

## CHAPTER VI

### ROMANS 4:1-25 - THE OLD TESTAMENT CONFIRMATION OF THE GOSPEL

**I**N the light of Paul's comprehensive exposition of the gospel up to this juncture in 3:21-31, it now becomes abundantly clear that the essential thrust of this message is that of justification through faith alone. The proof of this assertion is the consequent substance of the section that now confronts us. Here the thrust of 3:24, 28-30 is upheld as a timeless gospel principle, contrary to a perverse legalistic gospel so dominant in Israel, that has been foundational since the commencement of the Hebrew nation. It is also evident that while the Apostle has a primary calling to the Gentiles, yet he appreciates a secondary emphasis which the Lord Jesus described to Ananias: "He [Paul] is a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings *and* [emphasis added] the sons of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Romans confirms this secondary concern, not only in 1:16; 2:1-20 and substantially in chapters 9-11, but also here in 4:1-25. To the Jewish mind, preeminently in Abraham, as well as in David, we have two of the most impressive faithful models, and these decidedly uphold Paul's gospel.

#### A. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ILLUSTRATED, VS. 1-8.

The supreme ongoing concern of Paul is how any human being, any thorough sinner, any earthly inhabitant, might acceptably stand "just before God," 2:13 (cf. 4:2; I Thess. 3:13). Hence we are not dealing here with a mere peripheral matter but that which concerns the most vital interests of a human soul and the totality of the human race. Therefore a comprehensive perspective is necessary that is based upon the fact of there being only one God over all, 3:30. The expectation then is that this God's gospel will have a changeless dimension that is not temporally or racially restricted. The racial aspect has already been dealt with, 3:29-30, and now the temporal perspective is considered which causes Paul to look back 2000 years to the basis of Abraham's standing before God.

##### 1. Abraham was justified by faith, vs. 1-5.

Humanly speaking, or "according to the flesh" as Paul puts it in v. 1, Judaism has its origin in one man, that is Abraham, a Mesopotamian nomad of pagan ancestry originating from "Ur of the Chaldeans" (Gen. 11:27-32). As the father of the faithful, the destiny of the individual Jew was rooted in him, according to the boast, "We have Abraham for our father" (Isa. 51:1-2; Matt. 3:9; Luke 1:73; John 8:39). However, by means of accumulating tradition, extravagant and absurd legends became part of Hebrew life.<sup>1</sup> One significant aspect of this fanciful adulation was the merit of Abraham that was not only intrinsic, but also transferable. Thus, if anyone was justified by means of his own good works, it undoubtedly was Abraham; so his seed was to follow in these same meritorious steps! In *The Apocrypha*, Abraham is

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<sup>1</sup> "The improbable and often unworthy and even grotesque features of Abraham's career and character in the later rabbinical *midrashim* are of no religious significance, beyond the evidence they afford of the way Abraham's unique position and piety were cherished by the Jews." *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, I, p. 21.

described as sinless: “Therefore thou, O Lord, God of the righteous, hast not appointed repentance for the righteous, for Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, who did not sin against thee” (Manasseh 8). Further, he was blessed on account of his obedience rather than faith (Sirach, 44:19-22).<sup>2</sup> Edersheim comments, “‘The merits of the Fathers,’ is one of the commonest phrases in the mouth of the Rabbis. Abraham was represented as sitting at the gate of Gehenna, to deliver any Israelite who otherwise might have been consigned to its terrors. . . . In fact, the ships on the sea were preserved through the merit of Abraham; the rain descended on account of it.”<sup>3</sup>

a. His standing in the flesh, vs. 1-2.

Paul seems to primarily have Jews in mind when he enquires about “*our* forefather according to the *flesh*.” Abraham is τὸν προπάτορα, *tōn propatora*, Greek, “the forefather,” according to carnal generation, in contrast with spiritual faith generation in v. 11, and the question therefore arises as to what his natural seed in particular can discover from investigating his life as written in the Word of God.

- (1) Question: “Is it recorded that Abraham boasted in his flesh *before* God?” v. 1.

In other words, “Laying aside the ‘the tradition of the elders’ (Matt. 15:1-2) and the ‘ancestral traditions’ (Gal. 1:14), what fundamentally was the ground of Abraham’s status before God? Did he offer personal works as the ground of his justification?”

- (2) Answer: “No, for it is recorded that he did not boast of anything for personal justification *before* God.” v. 2.

In other words, “Hypothetically, if Abraham is described in Scripture as being justified on account of his works, then he may well have had something to boast about in a given situation, perhaps before man. But that particular situation could not have involved his justification *before* God.”

b. His standing by faith, v. 3.

