

Romans 4:1-3—Abraham Is Declared Righteous Apart From Works

But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness (Romans 4:5 NKJV)

Memory Verse

Romans 12:1-2 NKJV

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Introduction

In Romans chapter 3, Paul showed definitively that because of our sinful nature, the law can never save anyone, but rather can only condemn us. The law's purpose is *not to save*, but rather *to point out our need to be saved*; the mirror shows us that our face is dirty, but it can't clean our face. Paul then went on to demonstrate that there has only ever been one way for any person to be saved—by grace through faith—even in Old Testament times.

Romans 3:21-22 NKJV

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.

Now in Romans chapter 4 Paul uses Abraham and David as examples of how people from the Old Testament were saved by grace through faith. Abraham lived *before* the law was given, and he was saved by grace through faith. David lived *after* the Mosaic law was given, and although he had to follow the Old Covenant's rules and regulations concerning how to worship God, he also was saved by grace through faith. Both Abraham and David did lots of good works, but none of those works had anything to do with God declaring them to be righteous; *God imputed or credited His righteousness to them apart from their works*. Their good works were the result or fruit of their salvation, not the cause or root of it.

Abraham justified by faith, apart from works

Romans 4:1-3 NKJV

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."

v 1 **What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?:** Abraham was physically or humanly speaking (**according to the flesh**) the **father** of the Jewish nation. The NLT reads—"Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What did he discover about being made right with God?"

Paul will now use Abraham as an example of an Old Testament saint who was justified by faith. Why did Paul use Abraham? Because Abraham was the first Jew, he represented all Jews (Israelites); if it was true for Abraham, then it would be true for everyone else. Abraham is also the most esteemed and respected man in the Jewish faith—he was their hero.

Application: Something to boast about

v 2 **For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about:** This is what the flesh or sinful human nature longs for—**something to boast about**. Our sinful human nature is always on the lookout for something it can do to cause others to look at us and say, “Wow, isn’t he amazing”, or “Look at the important position he has in the church”, or “Isn’t she so spiritual”, or “What a humble man he is”, or “Look how good he is at playing basketball”, or “Look at how nice she looks”. All of us, when walking according to our sinful human nature, naturally look for ways to try to make people see us as being someone who are not.

Why is this? Because our sinful nature is selfish, our pride causes us to focus on ourselves, and then deceives us into thinking that we are more, or less, than what we actually are—this becomes our identity, who we believe we are. We then we set about saying and doing things to justify our own delusional view of ourselves. We either try to make ourselves look better or worse than we really are. If we are seeking attention in the form of praise, then we will talk ourselves up and try to make ourselves look better than what we really are—“I’m such a good parent, husband, worker, etc, especially compared to those other people”.

On the other hand, we can go the other way and look for attention in the form of sympathy. So we feel sorry for ourselves, indulge in our own miserable pity party, and talk ourselves down. We say and do things to try to make ourselves appear worse than what we are—“I cant’ sing, I sound awful compared to others”, “I’m so useless at parenting, I’m the worst parent in the whole world”. Also, we can flip between the two at a moments notice as well—up one moment, down the next, depending on how we perceive people’s opinions of us.

So what is the opposite of pride? It’s humility. Humility can be described in two ways:

1. Firstly, if pride is attention seeking, then humility is attention giving. In other words, humility is us living by the power of the Holy Spirit and being others-focused and not self-focused. The proud or selfish person is only focused on themselves, either seeking attention in the form of praise by making themselves look good, or seeking attention in the form of sympathy by making themselves look bad. Therefore, the proud person is oblivious to the feelings of others. Why? Because they are so concerned about how they themselves are feeling and what people are thinking or saying about them. This leads to the person either becoming obnoxious and critical, or depressed and miserable, or both.

Proverbs 16:18 NKJV

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

2. Secondly, if pride is having a false or erroneous view of ourselves, then humility is having a correct or accurate view of ourselves. We do this by measuring or comparing ourselves to the character of God as described in the word of God. We

then identify the areas in which we need to improve or change, asking God to help us on our faith journey to become more and more like Him.

Romans 12:3b AMP

I warn everyone among you not to estimate and think of himself more highly than he ought [not to have an exaggerated opinion of his own importance], but to rate his ability with sober judgment (thinking straight, reasoning correctly), each according to the degree of faith apportioned by God to him.

