

# Romans 4:13-17

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Modified from Irving L. Jensen's excellent work " <a href="#">Jensen's Survey of the NT</a> "				

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Romans 4:13-17:

The Detail of God's Good News, Part 4

by Dr. Wayne A. Barber

When you were born, you were born into sin. You hadn't sinned at that point, but you were born as a sinner. All sinners can do is sin. We are born under the wrath of God. We are born separated from God. The charges against us stand and continue to stand unless we put our faith into and upon the Lord Jesus Christ. At the moment we exercise that faith, believing God, putting our faith into what He has done for us and into the Lord Jesus Christ, then we are justified or acquitted or the charges are dropped. If you go any way other than Jesus, any way other than the cross, any way other than your faith in Him, then the charges are still against you. One day you will stand at the judgment seat of God, and you will be cast into hell forever because that is the penalty for a person not putting their faith into the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul has been showing us in Romans what our justification is all about, how the charges are dropped, how we are acquitted. All of this is by faith; it is not by the Law. He began this process in Ro 3:21 and has continued down to where we are in Ro 4:13. Looking at chapter 4, we see that it is all about Abraham. Ro 4:1-8 tell us works did not justify Abraham. Ro 4:9-12 show us ordinances such as circumcision did not justify Abraham. In Ro 4:13-17 we find that the law did not justify Abraham. The whole point of this is justification by faith and by faith alone.

Let's look at Ro 4:13-17. The whole passage has to do with a promise God made to Abraham. That promise was not on the basis of works, but it was on the basis of faith. It wasn't through the Law that the promise was made; it was on the basis of faith. He shows that faith, not law, is the divine method of blessing. Remember, the Jewish audience that he was writing to would immediately understand that the Mosaic law did not come about until 500 years after Abraham. Not only did circumcision not come around until

after he had been righteous, the Law was 500 years later. Man has never been able to come to God by means of an outward ceremony or a standard of conduct. God never accepts that. So, when Paul starts this you must recognize that they have an understanding already that the Law came much later on.

Ro 4:13: "For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith."

Paul starts off by saying, "The promise to Abraham was on the basis of faith." What was this promise to Abraham? First of all, the promise to Abraham recorded in Genesis involved a land. That land we know today is Israel. Genesis 15:18-21 describes that land and the promise of that land.

Secondly, it involved a people, a nation. Genesis 15:5 says, "And He took him outside and said, 'Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'" A nation, a physical nation, just as we see Israel today. Then it involved a blessing. There is not only a physical seed of Abraham, but there is a spiritual seed of Abraham. Some people say, "No, one is the replacement of the other." I don't believe that. Physical, tangible Israel is still there today, and God is not finished with Israel. But there is a spiritual seed also promised here.

Genesis 12:3, "And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

But the promise also involved a Redeemer. The Redeemer is built into the promise given to Abraham. In Galatians 3:8 Paul writes "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel [the good news] beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you.'" In Gal 3:16 Paul adds that the seed is promised to Abraham and the seed is Jesus Christ. We see how all the nations shall be blessed. It will be through the man, Jesus Christ, born in the lineage of David, traced all the way back to Abraham.

So this promise was made to Abraham, but it was made to Abraham on the basis of faith, not through the law. Read Romans 4:13 again: "For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith." If a Jewish person or any person would think that Abraham had something to hang his hat on to deserve this promise, Paul is tearing that argument down. Adam had failed; all of his successors had fallen. But Abraham had succeeded in the sense that he had put his faith into God and it was accounted to him as righteousness. From him now comes the method of how we are reckoned righteousness. It is not by what we do, it is by putting our faith into God and what God can do. He became known as the Father of Faith. We don't put our faith in Abraham, but we do what Abraham did, by putting our faith into God.

Remember, Abraham was from Ur, a Chaldean. Chaldeans were Babylonians. They were a very pagan people in this world. As a matter of fact, Revelation says that God remembered Babylon. There has been a problem with these kinds of people all through time. Abram was a man like you and me whom God singled out. He was just a Chaldean. Secondly, he was old and had no children. Not only no children, but no males to take up the family line, which in that day was sort of a shameful thing. Not only that, he was totally unworthy. There was not a thing in the world that he could offer to God, not one single thing. Old, barren, a Chaldean—and God singled him out.

This is what I think the Apostle Paul is trying to show you here. The fact that it was by faith, it certainly wasn't through the Law. There was not one single thing that Abraham could do to justify himself. As a matter of fact, let me read to you the verses preceding Ge 15:6 where he believed and it was accounted to him as righteousness.

Ge 15:1-5, "After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great.' And Abram said, 'O Lord God, what wilt Thou give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abraham said, 'Since Thou hast given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.' Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'This man will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.' And He took him outside and said, 'Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'"

Paul even called him heir of the world. Now what kind of worthiness did Abraham have to be called the heir of the world? Look at Genesis 15:6 "Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." The only thing that God would accept from Abraham was his faith. This is good news for you and me. He didn't have a heritage to depend upon. He didn't have good works to depend upon. He didn't have a family. He didn't have anything. But he put his faith into what God had said and as a result was reckoned righteousness and became what we know as the Father of Faith.