What is recorded in Scripture is the primacy of faith in the life of Abraham. Hence the quotation of Genesis 15:6 in this regard is of great importance to Paul’s argument, as in vs. 9, 22, 23, Galatians 3:6-7, for the following reasons.

- (1) It is the first time that the word “believe” is used in the Bible., and it is closely associated with a “reckoned [not earned] righteousness,”<sup>4</sup> as the LXX use of λογίζομαι, *logizomai*, supports.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Annotated Apocrypha*, ed. Bruce Metzger, pp. 187-8, 219.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, I, p. 271.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 261.

- (2) In the context of Abraham's life, it falls within that period of his conversion whereby the covenant promise of God was initially given (Gen. 12:1-9) and cut" (Gen. 15:7-21).
- (3) The context of Genesis 15:6 indicates that Abraham was justified through faith's saving object, not the objectification of faith. We read that, "the word of the LORD [Jehovah] came to Abraham in a vision" (Gen. 15:1). Thus his faith was not in faith, nor was God pleased with the mere act of faith; rather, his faith was focused upon Jehovah alone being convinced that His sovereignty and integrity would certainly accomplish what He had promised. Hence we read that, "he [Abraham] believed in the LORD" (Gen. 16:6). As a result God was pleased that Abraham completely trusted Him for salvation. Thomas Olivers writes:

He by Himself hath sworn, I on His oath depend;  
 I shall on eagles' wings upborne, to heaven ascend;  
 I shall behold His face, I shall His power adore,  
 And sing the wonders of His grace for evermore.

c. His standing illustrated, vs. 4-5.

In vs. 4-8 Paul substantiates the key verse of Genesis 15:6, first by means of a secular commercial illustration and then subsequently with the case of David. The essential contrast remains between justification before God by means of either self-generated *works*, or *faith* alone, by "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," vs. 24-25.

(1) *Works* demand compensation, v. 4.

- (a) This commercial illustration postulates a person, "the one working" (present participle), who is continuously laboring according to an employment contract. Hence the "salary" is based on "reckoning" at the end of the day and not according to a "grace" χάρις, charis, settlement, but what is "due" or "owed" or "earned." Thus the relationship of the employer to the employee is one of obligation. Hence Morris rightly comments, "It might fairly be said that Genesis does not speak of God as owing anything to Abraham or of Abraham as meriting anything from God, so that it was not works that saved the patriarch."<sup>5</sup>
- (b) By way of application, this contractual depiction represents the most common misunderstanding of a relationship between man and his Creator, namely that of God being obliged to trade acceptance and heavenly residency for proffered merit, that is neighborliness, philanthropy, humanitarianism, sincere effort, etc. But what arrogance this represents on man's part who fails to recognize the corrupt and tawdry nature of his offerings as well as the infinite holy demands that God has revealed in His Word (Isa. 48:1; 64:6).

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<sup>5</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 197-8.

(2) *Faith* receives grace, v. 5.

- (a) While the preceding illustration is drawn upon, yet the frame of reference changes from the secular to the sacred. Thus, when Paul writes of “the one not working” (present participle), he is not, as Morris puts it, “canonizing laziness”<sup>6</sup> in a secular sense but rather transposing the commercial scene into that of the right response of the sinner toward God. Here the analogy of v. 4 finds concrete fulfilment.
- (b) However the honest sinner is to be “not working,” but “believing on the one justifying the ungodly” (three present participles). Saving faith is ongoing as is justification (Heb. 7:25). This principle is well illustrated in the life of Abraham who believed initially (Gen. 15:6; Heb. 11:8-10), and continued to believe (Rom. 4:18-21; Heb. 11:17-19). This is the life of faith. Again the contrast is between *works* offered by the self-righteous and faith offered by the “*ungodly*.” Who are the “*ungodly*”? They are like any other member of the human race, but distinguished by the fact that they know and frankly confess what they are in the sight of God, such as did Job (Job 25:5-6), David (Ps. 51:3-5), Peter (Luke 5:8), Paul (I Tim. 1:15-16).
- (c) The conclusion then is that for the ungodly, just like Abraham, “his faith [alone] is reckoned as righteousness.” Again, it is faith which has its object clearly described in vs. 24-25. Thus Christ’s perfect righteousness is “reckoned,” λογίζομαι, logizomai, or “rightly accounted” to the believing sinner; God as Judge brings down the gavel in heaven’s court with a verdict of “not guilty” on the grounds of a righteous settlement of the sinner’s sin by means of an acceptable substitute’s “account payment.”
- (d) By way of application, the essence of the biblical gospel is embodied in Paul’s declaration that God “justifies the ungodly.” This is the very antithesis of the obligatory relationship between God and man so universally believed as described in the comments on v. 4. One of Jonathan Edwards’ most notable sermons is based on v. 5 here and is titled *Justification by Faith Alone* in which he states: “When it is said that God justifies the ungodly, it is absurd to suppose that our godliness, take some goodness in us, is the ground of our justification; as, when it is said that Christ gave sight to the blind, to suppose that sight was prior to, and the ground of, that act of mercy in Christ; or as, if it should be said that such an one by his bounty has made a poor man rich, to suppose that it was the wealth of this poor man that was the ground of this bounty towards him, and was the price by which it was procured.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, I, p. 622. It is significant that while Edwards also describes his experience of opposition to his proclamation of this doctrine, yet this sermon, the text here being an expanded form, was “remarkably blessed” as “God’s work wonderfully brake forth amongst us [at

