

II. SALVATION—THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD REVEALED (3:21–8:39)

A. Justification—declared righteous in Christ (3:21–5:21)

1. The Divine Method (3:21–31)
2. The OT Illustration of Justification by Faith (4:1–25)

a. Abraham received righteousness by faith (4:1–12)

4:1 *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?*

4:2 *For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.*

4:3 *For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."*

To the Jews, Abraham was particularly important as a model for righteousness. We know that Abraham obtained justification. If Abraham was not justified by works, then no one could be.

Paul said that all men are justified by faith, not by the works of the law (3:20–25). The first response of the Jew would be, “What about our ancestors? Was Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation (Isa. 51:2), justified by faith?”

So in 4:1–3 Paul addresses the Jews’ concern and asks, “What did Abraham discover about this matter?” (Murray, 129) How did Abraham achieve righteousness? How was he justified? Was it by works? (4:2) No, Paul says, it couldn’t be! Justification by works would give Abraham reason to boast. He could boast before men because he could point to the privileged position that he had earned. He could boast about his self-achievement before God. When he is declared righteous at the judgment, he could rightfully say, “I deserve this. I earned it.” But scripture expressly says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (4:3; Gen. 15:6).” His justification was not earned; “it was bestowed upon him, not for the sake of his works, but of his faith. . . . And hence it follows that though his privileged position in the sight of men remains, he has nothing to boast of before God” (Ellicott).

As Ellicott says when Paul adds, “but not before God,” it is an example of Paul’s eagerness to get to the point before he had fully developed the thought. It appears that his main thought is that there is no boasting before God; if that is so, there is no possibility of earning justification by works—even for Abraham.

In the Bible “credited,” “imputed,” “reckoned,” “accounted” and “counted” all translate the same Greek word, *logizomai* (λογίζομαι). In secular Greek *logizomai* (λογίζομαι) meant to write down in one’s account, or to credit money to someone. This is a major idea in Romans 4; the word appears 11 times in the chapter (4:3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24). Paul is showing that Abraham’s response to God’s promise led God to credit him with a ‘status’ of righteousness (Moo, 262). God was not obligated to grant Abraham this status *because* he believed; rather, He did so as an act of pure grace. Thus, Paul sees in Abraham the principle that righteousness is credited to the one who believes; the same principle is operative in the life of the one who

places their faith in Christ. Abraham's imputed righteousness is the righteousness that is "apart from the Law," "witnessed by the Law and the Prophets," and manifested in the gospel (3:21).

The relationship of *logizomai* (λογίζομαι) to righteousness and justification is important to understand. The basic meaning of righteousness is to do what is right, to live up to a moral standard, or to be in a right standing with God. To be justified means to be declared righteous. If righteousness is credited to the person who has faith, they are in a right standing with God and can be declared righteous.

What did Abraham find? Abraham found grace in the eyes of the Lord through faith alone. In the context of Genesis 15 from which the quote in verse 3 comes, Abraham believed that God would give him an heir. Paul's point is that Abraham was justified by faith, not works (4:5). Abraham trusted God and looked to His grace. That faith was credited to him as righteousness.

**4:4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.
4:5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,**

Verses 4 and 5 expand upon verses 2 and 3.

The average Jew believed that good works played a large part in salvation. But Paul explains that this was not true of Abraham: "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted (*logizomai*, λογίζομαι) a favor but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited (*logizomai*, λογίζομαι) as righteousness" (Ro. 4:4-5). The antithesis in these verses is not just between the worker and the non-worker, but also between the worker and the one who has faith.

If we could earn righteousness by good works, it would be a deserved compensation. But Abraham's favor was "credited" to him by his belief in God, not by what he had done. It follows then, that he was not a worker who earned something.

In Romans 3:24 Paul had expressly said we are "justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." If Abraham received righteousness but didn't work for it, he was justified in the manner Paul had just explained in Romans 3—by grace.

Verse 5 repeats the formula upon which everything turns: God credits righteousness; God "justifies the ungodly" (4:5). The point of the word "ungodly" here is to stress that the righteousness that God credits to us is not our righteousness. First, by definition, the ungodly have no righteousness. Secondly, if God credits righteousness then the righteousness they receive cannot be their own. Thus, being justified means being credited righteousness with God's righteousness counted as ours.

As Piper says, "This was utterly shocking. It jars all of our judicial sentiments (see Exodus 23:7; Proverbs 17:15). It makes us cry out, 'How can this be?' And the answer is, of course, that 'Christ died for the ungodly' (Romans 5:6). God can justify the ungodly because his Son died for the ungodly."

Most religions teach that God justifies the godly and being an adherent to religion is the means to become godly; the Bible teaches that God justifies the ungodly because that's the only kind of people there are (Also see Isa. 43:22–25).

