

What Abraham Found

Romans 4:1-8

I want you to imagine two young men. They could not be more different. One was wealthy, the other a lowly thief. One came to Jesus calling Him good teacher. The other hurled insults at the Lord. One could say he kept God's commandments since he was a boy. The other admitted he was being justly executed for his heinous crimes. Although Jesus loved him, the first man walked away from Jesus sad, forfeiting the kingdom of God for his wealth. The second simply said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He was granted a pardon and paradise.

Now imagine this. A nun spends her life working in a slum in a poor country, feeding the poor, ministering to the sick and dying, and caring for the orphans. As she nears death, you ask her why God should let her into heaven. She replies, "Because I have devoted my life to serving Him. I have denied myself for decades. I hope that I have added enough merits that God will accept me." She dies and faces God's eternal wrath because her faith was in her own good works, not in the shed blood of Jesus Christ alone.

Meanwhile, on death row a serial killer awaits execution. He mercilessly tortured, raped, and murdered many young women. Their families mourn the tragic loss of their daughters. A chaplain visits this killer and finds that he has been reading the Bible. God has convicted him of his terrible sins, so that he despairs about dying and facing God. He knows that he deserves eternal torment in hell. But the chaplain shares that if he will believe in Jesus Christ, who died for the ungodly, God will forgive all his sins and credit Christ's righteousness to his account. He does believe, is filled with joy, and goes to his execution at peace with God. He spends eternity in the unspeakable joy of heaven.

How do you feel about these stories? Do you feel like the first young man and the sweet, selfless old nun *deserve* to go to heaven? Do the thief and the murderer *deserve* to burn in hell?

In Romans 4:5, Paul says, **"But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness."** God justifies the ungodly. What an amazing statement. It does not say, "God justifies the one who tries to do his best. God justifies the nice person who always meant well, who loved his family, devoted his time and money to help the needy, went to church, read his Bible, and prayed every day." It says, God "justifies the ungodly."

Just like in Paul's day, many think that salvation is for the good, that heaven is for the morally upright and kind people. But under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Paul instead tells us, God justifies the ungodly. In Romans 3:21-31 Paul has just presented the gospel of justification by grace through faith—that we are made right with God as a free gift of grace through believing in the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now Paul sets out in chapter 4 to prove this gospel logically and scripturally.

Follow along in your Bibles as I read Romans 4:1-8,

1 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?

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

3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness."

4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,

6 just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered;

8 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin."

Paul has been arguing that we are made right with God, not by our good deeds but by God's gracious act in sending His Son as a payment for our sin. But just like many today, the Jews resisted this notion of grace because all their lives they have had it drilled into them obeying God's commandments makes you righteous, that you have to "do good" to get to heaven.

So Paul gives the supreme example, Abraham, because the Jews revered him as the father of their nation and their faith. Many early Jewish writings put Abraham on a pedestal far higher than the way the Bible portrays him. For example, the Book of Jubilees (23:10), written about 100 B.C. states, "Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life" (cited by Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 256). The Prayer of Manasseh (8), states that God did not appoint repentance for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, "who were righteous and did not sin against Thee." (What Bible were they reading?)

Most Jews thought that Abraham was right with God, because of his faithfulness, his life of obedience. So they believed that any person who follows Abraham's example of obeying God would also be accepted by God.

But in Romans 4 Paul challenges that view head-on. He uses Abraham as an example to prove the justification by grace through faith that he has presented in chapter 3. In 4:1-8, Paul illustrates with Abraham and David the principle of 3:27-28, that we are justified by faith, not by our works. Verses 9-17 develop the theme of 3:29-30, that righteousness by faith applies equally to Jews and Gentiles because it is by grace, not by law. Then in verses 18-25 Paul shows we are justified by divine power, not human effort as he applies the lessons of Abraham's faith to us.

It's absolutely essential for us to understand the doctrine of salvation that Paul sets forth here. John MacArthur said, "it is essential that we be very clear about the doctrine of salvation. If there is one doctrine which the enemy would desire to attack, which would ultimately damn men, it would be to attack the doctrine of salvation. If Satan can foul us up on how to be saved, then he has damned our souls."

Therefore for your own salvation, for you to stand firm against false doctrine, and for you to be able to share the gospel clearly to those who are trusting in their good works

to save them, you *must* be clear on this truth: God graciously justifies the ungodly sinner who believes in Jesus Christ.

Paul first demonstrates this truth in the life of Abraham (4:1-3). Then he proves it logically (4:4-5), and he confirms it with David's testimony (4:6-8).

