

LENT 2 Genesis 12:1–8 Romans 4:1–5, 13–17 John 4:1–26
March 12, 2017 Hymns: 106, 715, 391, 108

Think back to the last group you became a part of... Perhaps you joined a club, were hired by a company, or enrolled in a school. Joining a group usually requires an application process followed by an acceptance process. If you met the requirements, you were accepted. And if you kept up on your dues or other requirements, you stayed a member. If not, your membership lapsed. But how do you get into the Holy Christian Church? How do you become part of God's family? The apostle Paul told the Romans that they became Christians differently than joining a club or company. We, too, have been given that **Guaranteed Membership for Life!**

1. A Gift of Grace

Paul wrote the book of Romans at a time when the Jewish teachers had brought the club mentality into their understanding of how people come into membership in God's Church. For them, similar to the mentality of false prophets we are studying in bible class on Galatians, Abraham was the chief proof that supported their claim that one has to work his way into heaven. Some might see the great things that Abraham did and say that those things made him right with God. Look how he left Haran to travel to the promised land, followed the ceremony of circumcision, and much more. Abraham surely did great things, in the eyes of men.

But Abraham had nothing to boast about before God. ¹*What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter?* ²*If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.* If Abraham's works made him right, then he could pat himself on the back. But Abraham discovered something else. Works could not make him right with God! Yet God brought him into the righteous club through faith. ³*What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."*

Abraham was justified by faith. Today's Old Testament reading painted a picture of faith's meaning in the nuts and bolts of Abraham's everyday life. "Pack up, Abraham. Move out, Abraham," the call comes down. Abraham packs up. Abraham moves out. He walked the steps from familiar Haran to an unknown Canaan in faith. But it was not Abraham's idea or his own doing, it was God's promise that enabled him to move to the promised land. Abraham took God at his word, trusted and believed that what God said was true. "Abraham, I'm giving you a membership card in righteousness. It is yours through the Savior that I will send!" Abraham was not a man who worked, but the man who believed. God came to him; God made a promise; Abraham believed it.

Membership in God's Church, in his righteous family, is a gift. Paul explained: ⁴*Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.* ⁵*However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.* You know the difference between wages and a gift. After you got paid for your weekly 40 hours of work, you didn't thank your boss for a gift. Last Christmas, you didn't tell everyone how much you had earned your presents! Everything that has to do with righteousness and eternal life is a gift of God.

Our experience may show that wages are much more reliable than gifts. You can be pretty sure about receiving pay for services rendered, but you're never quite sure if your spouse will remember your Anniversary gift. But not always; I'm still waiting for two weeks of pay from a summer job back in the 1980's. My employer went bankrupt. I'll never see those wages. But when it comes to getting something good from God, you don't want your wages. Trust me on that! The wages of sin is death. The gift of God is much better, and it is guaranteed because God will not break his promise given and sealed in Christ - guaranteed membership for life. No work of yours brought you in, not even going to catechism or membership class. You are a member of

Christ's Church because of what he did in Baptism, in the Word, and in his promise in the gospel.

2. With Great Privileges

Years ago, a credit card company used the slogan, *Membership has its privileges*. You do join a group or club to get the benefits entitled to the group. The gift of our guaranteed membership for life with God includes great privileges. What did Abraham, and what do believers, receive by faith? ¹³*Abraham... received the promise that he would be heir of the world through the righteousness that comes by faith*. Those who have membership with God in Christ receive nothing less than the whole universe. The One who rose from the dead rules the universe for us and for the benefit of his Church.

We are privileged to be in Abraham's family. ¹⁶*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 are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all*. Whether or not you were raised in a loving family, you are guaranteed an eternal family in Christ. Human guarantees can fail, but God's guarantees stand firm! Jesus Christ bought you to make you his. He adopted you based on absolutely nothing about you, but only based on his love for you.

There was once a woman who had made a mess of her family, or families, I should say. She had been married five times before giving up on marriage as an outdated custom. Then she moved in with the next man who caught her fancy. She was hardly the ideal congregation member! The "good people" of her town stayed away from her. And deep down, even though she wouldn't admit it, she knew her actions didn't meet the standards they should have. Then, on one hot weekday afternoon, a man asked her for a drink of water, and told her about God's love. God brought her in, giving her the gift to believe it was true. The Samaritan woman had been a complete outcast, but God brought her into his family. Jesus told her, "I am the one who can teach you all things. I am the one who can make you right with God." He did. She became a member of his kingdom.

Meeting the Savior drew her into the greatest privilege - life. ¹⁷*[Abraham] is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were*. God gave life to the promise. He made facts out of things Abraham could not see or even imagine, and Abraham believed what God told him. God makes dry bones live; he puts flesh on his promises. A Christian believes Christ. God calls us righteous, and so we are in Christ. He calls us alive, and we rise up to sing his praises. He calls us his children and heirs, and we are. The promise gives, and faith accepts. Abraham waits in heaven, alive, and with open arms to welcome his children.

Hold on to God's promise, your guaranteed membership for life. This blessed gift is yours through the gospel that is preached in this congregation. You have done nothing to earn it. What you have done, even going to membership or catechism class with me or a former pastor, has not given you membership. God brought you in at your baptism, though sin had made you an outcast. Now, as members of God's family, you'll want to do study these promises in his word and serve. The privilege of service continues as Christ's undeserved love moves your heart to act, just as Abraham did. See such gifts and service as the privilege it is – the privilege of membership for life with God.