



## Abraham was Justified Through Faith Alone Romans 4

### Introduction

In Romans 3:21-24, Paul proclaimed: *now the righteousness of God...is revealed...through faith in Christ Jesus*. God's gracious plan, although witnessed by the law and the Prophets is not implemented through works of the law but by God's grace. The doctrine Paul presents is justification by faith (Romans 3:28). However, he is clear to point out that faith does not nullify the law but establishes it (Romans 3:31) by fulfilling all that the law had looked forward to.

In Romans 4, Paul goes back to the Old Testament to show that justification by faith, (the gracious and merciful, yet just plan of God), was not a new idea. It was God's way of saving sinners all along. Using the example of Abraham, Paul confirms that justification is not by works but by God's grace through faith. He demonstrates that his assertion in Romans 3:28 that *a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law* is true of Abraham.

Abraham was the patriarch and spiritual father of the Jews. If Paul can show that Abraham was justified by faith alone, then he proves his case. In Romans 4, Paul explains that Abraham was justified by faith, not by works (Romans 4:1-8), and not by circumcision (Romans 4:9-12). Furthermore, Abraham received what God promised, not through obedience to the law, but through faith (Romans 4:13-22). Paul concludes that all believers in God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, are justified in the same manner as Abraham — by faith. Paul's rational argument is presented in a clear and orderly manner. Let us study it carefully to reap the rewards of understanding.

### Outline of Romans 4

- I. Abraham was Justified by Faith Alone - Romans 4:1-8
- II. Abraham was Justified Before He was Circumcised - Romans 4:9-12
- III. Abraham Received God's Promise by Faith, not Law - Romans 4:13-22
- IV. Abraham's Example of Faith is for Us - Romans 4:23-25

### I. Abraham was Justified by Faith Alone - Romans 4:1-8

The Jews traced their ancestry back to Abraham. He was their forefather *according to the flesh* (4:1).

Jews would be especially interested in what Paul had to say about their great patriarch's justification. To them, "Abraham's faith was considered a meritorious work which earned him righteousness before God and guaranteed God's promise to him" (The Epistle to the Romans, Leon Morris). Paul had a different view. To him, Abraham's faith was the means through which righteousness was imputed to him.

- A. Works do not win the approval of God - Romans 4:1-3

Paul includes himself among his Jewish readers by referring to Abraham as *our father* (4:1). He calls them to consider Abraham as an example.

1. No boasting before God - 1:2

If Abraham was justified by works, he would have reason for boasting before men—although *not before God*. No one can rightfully boast before God. No man can glory, that is, complacently rejoice in his own goodness in the sight of God. "And this every man of an enlightened conscience feels. The doctrine of justification by works, therefore, is inconsistent with the inward testimony of conscience, and can never give true peace of mind" (Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Charles Hodge). Paul goes on to show why Abraham had no reason to boast.

2. Abraham believed God and it was accounted (imputed or credited) to him for righteousness - 4:3 and Genesis 15:6

The Greek word translated *accounted* is a term used in figuring and recording financial accounts. It means "to credit to one's account" or "to impute". Paul uses the word eight times in Romans 4 to explain how Abraham was made righteous before God. He takes his cue from Scripture, pointing out that Scripture has something very important to say about Abraham's justification. At the time God made His covenant with Abraham, promising that his descendants would be beyond number, just as the stars in heaven (Genesis 15:5), the Scripture says that Abraham *believed* God (Genesis 15:6). Abraham exercised faith (*it* in Romans 4:3), the instrument through which righteousness was imputed to him.

Remember that Abraham's faith was *the gift of God* (Ephesians 2:8-9) and could not be considered as work on his part. Never in the Scriptures is faith the ground

of justification. It is the means, or the channel, through which righteousness is imputed to give a person right standing (justification) before God.

NOTE: Some commentators take Genesis 15:6 to mean that Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness by God; since Abraham had no righteousness (*there is none righteous*, Romans 3:10) God took Abraham's faith and credited it to his account as righteousness. However, "the Greek preposition ("eis") used between *it was accounted to him* and *righteousness* denotes that righteousness is the result of faith being accounted. Therefore, the Scripture is not saying that Abraham's faith was accepted by God as righteousness, but that righteousness was the result of Abraham's faith." (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Geoffrey W. Bromiley).

B. Righteousness is received by grace, through faith - Romans 4:4-5

Genesis 15:6 reveals that Abraham was declared righteous through faith. Now Paul will explain.