I. How was Abraham saved? (4:1-3)

1 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?

Paul wants us to think about what Abraham found out or discovered in his relationship with God. What did Abraham discover "according to the flesh?" That is, when Abraham looked at his human resources—his moral courage, his high standards, his innate human goodness, his gifts and talents—what did he discover about them? Could those things save him? Was Abraham made right with God by good works? Is that the way that Abraham would describe his life?

Paul emphatically says no!

A. Not by works (4:1-2).

Verse 2 explains verse 1, "**For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.**" Here Paul is discussing a hypothetical possibility. He argues that if, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, (And he was not) he has something to boast about. But he adds, "**not before God.**" In other words, When God's viewpoint is considered, Abraham has no grounds for boasting at all.

When you compare humans to humans, Abraham was a good guy. It's as if one bug was bragging to another bug, "I'm taller than you are!" just before an elephant comes along and squashes both of them. But when you compare humans to God, Abraham is just a bug along with everyone else.

Paul's point in 4:1-2 is that if justification were by works rather than by faith alone, it would give us a ground for boasting. It would feed our pride. But such boasting is foolish, because we're really just one bug boasting to another bug. What is the best of human righteousness when you compare it to God's absolute righteousness?

Works don't work! You can't fool God by your performance. He judges your motives, not just your actions. Works don't work because they don't last! So you have to do more and more and more. Eventually you come to the end and you can't do any more. What then?

What we need is a righteousness that isn't based on our works, a righteousness that is wholly unrelated to our performance, a righteousness that comes from outside ourselves. What we need is the righteousness of God Himself.

That's what Abraham discovered "according to the flesh." He discovered that his human resources would never save him. How then was Abraham saved if not by works?

Then he supports his argument with Scripture:

B. But by faith (4:3).

3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness."

Paul quotes the scripture Genesis 15:6. This verse is the first time that the word *believe* is used in the Bible. Paul not only cites it here, but also in Galatians 3:6, where he argues against the Judaizers, who said that we must add our works to faith in order to be saved.

The passage in Genesis raises the question, “What did Abraham believe and why did God credit it to him for righteousness *then*?” We know that he had believed God previously, when he left Ur and set out for Canaan (Heb. 11:8). Abraham had built altars to the Lord, worshiped God and obeyed Him. In chapter 15 God told Abraham that at the age of 85 he was about to have children. Abraham thought he was kidding. But God took Abraham outside and said, “Look up!” Abraham looked up and God said, “Count the stars.” As Abraham began counting, God said, “Before I’m through, I will give you more descendants than the stars in the skies.” Does that sound crazy? I’ll tell you something crazier than that. Abraham believed God! That’s really crazy.

Derek Kidner (*Genesis* [IVP], p. 124) notes that Abraham’s faith was both personal (*in the Lord*) and propositional (in the Lord’s *promise* concerning a son). Abraham knew that through his seed, blessing would come to all the families of the earth (12:3). In Galatians, Paul argues that *seed* is singular, not plural, thus pointing to Abraham’s one descendant, Christ (Gal. 3:16). So when Abraham believed in the Lord, he believed the specific promise that a Savior for all nations would come from his descendants.

How much did Abraham know about Jesus Christ, who would be born 2,000 years later? Maybe more than we usually think! Jesus Himself said, “**Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.**” (John 8:56). Though he didn’t know Jesus’ name and he had no evidence other than God’s promise, Abraham looked forward in faith to God’s Redeemer and thus God credited it to him as righteousness.

The word *credited* (Greek = *logizomai*) is used 40 times in the New Testament, 11 times in this chapter. It’s an accounting term that means that God credited to Abraham a righteousness that did not inherently belong to him. The word *it* does not refer to Abraham’s faith, as if God exchanged his faith for righteousness, in a sort of trade. That would make faith a work, something in us that might merit us salvation. But faith cannot pay the debt of our sin. Faith is just the empty hand that receives the free gift of righteousness from God.

Abraham believed God’s promise about the Savior who would come and God credited the work of the promised Savior to Abraham through his faith. Abraham was justified for one reason and one reason only: Because he believed God! When he was old and childless, when he had no human reason to believe God, when everything argued against him, Abraham believed God! Though faith, righteousness was “credited” to his account. God declared him righteous completely apart from his works.