But then second, the Apostle Paul is working an argument here that is just beautiful. The promise would not be needed if a man could keep the law. If Abraham could have kept the Law, the promise would not have been needed. Look at Ro 4:14: "For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified." Paul is saying, "Now, listen. If you can obey a law, any

law, if you can obey that standard and measure up and think that you can earn righteousness and earn acceptance with God, then you wouldn't need the promise." In other words, you would have to start tearing pages out of your Bible. You could start with Genesis 3 and on. Man sinned. You don't want to know about that because, you might be thinking, man can still live up to the law. You would have to rip it all out. As a matter of fact, you would probably end up with "God created the world" and that is about all. The Bible from Genesis to Revelation is the story of how God has redeemed man and how God has been separated from man and how man needs to come back into fellowship with God. That is what the whole Bible is about. You would have to throw it away. If a man could live up to the law, then it would nullify the promise. Faith and law are on two different extremes.

I want to set that stage for you right now. We are going to come back to it. Let's just say that law is on one side. Law works a certain way. Let's put faith over on the other side. They are on two different principles altogether, two different highways, two different tracks altogether. They are diverse in the way that they are used. Those who think that by obeying the law somehow they can be acceptable to God are foolishly deceived. You see, there are many people today who still think that they have to do their part to help God out in their salvation. I have asked people, "Are you going to heaven?" They say, "I sure hope so." I say, "Well, what do you mean?" "Well, I am doing the best I can. I sure hope I get there." What principle are they under? They are not under the principle of faith because the principle of faith has nothing to do with the law. They must still be under the principle of the law. They are trying to live up to a standard, thinking that by living up to a standard, God can accept them in some way.

Well, Paul moves on. He keeps the argument flowing. The promise given to Abraham was on the basis of faith. But not only that, if a man could obey the law, then he wouldn't even need the promise. It would be nullified. Then he goes to a third step. He says in Ro 4:15 that the law was given to show that the promise is needed. It says in Ro 4:15: "for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation." He is contrasting something here. On one side is law. Law will bring about wrath. Do you want to go that way? It will condemn you. It is a dead-end street. But on the other side is faith, which is another principle. It has nothing to do with the works of the law. Since there is no law, there is no violation, no condemnation.

Let me work through that with you. You see, some people think they can merit justification by obeying the Law, but then Paul brings this whole point up. The promise was given to Abraham on the basis of his faith, but if you could merit it by the works of the Law, it would totally nullify it because the Law makes a person subject to wrath. The term "brings" there means it works against us. The longer I stay up under the Law, the more it is bringing me to wrath, and the more it is bringing me to condemnation. The Law works against me. It brings me under condemnation.

You may ask, "Why does it do that?" I will tell you why it does that. It does that because no man can live up to it. You see, the very fact of why God gave the Law is the proof of the fact that we need the promise. If man could live perfectly, if man could live the way God accepted, then you certainly wouldn't need the Law and you certainly wouldn't need the

promise. But the Law was given and it brings men up under wrath.

If the Law hadn't been given, then you wouldn't need the promise. But the very fact that the Law was given proves you need the promise. The Law was given to show you what you cannot do. Therefore, it makes you ready to receive the message of what God can do in your life.

Well, Paul goes on. The promise then is according to God's grace, not according to His law. Look at Romans 4:16: "For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all." Oh, what beautiful words, not by law but by faith in accordance to grace. Grace. We haven't looked at that word yet. Although everything we have looked at is a matter of God's grace, it now comes up to the surface. "In accordance with God's grace." Now listen, if my acceptance with God, if my justification before Him, my acquittal before Him was based on the works of the Law, then my hope would be totally uncertain day by day. Do you know why? Because I never know if I have obeyed enough laws. I never know when I have arrived because I am constantly working, working, working. I never know if I have arrived or not. But when I put my faith into Jesus Christ, my hope becomes certain because the whole promise is based on faith in accordance with the grace of God.

The word grace there is the word charis. Do you know what it means? It is so simple. It means absolutely, totally, unmerited and undeserved favor. You see, if I work one work, what God gives me is deserved. But I can't work one work. All of my works are filthy rags, therefore, I come to put my faith into Jesus Christ and as a result of that, God gives me grace which goes along with that faith. That grace is God's unmerited favor that He gives to me. He gives me something that I could never repay. He gives me something that I could never earn, nor deserve.

Paul goes on to say, "in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants [that is spiritual seed], not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all." He goes back to that promise that "through you all the nations on earth would be blessed." Circumcision came later on. The Law came later on. Everything that Abraham did was strictly and solely on the basis of faith. Why? So the Gentiles and Jews alike could have the same opportunity to

put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It was done that way so that Abraham could truly be said to be the Father of Faith to both Jew and Gentile. He set the pace for the rest of us. It was not just for the Jew. It was not just for the Gentile. It was done in such a way that all men might have the opportunity, who by faith and according to grace could be justified before God.

