end tail of the Tower of Babel! He's a total pagan! God invades his life with his grace and give someone a startling promise. And he believes the promise. And so his faith, as I think, it the authorized -- I beg your pardon, the King James Version says, "He did not stagger"! He did not stagger. The word really means, kind of, kind of staggering between two possibilities. He did not stagger at the promise of God although the promise of God was absolutely staggering.

Do you know Wesley's him Father of Jesus Christ, My Lord? "Faith", he says, "Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees, and looks at that alone. Laughs at impossibilities and cries, it will be done." And so you see precisely because this faith looks to the Lord this faith doesn't undo a life of holiness. But brings us into the wonder of a life of holiness. Because true justifying faith always takes its character from its object. It's always looking away from itself to the Lord.

Now, the second thing that we learn here is this, faith takes its character from its objects. And then you notice that faith grows strong as it focuses on God's glory. And this is surely one of the most beautiful statements ever made in scripture or out of Scripture about Abraham. He didn't weaken in faith, no distrust made him waver, verse 20, concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in faith, as he gave glory to God. Now, I think it's important for us to understand faith is not a "thing" that God gives to you. It's not some kind of substance, that he adds to your life -- have a little faith, and try to grow that little faith. Faith is the transformation of my whole being as a person so that as an individual, as a person, I come to have a disposition of total trust in my Lord. And that's one of the reasons because I am I mean, I speak generally, because you are also, because we are such complicated creatures and the longer we go on in the Christian life, the more complicated we begin to understand who we really are, as the Lord tries by -- tries the wrong word -- makes us by His grace, more and more simple. I think that's one of the great marks of somebody who's a growing Christian, they're becoming simpler. Not becoming more complicated, but simpler. You might say to me, but your sermons are becoming more complicated. So where's your sanctification, Ferguson? But you see, we're so complicated. We are -- so complicated. And God, you know, you know, an expression the theologians use about God, they say, God is simple. What do they mean by that? They mean, he is utterly uncomplicated. He is totally integrated. He's at one with himself. And you see, it's possible for us as we, as we think about faith, to think about all different kinds of ways in which we can grow strong in faith. But the only way to grow strong in faith is when as a Christian person, as I look to the Lord, I look to the Lord, and give myself over to Him for His glory. And that's what happened to Abraham. Abraham's faith grew strong as he gave glory to God. As -- to use the words of Martin Luther, as he let God be God, and stop telling God what he was supposed to be. And stop limiting God to the kind of thing that Abraham thought was possible. But as he allowed God to be God and God to fulfill his promises, as he gave glory to God in his life, in that sense, Abraham's faith grew strong. And of course, the Bible uses this language, it speaks about little faith, you remember Jesus chastising His disciples in the, in the storm in the Sea of Galilee? Why were you fearful? "Oh you of little faith. Oh you little faiths." Now, why were they little faiths? Because they weren't looking at the storm. They'd forgotten that the Master who had actually created all storms, was in the boat with them. And so their faith began to diminish because they were looking at themselves. Helpless sailors, they were looking at the storm, and their eyes had been taken

off the glorious person who was with them in the boat. And similarly, you remember how Jesus says about the man I haven't found such great faith, not in Israel. It wasn't that he had great understanding. But that the little understanding he had, he was he was absolutely fixed on that.