1. Those who trust in their works to please God do not receive a favor (grace), but a wage - 4:4

If Abraham's righteousness was a reward for work he had done, God would have owed it to him as a debt. The righteousness would not have been bestowed as a favor, that is, by God's grace. Paul has clearly shown in the earlier part of his letter that the natural man is unable to perform works which please God and is in dire need of God's grace. The natural man is capable only of sin, and *the wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23).

2. Those who believe God are counted righteous because of faith - 4:5

Those who realize that their own works are worthless to justify them, and trust in God *who justifies the ungodly*, are counted righteous by God. Their faith is put to their account for the purpose of righteousness. "All men are ungodly till they believe; but in the moment that they receive the gift of faith, they are thereby united to the Savior, and are instantly invested with the robe of righteousness" (Exposition of Romans, Robert Haldane).

3. David also is a witness to this - 4:6-8

As Abraham was the patriarch of Israel, David was their greatest king. He was also a shepherd, soldier, and poet--the writer of the Psalms which Paul quotes here. Paul uses David as a second example from the Old Testament to confirm that the person who is blessed is

not the one who does good works in an effort to please God. The example of David shows that the one who is blessed is the one whose sins are not credited to his account.

- a. Blessed is *the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works* - 4:6

Paul stresses the positive side of justification—righteousness imputed. The righteousness of which Paul speaks is the righteousness of God. "It must be the righteousness of God (or the righteousness of Christ, which is the same) that is here spoken of, BECAUSE THERE IS NO OTHER RIGHTEOUSNESS ON EARTH" (Exposition of Romans, Robert Haldane). See also Romans 3:21-22 and 2 Peter 1:1. The one who is blessed is not the one who works, but the one to whom righteousness is imputed apart from works.

- b. *Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,...to whom the Lord shall not impute sin* - 4:7- 8

The quote is from Psalm 32:1-2 which expresses David's joy in forgiveness. In the Psalm, it is revealed that David had no good works. He had nothing to justify himself. He had only evil deeds. He was blessed because his sins were forgiven rather than counted against him.

- c. The principle of justification

Paul has shown the two aspects of justification. On the positive side, God credits Christ's righteousness to the account of an ungodly person through the conduit of faith. On the other side, God forgives the sin of the ungodly person so it is not imputed to him but to Christ. *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

## II. Abraham was Justified Before He was Circumcised - Romans 4:9-12

Circumcision was very important to the Jews. It distinguished them as God's people, different from all other peoples on the earth. It marked them as set apart from the Gentiles whom they called by the derogatory term, "uncircumcision". Paul shows that blessing is not dependent on circumcision.

- A. The accounting (crediting or imputing) of faith preceded circumcision - Romans 4:9-10

The question is, was the blessing David spoke of upon the circumcised only, or also upon the uncircumcised? Was Abraham's faith accounted for righteousness while

he was circumcised or uncircumcised? The answer is *not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised*. From the record in Genesis, it is obvious that God did not command Abraham to be circumcised until after faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness (4:9). Genesis 15:6, records that Abraham's faith was accounted to him for righteousness. At that time Abraham was about 85 years old. It was not until fourteen years later that God commanded circumcision and Abraham obeyed (Genesis 17:10-27). Therefore, the imputation of righteousness is not dependent upon circumcision but upon faith.

B. Circumcision does have value - Romans 4:11-12

Circumcision had nothing to do with God accepting Abraham as righteous. However, circumcision was important as a sign and a seal.

1. *Circumcision was a sign of the covenant* - 4:11

*And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you* (Genesis 17:11). As a sign, circumcision was an outward, visible expression of a greater reality. The important thing was what the sign of circumcision pointed to. It was a continual reminder to every Jew that they were the covenant people of God through Abraham, and that through them all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

2. Circumcision was *the seal of the righteousness* received by faith - 4:11

In addition to being a sign, circumcision was *a seal of the righteousness* which was imputed to Abraham through faith before he was circumcised. After Abraham believed God and God declared him righteous, God gave circumcision as a validation and an assurance that what He had promised, He would perform.

3. Abraham's justification (being declared righteous through faith) preceded circumcision so that he might be *the father of all those who believe* - 4:11-12

Now it becomes evident that Abraham is much more than just an example of faith. He is the spiritual father of all who have faith.

a. He is the spiritual father of uncircumcised believers - 4:11

All Gentiles who believe are spiritual children of Abraham and righteousness has been imputed to them also. And *the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify*

*the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed"* (Galatians 3:8).

b. He is the spiritual father of circumcised believers - 4:12

"The true children of Abraham are not those who took his circumcision as a model, but those who received God's gift of faith as he did" (The Epistle to the Romans, Leon Morris). *Therefore, know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham...So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham* (Galatians 3:7 and 9).

