

Romans 3:31-4:12

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Modified from Irving L. Jensen's excellent work " Jensen's Survey of the NT "				

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The Detail of God's Good News, Part 3

by Dr. Wayne A. Barber

American Radio commentator Paul Harvey once told the story of a young lad of about 17 or 18 years old who was saving to buy a car. He saved \$1,500 and went to a car auction to buy his first car. Well, he hadn't seen one that he wanted when a van came along equipped for the handicapped. There was a young lady there who obviously needed that van. She bid on the van, but the price kept going up and she ran out of money. It so happened that the amount that the young man had was enough to help the young lady buy that van. That young man, instead of buying himself a car with the money he had saved, gave the money to that young lady. Some people asked him as he walked out, "Why did you do that?" He said, "Well, there will be other cars for me, but she needed that van."

When I heard Paul Harvey tell that story, it really blessed me. Then, having studied in the book of Romans, I realized something. If you take all the goodness of men—and there are good things being done—and wrap it up, it is filthy rags in the sight of God: it does not justify a man in God's sight. That is a tough truth to understand, but that is exactly what the Apostle Paul is saying. You can do good and certainly it will benefit others. But that goodness that you can do does not justify you in the sight of a holy God. It does not make you acceptable. It does not measure to the righteous standard of God. The one thing a man can do that God will accept is to put his faith into and upon the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what God accepts. That is what justifies a man. That is what makes an individual righteous.

Paul said this over and over again from verses 21 to 31 of chapter 3. "But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The term "righteousness of God" is a big term, many faceted, but right here it has to do with man's acceptance in God's sight. Paul says specifically that is "through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe." If I want to be accepted by God, it will never be on the basis of my goodness. It will be on the basis of what Jesus Christ did and of my putting my faith upon what Christ has already done.

In 3:24 he says that our justification, our acquittal, the charges being dropped, only takes place by placing faith into Jesus Christ. It says, "being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." In verse 28 Paul says, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law." In verse 31 he says that when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, this does not nullify the Law, it establishes the Law. Verse 31 reads, "Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law."

What does it mean when we put our faith into and upon what Jesus Christ has done and who He is? What does it mean when we say we establish the Law? A law is never established unless it is carried out. In other words, if someone transgresses it, the penalty that it demands has to be executed.

What did Jesus Christ do? He came to this earth. He lived among us and went to the cross to do to pay the penalty the law demands. All of us are guilty under the law. It seemed God winked at sin in the Old Testament. It seemed He never did anything extreme enough to show how His divine disfavor for sin could really be carried out. But when Jesus was crucified publicly and openly, it was a carrying out of the penalty that the law demanded for you and me. He took it upon Himself. When I put my faith into Jesus Christ, I am not nullifying the law. I have respected the fact it has condemned me. But I am also respecting the fact that it has been carried out to its fullest by Jesus Christ. The penalty has been paid. Therefore, my faith in Him does not nullify but establishes the Law. I hope you are clear on that. We establish the Law by putting our faith into the Lord Jesus Christ. A man is not good in himself. He could not have ever gone to the cross. Jesus is perfect. He was the perfect Son of Man, the Son of God, and He went to the cross for you and for me.

As we move into chapter 4 Paul is talking about the futility of good works. You can make all the New Year's Resolutions you want to make every year, but your works for God are just as dead now as they were before you got saved. We need to understand that. Good works do not impress God. He is looking to do the good works He does in and through us. That is what He wants us to see.

Now in chapter 4, the Apostle is acting like an attorney, like he has done before. It seems he is still addressing a Jewish audience because everything he says has relationship to them. He begins to build his point on justification by faith in Christ alone. The first thing he does in verses 1-3, as we get into chapter 4, is point to Abraham. Here is the point. Abraham's own justification confirms the truth of justification by faith alone. Look at verses 1-3: "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?" The word "found" is the Greek word *heurisko*. That's where we get the word "eureka." When you say, "I found it, eureka!", that is the word used there.