That answers the first question. How was Abraham saved? Not by works but by faith alone. Now Paul applies this to every sinner who believes in Christ:

II. How can the ungodly be saved? (4:4-5).

4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,

A. If salvation is by works, it is a reward, not a gift. (4:4)

First (4:4) Paul gives a negative example from everyday life that we can easily understand. When you work and your boss pays you, he isn't doing you a favor. You don't send him a thank you note, telling him how much you appreciated his kindness. No, he owes you the money. If he doesn't pay, you can take him to court to make him pay. It's a debt. Paul says it's not a gift if you have to work for it.

It's the same way with salvation. If you have to work for it, it's not a gift. If salvation is by works, then you have to earn it. And if you could possibly earn it, God would have to pay it.

B. If salvation is by faith, the ungodly can be saved. (4:5)

But the principle of grace is different (4:5). Under grace you do not work for justification. Instead, you believe God's promise to declare righteous any sinner who believes in Jesus. As the righteous Judge, God recognizes Jesus' death as payment in full for all our sins. The instant we believe in Jesus, God bangs the gavel and declares, "Not guilty!" But He not only removes our sin and guilt. Also, He imputes the very righteousness of Jesus to our account.

Again, Paul says "**his faith is accounted for righteousness.**" This means that the guilty sinner's faith has laid hold of Jesus Christ as the perfect and final sacrifice for sins. Faith is not a work that merits righteousness. If it were, verse 5 would be saying the opposite of what Paul is arguing! Faith does not merit God's favor, or grace would not be undeserved. Rather, faith means not doing anything ourselves to earn salvation, but rather trusting what Christ did for us on the cross. God justifies us as a gift through faith (3:24).

III. What about my sin? (4:6-8).

6 just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works:

7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered;

8 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin."

Paul brings in a second Old Testament heavyweight. He quotes the words of King David in Psalm 32. The reason is not hard to find: After Abraham, David was the most respected man in Jewish history. What's more, since Abraham lived before the law while David lived under the law, if they both agree on justification by faith, then Paul's argument becomes airtight.

Psalm 32 is part of David's confession to God after his terrible sin with Bathsheba. He writes while his hands are still red with the blood of Uriah the Hittite. At first he tried to "cover" his own sin by pretending it didn't happen. But that brought him only agony, pain and overwhelming guilt. Eventually he came to his senses and confessed everything to God. The verses Paul quotes deal with the blessedness David discovered as he confessed his sin and God freely forgave him.

So what happens to your sin when you trust Christ as Savior? Paul (quoting David) tells us that three things happen.

A. It is Forgiven. 7a

“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven.” The word forgive means to “send away.” When God forgives you, he removes your sins from you and sends them forever.

B. It is Covered. 7b

“... whose sins are covered.” The picture behind this relates to the sprinkling of the blood of a sacrifice by the high priest on the Mercy Seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant on the yearly Day of Atonement. By the sprinkling of the blood, the high priest was unknowingly acting out a picture of the bloody death of Jesus Christ. The message is clear: The blood of Jesus is so powerful that it completely covers all your sins. If you have trusted Christ, your sins are covered—yesterday, today, tomorrow and forever.

C. It is Not Counted Against You. 8

“Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.” This brings us back to the word *logizomai*, which means “to credit to one’s account.” When you trust Christ, your sin will never be counted against you. God will not credit your sin to your account. Why? Because your sin is now “credited” to Christ’s account and His righteousness is now “credited” to your account.

Let me draw out four implications of this astounding truth:

1. You must stop working for your salvation.

Paul clearly spells it out, **“to him who does *not* work....”** If you try to blend your works with God’s grace, you muddy the waters of pure grace. If you think that your good works will make God accept you or help you get to heaven, you are dead wrong. You do not understand God’s grace.

Paul will later write in Romans 11:6, **“And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.”** To be justified by God’s grace, you must *stop working for it!*

2. You must see yourself as ungodly.

God justifies only one kind of person: the *ungodly*. Abraham was as much in need of God’s perfect righteousness as were the wicked people of Sodom. We have already seen in Romans 3:10, **“There is none righteous, no, not one.”**

So if you see yourself as a basically good person, you can’t be justified. To be justified, you must see yourself as ungodly and deserving of God’s righteous judgment.

3. You must believe in Jesus.

Faith means taking the gift of Christ’s full payment for your sins. It means turning from yourself and your sin in repentance and trusting in Jesus to save you.

Maybe you are here today and you are worn out from trying to be good enough. You feel like the harder you try, the more spiritual debt you incur. If that’s your story . . . hear the great news of the gospel! We are not saved by our works, but by faith! You can get off the treadmill that is getting you nowhere and is merely wearing you out. You can know forgiveness. You can be set free and made new. All you need to do, is believe God’s promise, and receive His grace.