

## ABRAHAM'S JUSTIFICATION AND OURS CBC-28 Mar 2010

Paul's theme in Romans is the "gospel" (good news; 1.16-17) but first he dwells on the bad news (1.18) of man's **ungodliness** (living contrary to religious truth), **unrighteousness** (doing what is unjust), and **God's wrath** (his righteous anger and just retribution of sinners). This plight encompasses all mankind, Gentile and Jew alike, and it amounts to our condemnation (1.18-3.19; see 3.19 → "become guilty" = "be brought under the judgment of God," ASV; "liable to pay penalty to God," Wuest).

Severe bad news should alarm us, make us hunger for the indescribably good news, which corresponds to the bad → reconciliation not enmity, forgiveness not guilt, sanctification not corruption, glorification not humiliation, joy not sorrow, well-being not misery, heaven not hell.

The biblical gospel is stated in these divine and forensic (legal) terms. It is not focused on your health, wealth, and your best life now, but about God's honor, justice, love, mercy for you. At the center of it all is the biblical doctrine of JUSTIFICATION—in a legal sense, declaring just or righteous.

Paul reasons that since no one can possibly be justified in God's sight by doing the law (WORKS) which condemns us (3.20), then justification must come another way → through FAITH in Christ (3.21-22). And Paul argues that WORKS and FAITH cannot be mixed as the grounds of our justification. Justification only comes through FAITH ALONE (sola fide), that is, apart from works, because it is ABSOLUTELY FREE to us. This is good news indeed!

Rom 4 begins with 5 PROOFS of justification by faith alone, not works: 4:1-5 → Abraham's justification; 4.6-8 → David's testimony; 4.9-12 → Abraham's circumcision; 4.13-14 → Abraham's covenant; 4.15-17 → the nature of the law. Today we would take up the first.

*Abraham's case proves justification is by faith alone apart from works.*

### ABRAHAM WAS NOT JUSTIFIED BY HIS WORKS (4.1-2)

1. The Case of Abraham. Most important to the Jewish mind. We need to get into their mindset to appreciate this.
  - The physical progenitor of the Jewish nation. "As pertaining to the flesh" probably modifies "our father" rather than "hath found": "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?" (NASB). Abraham → Isaac → Jacob (Israel) → 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel. Abraham the greatest—even today highly esteemed by Jews, Muslims, Christians.
  - The spiritual father of the faithful, deeply revered. God entered into covenant with Abraham, and this same Abrahamic covenant was reaffirmed with Isaac and Jacob. Jews regarded Abraham not just as their physical but also as their spiritual father (Matt 3.9; John 8.39).

- The righteous one par excellence. Some Jews would have responded to Paul's sola fide by protesting that Abraham was justified by his righteous life, a common Jewish belief. "The Prayer of Manasseh" (c. 200 BC): "Thou therefore, O Lord, that art the God of the just, hast not appointed repentance to the just, as to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, which have not sinned against thee; but thou hast appointed repentance unto me that am a sinner" (v. 8). This reflects a common Jewish perspective on Abraham at the time of Paul's writing.
2. The Justification of Abraham All-Important.
    - "What shall we say then" = "what should we infer" (because thinking is done verbally) in general about justification from the particular case of Abraham's justification?" "What has Abraham discovered concerning this matter" (paraphrase).
    - Implied: Abraham's justification is paradigmatic, the pattern for all others. Paul is throwing down the gauntlet before his Jewish antagonist. If Paul's doctrine of justification is illustrated in Abraham's experience, then it must be the truth. Now the all-important question: how did Abraham come to be justified (declared righteous) by God?
  3. Abraham Could Not Have Been Justified by Works.
    - The concept explained. "Justified by works" is a phrase Paul intends to mean this: Abraham was righteous and did righteously by the standard of God's Word (moral law with its commands, prohibitions) so that God was merely recognizing what was existentially true about Abraham himself and Abraham's life → RIGHTEOUS (perfect conformity to God's law in heart and conduct); i.e., Abraham was a perfect man in God's sight, a man without sin, a man deserving in himself God's favor and reward.
    - The concept hypothetically considered. "If Abraham were justified by works." Paul lets it stand momentarily for the sake of argument, that it may be pondered, weighed, analyzed for its implications. In all fairness, if true, it would be devastating to Paul's *sola fide* thesis.
    - The concept necessarily rejected. Hypothetically, Abraham would have something to boast about (i.e., his inherent goodness and flawless performance) → a reason for pride, but this would obviously be totally wrong before God (i.e., in God's presence). The humble reverence required when in God's presence was so deeply ingrained in a pious Jew's mind that this unavoidable conclusion about the "JBW Abraham" was unthinkable, and so, JBW was impossible. Calvin expands the argument slightly (paraphrased): If Abraham were JBW he has something to boast about, but he has nothing to boast about, therefore he was not JBW.