Verses 2 and 3 go on to say, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'" Remember, Paul has just told us that we cannot earn our righteousness. Do you realize how important this is to be preached in this day? People think they can be good enough for God, but we cannot earn our righteousness. A man is still guilty before God if he continues to base his security on his own good works. The charges still stand. They have not been dropped. They will not be dropped until he has put his faith in and upon what Jesus Christ has done for him.

Every Jew felt that, since the Law had been given to them and since they were endeavoring to obey it, that somehow that was going to earn them the right to be in the kingdom of God. They had the covenants. They had the promises. When I mention the Law, that is not just the moral and ceremonial law. Sometimes it is the first five books of the Old Testament. It means a lot of different things. But it had been given to the Jew and they felt like since they had this somehow they were guaranteed heaven.

Well, Paul takes his Jewish audience back to their hero, Abraham, the father of their faith. He said, "Okay, if you don't need to be justified by faith, how was Abraham justified?" Look at what he says in verse 1: "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?" In other words, he has righteousness. How did he get it? The term "our" is used there: "our forefather." What Paul is doing here is very smart. He is identifying with them because he himself is a Jew but he has been converted by the message of grace.

He says, "our forefather according to the flesh." The Jewish people traced their heritage back to Abraham. Some people are still cloudy about this, so let me explain it again. God covenanted with Abraham. He ratified that covenant again with Isaac and passed it on to Jacob later on. Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob got the birthright. His name, Jacob, had to be changed to Israel. Israel then had twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel. If you were a true Jewish person, you could track your lineage

back through all of those tribes to Abraham. Paul says in Philippians 3, "I was of the tribe of Benjamin." So when they thought of themselves being Jews, they were proud because they could track their bloodline back to Abraham.

Paul says, "Since you can track back to Abraham, let's just see how he was justified." Verse 2 says, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God." If Abraham was justified by his works, he would have been bragging all the way down through the Scriptures: "This is what I did. I did this and I did this and I did this. If you will do those things you can be justified." But he had nothing to brag about before God. You see, nothing Abraham did justified him. Isaiah 43 says your first forefather, referring to Abraham, sinned. You find at the very beginning of the whole race of Israel that there was a man who was a sinner, just like you and me.

Paul says again in verse 2, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God." In other words, when Abraham's case came up in the divine court, God looked at Abraham and said, "Abraham, you don't have anything to stand before Me. You don't have any works that I will accept." So how was he justified? He was a sinner like you and me. He was a sinner like anybody else. He had to be justified just like we have to be justified. How was he justified? Paul goes on in verse 3 and quotes Genesis 15:6, "For what does the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'"

The word, "reckoned," *logizomai*, is an accounting term. It was put to his account that he was now acceptable to God on the basis of his faith. He believed God. That is the way Abraham had to be justified. Why would any Jewish person think that his justification had to be any different? Somehow they go back to Abraham and his covenant and forget the covenant was made after he was justified by his faith in Genesis 15. They don't put that together, evidently, because there seems to be a tremendous misunderstanding. So, to be reckoned means He doesn't put our sin to our account based on our believing Him.

Abraham was reckoned righteousness when he believed, not when he went to church, not when he gave his tithe, not when he gave money to the church, not when he gave money to missions, not when he did all these things. He was justified, made righteous, when he believed God. Justification by faith alone is what Paul is bringing out. So Abraham is his first witness.

Secondly, he says not only does Abraham's justification confirm the truth, the mind of man confuses the truth. We live in the natural world. Our mind does not think like God's mind: "My ways are not your ways. My thoughts are not your thoughts." We live in a world that says if you will go out and get after it, then something will come as a reward to you. There is nothing wrong with that, by the way. But the mind-set of man is to work. The mind-set of man is "I have to do something so that I can be rewarded with something else."

Verse 4 says, "Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due." We need to remember that our flesh wants to work for God. It always has, and it always will. The principle of working for something is not bad. It is a wonderful principle if you will do it right. But when you drag that into your spiritual vocabulary, you commit spiritual suicide. You can never earn what only God can give you by grace.

