

The Importance of Abraham’s Testimony About Justification (4:1,2)

4:1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? 4:2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

Then

- The “*then*” (οὖν in the Greek, sometimes rendered “therefore”) connects 4:1 with what just came before it.
- In 3:27-31, Paul taught these important Gospel principles:
 - We are right before God by faith alone.
 - All people are declared right before God the same way.
- Using Abraham as a biblical proof of these principles, chapter 4 now begins to show the argument that everyone, regardless of when they lived, is saved the same way.¹

Why Does Paul Focus on Abraham Here?

- Abraham is a massively important figure in the Bible, even the New Testament – he is, after all, mentioned in the very first verse: “*The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham*” (Matthew 1:1).

¹ “Although the price of redemption was not actually paid by Christ till after His incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefit thereof were communicated to the elect in all ages, successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those [Old Testament] promises, types, and sacrifices wherein He was revealed, and signified to be the seed which should bruise the serpent’s head [in Genesis 3:15]; and the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, being the same yesterday, and today and forever...the justification of believers under the Old Testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the New Testament” (1689 Baptist Confession, 8.6; 11.6). The fact that justification is taught in the New Testament using Old Testament texts and examples proves this!

- The main reason Paul now turns to Abraham is to show that Abraham was “*justified by faith*” (Romans 3:28) like every other human being. It was Jewish tradition that their being descended from Abraham would save them.² John the Baptist attacked this idea, warning Jews not to place their confidence in their Abrahamic lineage (Matthew 3:9,10//Luke 3:8,9) – God was fully capable of creating new “*children to Abraham*” from mere rocks! Similarly, Jesus told Jews who boasted “*we are Abraham’s descendants*” that they were actually “*of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father*” (John 8:33,44).
- Abraham, a figure the Jews thought they alone possessed, is now seen by Paul to be father of all those who have faith in God’s promised Savior, whether they be Jew or non-Jew.
- Paul uses the term “*according to the flesh*” in two different ways. First, it means a common ethnicity (Jewish here), as in 1:3; 9:3,5. This is how it’s used here.³

Abraham Didn’t Boast, and Neither Should You

- If Abraham was right before God just by being Abraham or by doing good works, then “*he has something to boast about*” (4:2). But that’s not how salvation works in the Bible.

² “...in the Medrasch Tillim, fol. 7, col. 2, it is said, ‘God swore to Abraham, that no one who was circumcised should be sent to hell.’ In the book Akedath Jizehak, fol. 54, col. 2, it is taught that ‘Abraham sits before the gate of hell, and does not allow that any circumcised Israelite should enter there.’” Quoted from Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972; original edition, 1935), 63.

³ Paul will use the phrase “*according to the flesh*” with a slightly different emphasis in chapter 8 (vss. 1,4,5,12,13). The attempt of the Jews to use the Law to achieve righteousness results in the opposite – a futile, losing battle with sin.

Justification by Faith Alone (4:3-5)

^{4:3}For what does the Scripture say [Genesis 15:6]? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

The Authority of Scripture

- The apostle Paul introduces a quote from the Old Testament by describing it as “*Scripture*.” “*What does the Scripture say?*” should be a question asked by the Church and all believers all the time concerning all things.⁴
- Paul has, of course, relied heavily on the Old Testament throughout this letter, from his appeal to the Scriptures and David in the first three verses (1:2,3), his quote of Habakkuk (1:17), Proverbs (2:6), the Psalms (3:4), and to a long list of strung-together passages (3:10-18) – Paul’s built the argument for

⁴ “The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God’s revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and **the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried**. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, Who is Himself the focus of divine revelation” (Baptist Faith & Message 2000, I). “**The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Scripture** delivered by the Spirit, into which Scripture so delivered our faith is finally resolved” (1689 Baptist Confession, 1.10).

salvation by faith in Jesus Christ thoroughly from the Old Testament.⁵

One of the Most Important Verses in the Bible

- Two of the most important verses in the Bible for right understanding of the Gospel come from the Old Testament!
 - We’ve already read the first one in this letter to the Romans: “...*I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written [in Habakkuk 2:4b], ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith’*” (1:16,17). Habakkuk, of all places! A prophet few people read, much less can spell! Yet it is here that the Holy Spirit inspired a fundamental truth about the saving Gospel: **we find true, abundant, and eternal life before God and obtain a right standing before Him solely by faith.**
 - Here, in Romans 4:3, we find another hugely important verse for a right understanding of the Gospel. This time it’s from Abraham’s life story as inspired in the book of Genesis.
- “...*he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness*” (Genesis 15:6).⁶

⁵ Paul preached Jesus from the Old Testament Scriptures (Acts 17:2,3; 18:28; 26:22,23; 28:23), since those Scriptures were given to lead us to Jesus. My passion is that we become a people of **the whole Book** of the glory of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and not just a people of the end of the Book.

