

THE HISTORICAL BASIS FOR GOD'S ACCEPTANCE – II

Romans 4:4-25

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[Doug Realizes the Extent of God's Forgiveness - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ht3JggVWv9E)

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Have you ever felt that your wrong doings, your past sins, were so great that God could not forgive you or accept you?

Having become a Christian, have you ever felt as Doug deep shame and guilt for ongoing sin and questioned, “To what degree can God’s forgiveness truly be extended to me?”

If Doug’s struggle resonates with your heart, or if you know of someone who is struggling with this very issue, you might relate to our passage of study for this morning. It deals with the question, “To what degree can God’s forgiveness be extended to me? To what extent can I be found acceptable to God?”

As we return to our study of **Romans** this morning, we will finish up the major section of **Romans 3:27-4:25**. Paul’s main message in this section is to establish once and for all that justification, the act by which God declares a person forgiven, righteous, and forever accepted, is based on faith alone in the promise of God. And as our study of the text has already shown us, the promise that God made to Abraham was that Jesus Christ’s work on the cross was more than enough to meet the needs of guilty sinners.

Paul uses the most revered man in Jewish history, indeed the father of the nation of Israel, Abraham, to prove his case that justification has always and only come on the basis of faith in God’s promises. And then Paul adds another example of a revered Jewish hero who was saved, but even in his saved state added adultery and murder to his resume.

As it concerns Abraham, the key verse upon which Paul builds his argument that covers the entirety of **Romans 4** is **verse 3**, which reads, “**For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him**

as **righteousness.**” Because Abraham had believed in God’s promise, God credited to his account His perfect righteousness, making Abraham fully approved by God with a permanent eternal relationship with the living God. Having stated that in **verse 3**, Paul quotes or alludes to it in every paragraph that follows in this chapter.

Before we continue to read, let’s review the promise in which Abraham put his complete confidence. This promise had several parts to it. We learned that:

A. Abraham did not believe that he could boast in his own goodness as the basis of being made acceptable to God.

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

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

D. Abraham 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 him.

There was one term that we looked at last time that is repeated ten more times in our passage. Hence, it bears going over again. It is the word “**reckoned**,” or as other translations render it, “**counted**” or “**credited**.” The original word is both a legal and accounting term that describes someone placing something legally into another’s account. It was a one-sided transaction, meaning it refers to putting something into someone else’s account that does not inherently belong to him or was earned by him.

Over and over again we will see from our passage that God is the one who put something into Abraham’s account, based upon Abraham’s putting his trust in God’s promise to do a miracle for him. As we read our whole passage, note the relationship between the terms “**reckon**,” “**promise**,” “**justify**,” “**faith**,” and “**believe**.”

¹What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the Scripture say? “ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.” ⁴Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. ⁵But to the one who does not work, but *believes* in Him who justifies the ungodly, his *faith* is credited as righteousness, ⁶just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ⁷“BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. ⁸BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT.” ⁹Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, “FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.” ¹⁰How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; ¹¹and 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, ¹²and 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. ¹³For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of *faith*. ¹⁴For if those who are of the Law are heirs, *faith* is made void and the promise is nullified; ¹⁵for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation. ¹⁶For this reason it is by *faith*, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, 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, ¹⁷(as it is written, “A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU”) in the presence of Him whom he *believed*, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. ¹⁸In hope against hope he *believed*, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, “SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE.” ¹⁹Without becoming weak in *faith* he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb; ²⁰yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in

unbelief but grew strong in *faith*, giving glory to God, ²¹and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. ²²Therefore “IT WAS ALSO CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.” ²³Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, ²⁴but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

To further drive home his point that God’s reckoning or crediting to Abraham righteousness is not to be confused with something Abraham did to earn or to hold on to, Paul writes in **verse 4-5**, “**Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor** [literally the word for “grace” or gift], **but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.**”

Abraham didn’t earn his acceptance or approval by God. If he had earned his righteousness, it would have been considered a wage. But his forgiveness by God, his standing accepted before Him, came as a gift based on Abraham’s complete trust in God’s promise that Jesus made him right with God. It was something “**reckoned**” to Abraham.

In the next three verses, Paul turns to his second Old Testament life example, King David, to verify that what was true with Abraham was also true for King David, even after he had committed adultery and murder. In **verses 6-8**, Paul quotes David’s public psalm of confession for these sins, found in **Psalm 32:1-2**. Paul writes:

Just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works. “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.”