Now, when you put that principle in the secular world, live with it and go after it. Work as hard as you can. That is the whole principle of working in the secular world. In Luke 10:7 it says the laborer is worthy of his wage. That is good, but not in the Christian vocabulary of salvation. You cannot bring that truth into the realm of spiritual salvation. You cannot work or do anything for your salvation other than place your faith into and upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 5 reads, "But to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness." There is a term you have to see in this verse. "Believes in Him," is in the present tense. It is not one time way back when. It casts everything upon Him who is consistent and continues the rest of your life. Paul goes on to say, "who justifies the ungodly." He realizes that no matter how hard he works, it doesn't matter. It is still ungodly in God's eyes. Therefore, the only way he can ever be justified, made righteous, is by putting his faith into the Lord Jesus Christ. What Paul is doing here is hammering good works. Good works do not save anybody. That is good news, because we could never be good enough. What saves us is putting our faith into the good work that Jesus did for you and me when he died for us upon the cross. God is narrow minded when it comes to our justification and consequent righteousness before God. There is only one way and that is by placing your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So Abraham's justification confirms it.

Thirdly, Paul goes to David. David's experience concerns this same truth. It is a great example of what it means to totally depend on what God can do and not what you can do for God. Romans 4:6-8 reads, "just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."

Paul is quoting Psalm 32:1-2. Understand what Paul is doing. This is when David had sinned. The whole thing is built around the sins of David, not the good works. David had nothing to stand on before God. He committed adultery with Bathsheba, had her husband killed, was guilty of lying, deceit and hypocrisy. Nathan the prophet had come to David, pointed his finger at him and said, "You are the man."

The response of David is what Paul goes back to. It shows David was a sinner. He was born a sinner. He sinned. All he had was a plea for the mercy of God. That is what he does in Psalm 51 and Psalm 32. He was bringing about the point again that justification comes when we realize what we can't do and that we can't help ourselves. We turn to God, cast ourselves upon Him and say, "Oh, God, you must do it. I cannot do it myself."

Psalm 32 and 51 have to do with the sin of David. Let's see what David confesses. You can understand why God forgave him. He didn't try to acknowledge that he was good. He acknowledged how bad he really was. Psalm 51:1 says, "Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions." David was saying, "God, I can't blot them out. I can't work enough for you to blot them out."

He says, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against Thee, Thee only I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight, so that Thou art justified when Thou dost speak, and blameless when Thou doest judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, Thou dost desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part Thou wilt make me know wisdom. Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness, let the bones which Thou hast broken rejoice. Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Thy presence, and do not take Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation, and sustain me with a willing spirit. *Then* I will teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners will be converted to Thee. Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, Thou God of my salvation. *Then* my tongue will joyfully sing of Thy righteousness."

Paul points to Abraham and you realize he had to be justified by his faith. Then you look at David and see David having to be justified by God because there was nothing good about David that could ever justify himself. Paul is confirming the truth, all the way back to the Old Testament that our justification, our righteousness comes only by placing our faith in God and in Christ Jesus.

In Psalms 32:1 when David says, "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven," no wonder he says what he says. Blessed, *makarios*, means completely, inwardly, spiritually satisfied. Do you want satisfaction? It won't come from trying to be good in God's eyes. No, it will come when you realize that only God can do what you want done in your life.

The verse says, "those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven." The word "lawless" means without God's approval, without any standard to govern what you are doing. Every one of us is that way. Think of the lawless deeds you did last year. You were not even listening to what God's Word had to say. You were not even listening to the voice of the Spirit trying to get you to move a certain way. You did what you wanted done. Thank God for His forgiveness based on our faith and our willingness to trust in what Christ has said.

The word "forgiven" is the Greek word that means to send away, never to return. Why are we forgiven? Because of our good deeds? Oh, no. Because of the grace and mercy of our precious God who loves us with a love that we will spend eternity trying to understand. That is how we are forgiven.

