

Romans: Chapter Four

Romans 3.21-5.11: SALVATION (Righteousness Received & Reckoned)

The Principle of Faith (3.27-31)

Paul now focuses on the implications of the principle of justification by faith. What follows in vv.27-31 will be re-emphasised and exemplified in Abraham and David in Romans 4. **vv.27-28:** The principle or 'law' of justification by faith removes all occasion of boasting in one's own personal merit. Salvation simply cannot be earned by works (see 4.1-8). **vv.29-30:** If justification can only be *achieved* by performing the works of the law, then it can only be available to the Jew who was given the law. But, there is 'one God' of *both* Jew and Gentile, and this *same* God offers justification to *both*. Justification must therefore be on the principle of faith – and thus available to *both* Jew and Gentile (see 4.9-16). **v.31:** Has the law therefore become 'invalid' or 'useless' (void)? By no means! The principle of living by faith upholds and maintains the moral principles of the law. In fact, the 'righteousness of the law' is fulfilled 'in' those who walk after the Spirit (cf. 8.4).¹ **Romans 3.31:** *Well then, if we emphasize faith, does this mean that we can forget about the law? Of course not! In fact, only when we have faith do we truly fulfill the law. NLT*

The Father of the Faithful (4.1-8) Faith not Works

After the declaration of man's *ruin* (1.18-3.20) and God's *remedy* (3.21-26), Paul now presents man's *responsibility* – to believe. Justification is by faith alone, as proved by the examples of Abraham and David. Abraham (effectively a Gentile) was justified by faith 14 years before he was circumcised and 430 years before the law was given (Galatians 3.17). David (from the tribe of Judah) was circumcised and living under the law but was still justified by faith. The chapter also illustrates the features of genuine faith – the kind of faith which should characterise every step of the believer's pathway. **David Newell:** *Faith believes God with the eyes fully open, for it is not a leap in the dark but a conscious step into the light of God's revealed word. Indeed, it is the most rational thing in the world to put your confidence in the only person in the universe who cannot lie (Titus 1.2).*

v.1: Continuing the theme of 3.27-31, and in anticipation of a Jewish objection, Paul is keen to point out that although the Jews considered Abraham as the prime example of justification by works, he was in fact justified by faith alone! In Judaism, Abraham was revered. The rabbis taught that he was 'perfect in all his dealings with the Lord and gained favour by his righteousness throughout his life'. Well, says Paul, what was Abraham's experience in terms of acceptance before God? **vv.2-3:** He was certainly not justified by works. That would give him ground to boast in himself and before men, but works are no ground of boasting 'before the face' of God. All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags before Him (Isaiah 64.6). Rather, the Scripture 'stands written' (a permanent record) that Abraham 'believed God' and was therefore justified by faith (Genesis 15.6). Genesis 15 records God's promise to make the then childless Abraham's seed as innumerable as the stars of heaven. Abraham abandoned all hope in himself and placed total confidence in the God of the impossible. This faith was 'reckoned' unto him for righteousness. The word 'reckon' is *logizomai*, a business term which means 'to put or credit' to one's account (x11 in Romans 4). The sinner has a great debt of sin (10,000 talents, Matthew 18.23-25), yet through faith God removes the debt and credits perfect righteousness to our account! **vv.4-5:** If a person works they are owed and morally deserve their wages. But God credits righteousness to the believer apart from works. Salvation is thus not a moral obligation on God's part, but all of His *grace*. Note. (1) Faith is *not* meritorious; it is *not* exchanged for righteousness. Calvary is the basis of salvation; faith is the hand that receives God's free, unmerited gift. (2) James 2.21 states that Abraham was justified by works. This is not a contradiction. James has Genesis 22 in view (30 years later than Genesis 15) where Abraham's works were an evidence of his genuine faith and salvation.

vv.6-8: The testimony of David (Psalm 32, sin in the matter of Bathsheba) is now joined to that of Abraham. David knew the great blessing and joy of having sins forgiven through faith and 'without works'. Abraham illustrates the *positive* – righteousness was credited to his account (v.3, 5). David illustrates the *negative* – sin was not credited to his account (v.8). This was David's experience as one *already* in a relationship with God showing that if a believer sins, it does not cancel their justification. Blessed is 'the man' (equivalent to the *whosoever*) that knows the same experience as David!

The Family of the Faithful (4.9-17) Faith not Circumcision (vv.9-12); Faith not Law (vv.13-17)

vv.9-10: Linking back to 3.29-30, Paul asks whether the blessing of justification by faith is limited to those who have been circumcised. This cannot be the case as God declares Abraham's justification by faith in Genesis 15.6 which was 14

¹ There are numerous different interpretations of v.31. **(1)** The law is upheld by obedience and executing its penalty (where contravened). Christ thus established the law by perfectly fulfilling all its demands in His sinless life and receiving all its penalty in His atoning death. **(2)** The law is established by the gospel in the sense that the OT contains and teaches the same doctrine of justification by faith (as Romans 4 shows) (Alford).