**III. Abraham Received God's Promise by Faith, not Law - Romans 4:13-22**

So far in chapter 4, Paul has demonstrated that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works. He has successfully argued that Abraham was not declared righteous by God because of circumcision, but because of faith. Now Paul will argue that the promise God made to Abraham and his seed (descendants) was not granted through obedience to the law, but through faith.

A. The law brings wrath - Romans 4:13-15

The promise to Abraham that he would be the *heir of the world* (4:13) was not fulfilled by obedience to the law, but through the righteousness received from God by faith. If the promised inheritance is for those who keep the law, then faith is of no use. Furthermore, if the fulfillment of the promise is dependent upon keeping the law, the promise is to no effect because neither Abraham nor any of his descendants ever kept the law perfectly (except, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ). No one can hope to fulfill the law. "Its (the law's) natural effect, men being what they are, is to bring God's wrath upon them by turning their sin into conscious transgression and so rendering it more exceeding sinful" (Romans, A Shorter Commentary, C.E.B. Cranfield). The law shows us where we stand in relation to God — we are transgressors of His law. The law condemns rather than justifies.

B. Only faith could guarantee the promise - Romans 4:16-17

Because no one can obey the law fully, the promise had to be by faith, according to grace.

1. Faith is according to grace - 4:16

Obedience to the law offers no guarantee because it is based upon the works of sinful men and women. Only faith is sure because it depends solely upon the grace of God. God's grace can be depended upon to make the

promise sure. Grace is the guarantee of the promise for all of Abraham's spiritual descendants, Jew (*those who are of the law*) and Gentile alike. Abraham is the spiritual father of all who believe.

## 2. Abraham's faith was in God - 4:17

At the time Abraham stood before God and believed God's promise to him, *I have made you a father of many nations*, Abraham was made the father of many descendants, both physical and spiritual. At that time he did not have even one descendant, but because it was God's promise, he was a father then as surely as he is recognized to be so today, 4,000 years later. This is because God *gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did*.

## C. Hope sustained Abraham's faith - 4:18-22

"When he had no grounds for hope, Abraham still relied in hope on the promise of God" (Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, Romans and Thessalonians, John Calvin). As far as having many descendants, Abraham and Sarah were as good as dead (verse 19) when God made the promise. Sarah was barren and they were both beyond the age of child bearing. But Abraham's faith did not fail in the face of human impossibility. He realized the inability of his own body, but he held fast to the promise with faith. *With God, all things are possible* (Matthew 19:26).

## 1. Abraham's faith brought glory to God - 4:20

Abraham kept his eyes on the promise. Instead of wavering in unbelief, he was strengthened by faith, and this brought glory to God. "The grandeur of faith consists in this, that it gives all the glory to God and rests in God's power and faithfulness" (The Epistle to the Romans, John Murray).

## 2. Abraham was persuaded that God is able - 4:21

It was many years between the promise in Genesis 15:5 and the first glimpse of fulfillment in Genesis 21:2, but Abraham endured in faith. He was fully convinced that God was able and would fulfill His promise. The apostle Paul had this same assurance in his own life. *I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day* (2 Timothy 1:12). "If your faith is genuine,

you will have that same assurance, knowing that what God has promised He will certainly do. Your faith will have a controlling influence over your heart and life" (Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Charles Hodge).

## 3. Therefore it was accounted to him for righteousness - 4:22

In light of all that Paul has just explained, the reader should now clearly understand that God's promise to Abraham was not fulfilled because of works he performed under the law. The promise came through faith by God's grace.

## IV. Abraham's Example of Faith Is for Us - Romans 4:23-25

Paul sums up by saying that Abraham is both our example and our pattern in faith. It is for our sake also that the Scriptures speak of Abraham's faith, to show us the way God deals with us. Faith is the means of righteousness for all believers just as it was for Abraham.

Abraham believed God's promise and looked ahead to all the nations of the earth being blessed through his seed (Genesis 22:18 and Acts 3:25). Today we are to believe in God who has fulfilled that promise by raising up Abraham's seed (Acts 13:23), *Jesus our Lord* (Romans 4:24) from the dead. He was delivered up because of our sin which was imputed to Him instead of to us who believe (Romans 4:8). He is the *propitiation* for our sin (Romans 3:25). Furthermore, He was raised so that His righteousness might be imputed to us for our justification. *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

## Applications

1. What do you think you have to boast about before God? Have you come to see that the removal of your sin, the righteousness which is yours through Christ, and even your faith are all gifts from God? What will you humbly thank God for right now?
2. What is your hope? In whom is your hope? Are you laying hold of that hope by looking beyond your circumstances to God in whom all things are possible? What seemingly impossible situation will you trust Him for right now? Will you ask God to strengthen your faith?



