

# THE HISTORIC BASIS FOR GOD'S ACCEPTANCE

Romans 4:1-3

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In wanting to better understand the modern day teachings and applications of Islam, I visited one of their “hope and inspirational” websites, IslamicSunrays.com. There was a blog from Muslim counselors that addressed the subject of forgiveness. The first thing that appeared on the blog was this cry for help from a 14-year-old boy. He left no name.

Please i want to be a good muslim i am aged 14 and i have done lots of bad sins which I did not enjoy i want to get rid of these sins and to become clear of all sins and become a good muslim and help my parents and families and muslim brothers and sisters i also want to go to heaven please help me i am really worried.

The following are a couple of responses he received from Muslim spiritual leaders:

Salam (Peace be upon you). I am here to say that if you want your sins to be forgiven from Allah, then stop all this bad things. If you want to become a good Muslim, first think of stopping the bad things. Then when you stopped it, pray 5 times daily, believe that Allah is all forgiving and Allah forgives those who turn to him. And believe that we worship Allah alone.” –Ahmed Hassan

Then came another leader's counsel. “My advice for you would be: 1. Offer prayers regularly. 2. Read Holy Quran with meaning 3. Ask for Allah's forgiveness in all your prayers” --Fayaz

In response to the Fayaz' words of counsel came this desperate cry from another reader of this blog for help and hope: "Hi Fayaz I did this before but no avail. Nothing happened maybe reason to this is that I'm still doing that stuff but after doing that I pray lord to forgive. I'm now in inferiority complex think to suicide but can't."

The cry of the human heart to experience God's forgiveness and acceptance is worldwide. I have no doubt that the Muslim counselors of this Islamic blog are genuine in their desire to help others. And I am not singling out Islam as being the only religion that gives this type of advice to those who are covered in shame. Actually, all the religions of the world subscribe to some form of religious discipline or performance in order to hope to receive forgiveness and shed the shame for things done wrong. All of them promote the idea that if you perform in one way or another, you can earn God's acceptance and approval. If you do certain things and avoid other things, you will appease any reason God may have to be angry with you.

But in the end, these religious practices do not bring the peace that comes from knowing that your forgiveness has been obtained. Their practices do not bring a deep sense of assurance that God loves them. As in this Muslim blog, the frustration from being unable to earn forgiveness by stopping a chronic sin has led some people to seriously consider or actually to commit suicide.

Only one religion, Christianity, stands alone as unique in offering another approach to finding peace with God and self and assurance of God's forgiveness, love, and acceptance. Only one faith has pointed the way by which we can find relief from shame by being justified before God, declared righteous, and completely accepted by Him.

It appears that only the Christian faith has been willing to state the obvious--that it is impossible to make oneself holy and acceptable to God. It is impossible to stop sinning while we live here on earth.

Furthermore, Christians also recognize that our loving God understood our predicament, sent Jesus to earth to solve the problems caused by our sin, and gave us the only way we could be forgiven and reunited with God, ushering in everlasting peace with God.

However, many who claim to be followers of Jesus do not really understand God's solution to our sin or how to experience the forgiveness and peace of our loving God. As a result, they too unnecessarily continue to live miserable lives and are incapable of loving others as God has loved them.

In **Romans 4**, the Apostle Paul invests a lot of words and time to demonstrate how God has made it possible since the beginning of time for someone to experience God's forgiveness and to know that they are saved and made once and for all acceptable before God. And as we will see, God's plan is based on a promise He made to us. My hope is that if you are wrestling with these things this morning, you will find confidence and peace in the truth of God's word.