## 2. David was justified by faith, vs. 6-8.

The case of David is confirmation of the case of Abraham, though perhaps in a more obvious sense since this king of Israel was such a conspicuous sinner. Justification by faith is not explicitly mentioned. However, the emphasis upon a “reckoned/imputed righteousness” as opposed to meritorious “self-righteousness” leads to the inevitable conclusion as Murray states it: “When Paul speaks of God as ‘imputing righteousness’ v. 6, he must be using this expression as synonymous with justification. Otherwise his argument would be invalid. For his thesis is justification by faith without works. Hence to ‘impute righteousness without works’ is equivalent to justification without works.”<sup>8</sup>

## a. His blessing is freely reckoned righteousness v. 6.

The quotation of penitent David in Psalm 32:1-2a describes his blessed relief when just condemnation, imposed by God’s heavy righteous hand, vs. 3-4, is relieved through the non-imputation of guilt (forgiveness) cf. v. 5, and the covering of his sin (imputation of righteousness). Here the essence of David’s bliss is righteous standing before God on the basis of pure grace and not human toil, cf. v. 7. As Augustus Toplady has written:

Not the labors of my hands  
Can fulfil Thy law’s demands;  
Could my zeal no respite know,  
Could my tears for ever flow,  
All for sin could not atone:  
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

## b. His blessing is Scriptural justification, vs. 7-8.

Paul’s quotation of Psalm 32:1-2b from the LXX is commonly agreed to have been David’s joyous response, cf. v. 11, to that forgiveness he received from God following his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah. Such a setting in the Writings of the Old Testament, in addition to the witness of Abraham in the Law, only enhances the argument of Paul that faith alone in God’s saving mercy has always been the repentant sinner’s only hope.

## (1) Blessedness in transgressions forgiven, v. 7a.

“Lawless deeds” are transgressions of God’s revealed righteousness, especially those which are inscripturated, and not simply the Ten Commandments. But the man who freely receives that smile from the pardoning God he has offended is truly blessed, and sings with Samuel Davies:

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Northampton], and souls began to flock to Christ, as the Savior in whose righteousness alone they hoped to be justified,” p. 620.

<sup>8</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, I, p. 134.

In wonder lost with trembling joy  
 We take the pardon of our God;  
 Pardon for crimes of deepest dye,  
 A pardon bought with Jesus' blood.  
 Who is a pardoning God like Thee?  
 Or who has grace so rich and free?

(2) Blessedness in sins covered, v. 7b.

The parallelism with v. 7a suggests a similar truth, another aspect of God's dealing with sin which involves it being concealed from His view, and thus not a source of divine aggravation. Of course implicit here is the covering of Christ's atonement which Isaiah 61:10 describes. Thus Toplady appropriately writes:

A debtor to mercy alone  
 Of covenant mercy I sing;  
 Nor fear, with Thy righteousness on,  
 My person and offering to bring;  
 The terrors of law and of God  
 With me can have nothing to do;  
 My Savior's obedience and blood  
 Hide all my transgressions from view.

(3) Blessedness in sin not chargeable, v. 8.

Negatively speaking, and reflective of 8:33-34, when transgressions and sins are hid from view having been covered, then there is no possibility (double negative) that God will condemn sin (singular). Thus happy is the man who worships God as a pardoning rather than a condemning Judge. So Charles Wesley has written:

No condemnation now I dread;  
 Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!  
 Alive in Him, my living Head,  
 And clothed in righteousness divine,  
 Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
 And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

B. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH EXCLUDES CIRCUMCISION, VS. 9-12.

