

## **THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part nine**

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### **UNDERSTANDING HOW JUSTIFICATION WORKS - AND HOW IT DOESN'T (Part 2)**

**Romans 3:31-4:25** - "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law....[4:1] 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 trusts 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.' [9] Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? 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. [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. [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 distrust 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." [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."

As Paul wraps up the third chapter he anticipates a very important question. The question sets up Paul's argument for the whole next section of Romans. Chapters two and three developed two main points. First, both Jew and Greek need salvation equally because each is equally under the wrath of God. And second, both Jew and Greek - both the person *with* the Bible and the person *without* the Bible - the person *with* the outward sign of circumcision and the person *without* circumcision - can only be pronounced righteous before God through *faith*, not *works* - **Romans 3:28-30** - "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. [29] Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, [30] since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith."

Clear enough. But there's a question that pushes its way to the front of the line when all this is said. If all are saved through *faith*, apart from the works of the *law*, then what's the point of the law in the first place? Paul, are you saying let's just scrap the whole Old Testament? Is it all totally worthless?

That's the question being asked in **3:31** - "**Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.**" Paul's answer - "**By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law**" - was already hinted at in **Romans 1:1-2** - "**Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, [2] which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures....**"

Now Paul is going to unpack this idea at length. Paul is going to take the whole fourth chapter to **prove** the whole Old Testament backs up his point that **all** are justified by **faith**, apart from works of the **law**. And there is no better go-to illustration than the giant pillar of Old Testament history - Abraham. Last week we studied **justification announced (3:21-30)**. Today we will study **justification illustrated and proven (3:31-4:25)**. Then, next week, we'll study **justification and its blessings (5:1-21)**.

## 1) HOW WAS ABRAHAM JUSTIFIED BEFORE GOD?

**Romans 4:1-5** - "**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 trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness....**"

We really need to sort this out. How **was** Abraham saved? For that matter, how were **any** of the Old Testament figures justified? Abraham's central place in the Old Testament was well known to all - especially the Jews ("**...our forefather according to the flesh....**" **4:1**). If anyone was going to have a special place before God on the basis of heritage and good deeds it would be Abraham. So this is the issue Paul brings to the table at this point.

What was the basis for Abraham's standing before God? The Jews placed great stock in Abraham's righteousness before God. This is recognized by Paul, though he says his works may give him standing in **man's** eyes, but not in the perspective of **God** - "**...For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God**" (**4:2**).

**Verses 3-5** tell us **why** no one - including Abraham - is justified before God on the basis of their keeping of the law. Starting in **verse 5** and working backwards, Paul tells us there is only **one kind of person whom God justifies** - "**And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness....**" God only justifies **ungodly** people because He has no other **kind** of person to justify. This backs up Paul's argument in **Romans 1 through 3**. **All** are guilty before God.

Then, in **verses 3-4**, Paul applies this to Abraham. **Verse 3** is a quote from God's calling of Abraham in **Genesis 15:6** - "**...And he [Abraham] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.**" This was the point at which Abraham was pronounced righteous. It was hundreds of years before the giving of the law. It was over a quarter of a century before anyone was circumcised. All Abraham did was **believe the bare promise of God**. It was faith plus nothing else.

That's Paul's point in **verse 4** - "**Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.**" If Abraham had **worked** for God's pronouncement of righteousness then he **earned** it as one earns **wages**. But because there was **no** law yet given and **no ceremony of circumcision** marking God's covenant people, Abraham didn't **do** anything to **earn** his righteousness. He simply believed God's promise. He was, in other words, justified by **faith** plus **nothing else** - "**And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness....**" (**5**).

## 2) IF ABRAHAM DEMONSTRATES HOW HE WAS JUSTIFIED BEFORE THE GIVING OF THE LAW, HOW WERE

## **OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS DECLARED RIGHTEOUS AFTER THE GIVING OF THE LAW?**

Paul imagines someone arguing, “Of course **Abraham** was justified apart from the keeping of the law. The law wasn’t given for hundreds of years after Abraham. But now that we **have** the law, one must keep it in order to be justified before God.” To counter this Paul brings up the words of David, who lived long after the law was well established in Old Testament Jewish history:

**Romans 4:6-8 - “...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.”**

The words Paul quotes from David are from **Psalms 32:1-2**. And Paul chooses them specifically because they contain the very same word - “**count**” or “**reckon**” - as is used in reference to Abraham’s faith in **Genesis 15:6**.

More important still is the way these verses **define** how God provides His justification to our lives. These words from David make clear that righteousness before God **isn’t** a matter of having our **good works** counted for us. Quite the opposite, these words from David prove justification is a matter of God **not** counting our sins against us. Not only do we not **earn** His justifying favor with good deeds. We depend on His **forgiveness** for our **bad** deeds.

Again, this is Paul’s precise point in **Romans 4:5 - “And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness....”** Clearly, **ungodly** people can’t rely on their works to attain righteousness before God. And Paul cites both Abraham and David from the heart of the Old Testament to show this was always true for **all** God’s people.

