

Faith – Righteousness apart from Works

Romans 4:1-25

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Do we feel our need for righteousness? Yes. Most people do. Oh, they might not say it that way. It is usually spoken of in a way that highlights our works. All religions think this way. It is the mark of all false religions. All false religions require some kind of deeds on the part of adherent to be accepted by their deity. Some of these are moral works. Some of these are sacrifices for failures. And some branches of Islam even require evil deeds to be accepted by the false god, Allah.

But what about us. You and I? Are you depending on your own version of works? Are you secretly thinking that God will accept you if you just do what He says?

This leads our author to a question. How were Old Testament saints saved? Specifically, how was Abraham justified? This is not a burning question for most of you. But understanding our own salvation, our own right standing before God is dependent on our understanding the role of faith.

In Paul's thinking about our salvation, Abraham is the model of justification.

These paragraphs almost exactly parallel Romans 3:12-29. They also expand on his response to the objections that close Romans 3. So verses 1-8 develop 3:27-28 and show that boasting is excluded. Verses 9-12 develop 3:29-30 and show that circumcision makes no difference. Verses 13-22 develop 3:31 and show that faith fulfills the Law.

Romans 3 <i>Universal</i>		Romans 4 <i>Abraham</i>
(v.27-28)	Boasting is excluded	(v. 1-8)
(v. 29-30)	Circumcision is makes no difference	(v. 9-12)
(v. 31)	Faith fulfills the Law	(v. 13-22)

In this, Paul is continuing to show the integrity of the gospel and the unity of the Jew and Gentile in Christ. The argument of this chapter is structured along the lines of bringing forward examples of justification and connecting them to important texts from the Old Testament. So, though this larger section began with, "but now" signaling that we are in the New, justification by faith has ever been the way of justification.

Abraham Not Justified by Works

(v.1-8)

¹ What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. ⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;

⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

Its Historical Reality

Here it is. If Abraham was declared right before God by the works he did, then he had grounds for boasting. But, the Scriptures in Genesis 15:6 say that Abraham *believed* God and righteousness *was credited* to him. This is what the Scriptures say. That makes it final. Abraham was justified by faith.

Its Scriptural Basis

Why is faith the way of justification so that we cannot boast? Because if it were given because of works, then it would be on the basis of a wage earned. Our works would put God under obligation. It reverses the debt of our sin and makes God a debtor to the sinner doing good. But this is not the blessedness, the happy holiness, of Old Testament saints. Even David in Psalm 32:1-2 understands that God credits, imputes or puts to our account righteousness when we believe and stop trusting our works. Do you see the powerful effect of Paul’s argument? Hear the two central phrases for the fostering of your faith. To you who turn from your works to trust the God who declares the unjust to be righteous on the merits of Christ, great is your blessedness, like that of David, when His righteousness is credited to you apart from your works.

Its Personal Application

Beloved, to have a right standing before God you must turn from trusting your works to believing on and trusting in Jesus Christ. Abraham was not justified by works. David was not justified by works. No Old Testament saint was justified by works. No person has ever been justified by works or by the Law. No one is justified by works. But great will be your joy when you simply embrace Christ alone as your righteousness from God.

Abraham was not justified by works. And neither are you.

Abraham not Justified by Circumcision

(v.9-12)

⁹ Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. ¹⁰ How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Its Unfelt Impact

In one sense, we do not feel the impact of this paragraph directly. Probably few of you were brought up to believe that being circumcised brought you into a special relationship with God, making you and identifying you with His people. But many in Rome and all over the world believe this is so. The gospel comes to them to say that you cannot have a right standing before God by circumcision. How do we know this is true? Because Abraham was declared righteous before God by faith *before he was circumcised*. The shocking thing that Paul is insisting on is that Abraham was saved while he was still a Gentile.

Its Important Implications

Now there are huge implications from this simple, Scriptural fact. Two of them Paul draws and I want to indicate additionally.

Circumcision then is a sign and seal of faith. God gave him an outward rite that reflected an inward reality. So the integrity of the gospel is upheld, even in the Old Testament. Abraham is saved by faith.

Abraham is the spiritual father of all who believe. God designed and revealed the timing of Abraham's justification by faith so that all who believe are united in faith. So the unity of those who believe the gospel is upheld. Abraham is not merely the father of the Jews, he is the father of all who believe, spiritually.

No religious rite can save. The connection between circumcision and baptism is often used by some to prove that infants are to be baptized and by others, having such a baptism, that they are saved. Loved ones, regardless of where you stand in this issue, know this: just as faith preceded Abraham's circumcision, so faith must precede your baptism.

Abraham was not justified by religious rite. And neither are you.

