

Romans 4:1-12 Answers Boasting or Blessing?

Overview: Romans has 16 chapters and 5 sections: Sin, Salvation, Sanctification, Sovereignty and Service. Today we are in second section: **Salvation**. Last week we discussed righteousness, redemption and propitiation.

Review:

Based on 1:16, how can a person get the God's power for salvation? (Reread). It is for everyone who believes. Righteousness comes by faith. The Reformers called this *sola fide*. The concept of salvation by faith is consistent with the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures, as evidenced in Paul's quotation in Romans 1:17 of Habakkuk 2:4.

To the Jew first and also to the Greek (1:16): Chronologically, salvation came to the Jew first, then to the Greek (1:16). In chapter 1, Paul wrote that God's wrath is upon those who suppress the truth about God. Some Jews thought that simply being Jewish, having the law and being circumcised would exempt them from God's wrath. In chapter 2, Paul taught that simply knowing the law of Moses and being circumcised did not exempt the Jews from God's wrath since they committed the same sins as the people described in chapter 1. Not only is salvation to the Jew first (**1:16**), but also is judgment (**reread 2:9-11**).

Circumcision: According to 2:28-29, when was circumcision of value?

The Law: Why did God give the Law of Moses to the Jews (3:19-20)? (Reread). The purpose of the law was not so that people could be justified before God by keeping it. The purpose of the law is to bring about knowledge of sin (3:20). It showed the Jews basic right from wrong.

According to 3:21, what has now been manifested apart from the law? The righteousness of God has been made known apart from the law. A system of apartheid exists between righteousness from God and the law. The two are in different apartments. They are apart from each other.

In what sense does the Law bear witness to the righteousness of God (3:21)? The law showed the Jews right from wrong; it helped them understand God's righteousness. But it could not make a person righteous. Its purpose was to show them their sinfulness.

The fact that the Law attests to the gospel is a very important element of Paul's argument (Cranfield, p. 203). It is not as though God's plan failed. The law pointed to God's righteousness, but it was never God's plan for them to earn righteousness by keeping the law.

Boasting: What applications to the doctrine of justification by faith are dealt with in 3:27-31? 1) Boasting is excluded, 2) God is the God of both Jew and Gentile, justifying both by faith and 3) faith upholds the law.

How does faith exclude boasting (3:27)? If a man could earn justification by good works, he would have something to boast about. The fact is justification comes by faith apart from the works of the law.

******Why did God count both Abraham and David to be righteous (4:1-8)?** God considered them righteous because of their faith.

1. Answer the question in 4:1. What did Abraham gain and how did he gain it? Abraham gained righteousness and he gained it by believing God (by faith, 4:3b). You might remember that if you are “justified” (4:1) it is “just as if I’d” never sinned.

2. What literary purpose does “what then” serve (4:1)? See 3:21-31. It links 4:1ff with 3:21-31. Paul called father Abraham to the witness stand to testify **1)** that there is no room for boasting (3:27a) and **2)** that justification comes by faith, not works. Even the law, properly understood, is a law of faith (3:27b).

Whose forefather according to the flesh was Abraham (4:1)? Generally speaking, every Hebrew is a direct descendant of this one man. Paul was writing to the Jews of his day to convince them that justification comes by faith, not by the works of the law.

Historically, how had Abraham become the forefather of the Jews (4:1)? God sovereignly picked Abraham, a man living in modern Iraq 2,000 years before Jesus’ birth, to be the man through whom would come first the Jewish nation and then the Savior. The name Abraham was given to him by God. It means “father of a multitude” (Thayer # 11). In the Abrahamic Covenant God promised Abraham a whole nation of descendants (Israel), land for them to live on (Canaan) and that through his offspring would come a blessing to all the families of the earth (Jesus the Savior, NBD, p. 4).

According to 4:2, under what condition would Abraham have had something to boast about? If Abraham had been justified by works he would have had bragging rights. It would be a big accomplishment to work one’s way into heaven by one’s own goodness. Such a person truly would have bragging rights.

Why did Paul add “but not before God” at the end of 4:2? Paul wanted to make it clear to his readers that from God’s perspective Abraham did not have any ground for boasting.

Verse 3 explains why from God’s perspective Abraham had nothing to boast about (4:2). According to 4:3, what does the Scripture say? See *Genesis 15:1-6*. Genesis, the very first book of the Old Testament, states that Abraham was declared righteous due to his faith (not his works, 15:6). The doctrine of justification by faith was not new; it is as old as Genesis (which means beginning).

ESV **Genesis 15:6** . . . he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

In general, what does it mean to believe something (4:3)? The Greek word is *pisteuo* “to think to be true, to be persuaded of, to place confidence in” (Thayer #4000).

