

Abraham's Justification by Faith (4:1-3)

Paul has firmly established the fact that all mankind, both the Jews and the Gentiles are under sin. Now he continues to explain what he first introduced in 1:16 and repeated in 3:21-28, that the gospel, “the righteousness of God apart from the law” is the solution to this sin problem. To make this argument he looks to two pillars of Judaism: Abraham and David. He asks first **what then shall we say that Abraham our**

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father has found according to the flesh? (4:1). Paul does not use the term “flesh” here of sinful flesh (as in 8:9). Instead he addresses both the condition of Abraham's flesh (i.e., circumcised or uncircumcised) and the fact that it was not deeds of the flesh that led God to forgive his sin and account him as righteous. Instead it was his trust in what God had promised.

In the previous chapter Paul asserted that boasting was excluded by the “law of faith” (3:27). Paul illustrates that the same was true in the life of Abraham. He continues, **for if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast** (4:2). What had led God to account Abraham as righteous? Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 to answer this, **Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness** (4:3). The righteousness of God which enables the sinner to stand before Him acquitted of sin is not accounted to a person based on the accumulation of enough good deeds, but upon God's mercy. The

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counted righteous.

Righteousness and Justification

At this point in our study it is appropriate to devote some time to consider the meaning of two words used extensively throughout this epistle: *righteousness* and *justification*. It is unfortunate that our English translations treat these as two different words. In the Greek there

is a family of words that are variously translated *righteous*, *just*, *justify*, or *righteousness*. The root word in this group, the Gr. word *dikē* referred to a right, custom, law or punishment (see 2 Thess. 1:9). To the Greeks *Dikē* was the personified deity of justice. The adjective, *dikaios*, referred to one who observed divine laws, and was thus considered righteous or just (see Rom. 5:7). The verb *dikaioō* referred to making one righteous (see Rom. 4:2). And finally, the noun *dikaiosisunē* was the abstract quality of being right (see Rom. 4:3). In the Old King James, every time that the English trans-

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Chapter Four



Wealthy Roman house from Pompeii. Courtesy of FreeStockPhotos.com.



The Greek word *dikē* from a Greek inscription in Ephesus. It is the root for the family of words rendered “righteousness” or “justification” in the New Testament. Photo: Kyle Pope.

lates the word “justify” (or “justification”) it is from the *dikē* family of words. Every time (except one¹), that the English translates the word “righteousness” it is from the *dikē* family of words.

There are at least two ways that the concepts of righteousness and justification are used in the New Testament. First, of the behavior that is expected by God. One practices righteousness (1 John 3:7). Zacharias and Elizabeth were “righteous” before God, walking in all God’s commandments (Luke 1:16). Lot was a “righteous man” (2 Pet. 2:8). The Hebrew writer speaks of those who “worked righteousness” (Heb. 11:3).

A second way these concepts are used in the New Testament is in reference to one’s legal status before God (i.e., one guilty of sin or innocent). In this sense, Paul in the previous chapter echoed the Psalmist in declaring that there is none “righteous” (Rom. 3:10). The Law of Moses did not resolve this

men to “practice righteousness” men must never “trust in themselves.” Jesus spoke against some who “trust in themselves” that they were righteous (Luke 18:9). This was much of Israel’s problem: through ignorance of “God’s righteousness” they sought to establish “their own righteousness” and did not “submit to the righteousness of God” (Rom. 10:3).

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God wants man to seek righteousness (Matt. 6:33). We should hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6). Paul taught Timothy to “pursue righteousness” (1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22). The gospel reveals the “righteousness of God” (Rom. 1:17; 3:21, 22). This is what man must seek in this age. Yet, how does

problem. Paul asserts that no flesh is justified by works of the law (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:16; 3:11). Even though Paul himself was “blameless” concerning the “righteousness which is in the law” (Phil. 3:6) he was the “chief of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15). The Old Law was not a law that gave life (Gal. 3:21).

While God wants

God’s righteousness come to us? One is justified by God’s grace (Rom. 3:24; Titus 3:7). In both Old and New Testament it is always God who justifies! God is just and the One who justifies (Rom. 3:26). God alone can justify the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). Since it is God who justifies, no other can condemn (Rom. 8:36). In this age God does so through Christ. One is justified by His blood (Rom. 5:9). One is justified in the name of the Lord (1 Cor. 6:11). One is justified by Christ (Gal. 2:17). One is justified by faith (Rom. 3:28; 5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:24). This stands in contrast to seeking to be justified by our “own righteousness.” Instead we must seek the “righteousness which is from God by faith” (Phil. 3:9). To try and be justified by the law is to be estranged from Christ (Gal. 5:4).