Abraham not Justified by Law

(v.13-15)

¹³ For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Believing God's Promises

Paul advances his argument by showing that the promises to Abraham were not a matter of the Law, but of faith. Abraham does not have and is not given the Law. He has a promise from God. Believing that promise, he was declared righteous. If we turn to the Law, we place ourselves outside the promises of salvation given to Abraham, who is the Father of those who believe and nullify faith.

Nullifying God's Promises

You see, the function of the Law was to describe righteousness and to condemn the unrighteous. It has no power to save. I have most clearly come to understand this in relation to gravity. We have a Law of Gravity which describes what we believe it is, what effect it exerts and what happens when we violate it. But the Law of Gravity in our textbooks is not gravity itself. The words in the text book will not cause you to fall from a tree but they will describe what will happen if you jump from a tree. So, the Law describes righteousness and what happens if you are unrighteous. But it cannot make you righteous. Only Christ can do that. That is the function of the Law – to expose your guilt before God and point you to your Savior.

Abraham was not justified by Law. You cannot be justified by the Law.

Abraham Justified by Faith

(v.16-22)

¹⁶ That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸ In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” ¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. ²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”

It Upholds Grace

Justification is by faith so as to uphold faith in God’s promises as bringing us grace, the favor and enabling power of God (v.16-18). Salvation is a promise, a promise to Abraham and to his heirs. Paul sees the words of God’s promise that Abraham would have heirs and would be the father of many nations as pointing, not to Isaac and Ishmael, but to all those who would believe by faith. Yes, there is physical, genealogical descent. But once Christ came as The Descendent and the New Israel, then all those who believe and are in Christ are the spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham.

It Gives Hope

When we read that God justified Abraham by faith we have growing hope. Because he believed God, God granted him a son when it was naturally impossible. Out Abraham's deadness, God brought forth life anew through the birth of a son. So, we are assured that God will bring to life many sons. Those sons will have faith like Abraham's faith.

It Models Faith

Abraham's faith also models for us believing God's promises in the face of impossibilities (v.17-19). This is the measure of true faith. He understood the impossibility of his own situation. But he did not waver in believing God's promise because he was fully persuaded about the power and perfection of God: power, in that God could do what He promised and perfection, in that God had staked His Name and character to His word. In this way, he gave glory to God or glorified God. So here it is. There is no Law yet. Abraham is a sinner who has fallen short of God's glory needing a right standing before God like all of us. God calls him out and gives him a promise to be believed and trusted. Abraham believes that promise by faith. Believing God's promise by faith glorifies God. So God credits righteousness to Abraham's account (v.22).

Abraham believed God's promises, thus glorifying God and being declared righteous before God by faith. You can be righteous in God's sight only by faith alone in Christ alone for God's glory alone.

Abraham was justified by faith. And so are you.

Abraham Justified for our Faith

(v.23-25)

²³ But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Its Record for Us

How do we leap from Abraham's faith to our own? The *for us* purpose of the Old Testament is at the center of this paragraph. We are supposed to read the Old Testament in the light of the cross. Yes, there is the Old and New and its accompanying discontinuities. But there are also massive continuities that teach us what it means to be God's people. These things about Abraham in the Old Testament are written for our sake also. The great object of Abraham's faith that he saw so dimly in the Old Testament has now been fully disclosed for us in Christ. The promises that he received of salvation for all people groups, we are now enjoying its fulfillment. And the pattern and example of unwavering commitment to God's promises, power and perfection is a God-glorifying faith.

Its Reality

At the heart of our faith is not a son, an Isaac, out of personal deadness – Abraham and Sarah are way beyond child-bearing age. At the heart of our faith is a resurrection from the dead. Abraham's believing that they would have a son is parallel to our believing that Jesus was raised from the dead. Our faith believes and trusts in the death – He was

handed over for our transgressions – and the resurrection – He was raised for our justification. But we must believe in God, who raised Jesus our Lord. So faith moves from facts to trust in God Himself.

You can have that very same right standing before God by faith. Believe in God's promises of salvation in Christ and bow to Him as your sovereign ruler.

Reflect and Respond

This is not faith in faith, but faith/trust/believe in God. So much religious talk is about the power of faith. Faith is no power. Faith itself does nothing. It is faith in God that justifies sinners and glorifies God.

The issue is a right standing before God.

- The problem is that we do not glorify God.
- The punishment is the wrath of God.
- The provision is the death and resurrection of Christ.
- The principle is faith that believes and bows.
- The purpose is to end boasting and glorify God.

Abraham was not justified by works. And neither are you.

Abraham was not justified by religious rite. And neither are you.

Abraham was not justified by Law. You cannot be justified by the Law.

Abraham was justified by faith. And so are you.

Will you repent and believe God and His promises today? The wrath of God has been revealed and the glory of God has been displayed in Jesus Christ. Believe and bow to Him today.