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## QUESTIONS

All questions are based on the New King James Version of the Bible.

### Day One: Read all notes and references.

1. Explain the two sides of the principle of justification.
2. a. Explain how Abraham is both the example and the pattern in faith for believers.  
  
b. What encouragement did you receive from Abraham's example?

### Day Two: Read Romans 5:1-21.

3. a. From verses 1-11, list some of the benefits of being justified by faith.  
  
b. ♥ (Heart Question) Which stand out as being most meaningful to you? Explain why.
4. a. How many times do you find the word *one* in verses 12-21? Give verses and write down to whom or what each *one* refers.  
  
b. From what you have learned about the word *one*, can you see any comparison or contrast which Paul is making in these verses?

### Day Three: Read Romans 5:1-5.

5. a. What is the first benefit of being justified by faith?  
  
b. Through whom does this benefit come?  
  
c. How does Romans 5:10-11 describe this benefit?
6. a. What other benefit do believers (those who have been justified by faith) have through the Lord Jesus Christ? Give verse.  
  
b. How do the following Scripture passages explain this?  
Ephesians 2:17-18  
  
Hebrews 10:19-22  
  
1 Peter 3:18

- c. Why does this benefit lead to rejoicing?
7. a. According to Paul, how does a believer view tribulations? Give verse.
- b. Use the following Scripture passages to describe the tribulations to which Paul refers.  
Matthew 5:10-12
- John 15:20
- 2 Timothy 3:12
- 1 Peter 4:19
8. a. What do tribulations ultimately produce in believers?
- b. What and who guarantees a believer's hope? Give verse.
- c. From 1 John 4:7-11, what more do you learn about the love of God?
- d. What more does Paul teach about the Holy Spirit in Romans 8:9-11, 14, and 16?

**Day Four: Read Romans 5:6-11.**

9. a. How does verse 6 explain the very heart of God's outpoured love?
- b. Find other phrases in this passage which help explain the meaning of *when we were still without strength*.
- c. How was what Christ did so far above and beyond what any mere man or woman would do?
- d. ? (Thought Question) How can it be said that Christ's dying for us was a demonstration of God's love?

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10. a. How does Romans 5:9 describe what Christ's death accomplished for us *while we were still sinners* (verse 8)?
- b. Use the following Scripture passages to give various aspects of what it means to be justified.  
Romans 3:24  
  
Romans 3:28  
  
Romans 5:9  
  
Romans 8:33
11. a. Christ's death on the cross justified sinners, but sinners are also *enemies* (verse 10) of God. What did Christ's death accomplish in this respect?
- b. What more does Colossians 1:19-22 teach about reconciliation?
12. a. What is the *much more* (verses 9-10) those who have been justified and reconciled can claim?
- b. How do the following verses help explain these things?  
1 Thessalonians 1:10  
  
1 Thessalonians 5:9  
  
Hebrews 7:25

**Day Five: Read Romans 5:12-17, Genesis 2:15-17, and Genesis 3:1-6.**

13. a. How did sin enter the world?
- b. How did death enter the world?
- c. Why has death spread to all men?
14. a. Did sin exist prior to the law?
- b. In relation to sin, what did not exist prior to the law? Give verse. If you can, explain why this would necessarily be true.
- c. What is the clear evidence that sin existed prior to the law, from Adam to Moses? Give verse.

15. Using verses 15-17, compare and contrast Adam and Christ.

16. Find the word *gift* in Romans 5:15-18 and tell what you learn about the *gift*.

17. a. What reigned through Adam's transgression?

b. From Genesis 3:4-5, how was this the opposite of what the serpent promised?

c. What great changes did Christ's gift make? Give verse.

**Day Six: Read Romans 5:18-21.**

18. Summarize Paul's comparison of Adam and Christ as given in verses 18 and 19.

19. a. Why was the law given? What do you think this means?

b. What do you learn about the law and its purpose from Romans 5:20, Romans 7:7, and Galatians 3:23-25?

20. a. What has abounded above and beyond sin?

b. What now reigns?

c. What is the ultimate result of grace?