

Romans 4:1-25

Despite the fact that “Amazing Grace” is our favorite hymn, most people think that if you just do your best you will somehow make it to Heaven. Modern man is, as a matter of fact, deeply hostile to the concept of justification by faith alone through God’s grace. He is much more comfortable with the motto: “*We get our salvation the old fashioned way. We earn it!*” Justification through the “*good life*”—that computes.

Scripture however states it differently. Justification is through grace-alone by faith-alone in Christ-alone. Paul has both expounded his gospel of justification by faith (3:21–26), and defended it against its critics (3:27–31). In doing so, he has also insisted that it is attested by Old Testament Scripture (1:2; 3:21, 31). To prove his point even further in chapter 4 Paul delves into specific illustrations from the Old Testament that further confirm justification by faith – Abraham, David, Circumcision, the Law and more on Abraham.

I. Justification by Faith Confirmed by Abraham Romans 4:1-5

Abraham was held in the highest esteem by the Rabbis as the epitome of righteousness and even the special ‘friend’ of God. Paul begins with a question: “*What then shall we say about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?*” Responding to his own question about Abraham Paul gives a twofold answer. The first reason, the very concept of Abraham having been justified by works, is so fiercely repudiated by Paul is that this would have given him something to boast about, or might have appeared to. But Paul rejects any possibility of human beings boasting before God.

Then there is a second reason for Paul’s denial that Abraham was justified by works, and that is the text of Scripture. What does the Scripture say he asks (v. 3a)? In answer to his query as to what Scripture says, Paul quotes Genesis 15:6: ‘*Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness*’ (v. 3b).

In order to catch the full impact of Abraham’s amazing faith we need to frame Genesis 15:6 in its context. Abraham had been in the land for ten years but despite the promise of Gen. 12:1-3, 7 he still had no heir to carry on the family line. It was at this point that the promise of the Lord came to him: “‘*this man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.*’ He took him outside for a visual aid and said, ‘*Look at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.*’... ‘*So shall your offspring be*’” (Genesis 15:4, 5).

“*Abram believed the Lord, and he reckoned or credited it to him as righteousness*” (Genesis 15:6).

The word “*credited*” (logizomai) appears eleven times in Romans 4, five times in vv. 3-8 (3, 4, 5, 6, 8, six more times in 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24) so this idea must be important, right? It has the idea of ‘*crediting to one’s account*’. Different translations render it: counted, reckoned, considered, imputed, and computed. In a financial or commercial context, it signifies to put something to somebody’s account, as when Paul wrote to Philemon about Onesimus: ‘*If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.*’

There are, however, two different ways in which money can be credited to our account, namely as wages (which are earned – vs. 4) – literally “*not according to grace (charis) but according to obligation – what is owed (opheilema)*” or as a gift (which is free and unearned – vs. 5), and the two are necessarily incompatible.

These two verses were a shock to his Jewish audience even to his Gentile audience as well. First because Paul discourages working for salvation!

Second, this was shocking because the paradoxical description of God as a “*God who justifies the wicked*” (literally the *ungodly*) assaulted traditional sensibilities. The doctrine of faith-alone, offends our natural

sensibilities. We naturally think justification ought to go to the good, those who are trying to do their best. But not to the ungodly! To bring home his point about God justifying the sinner Paul turns to David.

II. Justification by Faith Confirmed by David Romans 4:6-8

David broke three of the Ten Commandments outright as he coveted Bathsheba, committed adultery, and murdered Uriah—and the Old Testament sacrificial system made no provision for such premeditated sin. David's case was hopeless. He deserved death. There was nothing he could do but cast himself on God's mercy. How did God respond to David's plea? Rejection, judgment, punishment, or forgiveness?

Paul uses the 32nd Psalm because v. 2 in the LXX (Septuagint; the Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses the same word as Gen. 15:6 – *logizomai* 'to count, reckon, impute, credit'. (The Hebrew word is "hasab" which the NASB translates *impute* in Psalm 32:2 and *reckon* in Gen. 15:6).