That the principle of salvation by grace through "faith alone" has already been forcefully presented is abundantly obvious. The proven universality of sin has called for the response of faith alone, in Jesus Christ's satisfactory atonement, by Jewish and Gentile sinners alike, 3:9-19, 22-23, 29-30. In this context, circumcision has already been mentioned, that is its significance *when* heart circumcision is the case, 2:28-29. However, the Jew's trust merely in carnal circumcision is invalidated when lawless living abounds, 2:25. But now, in continuity with the teaching that Abraham was justified through faith alone and by implication is the father of all believers, and in anticipation of the Jewish insistence that physical circumcision was a distinctive medium of saving grace for a select people only, another powerful

argument is offered which must have severely jolted traditional Jewish teaching. From a logical point of view, the zealous Jew is bound to have objected that if faith alone saved Abraham, then his circumcision was of no vital saving importance.

It must be assumed that this crucial gospel teaching in v. 3 and here in vs. 9-10 is relatively new to Paul, that is only understood subsequent to his conversion. Hence, from where did this enlightenment come? The most likely explanation is that it resulted from the special biblical teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ himself (Acts 22:12-14; Gal. 1:11-12).

1. The insignificance of circumcision, vs. 9-10.

Circumcision, περιτομή, peritomē, is literally “a cutting around” of the male seed (descendant) organ, and was first instituted by God for Abraham and his seed or descendants (Gen. 17:10-13). The significance is that the succession of Hebrew males visibly indicated their incorporation into the covenant first given to Abraham, especially the promise of Genesis 12:2, 7; 13:15; 15:18, and in particular 17:8-11 where God declares, “I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; *and I will be their God* [emphasis added].”

Thus circumcision was a “sign” and “seal” of the Abrahamic covenant, 4:11, that Jeremiah later acknowledged had become an outward form that bore no relationship with a circumcised heart (Jer. 9:25-26). Thus, the mere rite became a mechanistic guarantee of a right relationship with God. By the time that Paul writes, circumcision has become a ritual that, *ex opere operato*, guarantees salvation, akin to the contemporary mistaken belief of some in baptismal regeneration. Thus Jewish tradition at the time of Christ maintained that physical circumcision ensured entrance into heaven, but only destruction awaited the uncircumcised.

a. Abraham’s faith alone gained righteousness, v. 9.

“This blessedness [David describes in v. 8],” of being truly right with God, “[does it come] on the circumcision alone or the uncircumcision as well?” This rhetorical question, which Paul postulates, arises in the light of the following reminder of the implications of Genesis 15:6. Actually the answer has been made exceedingly clear in 2:29-30. But the Apostle, knowing he has shocked the Jew, wishes to anticipate his expected objection and face the issue of circumcision head on.

b. Abraham’s faith alone preceded circumcision, v. 10.

Now follows a rhetorical setup that leads to a devastating putdown. The question is raised as to *when*, in relation to his circumcision, was Abraham “reckoned as righteous” according to Genesis 15:6? The obvious biblical answer is that Abraham’s circumcision in Genesis 17:9-14 followed at least fourteen years *after* his justification by faith; thus Abraham was saved *before* he was circumcised. Therefore salvation is solely by faith and thus circumcision has no saving significance.

## 2. The significance of circumcision, vs. 11-12.

In a strict sense, Paul does not here declare that circumcision has been invalidated on account of *sola fide*. Rather he establishes the true relationship that existed between Abraham's faith and his circumcision. When rightly understood, they are not mutually exclusive but rather related according to cause and effect. As Murray states, "Paul did not make the capital mistake of thinking that, because it [circumcision] had no efficiency in creating faith or the blessedness attendant upon faith, it had therefore no religious significance or value."<sup>9</sup>

## a. It signifies the blessing of righteousness by faith for the uncircumcised, v. 11.

## (1) It is a sign and seal.

"Sign" here is in the emphatic position, σημεῖον, sēmeion, meaning that which indicates, points or directs toward, cf. John 20:30-31. "Seal" here is in parallel with "sign," σφραγίς, sphragis, except that it adds the meaning of authentication, confirmation. Thus circumcision pointed back to and endorsed "the righteousness of the faith which he [Abraham] had while uncircumcised."

## (2) It aligns Abraham with the uncircumcised.

For a people who so distinguished themselves from the Gentiles on the ground of circumcision, Paul's reasoned declaration that Abraham is the "father of all who believe without being circumcised" must have been shocking indeed to the Jew. Again, he is not denying the validity of circumcision in its rightful place as v. 12 indicates, but the primacy of faith alone incorporates both circumcised and uncircumcised into the body of the faithful children of God. Thus the Gentile, through faith alone, becomes an heir of a "reckoned righteousness," and equally as acceptable as the Jew!

## b. It signifies the blessing of righteousness by faith for the circumcised, v. 12.

But in line with 3:1-2, the Jew as a physical descendent of Abraham with physical signification of this relationship retains the claim that God is "the father of [the] circumcision," but *not* exclusively.