Application: Applied to salvation, it is the attitude whereby a man abandons all reliance in his own efforts to obtain salvation and instead has complete trust in Christ, relying on Him alone for all that salvation means (NBD, p. 366). A synonym for 4:3 is “had faith in.”

What counted mean (4:3)? It is from *logizomai* (3049), “to reckon, count, compute, calculate, count over” hence, “to take into account, to make account of, to pass to one's account, to impute” (Thayer). It is like a general ledger book: faith is debited to one account and righteousness is credited to another. A synonym for 4:3 is “credited”.

Review: What is “righteousness” (4:3)? Righteousness is the state (condition) of being right with God.

3. Of all people, why do you suppose Paul chose Abraham to illustrate the fact that justification comes by faith (4:1-3)? It was because Abraham was the uber-Jew, father of the Hebrew race and to show that justification by faith is nothing new; it goes all the way back to Genesis and Abraham.

What is the point of 4:4? In the working world, paychecks are not gifts, but rather obligations.

4. What's the difference between a gift and something due (4:4)? A gift is voluntary. Something that is due is obligatory; it is owed.

5. Based on 4:5, how can you get righteousness counted to you? Righteousness comes by faith, not by works. Righteousness is not like a paycheck.

What word in 4:5 describes the believing people God justifies? Compare 3:9-12. God justifies the ungodly by faith. If righteousness could be earned by good works then we would not be wicked. Paul is here suggesting even Abraham, hero of Judaism, was ungodly in and of himself.

6. According to David (Psalm 32:1-2), who is truly blessed by God (4:6-8)? Compare 3:21, 28. The one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works, whose lawless deeds are forgiven, whose sins will not count against him, is truly blessed.

Important Truth: Righteousness comes apart from works (4:6). Works is from *ergon*, from which we derive the scientific term *erg*, a measure of work. It is also the basis for the word energy (*en* is Greek for “in” and *erg* comes from *ergon*).

ESV **Romans 3:21** . . . the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law,

ESV **Romans 3:28** . . . we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law

What three ways does David describe what God does with our sin (4:7-8)? The words used were forgiven, covered and not counted.

What does the word forgiven mean (4:7)? It is from *aphiemi* (863); *apo* means “away from” and *hiemi* means “to send.” Thus, “to send away, to depart” (Thayer). *Apheimi* means “to loose” (NBD, p. 391). This is the Greek word used to describe divorce. A suggested synonym in 4:7 is “sent away.”

ESV **Psalm 103:12** as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

ESV **Micah 7:19** You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.

7. Letting 4:7-8 interpret 4:6, what does it mean for God to count righteousness to you?
It means your sins have been forgiven, covered and not credited to your account.

Who was David? He was the shepherd boy who killed Goliath and later became a famous king of Israel.

8. Why did Paul cite David in addition to Abraham to prove that righteousness comes by faith? 1) Both Abraham and David are great heroes of Judaism are powerful authorities. **2)** By the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact shall be confirmed. **3)** Abraham lived prior to the giving of the Law and was saved by faith, David lived under the Law and was saved by faith.

Final Exam: Read the following quotes to the class and ask them to evaluate them in the light of Romans 4:1-6.

People want to be 'saved.' But how? Simply attending religious services? Salvation cannot be earned by attendance at meetings or in any other way. It is free, a gift from God. Yet Jehovah God does require efforts on our part if we are to receive his gift of everlasting life. What are they? For one, vigorous exertion in his service!

— *Watchtower*, Jan. 15, 1986, p. 10 (**Jehovah's Witnesses**)

...a most pernicious doctrine - that of justification by belief alone . . . Yet in spite of the plain word of God, dogmas of men have been promulgated to the effect that by faith alone may salvation be attained . . .

— *Articles of Faith*, p. 107-108 (**Mormons**)

A priest does not have to ask God to forgive your sins. The priest himself has the power to do so in Christ's name . . . The penitent must atone for them by performance of good works . . . Stress is placed on the fact that any sin not confessed is not forgiven...But even after a penitent has received pardon, a large, but unknown amount of punishment remains to be suffered in purgatory.

— *Salvation According to Rome* (tract) (**Roman Catholicism**)

We believe that through the atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved, by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel.

— *Articles of Faith*, #3 (**Mormons**)

People are capable of infinite improvement . . . When we raise ourselves on a higher moral and spiritual plane, through living the exalted precepts of our religion, we are achieving our own salvation.

— *Introducing Unitarian Universalism* p. 16

. . . it is by grace we are saved, after all we can do.

— 2 Nephi 25:23 (*Book of Mormon*)

Synthesis: Paragraph #1 (4:1-8) serves as a conclusion (“What then . . .?”, 4:1) that gives historical proof (via Abraham and David) of the truth presented in 3:21-31 (that justification is by faith). It also suggests an application: “blessing” (4:6-8).