Here, in Rom. 4 both vs. 6 and 8 reference *logizomai*: v. 6 reckons righteousness apart from works while in v. 8 he does not count sin against us. Justification involves a double counting, crediting, or reckoning. On the one hand, negatively, God will never count our sins against us. On the other hand, positively, God credits our account with righteousness, as a free gift, by faith, altogether apart from our works.

Abraham and David both confirm that justification is by faith and since both were circumcised how does justification by faith relate to circumcision?

III. Justification by Faith Confirmed by Circumcision Romans 4:9-12

So Paul now asks the question, "*When was Abraham declared righteous? Before or after circumcision?*" (v. 9). Paul's answer indicates that Abraham was credited as righteous at least fourteen years before he was circumcised. Compare Gen. 15:6 with Gen. 17:24; these events are separated by at least 14 years.

The point is, Abraham was declared a righteous man while a Gentile—and remained so for at least 14 yrs. and some say 29 yrs. before he was a Jew or before he was circumcised! Therefore, justification by faith was a Gentile principle long before it was Jewish reality.

There was a double purpose for this order of justification before circumcision. It was first that Abraham might be (*as he is*) the father of all who believe, and so have been justified, but have not been circumcised (v. 11b). The second purpose of this combination of faith, justification, and circumcision was that Abraham might also be (*as he is*) the father of the circumcised who in addition to their circumcision also walk in the footsteps of the faith of our father Abraham before he was circumcised (v. 12). Thus he is the father of all believers, irrespective of whether they are circumcised or uncircumcised.

OK but what about the Law? What is the connection between the Law and faith?

IV. Justification by Faith Confirmed by the Law Romans 4:13-17a

If circumcision and its many blessings had nothing to do with Abraham's justification, the Law had even less to do with it. The historical fact is, as Paul has written in Galatians 3:17, the Law came 430 years after Abraham was made heir to the promise by faith—and there is thus no way the Law could invalidate or restrict its scope. To make the promise conditional on obedience to the Law, which was not even hinted at when the promise was given, would nullify the whole promise.

Pursuing righteousness both by the Law and by faith is impossible, "*For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression*" (vv. 14, 15). If the inheritance depends on our obedience, then faith has no value (*kekenōtai*;

literally, *'has been emptied'*, i.e. of its validity) and the promise is worthless (katērgētai; literally, *'has been destroyed'* or *'rendered ineffective'*; v. 14).

In these verses the apostle uses a profusion of words—law, promise, faith, wrath, transgression and grace. The words *'law, transgression, and wrath'* belong to the same category of thought and language. While *'promise, faith, and grace'* belong to another. It may be summarized as follows: God's law makes demands which we transgress, and so we incur wrath (v. 15); God's grace makes promises which we believe, and so we receive blessing (vv. 14, 16).

Note verse 16 which gives us a twofold answer to why salvation, the gift of righteousness, is always by faith. First because that is in keeping with the divine standard of grace – *accordance with grace*. God cannot acknowledge any other way of salvation than faith because the gift is based on grace. The second reason salvation is always by faith is to guarantee the promises – *that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants* both Jew and Gentile. God promised Abraham that he would be the father of nations that would reap the blessing of salvation. The only way to guarantee that was by faith.

The apostle reaches his positive conclusion in verses 17b-25.

V. Justification by Faith Confirmed by Theology Romans 4:17b-25

Abraham grasped two massive concepts about God. First, he understood that God *"gives life to the dead."* Although there had been no recorded resurrection at this point in history, and although God had not revealed any doctrine of resurrection, Abraham believed in God's resurrection power! This was borne out when he obediently raised the knife above Isaac. He knew that if Isaac died, God could resurrect him (Genesis 22:5).