## (1) It is a sign and seal.

For the true Jew, circumcision has significance when it points to preceding saving faith in God who justifies by faith alone. But to trust in physical circumcision as an instrumental means of justification is to believe in a false gospel (Gal. 5:2-6). In other words, the physical descendent of Abraham is a child of God through faith alone, and a true Jew through consequent circumcision.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

## (2) It aligns Abraham with the circumcised.

Thus, like the Gentile people, Abraham is also the father of the Hebrew people. But the Hebrew can only claim this lineage by means of his having the same faith and reckoning that Abraham did according to Genesis 15:6. Thus a Jew is not a Jew principally because of circumcision or in any causal sense., but rather through justifying faith (Heb. 11:1-40).

- c. By way of application, in terms of the history of Israel in the Old Testament, while God ordained certain outward forms of worship and ceremonies, yet He repeatedly gave priority to the sincere, humble, attitude of heart with regard to His worship above all else (I Sam. 1:22; Ps. 51:16-17; Isa. 1:10-15). When man falls from this priority he always tends to trust in external form, and in this regard the Jew's reliance on circumcision is a classic example. That is, man takes legitimate ordinances and perverts them into either means of salvation or magical rites.

For instance, both Christian ordinances have suffered in this way. Instead of water baptism witnessing to prior saving faith, it has become an instrumental means of salvation with regard to children and adults. Likewise the Lord's Table, instead of simply portraying the significance of Jesus Christ's one offering for sin, has become, especially within Roman Catholicism, a supernatural re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice at the hands of a distinctive priesthood.

But Paul draws us back to the heart of a true relationship with God which is faith, that is a heart for God that is wholly dependent and not contributory or trusting in external means. Of course such faith is not merely cerebral or confessional, but intensely heartfelt as sinner David describes, "O GOD, Thou art my God; I shall seek Thee earnestly; my soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee, in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1).

## C. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH EXCLUDES THE LAW, VS. 13-15.

While the general focus remains upon the witness of the Old Testament to the only gospel of justification by faith, the specific emphasis pans from Abraham, David, and circumcision to the role of the *law* in contrast with *promise*, that is two opposing lines of reasoning and hope.

<i>Promise</i>	→	Covenant	→	Grace	→	Faith	→	Certain
<i>Law</i>	→	Pentateuch	→	Performance	→	Works	→	Conditional

## 1. Faith righteousness comes by promise, v. 13.

Obviously "promise" here refers to Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:5-21; 17:1-8, which, it has already been established in vs. 1-5, was embraced according to faith alone, exclusive of law performance. By its very nature, "promise" involves a sovereign, unilateral guarantee or covenant, that is ultimately based upon the immutable holy character of God. In Galatians 3:17-18 Paul has pointed out that the law could not

have been a justification factor since it was not given until 430 years after the giving of the Abrahamic covenant, that is the promise, “previously *ratified* [emphasis added]” by God. But here, through to v. 15, the argument is based upon the reasoned fact that law obedience and faith response, by their very nature, are mutually exclusive.

However, it is important for Paul that this antithesis here, which upholds faith alone, applies not only to Abraham but also to “his descendants” or “seed” who by definition in v. 16 are *all* Jewish and Gentile believers. Thus “the promise,” that offered “righteousness” or “righteous standing,” solicited the response of faith alone, not works, especially those of a Jewish character.

2. Faith righteousness is voided by the Law, vs. 14-15.

Law and faith cannot merge or mingle, as Judaism would maintain in a synergistic sense, and was the problem with the Judaizers that Paul opposed in Galatians 3:1-29. The gospel cannot be, “believe and behave,” nor is it a mixture of “promise and performance.”

a. The Law nullifies faith in the promise, v. 14.

(1) Earned heirship.

A supposition is offered. What if those who trust in personal performance and law keeping are the true recipients of the kingdom of God, that is heirship in the family of Abraham? What if law works gain acceptance with God? Then faith has been voided, not merely diluted, and the promise is useless, disabled, because of the element of human contribution that has been injected.

(2) Promise nullification.

Illustration. Suppose a kind and wealthy man promises to give a poor and needy man \$100,000 purely on a gratuitous basis. However, the needy man insists on providing labor for the next five years to offset the free nature of the gift. If the wealthy man accepts these terms, which tend to impugn his kindness, then the original promise is nullified. What remains is a different, conditional type of agreement. The poor man can always claim a degree of worthiness.

b. The Law brings about wrath, v. 15.

(1) The purpose of the law.

Here the explanatory point is made that the person who boasts in lawkeeping is denying the purpose of the law, which is to bring man to wrath due to guilt, not reconciliation. The law is a condemning rather than a saving instrument, (3:20; cf. Gal. 3:19); the law is an excellent means of diagnosis, but it is impotent to heal.

