When it comes to understanding just how it is that we are “saved by faith,” there is often a lot of confusion as to how that works. Because our understanding of faith as “belief” has been somewhat isolated from works, it can be easy to be puzzled about the implications of justification by faith. Does this simply mean we only have to believe in God, or that Jesus is the Son of God? Is belief enough? If so, that seems to set a relatively low standard of getting into heaven, even if we all acknowledge that no one deserves to go to heaven based on their own merit. Could not a person claim to believe in Jesus as the Son of God as a way of hedging his bet, while he maintains a style of life that is clearly contrary to God’s wishes? How are we to sort all of this out?

In Romans chapter four, Paul helps us with this dilemma of justification by faith. Drawing on the very beginning of God’s redemptive plan, he takes his readers back to some of God’s earliest interactions with the forefather of the Jewish faith—Abraham. Clearly, Paul says, Abraham was not a man who was justified by his own works. We know very little about Abraham’s earlier life, but even in the 25 plus years of his life that we have recorded for us in Genesis, Abraham was prone to big mistakes. And yet, God had made a promise to him that even in his old age, he and his wife would bear a son whose lineage would make him the father of a great nation. Despite whatever other struggles Abraham may have had, he dared to believe that God’s SPECIFIC promise to him would come true. The Bible tells us that Abraham was “credited with righteousness” because of that faith. Another way of saying that is, “he was justified by his faith.”

As Paul works out the details of this example for us in Romans chapter four, his ultimate point is to bring the application back to the reader. In the same way that Abraham was justified by God, so also are we. God has given us a SPECIFIC promise, and when we take the risk to believe that what God has promised is really true, then God justifies us and adds us to Abraham’s family because of our faith.

Yet again, however, a person might object at the casualness of this: “Do I simply have to believe what God has promised, and all else is taking care of???” In essence, yes....however, it is crucial to note that this is not just a general belief that God exists or that Jesus is his Son. James tells us that even the demons believe that, and clearly it is no credit to them. No, here again, we must remember that our faith is in a SPECIFIC promise. God’s promise to us is not the same as the specific promise he made to Abraham, but it is equally as grand. God has promised that despite our sin, he is working in and through Jesus Christ to restore us back to the glory always intended for us, and to make us fit to carry out our original calling of being God’s image bearers into his creation. To have faith in THIS promise means that not only do we trust that God is going to do it, but that we actually WANT to be the people God always made us to be. At the very least, we want to want to! It won’t work to say that I believe in the promise, and then simply go live a life contrary to what God has revealed. To do that would express that you don’t have faith in what God desires for us. You just want a good outcome to a life of your own pleasure. This is not faith. True faith trusts that God made us to be a specific kind of person, and that through Jesus and our own cooperation, God is working to redeem us back to a person who has God’s own virtue. We struggle in this life to cooperate with the Spirit to allow this to happen, failing along the way, but we trust God that he will finish his work in us, in this life or the next. That is the kind of faith that leads one into salvation. It is not just works, and yet it works. It is not just belief, and yet it believes.

(Don’t forget to join me for A Message from the Heart radio program Sunday evening at 8:00pm on KJAK 92.7FM, or streaming live at www.kjak.com)