The verse goes on, "and whose sins have been covered." In the Old Testament when they sent the scapegoat out into the wilderness, it pointed to the day when those sins would never return. "Covered" had the idea that those sins were remembered in the Old Testament, but not remitted. They are remitted when the ultimate sacrifice came and when the ultimate sacrifice died for us. Our sins, when they are forgiven, are never brought up against us again. They are not on God's ledger. On His accounting book, we have been forgiven. We have been justified. He has erased those things, even from before we came to know the Lord Jesus Christ. It is an incredible truth that Paul is trying to bring out here. So, we understand why David is so excited. If he can be excited about his sins being covered, I can certainly get excited about my sins being remitted, don't you think?

Then he goes on. Romans 4:8 says, "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account." I want to make sure you understand something. On the ledger of God, He took that away from David. David did not have to be held accountable in the sense of eternity, but he suffered greatly the consequence of what he did. The balance in what we are teaching here is that yes, forgiveness removes it in God's eyes and He takes it off of our account based on our faith and our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. However, we suffer the consequences of our wrong choices. The longer a person goes without receiving the Lord Jesus, the greater the consequences will be in his life. The sword never left the house of David. David regretted the rest of his life that he sinned because of the things that happened in his life, even with his own children.

You will suffer the consequences of your sin. That is just the law. That is just going to happen. But we are talking about forgiveness. When we come to know Him and are justified and are made righteous before Him, then God does that on the basis of our faith and we are forgiven. The sins are sent away never to return to us again. So David had no recourse. David could not say before God, "Look at what all I have done. I am the King. You anointed me as King." All he could say was, "I am a sinner and I have sinned. And O God, if you don't do something, nothing will ever been done in my life. I can do nothing good on my own. God, you wash me. You cleanse me. You forgive me."

Abraham's justification confirms it. The natural mind confuses it. David's experience concerns it. There is one more thing he brings up in verses 9-12. Circumcision clarifies this truth. Of all things, circumcision is going to be one of the greatest arguments Paul has against works justifying an individual.

Verse 9: "Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, 'Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.' How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised."

The Jew would say, "I've got the sign. I am circumcised. I am already marked. I am going to be in the kingdom of God." The Apostle Paul tackles that head on. In verse 9 Paul is saying that the blessing of righteousness is not just for the Jew. It is also for the Gentile. Then he says if Abraham was justified after he was circumcised, it would be just for the Jew. But he wasn't. Circumcision wasn't even heard of when Abraham was made righteous by his faith.

I tell you, that is a powerful argument. If you are a Jewish person holding on to the fact that you have done the divine ordinance of circumcision and you think that somehow that is going to enable you to be in the kingdom of God...no way!

I want to stop right here. If you don't see the parallel in this, you are missing the whole point in what God is saying to us. Paul is talking to Jews. I understand that. We are trying to stay in the context as much as we can. But do you realize people today are still depending on divine ordinances to get them into heaven, to make them righteous, to somehow make them acceptable in God's eyes? What are some of the divine ordinances? Baptism. Do you realize that some people count on their baptism to get them saved? There is a denomination that preaches that if you are not baptized, you are not saved, that salvation comes with baptism. What did Paul just say? He has just told you that good works won't do it. Now he says divine ordinances will not do it. It is your faith in and upon the Lord Jesus Christ. You can't trust in your baptism.

What about the Lord's Supper? The Lord's Supper doesn't get you anywhere with God. What about joining the church? You can just go on with ordinance after ordinance after ordinance. I have asked people before, "Are you going to heaven one day?" They would say, "I sure hope so." I would reply, "You are? How are you going to get there?" "Well, I will work as hard as I can. I am just doing the very best I possibly can." I hate to tell you, but that is filthy rags in God's eyes.

That is a tough doctrine, isn't it. I don't like it. Man does not like to hear that. We think a little more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. Do you know where we come from? Dirt! Doesn't that excite you? Faith in Christ alone is all it takes to be justified, to be made righteous, to be forgiven, for it to be reckoned to our account as righteousness