## (2) The absence of the law.

Thus law and *transgression*, παράβασις, parabasis, not *sin*, are indivisibly related. If there is no law, whether in the conscience or on tables of stone, then there is no knowledge of sin; there can be no transgression of the law if there is no law! But the law has obviously been given, and with great clarity to the Jews. The reason the law was given was to reveal transgression, lawlessness, with equal clarity, and this it effectively does.

## D. JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH INCLUDES ABRAHAM'S SEED, VS. 16-25.

The flow of thought continues. If the right role of the law is appreciated as stated in v. 15, then justification by faith alone becomes the operative gospel principle in a most exclusive and universal sense.

## 1. Abraham's seed all have grace through faith, vs. 16-17.

"Faith," as emphasized in vs. 3, 5, 9, 11-14, and in contradistinction to "law," is to be the essential and sole response of any sinner toward God.

## a. He is the father of all who believe, v. 16.

As a father produces like kind, so Abraham has produced a race of believers who have identical faith. The children of Abraham have the vital birthmark of justifying faith that identifies them as being authentic and not illegitimate.

## (1) The gospel through faith is of grace alone.

Why? Because it is of faith alone. Grace and faith harmonize because faith is works-renouncing in a total sense and grace can only operate where works are totally renounced. Faith cleaves to the complete work of Another while grace offers the complete work of Another. Faith confesses personal bankruptcy while grace provides full payment of the debt. Human works nullify this relationship.

(2) The gospel through faith ensures the promise for *all* the seed.

Why? Because faith does away with racial distinctions. Law concerns only Jewish devotees. But faith is applicable to Jew and Gentile; it guarantees and validates the provision of the gospel to "all the seed," παντὶ τῷ σπέρματι, panti tō spermati, Greek. But how can we be sure that "all the seed" is a universal term and not exclusively Jewish? What proof is there that Abraham is "the father of us all [*all* the saints, especially in Rome]"? V. 17 explains.

## b. He is a father of many nations, v. 17.

Here Paul reaches a climax in his argument that leaves no room for doubt as to the absolute nature of salvation by faith alone that totally excludes human merit,

energy. or contribution. The work of redemption of man dead in sin is nothing less than a new creation, the sovereign provision of life for the dead.

(1) The Word of God confirms.

The quotation of Genesis 17:5, given in proof of the applicability of faith to “all the descendants” of Abraham as comprising Jew and Gentile in v. 16, has two important aspects. First, “many nations” clearly refers to the Gentiles as heirs, with the Jews, of the Abrahamic covenant (cf. 11:17-18). Second, “I have made [appointed] you,” perfect tense, τέθεικα, tetheika, establishes the sovereignty of the grace that has accomplished such a saving work.

(2) The works of God confirm.

So Paul is moved to now qualify the object of Abraham’s faith, namely “God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist [has no being].” The allusion clearly seems to be to God’s creative works *ex nihilo* (Ps. 33:6-9; Isa. 41:4; 48:12; Jer. 51:15-16). So God has determined to make a people for himself, out of the pit so to speak (Isa. 51:1-2). Thus, “the justified bring nothing; they are as dead, as those who do not exist. But because of God’s creative call they are brought to newness of life”<sup>10</sup> (Eph2:1-10). As W. T. Matson has written:

Lord, I was dead, I could not stir  
My lifeless soul to come to Thee;  
But now, since Thou hast quickened me,  
I rise from sins’s dark sepulcher.

2. Abraham’s faith was in God’s promise, vs. 18-21.

In religious society in general, even during the first century, the term “faith” is common currency that falls from the lips of “believers” of every stripe and hue. Hence, the fact that Paul has given this term primacy of place, with regard to the only saving gospel, requires that he qualify its meaning and distinguish it from everyday parlance. It is one thing to refer to the faith of Abraham such as in Genesis 15:6; it is quite another to understand the specific quality and purity of this faith. In particular, it is common for “faith” to be spoken of while at the same time “works” are incorporated into that definition. But here Paul makes it clear that the outworking of Abraham’s faith was wholly exclusive of any performance on his part and singular in its constant trust in God.

a. He hoped against hope, v. 18.

- (1) Literally we read, “Who beyond [and without] hope, [yet] on the ground of hope, he believed.” Clearly “hope” and “faith” are closely related. “Hope” is not weak “faith,” but visionary in a concrete sense. “Faith” believes the truth, but “hope” perceives its certain fulfillment. A prospective bride believes

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<sup>10</sup> Morris, *Romans*, p. 209.

the truth of the promise of her fiancé to marry her. But beyond this belief is hope, that is the confident envisioning of the happy day of marital union.

(2) What specifically then was this faith/hope of Abraham?