In **Romans 3:27-4:25**, Paul explains in depth how it is that people throughout history have experienced God's forgiveness and have received His complete acceptance and approval. We saw last week that the key word used in this section of Scripture is the word "**faith**." It is used twenty-one times in just this section of Scripture. If you simply do a study of this term in these verses, you can make an outline of the passage that looks like this:

The Faith Road Map  
**3:27-4:25**

- 3:27-31** Faith contrasted with "**works of the Law**"
- 4:1-8** Faith contrasted with "**works**"
- 4:9-12** Faith contrasted with "**circumcision**"
- 4:13-16** Faith contrasted with "**the Law**"
- 4:17-22** Faith contrasted with "**sight**"

Last time we looked at **3:27-31**. We saw that the Apostle Paul's point in writing that paragraph was that faith alone in Christ's work on the cross is what saves and forever reunites the sinner with the living God. Faith is the basis of our forgiveness and being made right with God. It is not our faith plus our good works or our promise to never sin again. Our being able to declare that we are right or okay with God is based on our faith alone. Good works like loving others hopefully will follow. Our good works are the fruit

or evidence of being made right with God. But our good works do not play a role in our being made acceptable to God.

From this point forward in this section of Scripture, beginning with our passage for this morning, Paul will be proving why and how this is true. Furthermore, since Paul knows that a major portion of the infant Christian church at Rome was made up of Jewish Christians, Paul's purpose in **chapter 4** is to address them about some mistaken Jewish theology as it concerns what leads to God's forgiveness and acceptance. Paul wants to make sure they understand that what they had traditionally been taught about God's forgiveness was not Biblically correct. As you will see, beginning with **verse 1**, Paul turns to the Torah and other parts of the Old Testament to prove his case.

In **4:1-8**, Paul brings up two of the most significant figures in the Old Testament, two of the greatest Jewish heroes, Abraham and David, to witness how they were justified, forgiven, and declared acceptable to God. Paul knew that if he could show the present-day Jews that these men were made righteous by their faith in the promise of God, the same way that we are today, then Paul would win over his Jewish Christian brethren.

Follow along as I read our passage of study, and then we will examine what the text teaches.

**<sup>1</sup>What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? <sup>2</sup>For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup>For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." <sup>4</sup>Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. <sup>5</sup>But to the one who does**

not work, but *believes* in Him who justifies the ungodly, his *faith* is credited as righteousness,<sup>6</sup> just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:<sup>7</sup> **“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. <sup>8</sup>BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT.”**

For those who were not with us last time, let me remind you the relationship between the two Biblical terms “**justify**” and “**righteous.**” Both come from the same root word in the language of the Bible. The verb to justify means to declare righteous. To be declared righteous means to be declared by God, once and for all, accepted and approved.

In this paragraph, Paul begins with Abraham for two reasons: First, Abraham is considered by all Jews to be their physical father of origin, according to several passages like **Isaiah 51:1-2**. Abraham’s life and character were held up as God’s model of what true obedience and acceptance looked like to Him. It has been argued in Jewish commentaries that Abraham had obeyed the Law perfectly before the Law had been given. So, by using Abraham to prove his point, Paul removes the greatest example that the Jews thought they had to prove their case, and Paul turns around the evidence of Abraham’s life to prove his case.

Secondly, I believe the Spirit of God moved Paul to use Abraham because of Abraham’s future significance in history. Today, Abraham is honored and revered throughout the world by three different faiths: Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Abraham was a man who, by anyone’s reckoning, stood head and shoulders above most of the human race. Hence, Abraham becomes an even more powerful witness to the truth which Paul has been expounding.

Let's go back and look more closely at our first three verses. Paul writes, "**What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, [which is what traditional Jews believed] he has something to boast about; but not before God.**" Paul's point is that God is the ultimate judge of whether or not a boast is valid. Before God, Abraham had no basis to boast that his righteous life had earned him God's acceptance. Paul goes on to explain why by citing Scripture, specifically **Genesis 15:6**, "**For what does the Scripture say 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'**"

Don't you just love some of these Biblical terms, like "**reckoned**?" What does this word mean? The original word is both a legal and accounting term to say that someone places something legally into your account. It was a one-sided transaction. In this case, it refers to putting something to someone else's account that does not inherently belong to him.