No boasting before God

v 2 **He has something to boast about, but not before God:** As Paul has shown already, if we are willing to honestly evaluate ourselves using the law, we would understand clearly that we are sinners in desperate need of a Saviour. As we just learned, the temptation is to be proud and try to justify ourselves or make ourselves look good in front of others—and *that includes God*. But this is the greatest delusion of all—sinful man thinking that he can achieve the perfect righteousness of God—it's pure insanity. Remember, **before God**, we will never have anything to **boast about**.

How would the Jews have received this truth?

v 3 **For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness:** Put yourself in the shoes of a Jew living under the law. They knew that God had declared Abraham to be righteous. They would most likely have looked at the tremendous sacrifices and obedience of Abraham and assumed that Abraham was chosen by God because of his good works.

“Generally, the Jewish teachers of Paul’s day believed that Abraham was justified by his works, by keeping the law. Ancient passages from the rabbis say: “We find that Abraham our father had performed the whole Law before it was given” and “Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord.” The rabbis argued that Abraham kept the law perfectly before it was given, keeping it by intuition or anticipation.” (David Guzik)

The only way to be saved is by grace through faith

v 3 **And He accounted it to him for righteousness:** The scriptures confirm what we have already learned. All people are saved by grace through faith. All Abraham was required to do to receive *the righteousness of God* was to believe. Genesis 15:6 says that **Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness**. Abraham’s righteousness was obtained through faith.

“This is one of the clearest expressions in the Bible of the truth of salvation by grace, through faith. This is the first time *believe* is used in the Bible and the first time *righteousness* is used in the Bible. This is the gospel in the Old Testament, quoted four times in the New Testament.” (David Guzik)

Abraham’s spiritual birthday—when was Abraham saved?

The scriptures record the day when Abraham was saved—the day he put all his hope in the coming Messiah—**Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness**. Being saved or justified is a one off event that has happened in the

life of every believer; Jesus in John chapter 3 calls it being *born again*. It's sobering to realise that up to this point, after spending several years in the land of Canaan, Abraham had believed in the existence of God, and had been partially obedient to God, but he had not yet been saved. He had been on his journey to full submission and reliance on God for salvation.

“When is a man saved? Not when he follows God's call obediently or even offers himself sacrificially, but when, like Abraham, he simply says, “Lord, I believe You. I believe what You say is true—that I'm righteous in Christ Jesus, that my sins past, present, and future are all forgiven.”” (Jon Courson)

v 3 **Abraham believed God, and and it was accounted to him for righteousness:** “The faith that made Abram righteous wasn't so much believing *in* God (as we usually speak of believing in God), as it was *believing God*. Those who only believe *in* God (in the sense of believing He exists) are merely on the same level as demons (James 2:19).” (David Guzik)

Application: Understanding the difference between accounted righteous (Justification) and made righteous (Sanctification)

v 3 **Accounted to him as righteousness:** **Accounted** means: imputed, reckoned, credited, or counted. “*Counted* is *logizomai*. It was used in early secular documents; ‘put down to one's account, let my revenues be placed on deposit at the storehouse; I now give orders generally with regard to all payments actually made or credited to the government.’ Thus, God put to Abraham's account, placed on deposit for him, credited to him, righteousness ... Abraham possessed righteousness in the same manner as a person would possess a sum of money placed in his account in a bank.” (Wuest)

Notice it doesn't say that God **made** Abraham as righteous as God. If that were true, then Abraham would never have sinned anymore. No, instead, God credited or accounted Abraham with “the righteousness of God”: his sin debt was removed, and in its place God declared Abraham to be as righteous as Himself: This means that in the eyes of God, Abraham had never sinned, and, had lived a perfect life (Jesus life)! Remember 1 Corinthians 5:21, “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (NKJV).

Only then did God start to transform Abraham to actually *become* righteous, to become like God in character. This is the same for all who believe. God first *counts* us as righteous, and then *makes* us righteous over time, the process being complete when we go to meet Him or He comes to meet us. In summary, the act of *accounting* us as being righteous is called justification, while the process of *making* us righteous practically or in actuality is called sanctification.

Two scriptures that describe the process of sanctification, the process God uses to *make* us as righteous as Himself, are given below.

Philippians 1:6 NKJV

Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

2 Corinthians 3:18b NLT

And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.

“The Apostle Paul does not say that Abraham was *made* righteous in all of his doings, but God **accounted** Abraham as righteous. Our justification is not God *making* us perfectly righteous, but *counting* us as perfectly righteous. After we are *counted* righteous, then God begins making us truly righteous, culminating at our resurrection.” (David Guzik)

Application: What promise did Abraham have to believe so that he could be saved?