It was not, “as a ‘leap into the dark,’ a completely baseless, almost irrational ‘decision’ — as Christian faith is pictured by some ‘existentialist’ theologians — but as a ‘leap’ from the evidence of the senses into the security of God’s word and promise.”<sup>11</sup> Physical evidence indicated no possibility of fathering even one descendant; but Scripture truth declared in Genesis 15:5 the certain prospect of a host of descendants, a multitude of nations. Of course, such an astonishing expectation still required an initial descendant.

b. He contemplated his weakness, v. 19.

- (1) Abraham’s faith was reasonable in that it weighed up all the options. When the promise came in Genesis 15:5, he “contemplated,” κατανοέω, katanoeō, or clearly discerned his physical condition. The facts were that Sarah and he were well past child bearing age (Heb. 11:12), “having been dead” in this capacity, or “worn out, impotent,”<sup>12</sup> the perfect tense stressing the present situation originating from a past condition. But while Abraham was “as good as dead” humanly speaking, from God’s perspective he was, on account of his faith, very useful. Such is the value of mature saints!
- (2) The age of “a hundred years” draws upon Genesis 17:1, which is 13 years after the birth of Ishmael (Gen. 16:15-16) and 14 years after the “cutting of the covenant” in Genesis 15, and specifically v. 5 which Paul has just quoted. Thus Abraham’s contemplation of his impotence and the triumph of his faith were protracted.
- (3) Application. “Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?” (Ps. 78:19). Can God cause the waters of the Red Sea to Part? Can God bring forth water from a rock? Can God bring forth streams in the desert so that it blossoms as the rose? Can God cause the barren to rejoice? Can Jesus Christ calm a raging storm? If a man dies, shall he live again? The world in general and man by nature answers, “No!” Abraham believed God, that is *His clear revelation* and not mere speculation, in spite of human reasoning, and affirmed, “Yes!”

c. He grew strong in faith, v. 20.

(1) The unwavering faith.

“With respect to the promise of God, he did not waiver.” That is, Abraham never doubted *the fulfilment of the covenant*, though he did consider a

<sup>11</sup> Moo, *Romans*, pp. 282-3.

<sup>12</sup> Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 537.

variety of ways that he speculated about concerning the actual outworking of the promise.

(2) The trials of faith.

With respect to the testing of faith, Abraham entertained a carnal means, at the suggestion of Sarah, by which the covenant could be fulfilled (Gen.16:2-4), and yet he accepts God's rejection of his proposal (Gen. 17:18-19), especially at the birth of promised Isaac, named according to God's command (Gen. 21:1-3).

(3) The progress of faith.

Thus Abraham "grew strong in faith", but how? Just as "muscles [do] when weights are raised; holiness when temptation is successfully resisted. So Abraham's faith gained strength from its victory over the hindrance created by the conflict between God's promise and the physical evidence."<sup>13</sup> At the *same time* he was "giving glory to God," that is "glorying in God," or growing in his understanding and acknowledgment of God, that is his holiness, integrity, sovereignty, etc.

d. He believed God would perform, v. 21.

The climax of the faith/growth process is described in terms of the *manner* of Abraham's glorification of God, and it is wholly attitudinal and confessional.

(1) The character of the response.

The true worship of God here is essentially in "spirit and truth" (John 4:24), that is the soul fully comprehending the promise and expanding in its confidence in it. But further, the glorification of God by Abraham here is solely that of a "faith" response and exclusive of any performance. Once again, *sola fide* continues to be the justifying principle. God delights in such "faith-full," self-denying worship.

(2) The character of God.

In the final analysis, it is the nature and understanding of God that determines the ground and strength of assurance. If there is doubt as to God's *ability* to accomplish what He has promised, then there cannot be strong faith. But Abraham believed that "He [God] was able also to perform," that is He had "the power to do." In Hebrews 11:17-19, concerning the offering up of Isaac, Abraham "considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead."

3. Abraham's faith establishes gospel faith, vs. 22-25.

The whole thrust of Romans 4 thus far has been a doctrinal argument concerning the essence of the gospel as personified in the life of Abraham and his justification by faith

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<sup>13</sup> Moo, *Romans*, pp. 285-6.

alone. Obviously this reasoning has the greatest force with those addressees who have highly esteemed Abraham and the Scripture record of his life. Of further significance has been the use of the word “reckon,” λογίζομαι, logizomai, up to this point in vs. 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11 of chapter 4, which concerns the centrality of the doctrine of imputation in a forensic sense, that is the “reckoning” of God’s righteousness to Abraham on the ground of *sola fide*. Now in conclusion, this doctrine is pressed home by Paul upon his readers even to the present day, and for unmistakable emphasis this key word “reckon,” again as a consequence of faith, is used three times in vs. 22-24. Thus, out of 19 uses of “reckon” in Romans, 11 occur in chapter 4!

a. His faith establishes justification, v. 22.