As it concerns Abraham, this reckoning dealt with Abraham's acceptance and forgiveness. He didn't earn it; God reckoned or gave it to him. And the basis upon which God's acceptance and approval came to Abraham was because of his faith in a promise of God. Abraham simply "**believed**" in something God had said or promised to him. Abraham didn't do anything except put his confidence or trust that what God said was true. He simply believed in what God said and that God would do it. As a result of his simply trusting, God "**reckoned**" to Abraham a status of "**righteousness**" or acceptance and approval. Paul is demonstrating that this reckoning is an entirely gracious act of God that by its nature excludes any appeal to the nature of one's obedience or morality.

So what was the promise that Abraham believed? Paul assumes that his Jewish readers would know what that promise is, so he doesn't explain. Some of us may not know what that promise is, so let's take a moment to track it down.

We begin our search by first getting a grip on what the term "**found**" means, in **verse 1**. Here this word "**found**" has a double meaning. First it refers to

what Abraham found out about or what he discovered as to how one is made righteous and approved of by God, once and for all.

Secondly, this term “**found**” refers to what Abraham personally obtained as a result of what he learned. This same expression and its intended meaning is used in **Genesis 6:8**. There we read, “**Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.**” Noah not only discovered through his experience how one is made righteous before God, he also believed what God said about the coming of a flood, even though there had never been a flood in human history at that time. He believed God and built the ark that God had commanded, even though no boat as such had ever been made. So by faith in God’s promise to rescue him, Noah was made acceptable to God by his trusting in God’s promise.

Likewise, the Apostle Paul is telling us what Abraham discovered about how one can be made righteous and approved of by God and how Abraham himself became forever accepted by God.

According to these verses, Abraham discovered two possible ways that a person could try to gain a sense of worth or righteousness in this life. Of the two ways, one worked and the other did not. The first is given to us in the words, “**For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about.**”

Now, let’s consider the man Abraham for a moment. Abraham was a man who had performed many good deeds and religious works. If he hadn’t, the three major world religions would never have recognized him as a man of God.

But Abraham also knew that God is not impressed with the outward appearance of things. He knew that God was most interested in what motivates us to do what we do. Abraham knew that often times what prompted many of his actions was the selfishness, the greed, the grasping for self-glory, the self-protection at all costs, and other impure motives in his heart. Abraham knew about his good works, but he was also very much aware of his weaknesses and failures. Abraham knew he had lied to protect his own skin, all the while setting up his wife to be either raped or forced to submit to

adultery. And he didn't do this just once. He had done it twice! He also knew that in his past, he was also proven to be an idolater.

Hence, knowing this about himself, Abraham knew that he had no grounds to boast about his ability to earn God's approval. Abraham knew that no one, including himself, could by their own good works stand forgiven and accepted by God. Abraham did not believe that he could boast in his own goodness as the basis of being made acceptable to God.

This is the same for me and you. Although your good works may out measure mine, neither your good works nor my good works will ever outweigh that which is wicked in our lives. Remember, our Holy God works only on a scale of perfection--no bad works allowed! He requires perfect holiness because He is perfectly holy. Abraham knew that he had not lived a perfectly good life. Hence, based on his own imperfection, Abraham failed in making himself righteously acceptable before God. He might have been able to earn the applause and praise of others for being a good man, but as our text says, "**But not before God.**" In other words, Abraham knew that he had nothing to stand on that would give him the right to boast before God that, "I'm worthy to stand approved before God based on my own efforts."

Yet, many of the Jews who point to Abraham as being the perfect model upon which to base their idea that a good moral life is the basis of being approved of by God, have not been honest with the text about Abraham's failure. Today many, if not all, Jewish or Muslim commentators have misrepresented Abraham's life as well as what he believed as to how it came to be that God reckoned him as righteous.