Then he comes to the final point in Ro 4:17. I think what Paul is doing here is showing us that God can fulfill and stand behind the promise He made to Abraham. Paul wants to make sure we understand that. Ro 4:17 reads, "(as it is written, 'A Father of many nations have I made you') in the sight of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist." Paul quotes directly out of Genesis 17:5 which says, "For I will make you the Father of a multitude of nations." Take that verse and hook it to Genesis 15:5: "Your descendants shall be as the stars in the heavens." Hook those to Genesis 12:3: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." I still see two seeds coming from Abraham.

Israel, which still stands there, is rejecting the Lord. But what we are talking about here is the spiritual seed of Abraham, those who have done what he did by exercising their faith in God and what God has said. Then righteousness is accounted to them. So there is a spiritual Israel and a physical Israel that we are looking at here. You have to deal with both of those. The context here is talking about the spiritual seed of Abraham.

Paul goes on to say that there is a two-fold promise here. One is obviously to tangible Israel, but also to spiritual Israel. Galatians 3:16 says, "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. He does not say 'to seeds,' referring to many, but rather to one. He says, 'and to your seed,' that is, Christ." The coming of Christ was given in that promise to Abraham. Then in Galatians 3:29 Paul says, "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

So what he is talking about here is the promise given him of many nations, being heir of the world and all the different things he said from Romans 4:13-17. That promise was given to you on the basis of faith so that all might come in and God gave it Himself.

The question might come up in somebody's mind, "What God?" Paul clears it up very clearly in Ro 4:17: "in the sight of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist." First of all, He is God who gives life to the dead. Abraham knew something about that, didn't he? As a matter of fact, verse 18 and following describes his whole experience in that. Heb 11:11 says, "By faith even Sarah herself received the ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised." She was "dead" in the sense of child-bearing. She had gone way past that time. But God says, "You are going to bear a son." Abraham knew what God he was dealing with.

Heb 11:12 says, "Therefore also there was born of one man and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars in heaven in number and innumerable as the sand which is upon the sea shore."

Paul is saying, "Do you know what God it was that promised all this to Abraham? It was the God that brings life from that which is dead. The proof being that Isaac was born in the later years of their life."

Then secondly, that God is the one who calls into being things which do not exist. Who is this God that can bring life from those things that are dead? He is the same God who created all things. Paul quotes out of Hebrews 11:3, "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the Word of God so that what is seen was not made out of things were visible." He is the one true God. He speaks and it comes about. This is the God who made the promise to Abraham and signified it by the fact that He brought Isaac to them in the later years of their life. He is a God who said, "Don't come to me by the Law. Come to me by faith. That is all that I am going to accept from you." Therefore, when Abraham was justified, it had nothing to do with the Law. But it had everything to do with his putting his faith into that which God wanted to do. Works did not justify Abraham nor do they us. Ordinances did not justify Abraham nor do they us. The law did not justify Abraham nor does it justify us.

Now, let's come down to some application here. This has been sort of heavy. We are seeing some things being developed in our theology that I hope you are getting a handle on. You can be under the Law before you get saved and you can also be under the Law after you get saved. You can come up with these silly little rules that say a person is spiritual if they come to church every Sunday, and if they tithe, and if they do certain things. You can make up your own set of rules and start judging everybody by that set of rules. But I want to tell you something, the very standard you are using to judge them will somehow come back to condemn you before it is over with. It is a fence that you have rebuilt in your life. It is a wall that you put back up that God has already torn down.

Faith according to grace lifts you out of those fences. It gives you a freedom not to do as you please but to do as you should. Now you are not restricted by all these sets of rules that man wants to put on you. You get saved by grace. Read the book of Galatians. Paul says to the Galatians, "O foolish Galatians. Who has bewitched you? You were saved by grace. Do you think you are now kept by the law?" He is saying, "You have gotten back up under this kind of thing. You are not walking in that intimacy of fellowship and oneness. You are not in the Word and listening to what God is saying to you and by faith acting upon what God has said. Instead you have gone back up under that law."

When you get back up under this law as a believer, you lose your joy, number one. You become suspicious of every person who walks. Somehow you have got to figure them out and judge them because you have a standard now that you are living up under and you are judging everybody around you. If they don't measure up to what you think they ought to measure up to, then you spend your life criticizing and condemning everybody else and missing out on all the joy you could have yourself of being a part of what God is up to. You have a choice. You have a choice to either go the way of the law or to go the way of faith in accordance to grace.

Let me ask you a question. Are you under the law? Or are you living under faith in accordance to grace? Are you measuring everybody else by what you perceive or are you daily coming before God as David did? He didn't say, "O Lord, Nathan sinned." He said, "O Lord, I have sinned and against Thee and Thee only have I sinned. Not only have I sinned, I am a sinner and can do nothing else unless You forgive me and empower me to do differently." You see, that is the whole message to me. Romans is so fundamental to everything we believe as Christians. You are either under the law or you are under grace. My prayer is you are free to be what God wants you to be. You get under grace and find out what God can do.