The glorious truth that God forgives the ungodly is found in other places in the OT as well:

- Isaiah 43:22–25 "Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel. You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with grain offerings nor wearied you with demands for incense. You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me, or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses. "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.
- Psalm 130:3–4 If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared.
- Micah 7:18–19 Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in unchanging love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins Into the depths of the sea.

4:6 just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

4:7 "BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED.

4:8 "BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT."

In verses 6–8 a second example of justification by faith is introduced to show that the concept is imbedded throughout the OT scriptures.

David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God credits (*logizomai*, λογίζομαι) righteousness apart from works. In Psalm 32:1–2 David wrote, "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not *take into account* (*logizomai*, λογίζομαι)" (Ro. 4:6–8; Psa. 32:1–2).

David rejoiced in the blessedness he experienced because he knew that God had not credited his sin to him (*logizomai*, λογίζομαι; 4:8). If we were to read the rest of that Psalm, we would discover that David received forgiveness by grace through acknowledging his guilt and casting himself before the mercy of God. This too is justification by faith, not by works.

Notice carefully that in verse 6 it says that "David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works." But the quotation from Psalm 32:1–2 doesn't say God "credits righteousness" to us. It says that God does not credit sin to us. Until now Paul has been defining justification as the positive reckoning of God's righteousness to us. But now he adds to the definition the non-reckoning of sins. God's righteousness is credited to us; our sins are not credited to us. Both are essential. We have to get God's righteousness, and we have to get rid of our unrighteousness. In justification, we are not merely forgiven and left with no standing before God. God both sets aside our sin, *and* counts us as righteous.

Paul does not see justification as the imputation of righteousness alone nor does he see it as the forgiveness of sin alone. For him, forgiveness of sin must include the positive imputation of God's righteousness and the imputation of righteousness must include the forgiveness of sin. And the blessedness of both conditions is that each is "apart from works."

As Piper says,

"Blessed" is a condition where you are deeply secure and content and happy in God. Blessed are you when God credits his righteousness to you. Blessed are you when God does not credit your sin to you. Blessed are you when Christ takes your sins and you take His righteousness. Blessed are you when you wake up to the breathtaking truth that all this blessing is "apart from works" and that all you can do to get it is depend on Christ alone for it.

Notice that:

- God is the One who credits righteousness and doesn't credit sin
- righteousness is credited apart from works
- credited righteousness is associated with forgiveness of sins; forgiveness constitutes God's act of not reckoning sins against us
- the one whose sins are forgiven is blessed

4:9 Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."

4:10 How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised;

Paul now questions if this blessedness of forgiven sin and credited righteousness comes upon the circumcised only (the Jews only), or upon the uncircumcised (the non-Jews) also. (Ro. 4:9a). What is the extent of justification? Paul had shown that Abraham was not justified on account of works, but both he and David were circumcised members of the covenant community. Does justification extend to outsiders as well?

To state it differently, faith was credited (*logizomai*, λογίζομαι) to Abraham as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited (*logizomai*, λογίζομαι)? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? (Ro. 4:9b–10a). That is, was circumcision a part of Abraham's justification? No! He was declared righteous before he was circumcised (Ro. 4:10b). Therefore, the faith that is credited as righteousness is not related to the rite of circumcision at all; it is by faith alone.

The blessing of getting right with God and being accepted by God did not come by means of circumcision. It came before circumcision and is independent of circumcision; that is, it came by faith, apart from works. That's what Paul wants to establish here with the example of Abraham.

4:11 and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them,

4:12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.

Paul goes on to explain the true nature and design of circumcision. Abraham “received the sign of circumcision, [not as a means of obtaining righteousness but as] a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised” (Ro. 4:11a). Abraham’s circumcision was a sign because it attested to the existence of his faith. A seal assured the genuineness of something, just as a product trademark guarantees that the product is really what it appears to be. In other words, “the circumcision of Abraham was designed to confirm to him the fact, that he was regarded and treated by God as righteous, through faith. . .” (Hodge, 117).

Thus, Abraham possessed righteousness through faith while he was yet uncircumcised “that he might be the father of all those who believe” (Ro. 4:11b). “Father” expresses community of nature, and is often applied to the founder or head of a particular class of men. God’s point in justifying Abraham by faith alone *before* he was circumcised was to make it clear that Abraham is the spiritual father of the uncircumcised. However, because he was later circumcised he is “the father of circumcision” (Ro. 12:4a), as well. This means that he is the father of all who are justified by faith, no matter what people group they are from.

Because righteousness was deposited into Abraham’s account (*logizomai*, λογίζομαι) through faith, his children in the faith can also know “that righteousness might be credited (*logizomai* - λογίζομαι) to them also” (Ro. 4:11c; Gal. 3:7). However, since Abraham is head of the “race of believers,” Paul insists that in order to have righteousness credited to us, Abraham’s faith must be imitated; we are to “walk in the steps of faith of Abraham” (Ro. 4:12b).