Much has been made of the different emphasis that Paul and James place upon justification and works in Romans chapter four and James chapter two. If we understand the different way that the terms can be

used we see there is no conflict. Paul is concerned with a person’s legal status; James with one’s obedience. Paul considers how God moves the “sinner” to a condition of being “justified.” James addresses the fact that one who has been justified should do

what is right. It is in consideration of these two different aspects of righteousness that Paul asserts that Abraham was not justified by works (Rom. 4:2) while James asserts that one is justified by works and not faith only (Jas. 2:24, 25). James is not saying that obedience changes

¹ The Old King James version in Hebrews 1:8 translates the Greek word *euthutes*, meaning “straightforwardness,” as “righteousness.”

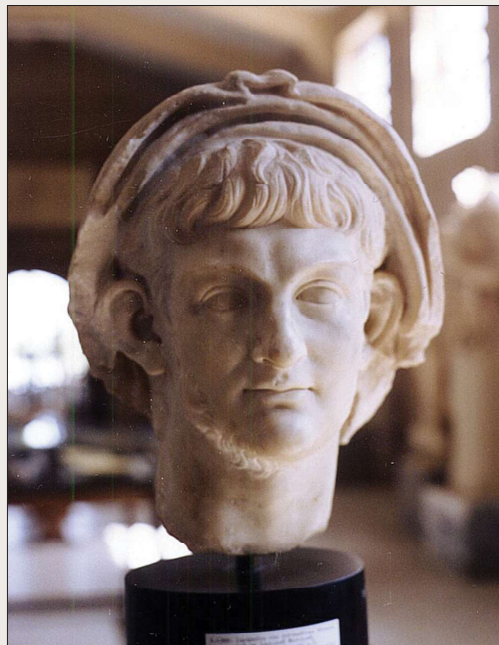
a person's legal status from being a sinner to being accounted "righteous." Neither is Paul asserting that one who has been forgiven and acquitted of sin is not responsible to do what is righteous.

God's righteousness requires obedience. Obedience leads to righteousness (Rom. 6:16). Those who "work righteousness" are accepted by God (Acts 10:35). Those whom God has justified must consider themselves alive from the dead, and thus present their bodies as "instruments of righteousness" (Rom. 6:13). Those forgiven (in Christ) become "slaves of righteousness" (Rom. 6:18). The Christian's righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20). We must live "righteously" (Titus 3:5). Those who "practice righteousness" are born of Him (1 John 2:29). Scripture gives "instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). While we are justified in obedience to the gospel, at the same time we await "righteousness" (Gal. 5:5) when we will receive the "crown of righteousness" (2 Tim. 4:8). One must remain faithful, because one can know the "way of righteousness" and turn from it (2 Pet. 2:21).

David's Righteousness Apart from Works (4:4-8).

Paul in this chapter uses Abraham and David as examples to illustrate the contrast between trusting in one's self and trusting in God's mercy to justify the one who has sinned. Paul writes, **now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the**

ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness (4:4-5). Paul is not teaching that one can do nothing and be right with God. He is refuting the attitude which imagines that one can be righteous before God based upon doing enough good works. While obedience can never take away a single sin, one cannot please God without it. Forgiveness of sin comes not to the one who works, but to the one who trusts God as the source of forgiveness. This is illustrated by the second pillar of Judaism: David. **Just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those**



Bust of Nero from Corinth. Although limited to Rome itself, Nero initiated the first Roman persecution of Christians. Photo: Kyle Pope.

whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin" (4:6-8). Paul quotes Psalm 32:1-2 where David speaks of one as "blessed" be-

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cause his sin is not imputed to him, but covered and forgiven. Paul cites this as an example of accounted righteousness apart from works. David's works were sinful. It was not his good works that brought about his forgiveness. Rather it was God's mercy and willingness to grant forgiveness. No works of human righteousness can ever take away sin.

Abraham, Circumcision and the Law (4:9-25)

Paul now returns to the issue of circumcision, asking **does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also?** (4:9a). To answer this question he returns to the example of Abraham, declaring, **for we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised** (4:9b-10). This is a crucial point in refutation of those who would contend that the Gentile must be circumcised. Abraham's accounted righteousness did not come because of or as a result of circumcision. The declaration that Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness came well before the covenant of circumcision was even given (see Gen. 15:1-6; 17:9-14). What role did circumcision play? Paul declares, **he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe,**

though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also (4:11). Paul declares that circumcision did not solely concern the distinction between the Jew and the Gentile, but it was “a seal of the righteousness of faith.” That is, it marked the type

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of faith which Abraham had that trusted in God as the source of righteousness.