With these words, David testifies to God’s sovereign role of reckoning righteousness to sinners. Using David’s testimony as a full-blown sinner, he tells the world, “Look folks, the only reason this sinner is blessed is because God did not reckon my sin against me. Instead, he forgave me, and reckoned or credited to my account Christ’s righteousness. My being declared righteous by God had nothing to do with my being a man after God’s own heart. It had nothing to do with my trying to be a good or better man from here on out. It is all a work of God, a gift given to me from God.”

By the way, this is the first time in **Romans** that the word “**forgiveness**” is tied together with “**justification.**” Hence, when God says that He has declared a person righteous, it includes the reality that the person has been totally forgiven, fully accepted, approved, and thusly forever loved by God.

In the first eight verses of **Romans 4** both of these Jewish heroes of Judaism, David and Abraham, model for us what it takes for any of us to be called “a friend of God” or “a person after God’s own heart.” Both of these men remind us that what people in every generation long for is an intimate fellowship with God, to be approved of by God, to be a friend of God’s. And this can only come by God’s work of justification, which is in response to our putting our faith and confidence solely in God’s promise that the Messiah Jesus Christ’s work on the cross paid for and removed from us the ultimate penalty for our sin. It is not by our promise to be good or by some past good work that our sin is once and for all removed and we are made acceptable to God. It is solely on the basis of our trust in Christ’s work on our behalf.

As we look at both Abraham and David, there is a significant implication that must not go unnoted: We learn from this text that Jesus Christ is not the Savior of the righteous (because they have no need for a savior), but of the self-confessed failures, misfits, and unrighteous people of the world like David, Abraham, me, and you.

In **verses 9-12**, Paul continues his argument that justification can come by faith alone by answering the question, “When was Abraham made righteous?” The timing of when Abraham was declared righteous by God has several important implications. Let’s look at two. Paul writes:

Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, [Jews] or upon the uncircumcised [non-Jews] also? For we say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised.

When was Abraham circumcised, according to these verses? According to **Genesis**, Abraham was circumcised fourteen years after he was pronounced by God to be righteous by faith and declared a friend of God. Hence, Paul’s point is that religious rites have nothing to do with being justified. Religious rites or rituals have no saving value and no value as to earning more of God’s approval. Being made right with God has nothing to do with circumcision, baptism, confirmation classes, or bar mitzvahs. Justification is by faith alone.

However, to say that religious rites have nothing to do with making us righteous before God does not mean that the religious rites that God set down through history do not have a purpose. Paul wants us to understand that circumcision had a purpose. He gives us two of them. The first is to be a “**sign**,” the second to be a “**seal**.”

A sign and a seal were two different things. A sign points to something by way of instruction or reminder. In this case, Abraham’s circumcision was a reminder that it was the promise that God had made to Abraham that was the basis of Abraham’s forgiveness, not the circumcision itself.

A seal, on the other hand, during Paul’s day, indicated or authenticated ownership and authority over something. In addition, once something was sealed, it was meant to be permanent. In the case of circumcision, it was a

procedure that could never be reversed. Abraham's circumcision, which came fourteen years after he had been declared righteous, was the proof or guarantee by God that Abraham's permanent acceptance by God was true. He was now God's property and God had authority over his life, not Satan or anyone else. Abraham was secure. His standing of being righteous before God could no more be reversed than his circumcision. It is another piece of Biblical evidence that once a person is saved and made righteous before God, they can never lose their righteousness or salvation.

In the rest of **verses 11-12**, Paul closes out this segment explaining why God required Abraham to be circumcised after he had been made righteous by stating:

That he [Abraham] might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, 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.

The second reason that God had Abraham circumcised long after he was declared righteous was that then he could be declared the spiritual father of all who are saved, both Jew and non-Jew. In other words, there is only one way to salvation and acceptance by God. It is based on putting faith in the one and only Savior, Jesus Christ. Furthermore, one does not have to become a Jew first to be saved, forgiven, and accepted by God.

Abraham was going to be the spiritual father of all believers, both those who were non-Jews and uncircumcised, as well as Jews who were circumcised and had put their faith in the Messiah. Hence, there is only one Savior, and He is for everybody.

Beginning with **verse 13**, Paul drives home the point to his Jewish Christian friends that even possessing their treasured Torah or doing their best to follow the Law had no avail in being forgiven or made acceptable to God. Why? Because Abraham was made acceptable and righteous four hundred thirty

years before the Torah had been written! Follow along as we read Paul's argument:

For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law [Jews] are heirs [meaning only those who follow the Torah are heirs to Abraham's salvation], then faith [the basis for Abraham's being made righteous and saved] is made void and the promise [of being saved by the work of Christ] is nullified.