Quite frankly, this is one reason why I struggle with many of the biographies of Christian leaders. Often the person being remembered is painted in such glowing terms that that person becomes the ideal or comes across as almost sinless. As a friend of mine once said, "I am convinced that anytime a biography is written about a man, his wife or a close family member ought to edit it and add their views." It would certainly help the rest of us who struggle with spiritual battles and failures not feel so alone. It's one of the reasons I appreciated so much Billy Graham's autobiography. Throughout his career,

Billy told the millions who had come to hear him preach that he had his own sins and shortcomings. In addition, his wife and children, all of whom adored him, confirmed Billy's confession, because his whole family wanted the world to get the message of the gospel correct. Jesus died for sinners, not for those who are perfect, or may appear perfect or faultless like Billy Graham. He wanted others to know that he was a sinner and needed Jesus. Furthermore, he wanted them to enjoy what he had come to enjoy: release from the gripping shame of personal sin, the gift of forgiveness and the acceptance of God, and the peace and confidence to stand loved before God.

So, what's the second way that Abraham learned one can be made righteous and fully approved of God? What is the way that Abraham was accepted by God? The Apostle Paul answers that for us in **verse 3**. And to answer that question, he goes back to an event in Abraham's life, recorded **Genesis 15**. Paul writes, "**For what does the scripture say? And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.**"

But even that statement makes us ask, "What was it that Abraham believed? What truth or promise did Abraham put his trust in that led to God's reckoning Abraham as righteous?" To find out, we must go back to **Genesis** and do some investigating. Let's begin with **Genesis 15:5-6**. Here's what it says:

**<sup>5</sup>And He [God] took him [Abram] outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He [God] said to him [Abram], "So shall your descendants be." <sup>6</sup>Then he [Abram] believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.**

Now what does that mean, "**So shall your descendants be**"? There are two important facts you must understand about this word "**descendants**" if you are going to understand Paul's argument and what God promised Abraham.

First of all, the word “**descendants**” is the same word translated elsewhere in the Old Testament as “seed.” In Hebrew, the word “seed” is what’s known as a collective noun, meaning that it can refer to just one seed, or it can refer to many seeds. It is similar to our English word fish or sheep. You can have either one or many fish, not many fishes. You can have one or many sheep, but not many sheeps.

In **Genesis 15:5**, this term refers to several descendants. Furthermore, from **verse 5**, we see that not only did God promise Abraham to have several descendants, but He also promised him that, because he believed or trusted in God’s promise, he would be made righteous by God. But was that all he believed that made him righteous? No.

It is important for us to understand that what we see here in **Genesis 15:5** is not all that God promised on that night. This account, like many in the Old Testament, is highly condensed as to all that God had promised Abraham. In other words, in **Genesis 15** we have only part of the discussion that took place between God and Abraham. The rest of the details are to be filled in from other portions of scripture that refer back to this very same night and conversation. Because, as you will see, this promise had several parts to it, all of which Abraham believed, he was then reckoned righteous by simply putting his trust in what God promised was true and would come to be.

Let’s go look at some other portions of scripture that deal with that same night and conversation between Abraham and God. In **Genesis 22:17-18**, we have God reaffirming to Abraham what He had already promised earlier. Except here are included more details of what took place during that first discussion back in **Genesis 15**. As we read **Genesis 22**, let’s notice the three times in these verses the same term “seed” (singular) was used for “**descendants**” (plural) in **Genesis 15**. Here God says to Abraham:

**Indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed**

[singular] **as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the**

**seashore; and your seed** [singular] **shall possess the gate of their** [his] **enemies.** [literally and more accurately as the KJV and the ESV has it, “**His enemies**”] **And in your seed** [singular] **all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.**

Notice several things. First, I have stated after each time the word “**seed**” is used that it is intended to refer to one singular seed, not to many seeds, as in **Genesis 15**. I will show you why that is so, in a moment.

Second, notice that this promise states nothing about Abraham being reckoned as righteous as did **Genesis 15:5**. Instead the stress of this section is on the “**seed.**”

Now, let’s look at the first insight I mentioned, that the term “**seed,**” as used here, is meant to be taken as a singular rather than a plural. In **Galatians 3:6, 16**, the Holy Spirit led the Apostle Paul to correctly interpret what was meant in both **Genesis 15** and **22**. In **Galatians 3**, the apostle Paul ties together both of these Old Testament passages. In **Galatians 3**, the context and subject matter is the very same as in our **Romans** passage and **Genesis**. It is dealing with the promises that God made to Abraham that first night, in **Genesis 15**. In **Galatians**, Paul demonstrates that the promise of what makes one righteous and the promise about the “**seed**” are both part of the same promise.