Second, he saw God as a God who *"calls things that are not as though they were."* God creates *'ex nihilo'*, from nothing. It is out of nothing that he created the universe, and out of death that he raised Jesus. The creation and the resurrection were and remain the two major manifestations of the power of God. This firm conviction about the power of God enabled Abraham to believe, both against all hope and in hope (v. 18a) at the same time, when God promised him that his descendants would be as many as the stars, even though at that time he and Sarah did not have even a single child.

Abraham's faith faced two obstacles. The obvious barrier to his believing God would give him a child was the biological impossibility due to his age and Sarah's.

The less obvious obstacle was the staggering nature of the promise. That is, the promise was so wonderful, it was hard to believe—it was too good to be true! Despite that *"he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith"* (v. 20).

R. Kent Hughes: *"How did Abraham come to such a massive exercise of faith? He weighed the human impossibility of becoming a father against the divine impossibility of God being able to break his word and decided that if God was God, nothing is impossible. That is, against all human hope, Abraham in hope in God's promise believed, and so became the father of many nations."* (Commentary on Romans, pg. 101)

It is not that Abraham ran away from the realities of his situation into a world of fantasy. On the contrary, without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact, indeed the two painful, stubborn facts that he could not beget a child and that Sarah could not conceive one. For the facts were that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead (v. 19). Yet out of that double death God brought a new life. It was at one and the same time an act of creation and of resurrection. For this is the kind of God Abraham believed in.

Paul keeps repeating the word “*credited*” (4:3, 5-6, 8, 9-11, 22, 23, 24) to hammer home the point that righteousness before God is a forensic matter. Justification is God declaring us to be righteous based on Jesus taking all of our sins on Himself on the cross. God credits the perfect righteousness of Christ to every ungodly person who believes in Him as he credits our sin to Christ on the cross (2 Cor. 5:21).

What happened to Abraham happens to anyone today who believes (vv. 23-24). Righteousness will be reckoned to us the same way it was reckoned to Abraham – by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who was raised from the dead. Finally in verse 25, Paul summarizes the two sides of the salvation coin: Christ was delivered over to death for our sins, but then he was raised to life for our justification. What’s the difference? The sacrificial atonement for sin was accomplished through the death of Christ (Rom. 3:25), and the approval of God was manifested in the resurrection. Christ’s resurrection set his death apart from all other human deaths.

The phrase, “*raised because of our justification,*” is a bit difficult. It is parallel with the phrase, “*delivered up because of our transgressions.*” Perhaps the simplest way to understand it is that Jesus was delivered up to death as a consequence (“*because*”) of our sin; He was raised as a consequence (“*because*”) of our justification, which He achieved by His death (Rom. 5:9). In other words, when God raised Jesus, He put His seal of approval on Christ’s death as obtaining our justification.

Conclusion

So Paul has now summed up his points. In 3:21–4:25 his doctrine of salvation by faith-alone, apart from works, is complete. At the heart of his doctrine is the fact that Christ’s death was a “*sacrifice of atonement*” (propitiation, 3:25) that paid the price for our sins (“*redemption*”) and resulted in God’s legal decision to pronounce us “*right*” before him (justification, 3:21–26). The key is faith rather than observing the law, and this means that God is the God of the Gentiles as well as the Jews (3:27–31). To prove this, Paul turns to Abraham, the father of the nation and the one who precedes Moses (4:1–25), showing that faith has precedence over the law as the means by which one participates in salvation. This issue is just as critical in our day as it was in Paul’s, for people are always trying to get right with God on the basis of good works, such as an ethical lifestyle or involvement in church.

We need to understand just how radically sinful we are. We need to understand that we are in need of a radical righteousness which comes “*from God*” alone (1:17)

On a personal note: How big is your God? Is he the God who raises the dead, who can bring things out of nothing? Is he the God who can handle your circumstances, burdens, and trials? Is he the God who loved you enough to send his Son to die for you so that you could know Him? This is our God so know him and trust him.