years *before* he was circumcised (Genesis 17.25-26, cp. Genesis 16.16). **v.11:** Why then was Abraham commanded to be circumcised? It was a 'sign' or 'mark' to distinguish Abraham and his seed as those who were in covenant relationship with God. Circumcision was also a 'seal' or 'confirmation' to authenticate the right standing Abraham *already had* with God through faith. Abraham believed God while he was uncircumcised and is thus declared to be the *spiritual* 'father of all them that believe', even the uncircumcised Gentile, because they imitate his faith and follow his pattern and example (cf. Genesis 12.3). There is no merit in mere blood descent from Abraham (John 8.37-39). **v.12:** Abraham is also the spiritual father of those Jews who believe, or 'walk in the steps' (example) of *the* faith that Abraham exercised.

v.13: Paul will now show that justification is not only apart from works (vv.1-8) and circumcision (vv.9-12), but also apart from the law (vv.13-17). God made a promise to Abraham which was based, not on obedience to the law (which was given 430 years later), but on his right relationship with God by faith. The promise was that Abraham 'should be the heir of the world', a promise which is not exactly expressed in these terms in the OT, but probably refers to all families of the earth being blessed in Abraham. This is the blessing of eternal salvation through faith in Christ who is Abraham's seed (Genesis 12.3; [Galatians 3.8-9](#)). **vv.14-15:** If this promise is only for those who are obedient to the law, then faith has 'no value' (void) and the promise is worthless because mankind can't keep the law! The law of God gives clear boundaries which men frequently transgress (overstep) – this tends to the *wrath* of God, not His salvation! **vv.16-17:** The conclusion of the matter is therefore that the promised blessing of salvation is 'out of' faith (on man's part) and by grace (on God's part). This makes salvation SURE for it does not depend upon man, but upon God. **MacDonald:** *If justification depended on works, he could never be sure because he could not know if he had done enough good works or the right kind. No one who seeks to earn salvation enjoys full assurance. But when salvation is presented as a gift to be received by believing, then a man can be sure that he is saved on the authority of the word of God.* Salvation is therefore realized by 'all the seed', that is, all of Abraham's spiritual children, whether Jew or Gentile. v.17 forms a transition into the closing section of the chapter by drawing attention to the kind of God '*before whom*' (in whose presence) and *in whom* Abraham placed his faith. If righteousness is by faith, then it is essential to understand the nature of faith, and the character of the God in whom faith is placed. He is the God of resurrection power ('quickeneth the dead') – probably a reference to the 'dead' womb of Sarah (v.19). He is also the God that 'calls into being things that do not yet exist'. Although this is true of creation, it is more likely a reference to Abraham becoming the father of many nations (v.18). In fact, God said 'I **have** made thee a father of many nations' (Genesis 17.5) even before Isaac was born!

The Features of the Faithful (4.18-25) Strong in Faith

v.18: Now, consider the nature of Abraham's faith. He had no children, was 100 years old and Sarah's womb was dead. God's promise was beyond any natural hope (humanly impossible), yet he believed 'in (upon) hope', placing his full confidence in God. **McClain:** *There was no human ground for any hope, but he believed God anyway.* Note. The basis of Abraham's faith was 'that which was spoken' (Romans 10.17). Faith must reason from God and his word, not from self or circumstances (William Kelly). **v.19:** Although both Abraham and Sarah were beyond child-bearing age (human weakness), his faith was *not weak*, being able to overcome human and natural obstacles. **vv.20-22:** He 'staggered not' at God's promise meaning he did not 'waver between two opinions' and was not 'divided in his mind'. He was fully persuaded *of*, and maintained a firm conviction *in* God's promise. This strong faith brought glory (honour) to God, for Abraham was fully persuaded (convicted) that He was able to fulfil His word. That is the kind of faith upon which God can reckon (impute, *logizomai*) the guilty sinner righteous.

vv.23-24: Paul now applies the teaching of the chapter (and Scripture) to his audience. That which Paul has referenced in the OT not only has relevance for Abraham alone – it has relevance for all believers! We are to learn from Abraham's example and exercise the same *kind* of faith in God that he did. But with this major difference – we live beyond the cross. Therefore, we exercise faith in the God that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead. Abraham believed God as a God of *promise*; we believe God as the God of *fulfilment*. **David Newell:** *Abraham's faith parallels the Christian's with this difference: he believed God's promise about a coming son, whereas we believe God's word about a Son who has come, died and risen again for us.* **CH Mackintosh:** *Abraham was called to believe in a promise, whereas we are privileged to believe in an accomplished fact. He was called to look forward to something which was to be done; we look back on something that is done, even an accomplished redemption, attested by the fact of a risen and glorified Saviour at the right hand of the majesty in the heavens.*

v.25: This is the same Jesus who was once delivered up sacrificially because (*dia*) of our offences (8.32; Isaiah 53.12) and gloriously raised again because (*dia*) of our justification. That is, His resurrection authenticates and confirms that our justification has been secured. He was not raised to *procure* our justification (that was accomplished through His precious shed blood at Calvary, 5.9), but as *proof* that we are justified. **WE Vine:** *We had sinned, and therefore Christ was delivered up. The ground of our justification was completely provided in the death of Christ, and therefore He was raised.*