What exactly did Abraham have to believe for God to declare him to be as righteous as God Himself?—in other words, what did Abraham have to believe so that he could be saved. Remember that the best Bible commentary is the Bible itself. Many times the Bible explains difficult to understand passages elsewhere in the Scriptures. Let’s start by looking at Genesis 15, the passage that Paul quotes from.

Genesis 15:1-6 NLT

Some time later, the Lord spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, “Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great.”

² But Abram replied, “O Sovereign Lord, what good are all your blessings when I don’t even have a son? Since you’ve given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. ³ You have given me no descendants of my own, so one of my servants will be my heir.”

⁴ Then the Lord said to him, “No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own who will be your heir.” ⁵ Then the Lord took Abram outside and said to him, “Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That’s how many descendants you will have!”

⁶ And Abram **believed** the Lord, and the Lord counted him as **righteous** because of his faith.

If we just read this passage, it would seem that Paul is teaching us that all Abraham had to do to be forgiven and receive eternal life, was believe a specific promise that God would give him a son of his own. It seems strange that a person could be saved from their sins, just by believing a promise from God that they were not going to die childless. However, the Bible gives us more information and tells us exactly what Abraham was actually believing. The first clue to this puzzle is found in:

Galatians 3:6-8 NKJV

Just as Abraham “*believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*”

⁷ Therefore know that only those who are of faith are [the spiritual] sons of Abraham.

⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, **preached the gospel** to Abraham **beforehand**, saying, “***In you all the nations shall be blessed.***”

So what do we learn from the verses above?

1. God had already preached the gospel to Abraham **beforehand**, meaning before the time when Abraham believed God and God counted him as righteous.
2. The gospel has everything to do with “***In you all the nations shall be blessed***”. This promise is repeated at 5 different times in the book of Genesis. The first time was when God first called Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldeans and go to a land that God would show him (see Genesis 12:1-3), and then on another two occasions in 18:18 and 22:18. The promise is also given to Isaac in 26:4 Jacob in 28:14. Here’s the promise that God gave to the three patriarchs of the Jewish nation, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—“And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; **and in your Seed [offspring] all the nations of the earth shall be blessed**” (Genesis 26:4).

Paul continues in Galatians chapter 3 to explain exactly what this special promise means, just how and why all the nations would be blessed by this one descendent that would be a descendent of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Galatians 3:16 AMP

Now the promises (covenants, agreements) were decreed and made to Abraham and his Seed (his Offspring, his Heir). He [God] does not say, And to seeds (descendants, heirs), as if referring to many persons, but, And to your **Seed** (your Descendant, your Heir), obviously referring to one individual, **Who is [none other than] Christ (the Messiah)**. [Gen. 13:15; 17:8.]

So we see that the promise that God had made to Abraham went far beyond him just having a child. It was far more than Sarah just feeling sad that she couldn't have kids. Abraham understood that God's promise to him was that one of his descendants would be the promised Messiah, the Saviour Who would save people from their sins. Therefore, when Abraham was expressing his concerns that God hadn't yet delivered on His promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son, it was with the understanding that if they didn't have a son, then there would be no Messiah, no Saviour, no Lamb of God Who would take away the sins of the world.

It's important to understand the context of when Abraham questioned God on why He hadn't yet given him a son. There are two important things to notice.

1. Abraham was rich: The fact that Abraham was still concerned about the Messiah showed that he regarded spiritual things as being more important than physical things—he was more concerned about his eternal welfare than he was about enjoying the passing pleasures of sin that this world offers.
2. Abraham was afraid (**Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you**—Genesis 15:1): He and his 318 household servants had just defeated a large army made up of 4 powerful kings and their troops (see Genesis 14): Abraham was scared that he could die at any time (see Genesis 15:1). He was “public enemy number one” in the eyes of these four powerful, angry, and humiliated kings who would very likely be seeking revenge.
3. Therefore, all Abraham was concerned about was that the Messiah would come and save him from his sins and make it possible for all mankind to spend eternity with God. Again, Abraham knew that if God didn't keep His promise to give Abraham a son, then there would be no Messiah, there would be no hope for all of mankind—we would all be doomed to eternity in hell. Consider how the writer of Hebrews describes Abraham's outlook.