******Why did God not require circumcision until after Abraham was justified by faith (4:9-12)?** Timing is everything! It was to make Abraham the spiritual father of all those who believe, both uncircumcised and circumcised, 4:11b-12. It happened before he was circumcised. Genesis 15 records that Abraham was justified by faith. Two chapters later, in Genesis 17, Abraham was circumcised. Approximately 15 years passed between the two events (Cranfield, p. 235).

ESV **Romans 3:30** [God] will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

9. What is the answer to the question asked in 4:9? The blessing is for both circumcised and uncircumcised.

According to 4:9b, on what basis was righteousness counted to Abraham? Faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

10. Historically, of what was Abraham's circumcision was a sign (4:11)? See *Genesis 17:11*. Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with Abraham where God promised Abraham land, seed and blessing.

A sign is different from that to which it points. A sign is a symbol that points to a deeper reality or substance. The sign announcing entrance to a city is not the same as the city itself.

11. Abraham's circumcision is also called a seal (4:11). What is a seal? (Define the word).

The word seal is from *shragis* and means that by which anything is confirmed, proved, authenticated"; it is a token or proof (Thayer #4973). Think of a seal as a guarantee; it denotes approval; it is a safeguard as well as a mark or possession (NBD, p. 1082). For example, Good House Keeping may put its seal of approval on a product. A synonym for seal in 4:11 might be "authentication".

According to 4:11, what did Abraham's circumcision seal? It was a seal of the righteousness of the faith which Abraham had while still uncircumcised. Circumcision did not make Abraham righteous; it only authenticated the fact that he already was righteous. Circumcision was the seal, not the substance, of righteousness.

Baptism Parallel: Not many people today teach that a person has to be circumcised in order to be saved. Just as circumcision was only a seal that pointed back to the righteousness Abraham already had by faith, so to water baptism is merely an outward seal of the inward act of saving faith. Justification comes by faith, before a person is baptized.

12. According to 4:11b-12, what was the purpose of not circumcising Abraham until after he was declared righteous? It was to make him the father of those who believe without being circumcised as well as the father of those who believe who are circumcised.

Timing: According to Paul, God's intention all along in causing Abraham to be circumcised years after being declared righteous by faith was to point out the union between all those who would one day believe, whether circumcised or not (Cranfield, p. 236).

13. What is the significance of the fact that Abraham is the father of uncircumcised believers (4:11)? Compare 2:28-29. Just as God is the God of both Jew and Gentile, so too in some sense Abraham is the father of believing Jews and Gentiles. This necessarily means the true essence of Abraham's fatherhood is spiritual, not physical. Just as true circumcision is inward, of the heart (2:28-29), so also true sonship is spiritual, by faith. Abraham is every believer's father in the faith.

14. What are the implications of the statement that Abraham is father of those not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps Abraham's faith (4:12)? It suggests he is not the father of the circumcised who lack faith.

Abraham's Four Seeds: The book of Genesis records that God promised Abraham many descendants ("seed"). In *Abraham's Four Seeds*, John Reisinger pointed out that Abraham's seed (descendants) fall into four categories:

- 1. Natural Seed** ~ All physical descendants of Abraham, from both Isaac and Ishmael (Jews & Arabs).
- 2. Special Natural Seed** ~ Those descendants of Abraham through Jacob and his twelve sons who made up the nation of Israel. This excludes the Arabs.
- 3. Spiritual Seed** ~ This refers to Abraham's spiritual descendants, those people (Jew, Arab or Gentile) who have the faith of Abraham. This is what Paul is dealing with in Romans 4.

4. Unique Seed ~ Abraham's ultimate descendant is Jesus the Messiah. Jesus is Abraham's Seed with a capital S.

Synthesis: Paragraph #2 (4:9-12) picks up on (continues with) the "blessedness" mentioned in paragraph #1 and blends it with Abraham's example from paragraph #1. It ultimately serves to reinforce the truth of 3:27-31 that God is God of both Jew and Gentile and that both groups are equally justified through faith.

So What?

15. What is the point of this passage (4:1-12)? The points seems to be that Abraham was justified by faith (not works), as is any believer (whether Jew or Gentile). The wall of separation between Jew and Gentile has been torn down (Hendriksen, p. 152).

16. What glaring applications are obvious from 4:1-12?

1. I am justified by faith, apart from works. Forgiveness is a gift, not a wage earned.
2. Circumcision has nothing whatever to do with causing salvation.
3. To be righteous by faith results in my sin being forgiven, covered, not taken into account.
4. Abraham is my spiritual father.

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the text of the ESV.
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