

"The one who works... the one who... trusts God" – wages received for work are earned, not a gift. By contrast, what God gives is gracious (unearned and undeserved) and a gift. Therefore people cannot be declared righteous because of their good works.

"Credited" – a financial/legal word much used in this chapter, which means to add to the account something that belongs to another. The implication of these verses is shocking, because in God's accounting He breaks the world's rules and grants salvation to, or justifies, His ungodly enemies turning to Him in faith.

13 It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.

"Abraham... received the promise" – of Genesis 12:2-3 (above), but not by fulfilling any condition, but by believing and acting on it.

14-15 For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

"Depend on the law... [depend on] faith" – opposites: believing faith and good works are mutually opposed, because faith trusts in God's work, rather than relying on ours.

REFLECTION In his teaching to believers in Rome, Paul addresses the human desire to aspire to righteousness by a "depending on the law", meaning human striving with expectation of some credit for it. His shocking answer is that God applies that credit to those who clearly have not earned it. Thoroughly undeserving people find salvation by simply trusting God and not doing anything else! The message for us is direct but also a little difficult: we must root out every strand of entitlement, and every every tendency to man-centred righteousness,. It is the lesson of Abraham, of Nicodemus and now taught to the early church by Paul: the promise of new life and eternal life is secured by God's definition of righteousness, not ours - the righteousness that comes by faith.

QUESTION *Is Christ's church a gathering of people like us, or is it for us to serve people not like us who are finding their way to faith?*

PRAYER Thank You so much, Father, for making a way for me to be accepted by You in a way I never could have achieved – through believing and accepting Jesus. I hear again Your command to be born of Your Spirit to be counted as of right standing with you, by faith, nothing more or less. Once again I surrender my baggage of unbelief and accept Your invitation of grace, gladly Jesus, in Your name. Amen.

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"Law brings wrath" – for 'wrath' understand 'judgment'. The nature of the law (as opposed to grace) is to flag up every transgression for judgment.

16 Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

"By faith... by grace" – faith and grace go together, as do the opposites, law and judgment.

"Of the law... also...those that have the faith of Abraham" – Abraham is the Father of the Jews but also of those (non-Jews) who share his faith but not the law.

17 As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

"Gives life... and calls into being things that were not" – different expressions of the same idea. Isaac's birth to Abraham and Sarah, a life called out of two people well past childbearing; Christ crucified and dead, then called into being in resurrection. God has the ability to create out of nothing. He has the ability to confer life on those spiritually dead in sin – the new birth, John 3:3, 7, 14-16.

The Living Word

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Bible readings for Sunday, March 8, 2020, with explanatory notes

Bible study on the Revised Common Lectionary passages for **March 8**
Prepare by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on the pulpit teaching

Theme: How to be completely accepted by Almighty, holy God

Genesis 12:1-4a – God promises Abram to make a nation through him

John 3:1-17 – Jesus tells 'the teacher of Israel' even he must be born again

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 – Like Abraham we are made right with God by faith

Also read: Psalm 121

Genesis 12:1-4a – God promises Abram to make a nation through him

Taking God at His word he set off for a new land

1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

"The Lord" – named to Moses as *Yahweh*, Ex. 3:14-15.

"Go from your country" – God spoke to Abram about leaving "while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran", Acts 7:2. His name is in other ancient texts from 20th-19th centuries B.C.

2-3 "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever

curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

I will make... I will bless... – A sevenfold promise expanding the LORD's original blessing of the whole human race, Gen. 1:28, into a covenant which is largely just on God's side (unlike others), and everlasting.

4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

"Abram went" – with limited understanding of what God was saying; a model of faith which obeys and trusts that understanding will follow.

REFLECTION Believing God is always a step into what we do not know – otherwise it would not be believing. Abram's willingness to trust God's purpose absolutely, leaving a settled existence to seek an unknown destination in another land, leaves us wondering how we would respond. God was clear that Abram would know God's blessing and also become part of God's blessing to others. But we are left with the sense that Abram understood very little about his unique call. And that's the point: faith doesn't seek to understand everything first. *Faith is able to trust God to work out the details. "So Abram went, as the LORD had told Him..."*

QUESTION *Do you tell God to show you the whole map before starting the journey?*

John 3:1-17 – Jesus tells 'the teacher of Israel' he must be born again

Nicodemus learns that spiritual renewal is the way into the kingdom

1 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

"Nicodemus" – an influential, educated and genuine-hearted lay representative of the Jewish religious establishment. A wealthy person of this name is mentioned in other Jewish sources of this period.

2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

"He came... at night" — for for privacy and a longer discussion than crowds would allow, and (John adding a double meaning) out of the spiritual darkness prevailing.

"Rabbi" — remarkable respect from a teacher of repute, v.10, to a Galilean not formally trained as a rabbi.

3 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

"See" — perceive, recognise, or simply enter.