Obviously, this is true of everyone else also. The law convicts us all as sinners doing sinful things and liable to punishment for our sins.

Having logically disproved A's JBW, Paul seeks the answer from Scripture.

### **ABRAHAM WAS JUSTIFIED THROUGH FAITH ALONE (4.3)**

Paul's gospel is not fundamentally new but arises out of the OT text itself. The OT = Bible for Jesus and the earliest Christians (cf. Luke 24.25, 32, 44), and they preached the gospel of Jesus Christ directly from it (Rom 1.1-2).

1. The Authority of the OT. "For what saith the Scripture?" (i.e., the OT).

Implies Scripture's inspiration (God's Word), inerrancy (or we could not trust it), abiding relevance ("saith" → present tense; old and new like water).

Three-quarters of the Bible is the OT. Jesus and the apostles constantly appealed to it, insinuating its abiding validity and authority for the church. "NT Christians" is an unfortunate phrase; we should be "whole Bible Christians."

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined . . . and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit, into which Scripture so delivered, our faith is finally resolved (1689 LBCF I.9-10).

Again, Jewish antagonists would admit this in principle, though in practice they had displaced the Word of God by their tradition, like Romanism today.

2. The All-Important Passage of Gen 15.6. Cited: "Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness" (passive voice).

Verbatim: "And he [i.e., Abram] believed in the LORD; and he [i.e., the LORD] counted it to him [i.e., Abram] for righteousness" (active voice).

- Abraham's works are not mentioned but only his faith. This "rules out all efforts and attainments of man as contributory factors in the justification. 'Works-righteousness' is completely eliminated" (Leupold). First explicit mention in the Bible of faith, but Abraham had believed years before when first called out of his idolatry and he was justified even then through faith alone (Heb 11.8), since he had not yet become a faithful servant of Yahweh.
- Abraham's righteousness is not his own, but God's righteousness imputed to Abraham. "Counted" (Heb. chasab, to impute, to credit/blame someone; Gk. logizomai, to reckon, to put into one's account—a financial term). Although Abraham was not righteous in himself but a sinner, when he believed God, God credited his account with perfect spiritual righteousness. This supports:

WLC #70. Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone.

### **JBW IMPLIES MERIT AND IS THEREFORE IMPOSSIBLE (4.4)**

Paul broadens from the particular to the general (inductive logic), and extends beyond *sola fide* to *sola gratia*. To be justified by faith alone and not by works is to be justified completely gratis, as a free gift to the unworthy. "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due" (ESV).

1. Sharp Contrast of Works and Faith. "Him who works" (v. 4) versus "him who works not but believes" (v. 5). For Paul justification must be either by works or by faith. He not only rejects the first, but blending these also.
2. Justification by Works Hypothetically Considered. "If it were possible to be justified by works," etc., or just taking an illustration from everyday life about workers and their pay. Either way merit is necessarily involved, and this is grossly inconsistent with Abraham's justification.
3. The Logical Conclusion: JBW Impossible. Paychecks are wages earned not gifts freely given. You work for one, and having earned it, you deserve it, and your employer owes it to you. This can never be the arrangement between a sinner and his God, because no man can make God a debtor. All things are his already; we give him but his own.

### **JBFA IS FREE AND PROMISED IN THE GOSPEL (4.5)**

"And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness" (ESV). Who is righteous in God's sight? 1) The ungodly person who 2) does not work to earn his salvation but 3) trusts alone in the Lord alone to justify him by grace alone. Paul generalizes and crystalizes the stunning good news of salvation.

1. God Justifies the "Ungodly" (Gk. lexicons: pertains to violating the norms for a proper relation to God, living without regard for religious belief or practice, disregard for and defiance of God: irreverent, impious, wicked, godless, evildoer). God declares righteous the unrighteous! This is shocking good news for the unrighteous who fears damnation.
2. God Justifies the One Who Does Not Work. Paul is not glorifying laziness or hypocrisy, but repudiates the tiniest merit on our part.
3. God Justifies the Believer by Grace Alone. If justification comes to hell-deserving sinners apart from anything they can do through faith alone, then it is necessarily a completely free gift of God's generosity.

### **APPLICATIONS**

1. For Helplessness. You ought finally to despair of self-justification by being good and doing good. You could never succeed in this.
2. For Hope. You cannot and need not be worthy of God's love to have it. Trust in Christ the Savior and you will be justified.
3. For Humility. Saved by grace alone, you have no grounds for boasting in who you are or what you have done, but only in Christ (Gal 6.14). Amen.