Paul is saying the thing about Abraham for all his failures, and there are failures in the life of Abraham, we never forget he came out of paganism, and so when he slipped in the life of faith, he didn't slip back into Presbyterianism. He slipped back into paganism. Yes, we understand that. But when his eyes were fixed upon the Lord and the Lord's glory, then faith grew strong. Now, that's another reason why, of course, the man or woman, the young person, the boy or girl who has justifying faith, true saving faith instead of overthrowing what God has desired that we should fulfill through his law, we begin to fulfill these things. Because the purpose of the law is that we might live for the glory of God. But we can't. But when faith comes -- when faith is alive in us, and we are looking to the glory of the Lord, then the very thing that the Lord commanded us to do, that we couldn't do because we were faithless, the Holy Spirit enables us to do. We're not trying to earn our salvation by clambering up the ladder, the ladder of the 10 commandments. And that, -- you know, I sometimes wonder is the 10th commandment there, just in case any of us think that we've clambered up the first nine rungs and then we get to the 10 and it says, "You shall not covet." To they Snakes and Ladders in the United States? You know that, that board game, something like it, when you're almost at the top, and then you you've gone up all the ladders, and then you slither down the snakes. Life's like that. You see. The glorious thing about this faith that, that focuses on all that God has done for us and ultimately, in Jesus Christ is, it leads us to say to the Lord, Lord, as I trust you, my greatest desire in life, is to glorify you. You see, the spiritual fathers understood that the first question of the shorter catechism, -- we don't all know question number two but we all know question number one, "What is man's chief end? To glorify God and to enjoy him forever?" The Catechism then goes on to spend about a third of its space, telling you how the law of God works out in your life. What's it saying? It's saying as you trust in the Lord, and seek to glorify Him, here's the pattern that will begin to work out in your life. And you know, this question, I think this may be among the two or three questions that I should be asking about everything I do about every decision I make. Not least the decisions I find difficult as I struggle to find what God's purpose might be for me, as an individual. Listen to this --carefully I speak as an old man to younger men and women -- always ask yourself, will this tend to the glory of God? Will this tend -- does it have a tendency in it to bring glory to the Lord? You know, that will get you out of many a scrape? It will prevent you from doing some very dumb things. By just asking the question, Is it to the glory of God? How many people end up in pastors studies with their heads in their hands because they never asked that question. Is it for the glory of God? Because you see, that's what faith -- faith is drawn to the glory of God. Like a young man being drawn to a young woman of, of, of grace and comeliness...and, and gentleness and beauty -- that you can't keep your eyes off. I mean, in the very best sense. You see something you can't, you just can't -- there's something so --

There's an art exhibition coming to town as of this month, this month. Some of these great painters of the past. I remember I think, for the first half of my life, I totally despised the impressionists. I'd seen so many books -- people had sent me so many postcards -- I was -- I'd had it up to here with the impressionists. All they did was throw paint around. And then I remember for the very first time going into the Metropolitan Museum in New York and into the rooms of Impressionist paintings, and I couldn't take my eyes off them. The color, the paint... (in a whisper) was absolutely astonishing. It was riveting. I'd wandered off from those who were with me. I didn't -- I just wanted to stay there and try and take this in it was so, it was so stunning -- the colors. My friends, the postcards are nothing, they're rubbish by comparison with the reality. And you see when, when we've seen something of the glory of God as we

have seen, ya remember how Jesus says, "Abraham saw my day and he was very glad." But you and I have seen Jesus day, with far clearer eyes and Abraham ever did. We have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, we have seen the ultimate Impressionists as he has painted the colors of His deity, and the character of His glory into his perfect humanity. And we cannot take our eyes off him in whom we have seen the glory of God. Now such a faith as that could never possibly turn round and say to God, I am indifferent to how you want me to live. And so again, he answers his own question. Faith takes its character from its object. Faith grows strong, as it gives God the glory.

And then thirdly, as Paul brings this all to a conclusion, he says, now -- this is this is really marvelous. He says, Now listen, "This was said, not just for Abram's sake", look at the words, verse 22, This is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness, "but the words that was counted to him, were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also." He's saying, Don't you see that Abraham was a was like our working model of the life of faith that God held out to every generation. But now he says, now he says something of a different order of reality has happened to the faith of believers. Let's go back. Faith takes its character from its object, Abraham's faith took its character from the promise of the coming of the Lord Jesus. Faith grows strong as it focuses on God's glory, Abram had a glimpse of God's glory. And Now thirdly, Paul is saying, and our faith rests on the Lord Jesus Christ, and takes its character from who he is and what He has done, and grows strong. As more and more we live for the glory and honor of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was now notice the words, you see what he's doing now. He is saying, Abraham's faith led him into a life of godliness in which the law of God began to be fulfilled, yes, imperfectly, but began to be fulfilled in his life. Long before the law of God was republished at Mount Sinai. But now, he says, We're way beyond that, in terms of the way in which God has revealed the resting place for our faith, because our faith rests now, not simply in the promise, but in the promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised up for our justification. The Gospel. He never put it more succinctly than this. Our faith is in Jesus Christ, who was delivered up -- its judicial language. It's actually a language that's used both in the Gospels and in Paul for, for that whole series of events that led eventually to Jesus being delivered up to the cross. First, you remember by by Judas Iscariot, "delivering him up" to the priests. And then the priests "delivering him up", you see to Herod. And Herod "delivering him up" to Pilate. Pilate "delivering him up" to be crucified. But at bottom, of course, it's the language of Isaiah 53. It was "the father who delivered him up for our trespasses." It's on that, that we rest.