Hebrews 11:8-10 NKJV

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; ¹⁰ **for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.**

In summary, Abraham had put all his hope in the promised Messiah. This included the forgiveness of sins and eternal life that the Promised Seed or Messiah would make available to all mankind (remember that the Messiah was first promised in Genesis 3:15, the very day that Adam sinned—see last weeks notes). All that mattered to Abraham was that God keep His promise to give Abraham a son so that the Messiah could and would be born. Why? Because Abraham knew that he was a sinner who needed a Saviour.

Personal reflection: How important is Jesus to you? Are you living (so to speak) in tents like a sojourner or temporary resident during your time on earth, with your heart seeking the things which are above (see Colossians 3:1-7), remembering that you are a citizen of heaven (see Philippians 3:20)? Or are you living it up down here, making this world your home, with eternity as a distant thought?

Application: Misdirected zeal and its tremendous cost

As we have already mentioned, the Israelites had an incorrect understanding, both of the extent God's righteousness (perfection), and how to obtain it (only by grace). The same can be true for us as either false converts or believers.

Romans 10:1-3 NLT

Dear brothers and sisters, the longing of my heart and my prayer to God is for the people of Israel to be saved. ² I know what enthusiasm they have for God, but it is **misdirected zeal**. ³ For they don't understand God's way of making people right with himself. **Refusing to accept God's way, they cling to their own way of getting right with God by trying to keep the law.**

Think about what this misdirected zeal has cost the nation of Israel. By misunderstanding or rejecting grace, by rejecting Jesus gift of Himself at the cross, they have suffered terribly—finding themselves under God's curse instead of being able to receive His blessings (see Galatians 3:10-14).

A works based mentality means death to relationship—any relationship, and not just with God. If we approach God with the attitude of, "I did this so I deserve that", then we will also have that same works or merit based attitude towards others—we keep score and they always end up owing us. That person will never experience a close love relationship with anyone. Real relationships are based on grace, on freely giving to and doing things for the other person without expecting anything in return. Listen to what Jon Courson has to say and see if you can relate.

"If Abraham had been pronounced righteous because he left Ur, or because he was willing to sacrifice his son, then he would have been given salvation as a reward. God would have been paying off a debt. But Paul's argument is that it was nothing Abraham did or didn't do—other than believe what God said was true—which justified him. So, too, if you are attempting to work your way into God's favour—either prior or subsequent to your salvation—then He owes justification to you. Whenever we subconsciously think, *Now, Lord, I prayed a whole bunch today, so I know it's going to be a great day*, the implication is, *Lord, You owe me*. And that nullifies grace. God will not be a debtor to any man. He won't owe us anything.

That is why there will be no boasting in heaven—not only with regard to our salvation, but with regard to any of God's blessings. A lot of times we forget that and think it's because of our great faith or our prevailing prayer, our diligent works or our dedicated devotion that God has blessed our life.

It's a hard thing to say, but it's true: Some of the greatest blessings both in my life and flowing through my life have come when I have not been in prayer, when I have not had strong faith, when I've not been what I should or want to be. God's blessings during those times remind me that *everything* that comes my way is because of grace—unmerited, undeserved, unearned favour. This creates in me a heart that wants to love the Lord and worship Him rather than a tendency to say, "If I've accomplished this with three hours of prayer, I wonder what I could do with six!"

Am I saying we should never pray? If you're praying to earn reward, give it up. But if you're praying because you enjoy the Lord, are amazed at His goodness to you, because you want to participate with Him in what He's doing on the earth, because you love to spend time with Him, or because you're thankful for Him and want to be close to Him—then pray! If you get up at three o'clock tomorrow morning to pray in order to fulfill an obligation, God won't be impressed a whit. But if you get up at three o'clock just to enjoy Him, He'll be blessed. The man, woman, or congregation that truly understands that salvation is all about grace will find themselves praying, worshiping, studying, witnessing—not because they're trying to earn God's blessing, but because they're responding to the One who's already been so good to them." (Jon Courson)

Conclusion

We all need to ask God to search our hearts and see if there is any wicked way in me. Any legalistic attitude needs to go. It will not just affect my relationship with God, but all other relationships as well. Remember that a works mentality or legalistic attitude is offensive to God.

Psalm 139:23-24 NLT

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.
²⁴ Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

Here is a Scripture that sums up nicely what we have learned today.

Titus 3:3-8 NKJV

For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. ⁴ But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, ⁵ not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

⁸ This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men.