In **Galatians 3:6**, Paul says, “**Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.**” Verse 6 connects us to **Genesis 15**. Then in verse 16 Paul states, “**Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed,**” which connects us to **Genesis 22**. It might interest you that in Greek, the word for “**seed**” is different than the Hebrew word. In Hebrew, it is a collective noun. Not so in Greek. In Greek, the word refers to one seed, and is different than the plural. Here, Paul does not say, “and to seeds,” as referring to many, but rather to one. “And to your seed,” that is one seed, Paul tells us points to Abraham’s future descendant Jesus Christ.

What we have here is Paul showing us that the promise made to Abraham had several parts to it. Part one of the promise is that he would have many descendants (**Genesis 15**). Part two of the promise is that he and many of his descendants would be made righteous. And part three of the promise is that Abraham would have one special descendant called his “**seed**,” which would be Jesus Christ. And based on what Jesus did on the cross, all those who looked to their Messiah to come, before Christ came, and all those who put their faith in Jesus the Messiah after He came would be saved and made acceptable before God.

Hang in there with me as we turn to one more passage in **John 8:39, 56**. John writes:

<sup>39</sup>**They** [the Jewish leaders] **answered and said to Him** [Jesus],  
**“Abraham is our father.”** Jesus said to them, **“If you are  
 Abraham’s children** [if you truly are the descendants who were spoken  
 of in Genesis, to whom the promise referred], **do the deeds of  
 Abraham.”** <sup>56</sup>**If Abraham were your father** [in one sense, Abraham  
 was their spiritual father], **you would believe Me because . . .  
 Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.**

Jesus tells us that there are really two types of descendants that come from Abraham—the believers who seek after the Messiah, as Abraham did, and those Jews who are merely non-believers and deny or refuse to follow Jesus. In other words, not all Jews will be saved, but only those who believe in the promise that Abraham believed in, including that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus says that Abraham saw something and was glad. What did Abraham see way back then and put his total confidence in so that he would be reckoned as righteous, saved, forgiven, and accepted by God? The Apostle Paul tells us in **Galatians 3:8**. **“The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the**

**Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.’”** Abraham saw ahead of time the day when Jesus Christ would come. God gave him a preview of the suffering Messiah dying on the cross for sin. In **Galatians**, Paul tells us that Abraham not only saw Christ’s day, but he had the Gospel fully given to him.

Let’s put all of these various scriptural brush strokes together on one canvas and see the picture that they communicate. Remember, we are looking at **Romans 4:1-3** and trying to answer the question, “When God said that Abraham believed God, what did Abraham believe?” Here is what Abraham believed:

He believed that God’s promised future Messiah’s (Jesus) work on the cross would make him forgiven and acceptable to God.

He believed he would have many believing descendants, who like himself, would put their trust in his future Messiah.

He believed that God’s salvation, forgiveness for sin, and acceptance of others today and in the future will be the same as it was for Abraham.

Now, let’s go back to the cry of the human heart to be forgiven for sin and to know one is accepted by God, approved of by God, and loved by God. Upon what basis can we know this? Upon what basis can we, in turn, become lovers of others who irritate us or are tough to love?

The answer to this is that we can’t do anything to be approved and forgiven by God on our own merit. We have to first admit to ourselves that this is true, turn to Christ, put our trust in His work on the cross on our behalf, and grasp hold of it by faith as the only thing to make us forgiven and accepted. We are to receive this as a gift from God, thanking Jesus for being our Savior. It is only because of what He has done can we have eternal peace with God, and know that God has forgiven us once and for all and has put His loving arms around us to hold us secure forever. Then, in turn, we can begin to love others as God has loved us.