What a thing. What a thing to rest on the promise of God, when you're 100 years old to rest on the promise of God that he'll give you a son. But my dear friends, that's, that's nothing by comparison with resting, and the way in which that promise was ultimately fulfilled, when the son of Abraham turned out to be the incarnate Son of God. And the Heavenly Father did, what he prevented Abraham from doing, as Abraham was going to deliver up his son as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah. The father stayed his hand because he was looking forward to the fulfillment of His own promise, when he would deliver up his own Son on the cross of Calvary. "It pleased the Lord to bruise him. He has put Him to grief. The Lord made to meet on him the sins of us all."

And then "raised up for our justification." What does Paul mean? Well, part of what he means is this, that if Jesus had stayed dead, we would never have known that we could be justified by faith in Him. We would never have known that his sacrifice had been accepted. Any more than the people could ever have known that the high priests sacrifice once a year on the Day of Atonement was acceptable to God unless the high priesthood reappeared in life, in order to reassure them that he hadn't been struck dead because God refused his sacrifice. Jesus appears in his resurrection power to reassure us His

sacrifice has been accepted. He's laid it down, he bears our guilt and sin no more. "All his work has ended. Joyfully we sing. Jesus has ascended. Glory to our king." His sacrifices is accepted.

But I think you'll see there's even more than that. He was given over for our trespasses to bring us pardon. But in a sense, pardon just brings us back to the Garden of Eden doesn't it. And that wouldn't be a sufficient gospel for me, or for you. You would just sin all over again. And so our Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished for us in his living and doing and dying, and rising, not just pardon, but justification. Not just being counted: not guilty. But being accounted, finally righteous in God's sight. And when you have seen that this is the ultimate glory of God, that you are "alive in him your risen head and clothed in righteousness divine, then bald, you may approach the eternal throne and claim the crown, through Christ your own." And the man or woman, the young person, the boy or girl, who has who has had had a glimpse of that -- well, he is going to be able to say with the Apostle Paul, do we by this faith overthrow the law? (Laughs) No, we live to the glory of God. As he will say later on in chapter eight, verses three and four: "What the law couldn't do because it was weak through our flesh, God did sending His Son in the likeness of the flesh of sin and for sin, condemned our sin in the flesh, in order that the requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." That's faith. "My faith has found a resting place not in device or creed. I trust the ever living One. His wounds for me shall plead. Enough for me that Jesus saves. This ends my fear and doubt. A sinful soul. I come to him. He'll never cast me out. My heart is leaning on the word the living Word of God. Salvation by my Savior's name, salvation through His blood. I need no other argument. I need no other plea. It is enough that Jesus died and that He died for me."

Now, when the Holy Spirit enables ya to trust in this Jesus Christ, who was put to death for your trespasses, and raised again, so that you might boldly approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ your own. You're always going to live in a way that pleases Him. Not perfectly. Yet. But for His glory. Just like your father, Abraham. Now my friends, all of that's a parenthesis. And by God's grace next week, we get into the really exciting things in the Gospel.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, how much we praise You for Your word and for the Living Word, Jesus Christ and for the joy of seeking to nourish ourselves in the word and, and hearing you speak to us and apply it to us -- our very different situations and needs and how marvelous you are to us. And what a joy for us to end the day under the word, in the presence, as the fellowship. We pray, as we prepare to go into the rest of this week in the power of our risen Lord Jesus Christ that the fragrance of your presence with us and the blessing of one another as a company of those who have been justified by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ may make us strong and joyful, as we live for Jesus' glory. And draw any of us who are confused the clarity; downcast to encouragement; faithlessness to faith; and, darkness to light -- for Jesus our Savior's sake Amen.