In returning to Genesis 15:6 introduced in v. 3 and repeated in v. 9, we have a grand QED, so to speak. The cumulative effect of this evidence leaves not the slightest room for any synthesis of faith and human performance in the minutest proportion, or of faith even being productive of justifying works through the enabling of grace. Since the Fall, this timeless gospel message has been both perverted by man-centered religion and preserved by faithful heralds of God. So Paul now exhorts his readers to continue to personally embrace and defend this glorious, soul emancipating, God glorifying gospel message.

b. Our faith establishes justification, vs. 23-25.

Truth has consequences; doctrine calls for duty; principles require practice; mentors are productive of models; so Abraham is the father of the truly faithful. Of course Hebrews 11 gives a broader perspective of this “faith” lineage that encompasses Abel onward to “David and Samuel and the prophets” v. 32.

(1) It is the faith of Abraham as a mentor, v. 23.

We are reminded that Genesis 15:6 was “inscripturated,” aorist of γράφω, graphō, and thus the purpose of this record was obviously not merely for the benefit of Abraham or even his immediate generation (cf. I Cor. 10:8-11). Implicit here is the useful concreteness of the written Word of God when the perpetuation of vital truth is at stake; verbal tradition is too unreliable.

However, the vital matter for permanent documentation is that of the principle of “reckoning,” that is a grace relationship through faith alone in an “able” God, v. 21, as distinct from a works relationship through participation with a cooperative God.

(2) It is the faith of Abraham that is to be modeled, v. 24a.

The Scripture record is for the saints at Rome, and beyond. They too inherit the same gospel blessings, a “reckoned” righteousness through faith, and the intimation is that such readers are to stand more solidly than ever upon this truth; their *sola fide* is to be more “*sola*” than ever before. There is the further intimation that the church at Rome should review its gospel witness and make sure that it is precisely what Paul here declares.

## (3) It is faith in Abraham's God, v. 24b.

While the "reckoning" is God's gracious means of providing "the gift of righteousness" (5:17), faith alone is the sinner's self-renouncing acknowledgment and embrace of *sola gratia*. It is for this reason that Paul often objectifies faith, that is describes it as if it were a saving object itself (3:28-30; 4:16), nevertheless here he makes it clear that in reality it is faith's object that saves. The object of true saving faith is Abraham's God, who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead, and raises the ungodly from their death in sin, v. 17.

Note here that "those who are believing in Him [God]," present participle, describes the ongoing character of justification by faith, even as the Lord Jesus remains an ongoing intercessor (Heb. 7:25).

## (4) It is faith in God's justification, vs. 24c-25.

In this conclusion of Paul's argument and exhortation, he moves from the occurrence of the Lord Jesus' atonement to its purposes (cf. I Cor. 15:3). The truth to be believed in a personal sense is summarized in the fact of "Him [God the Father] who [bodily] raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." The purposes of this mighty happening are twofold as he now describes them, and according to Moo, the Apostle may well be alluding to Isaiah 53, and especially v. 11-12.<sup>14</sup> These truths comprise, according to Hebrew parallelism, both sides of the one gospel coin, namely sin remitted or forgiven through Christ's death (negative justification) and righteousness imputed or reckoned through Christ's resurrection (positive justification).

## (a) Jesus Christ was delivered up for our transgressions.

The agent of delivery is, from the divine perspective and according to 8:32; Isaiah 53:4, 10, the Father; from the human perspective according to Isaiah 53:3 and Acts 4:27, it is both Jew and Gentile. Of course for the believer it is the ultimate truth that Jesus Christ was delivered up for *my* transgressions, *my* iniquities, *my* rebellion (Isa. 53:5-6), the result being *my* justification, *my* pardon, *my* reconciliation (Is, 53:11-12).

## (b) Jesus Christ was raised up for our justification.

The parallelism here helps us appreciate that Paul was not formally, but rather in a complementary sense attributing the justification of the sinner to Jesus Christ's resurrection, 5:9. Stephen Charnock illustrates: "Not that we are formally justified by the resurrection of Christ, but that thereby God declared that whosoever believes in him should be justified upon that believing; for if Christ has not risen, there had been no certainty of the payment of the debt. In his death he pays the sum, as

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 288-9.

he is our surety; and in his resurrection he hath his *quietus est* [receipt of proof of payment] out of God's exchequer [treasury]."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen Charnock, *The Works of Stephen Charnock*, V, p. 442. Similarly refer to *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, XX, p. 499.