### 3) **GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS WAS “COUNTED” TO ABRAHAM BEFORE HE WAS CIRCUMCISED**

**Romans 4:9-12 - “Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? 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.”**

This is a very important point. Abraham, says Paul, was justified by faith and not by works. And the **timing** of God’s pronouncement of Abraham’s justified state was **before** he was circumcised. In fact, Abraham was declared righteous about **25 years** before he was circumcised. This means circumcision was not the **instrument** of righteousness, but merely the **sign** of the faith that was already present.

Paul says, “Remember, Abraham was justified while he was still a **Gentile**. There were no **Jews** when God pronounced Abraham righteous through faith. And God did this intentionally so Abraham would be the father of **all** the faithful - both Gentiles and Jews. Abraham is the father of all who follow him in his bare faith in the promise of God.

This was stunning news to many Jews of Paul’s day. Paul was telling them circumcision had no **independent** value. It couldn’t affect **entrance** into the people of God. And it doesn’t **mark** even the Jewish people as belonging to God apart from the faith demonstrated by Abraham while he was still uncircumcised.

4) **THE WORKS OF THE LAW HAVE NEVER BEEN THE FOUNDATION FOR JUSTIFICATION - FOR ABRAHAM OR FOR ANYONE ELSE**

**Romans 4:13-17** - "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. [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."

The point here is that the promise of "*the seed*" that was given to Abraham was not given because of his keeping of the law. The promise of "*the seed*" was given to Abraham 400 years before the law was even given.

See also **Galatians 3:15-18** - "To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. [16] Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. [17] This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. [18] For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise."

Paul is piling up evidence for his case here. He is taking a lot of time ruling out all the false options. If Abraham was not justified by his *circumcision*, nor by his *keeping of the law*, and if God only justifies the "*ungodly*" (4:5), it stands to reason that he was "*counted*" or "*credited*" righteousness as a result of faith in God.

And there is still one more reason neither Abraham nor anyone else can earn justifying righteousness through the keeping of the law - **Romans 4:15-16** - "For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. [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...."

These verses teach that, far from using the law as a means of earning righteousness, the very *presence* of the law *establishes guilt* and *promotes the wrath of God*. The law makes sin official. It turns sin into an *accountable transgression* of God's law. Using the law to eliminate sin is like using gasoline to extinguish a fire.

This is why God constantly follows up the giving of the law *immediately* with the provision of an altar. First He gives the commandments (**Exodus 20:1-20**). Then He immediately commands the building of an altar (**Exodus 20:21-26**). Notice, the giving of the altar is *simultaneous* with the giving of the law. God *knows* the law will increase the knowledge of inward sin. The giving of the law makes the necessity of atonement *obvious*.

This is immediately repeated for emphasis in **Exodus 24:3-4** - "Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do." [4] And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to

the twelve tribes of Israel.”

## 5) WHAT IS JUSTIFYING FAITH AND WHAT DOES IT DO?

**Romans 4:17-22** - “...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 distrust 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.’”

Clearly, we’re *meant* to see the parallels between Abraham’s justifying faith and our justifying faith. Now, Abraham’s faith wasn’t in exactly the same *object* as ours. He had no clear apprehension of our heavenly Father sending Jesus, God the Son, to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. But Paul still wants us all to take note of the *process* of faith in the heart of Abraham. Because it’s exactly the same way *we* believe God for our justification today.

The most direct parallel is this: **Abraham believed God to accomplish something *for* him that he could never accomplish himself.** Both he and Sarah were too old to have children. But Abraham **believed God’s promise** to do what Abraham couldn’t do. God would **provide** what God had **promised**. The conclusion of it all is summed up in **verse 22** - “That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”

## 6) ABRAHAM’S FAITH AND OURS

**Romans 4:23-25** - “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.”

Now Paul states directly what the account of Abraham only pictured. All saving faith looks finally to Christ. When Abraham dimly trusted God’s promise he was looking farther down the road than he probably fully knew. Sarah’s dead womb was akin to Christ’s dead body in the tomb. Abraham’s trust in God’s promise for future life was faith in Christ’s resurrection - it was faith in Christ in embryo form.

Christ crucified and risen is God’s saving work for everyone - Old Testament and New - Jew and Gentile. This is beautifully hinted at in a very famous New Testament account - **Luke 9:28-31** - “Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. [29] And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. [30] And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, [31] who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.”

Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. What an amazing moment that must have been. In fact, it was such an *important* moment, Jesus must have **told** the disciples the subject of the conversation because the disciples were sound asleep (**verse 32**). The question is, **why** did Moses and Elijah talk specifically about what Jesus was “**about to accomplish**” in Jerusalem? Because **that’s how Moses and Elijah were to be saved**. They **needed** what Jesus was going to accomplish in Jerusalem **for them**, And they wanted to know all about it. That’s what Paul has been describing in Romans chapter four.