A core assertion of the Christian faith is introduced here. Abraham is not only the father of those who are descended from his body, but also those who have the same faith as Abraham. Paul says that Abraham was **the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised** (4:12). This is a significant example to those under Christ. Since Abraham was accounted as righteous, before his circumcision, to argue that Gentiles must be circumcised would bind upon them something that was not even bound upon Abraham. Paul points out that this did not come **through the law, but through the righteousness of faith** (4:13). Since the Law of Moses did not grant righteousness, it would be foolish to look to it as the source of righteousness. Now, under Christ, one should seek in Christ what Abraham himself relied upon, “the righteousness of faith.” To do otherwise, **faith is made void and the promise made of no effect** (4:14).

Paul then turns to the problem with the Law which he will explore in detail in chapter seven, that **the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression** (4:15). While Paul is pointing out that the Law of Moses did not offer a long-term remedy for sin,

he makes the necessary inference that all mankind has always been under law toward God. If this were not the case, the Gentiles could not be under sin, because “where there is no law there is no transgression.” In the context, Paul illustrates that the means by which God makes men righteous (i.e., grants them the legal status of forgiveness) was not the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses brought knowledge of sin, awareness of when law was violated, and thus divine wrath over this violation. On the other hand, God’s means of righteousness, **is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all** (4:16-17). Paul told the churches in Galatia, “those who are of faith are sons of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7). Paul quotes the promise to Abraham, **I have made you a father of many nations** (4:17a) which was given in Genesis 17:5. This promise came from the God, **who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did** (4:17b). God knows what will be even before it has come into existence. Thus, God called Abraham, the “father of many nations” even before he had given birth to Isaac (see Gen. 17:5). In the same way,

in this age, God promises the resurrection, judgment, and the passing away of this present world, long before it takes place.

Paul tells us that Abraham, **contrary to hope, in hope believed** (4:18a). It was not the natural course, by the time of the post-flood patriarchs as today, for a man over 100 years old to have a child. Even so, Abraham “in hope believed.” Abraham was not **weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb** (4:19). The Hebrew writer speaks of her condition as being “past the age” and Abraham “as good as dead” (Heb. 11:11-12). Abraham, **did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform** (4:20-21). Those who would follow the Lord must have the same trust in God that, He will do exactly as He has promised. There are many things that we are called upon to believe that cannot be verified by the senses or by experience. Saving faith demands that we trust in God “contrary to hope” not wavering at His promises “through unbelief,” but maintaining a strong faith that glorifies God in confidence that He will fulfill His word.

For Paul, through the Holy Spirit, the declaration that Abraham’s faith was “accounted to him for righteousness,” is not a minor Old Testament doctrine. Rather, Paul asserts that **it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us** (4:23-24a). The promise to Abraham, and example of Abraham illustrates for those under Christ that **it shall be imputed**

to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead (4:24b). Men throughout the ages have wrestled with the question, “who killed Jesus?” Prejudice and racial bigotry have led one group to say, “the Jews killed him!” While another will say, “the Romans

killed him!” Paul declares the simple fact that all mankind killed Jesus, in that he was **delivered up because of our offenses** (4:25a). We are all responsible for the nails in His hands, the thorns on His brow, and the spear that pierced His side. However, Jesus’ death was not the end. Thanks be to

God, He was **raised because of our justification** (vs. 25b). Jesus’ death, as horrible as it was, gave mankind the means to stand before God justified and forgiven of the sin that led Christ to be delivered up.

Questions

1. What two important personalities in Judaism are cited in this chapter (4:1, 6)?
 a. _____ and b. _____
2. Fill in the missing words from the central quote in this chapter regarding Abraham: “_____ believed _____, and it was _____ to him for _____” (4:3; Gen. 15:6, NKJV).
3. What is the main root word, from the family of Greek words that are translated “just, righteous, justification, or righteousness”? _____ What was the false god the Greeks associated with this name? The goddess of _____
4. Are the words “righteousness” and “justification” different words in Greek? _____
5. What are two ways that the concepts of righteousness and justification can be used in the New Testament?
 a. _____
 b. _____
6. Which of these two uses of the terms righteousness and justification does Paul use in Romans 4? _____
 _____ Which of these two uses of the terms righteousness and justification does James use in James 2? _____
7. Had God’s declaration that Abraham’s belief was accounted as righteousness come before or after the covenant of circumcision (4:9-10; Gen. 15:1-6; 17:9-14)? _____
8. What does Paul call the “sign of circumcision” in this text (4:11)? _____

9. According to Paul what determines whether someone is a child of Abraham (4:11-12)? _____

10. What does Paul teach does not exist if there is no law (4:15)? _____
11. Explain the phrase: “who, contrary to hope, in hope believed” (4:18): _____

12. Of what was Abraham “fully convinced” (4:21)? _____

13. What does Paul teach was not written for Abraham alone (4:23-24)? _____

14. Why does Paul teach that Jesus was delivered up (4:25a)? _____
15. Why does Paul teach that Jesus was raised up (4:25b)? _____