"Born again" — also "born from above" e.g. The Message which helps to answer Nicodemus' question, below. This is a spiritual birth, a faith transaction in which the human spirit is kindled into spiritual life by the Holy Spirit, vv.5-6.

4 "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

"How..." — difficult to understand from human perspective and life experience.

5 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

"Born of water and the Spirit" — made clean and made spiritually alive, a spiritual regeneration that comes about only as a result of an intentional decision to trust Christ. In Paul's letter to Titus is the "trustworthy saying" describing rebirth as washing, Titus 3:4-7. Baptism cannot be in view here.

6-7 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again."

"You (singular) should not be surprised at My saying, 'You (plural) must be born again.'" — Jesus is saying that Nicodemus and all the Jewish ruling council he represents need spiritual rebirth to see the kingdom of God, and grasp the nature of His call — and so He applies this to all people.

8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"Wind blows wherever it pleases" — Heb. Ruach and Gk. pneuma means both wind and Spirit. We cannot control how the wind blows; nor the new birth, which is, in effect, the opposite — relinquishing control to God.

9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?"

"Do you not understand" — emphasised, because Nicodemus the teacher should have known from familiar Scriptures about new birth allusions in the breath (Spirit) entering the dry bones of Ezekiel 37, and in both Ezekiel and Jeremiah, the heart of stone replaced by a new living heart with the Holy Spirit indwelling and enabling.

• For further study, see Deuteronomy 30:6, Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 36:26-27, Ezekiel 37.

11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.

"We speak of what we know" — not hearsay. Jesus focuses on how believing faith, over and above intellect, is needed to receive this teaching.

12-13 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven — the Son of Man.

"Gone into heaven... came from heaven" — like Proverbs 30:4, "Who has gone up to heaven and come down... what is His name?" Only Jesus descended from heaven and then returned there (on His ascension, Luke 24:51, Acts 1:9).

14-15 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him."

"Lifted up" — the first of three uses by John of this phrase. Another double meaning: Jesus "lifted up" on the Cross to die for us, and His "being lifted" in resurrection and also exaltation to the highest place of honour. The Israelites were commanded to look up at the bronze snake and believe God would save them from death, Numbers 21:4-9; so we are to look at Christ, "lifted up" on the Cross and believe what He has done for us, to gain life spiritually and eternally. A way of understanding the new spiritual birth.

16 For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

"God... loved the world" — a truth at the foundation of Christian faith. God's love is without condition and extends to "so loving the world", which must include "whoever" does not know Him, or who opposes Him before believing: He loves us first, 1 John 4:9-10.

REFLECTION Abram (who became Abraham) came into in right relationship with God, simply by what he believed. Or to put it another way, by trusting God with his life. This is what Jesus encouraged the renowned "teacher of Israel" and wealthy man of business, Nicodemus, to take hold of when he visited Jesus privately. What God is looking for in us, is usually a lot less complicated than we want to make it. That was certainly true for Nicodemus, and for Pharisees generally, who maintained an oral tradition of layer upon layer of 'good practices' that had been constructed as a way to keep the law perfectly. Except that it missed the point: the Law of Moses was a rule-based way of trying to define a relationship between loving, merciful God and somewhat wayward man. Jesus told this worthy teacher, "You must be born again". Rules and strict observance cannot change us spiritually — only the Holy Spirit does that. Nicodemus simply needed a new spiritual start to be put in relationship with almighty and holy God. Now that he had met Jesus, he needed to believe, accept and trust who Jesus was. It's the same for us — we need to meet Jesus, acknowledge what He has done for us that we (like Nicodemus) could never do, and receive Him as Lord. No one else can do that for us — it is simply our decision, to invite Him in.

QUESTION In what way have you been a good observing person like Nicodemus? Why does that not have the power to bring new life?

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 - Like Abraham faith alone makes us right with God

The gift of God comes only by believing, not by any merit from good works

writings 1 Maccabees 2:52, Sirach 44:19-21).

1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?

"Abraham, our forefather" — the Father of the Jewish nation is now Father of faith to all believers.

2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about — but not before God.

"Justified by [good] works" — over the centuries the faith of the patriarch ancestors had degenerated into a 'works-righteousness' where keeping the many rules (like Nicodemus) had taken the place of the faith relationship with God. In Jewish writings familiar to Paul's contemporaries, Abraham had been wrongly portrayed as someone justified by his good works (e.g. in the non-canonical Apocrypha

17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.

"Not... to condemn the world" — Jewish people believed that the end of the age would bring both judgment and salvation with eternal life. But in Jesus those promises start to take effect, with salvation and new life starting in the present, through new spiritual birth.

3 What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

"Abraham believed God" — Paul quoting Genesis 15:6, where nothing is mentioned about works, Paul shows Abraham to be the example of righteousness to follow, because of his relationship with God. Abraham kept no law, carried out no service and performed no ritual that earned credit to his account with God. His righteousness was awarded simply on the basis of his believing faith, a model now for Christians.

4-5 Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.