⁶ Abraham’s life shows forth a Baptist principle, by the way: He had faith (15:6) before receiving the sign of the covenant (17:10-14). In

- Abram (he was still just “Abram” at this point – the name change doesn’t happen until 17:5) doesn’t just believe in God, but specifically in God’s Word, what God had promised.⁷
- This verse is quoted several times in the New Testament because it is so important to a right understanding of the Gospel.⁸
- Since this is a verse so early in the Bible, take note that salvation happens the same way throughout the whole Book: by faith.
- I think there’s an important parallel here between Paul’s teaching of the Gospel in Romans and this example from Abraham’s life:
 - **Promise:** God had made a promise to Abraham that his “seed” would be as numerous as “the dust of the earth” (Genesis 13:16), as “the stars” of heaven (15:5). God made a promise that “to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life...the doers of the Law will be justified” (Romans 2:7,13).
 - **Inability:** Abraham’s wife is barren and cannot produce an offspring for Abraham (Genesis 11:30). No one can do “good,” and “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:12,20).
 - **God’s gracious provision:** Abraham is promised that the “seed” will “come forth from [Abraham’s] own body” (Genesis 15:4).

the same way, we only administer the sign of the new covenant (baptism) to those who have expressed faith in Jesus Christ.

⁷ The phrase “the word of the LORD came to” Abram occurs twice prior to this (15:1,4).

⁸ Galatians 3:6; James 2:23.

The “righteousness of God” comes to believers “through faith in Jesus Christ” (Romans 3:22). We are “justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (3:24).

- God makes a promise. We cannot meet the conditions of that promise. God graciously provides the conditions Himself. We put our faith in that provision (Jesus Christ), and receive the promise.

Works and Wages (4:4)

4:4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.

Faith and Favor (4:5)

4:5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him Who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness...

- “The one who does not work...” One of the rules for good Bible interpretation is that we (1) consider what we’re reading and how it fits with the rest of the Bible, and (2) keep what we’re reading in its context:
 - If you put works before salvation, you are confessing every world religion. The Gospel puts works after salvation.
 - We are not saved by doing good works, but are saved to do good works: READ Ephesians 2:8-10; Titus 2:13,14. Do you see the difference between works before salvation and works after salvation? One condemns, and one is proof.
- When Paul speaks of “the one who does not work,” he is not speaking absolutely, but solely in the context of justification, or being declared right before God.
- “Him Who justifies the ungodly” is one of the most astounding titles for God in the Bible! He justifies no one else! Until you and I realize that we are ungodly, and seek justification in Jesus Christ alone, we cannot be saved.

The Blessing of Blessings (4:6-8)

^{4:6}...just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works [in Psalm 32:1,2a]:
^{4:7}“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered.
^{4:8}Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.”

Why Does Paul Invoke David Here?

- David is a massively important figure in the Bible, even the New Testament – he is, after all, mentioned in the very first verse: “The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of **David**, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1).⁹
- David, a murderer and adulterer, is justified before God by faith.

Double-Credit

- Justification involves a double-statement of credit:
 - Righteousness is credited to us when we believe in the promise of God concerning His Son.
 - Our sin is not credited to our account when we are forgiven by faith in His Son.

God’s Blessing and Our Total Sinfulness

- There is a threefold description of sin in this quote: “...lawless deeds...sins [specific actions]...sin [our nature]...”
- God does not give us what we deserve (as 4:4 describes), but credits Christ’s righteousness to us when we believe.

⁹ One of the great promises of the O.T. is that God would provide a forever-King to deliver His people. That promise is called the Davidic covenant. The N.T. teaches us that Jesus fulfills that promise: Matthew 1:1; 20:30,31; 21:9,15; Luke 1:27,32,69; 2:4; 3:23-31; Acts 2:30; 13:22,23,32,34; 2 Timothy 2:8; Revelation 5:5; 22:16.

“Jesus answered, ‘...truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he will never see death.’ The Jews said to Him, ‘...Abraham died, and the prophets also; and You say, “If anyone keeps My word, he will never taste of death.” Surely You are not greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets died too; whom do You make Yourself out to be?’ Jesus answered, ‘If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father Who glorifies Me, of Whom you say, “He is our God”; and you have not come to know Him, but I know Him; and if I say that I do not know Him, I will be a liar like you, but I do know Him and keep His word. **Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.**’ So the Jews said to Him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘**Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.**’”

John 8:49-58

“Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch **David** that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. And so, **because he was a prophet** and knew that [as it says in 2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 89:3,4] God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne, **he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ**, that [as it says in Psalm 16:10] He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay. This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear...repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 2:29-33,38

Abraham and David were saved by faith in the promised Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Are you?