Paul then adds this difficult statement in **verse 15** that needs to be clarified. The first half of the verse tells us what trying to be made righteous by following the Law produces, and the second half of the verse tells us what trying to earn God's acceptance by following the Law cannot produce. **“For the Law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation.”**

John Calvin has done the best job of explaining this verse. He puts it this way: Violation of the Law turns sin into the more serious offense of transgression, which earns wrath.

Before we go further, let's understand the difference in meaning between sin and transgression. Many people think these are the same, but they are not. Sin is doing wrong whether you know the law or not. The speed limit outside is 35 mph. But if you don't see the posted sign and drive 45 mph, it matters not that you are ignorant of the posted speed limit, you are still guilty of speeding. But a transgression is knowing full well that the speed limit is 35 mph, but ignoring the law and driving 45 mph. Hence, all transgressions are sin, but not all sin is a transgression.

Transgression earns God's wrath. Here is Paul's progressive reasoning simplified:

God gave the Law to the Jews.
The Jews have transgressed the Law.
The Law brought wrath to the Jews.

According to **Romans 1:18**, outside the Mosaic Law the wrath of God certainly exists for all people. But the Mosaic Law produces even more wrath rather than rescuing people from the wrath of God. Later in **Romans 7**, Paul will use his own testimony to demonstrate how the Law produced awareness in him that he, a moral and upright Jewish Pharisee, deserved the wrath of God for his own sin.

But with **verse 16**, Paul now turns to the positive of what “**faith**” as Abraham had can do, rather than what the works of the Law produces.

For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace [a gift not of works or religious heritage or of morality], so that the promise may be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law [the Jews], but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all [Jewish and non-Jewish believers in God’s promised Messiah], (as it is written, “A father of many nations have I made you”) in the sight of Him whom he [Abraham] believed, even God, Who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

The object of Abraham’s faith was his God, in whom Abraham had learned was able to give life to the dead and was able to create out of nothing things that did not exist.

I believe that Paul wants us to understand a double meaning here concerning the promise of God giving life to the dead. At the time of this promise that

God made to Abraham, that he would finally have children, Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was almost that old. Both of their bodies were past childbearing years. But Abraham believed, with unwavering faith, that God could do the possible, and out of a dead or non-existent ability to bear children, God could create a life. Abraham believed that and more. Abraham believed that if God could give life to his dead child-producing ability, then God could give spiritual life or make spiritually alive anyone, including himself, who is spiritually dead and separated from God because of sin.

In these next verses, **18-20b**, Paul points out some obstacles that Abraham and we must overcome if Biblical faith is going to be realized. Paul says:

In hope against hope he [Abraham] believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, “so shall your descendants be.” And without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about one hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief.

Whenever we are called upon to exercise faith, there will always be obstacles. Abraham had faced the obstacle of hopeless circumstances. All of the physical data pointed to the reality that Abraham could not have children. But in spite of that, Abraham instead chose to believe God would give them a son and that he would become the father of many nations!

Then Paul adds in the rest of **verse 20** that Abraham “**grew strong in faith, giving glory to God.**” Paul is teaching us that faith grows only when it is exercised. Faith is nurtured and cultivated through obedience to what God says. God knows that a consistent response of faith from us is not achieved by one experience we may have with God, no matter how impressive that experience may be. It is over the years, regardless of our maturity, when we are squeezed or tested or pressured, we have to trust God. And as we do, even

though like Job, at the moment something might not seem right, God proves Himself faithful and this strengthens our faith.

Too often we ignore God and take matters into our own hands. Only later do we learn of our mistake, grow from that, and deepen our faith. Abraham and Sarah did that when they brought in Hagar to give them a child. The next time we face a similar situation, we must trust God and watch Him deliver. After He does, our faith is strengthened.

One more thing **verses 20-22** teach us about faith is that Abraham “**Grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what He [God] had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore also it was reckoned to him [Abraham] as righteousness.**” Abraham’s life teaches us that when true Biblical faith is practiced, the evidence of true faith ultimately glorifies God, not man.

Finally, we can make one last observation about Biblical faith, in **verses 23-25**. Paul writes,

Now not for his sake only was it written, that it [righteousness based on faith] was reckoned to him [Abraham], but for our sake also, to whom it will be reckoned, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, He who was delivered up because of our transgressions and was raised because of our justification.

On the one hand, Jesus’ death provides the necessary grounds on which God’s justifying action can proceed. Christ’s resurrection, by vindicating Christ and freeing him forever from the influence of sin, provides for the ongoing power over sin experienced by the believer in union with Christ.

Remember how we began with Doug’s testimony? Let’s see how his testimony concludes.