

Faith, Grace and Promise – Romans 4

In **Chapter 1**, Paul concerned himself with the way that God's power and divine nature have been visible to everyone, but still mankind rejected that and pursued idolatry – bringing depravity.

In **Chapter 2**, he showed how God is impartial and that Jews and Gentiles are on a level footing before God, facing his judgment.

In **Chapter 3**, he went on to show that, although the Jewish people had been entrusted with the words and message of God down the ages, the Jewish Law could not save them. By contrast, Jews **and Gentiles** are “justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” (3:24)

Now, in **Chapter 4**, he takes the example of Abraham (whom every Jew would be proud to call their ancestor) to underline the fact that observing the Law and commandments was NOT the way in which Abraham's relationship with God was initiated or established. The promises of God to Abraham were based on **grace and faith** – two words which we shall continue to follow!

As we have already seen, Paul has much to say about the Jews and their history as the people of God but, at the same time, he is opening out that history to Gentile believers so that they – and we – begin to share in that rich background and the Scriptures which enshrine it. Gentile believers in Rome, hearing or reading this letter, are being told that the promises which God made to Abraham as the father of the Jewish nation have now been extended to **all** who put their trust in Jesus. Jewish believers might possibly feel put out, that their once exclusive heritage is now being offered to Gentiles, but Paul is adamant and uses Abraham himself as a prime example.

Where does righteousness come from? (4:1-8) The classic Jewish answer would probably be: “from obeying the Law given to Moses”. ¹ “Wrong!” says Paul, and takes Abraham and David as his proof.

Abraham was not justified by what he did, but by his trust in God. In **Genesis 15**, the LORD makes promises to Abram (as he was then called), Abram trusts God's word to him, and the LORD counts ² that faith as righteousness. I like the fact that the LORD is still prepared to give Abram some extra proof after his exercise of faith!

King David knew how his wrongdoing robbed him of his open relationship with God, and found that simple acknowledgement of his sin and confession to the LORD resulted in forgiveness and even positive blessing! (see **Psalms 32:1-7**). Neither on this occasion, nor when Nathan challenged him about Bathsheba, is there any mention of needing to DO anything else in order to receive God's forgiveness (see **Psalms 51**, especially **v.16-17**). Even Nathan is very clear about the LORD's instant forgiveness of David (**2 Samuel 12:13**).

Blessing for those who believe. (4:9-12) The words translated ‘blessed’ and ‘blessing’ also means ‘happy’ and ‘happiness’; they're not just religious words!

Paul is still talking to both Jews and Gentiles, aiming to show the Jews that their blessedness is not exclusive and the Gentiles that they have been included in God's promises. And here is a really strong point: Although circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign of the covenant

¹ See Jesus' answers to the ‘rich young ruler’ in **Matthew 19:16-22, Mark 10:17-22, Luke 18:18-23** and to the lawyer in **Luke 10:25-37**. Not just following rules, but life-changing faith!

² This word, translated variously as ‘reckon’, ‘credit’, ‘impute’, ‘account’, ‘consider’ or ‘regard’ is a book-keeping word, meaning an accurate statement of account, and is in **v. 3,4,5,6,8,9,10,22,23 & 24** of this chapter (marked in these notes with *). We will meet it again in **Romans 6:11**. Watchman Nee has useful comments about it in chapter 4 of *The Normal Christian Life*.

between him and the LORD in **Genesis 17**, that covenant was only set up after he had put his trust in the LORD in **Genesis 15**. Jewish believers need to face up to the fact that Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised, and Gentile believers can be encouraged by that same fact. Paul describes the sign of circumcision given to Abraham as *“a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be accounted* to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.”* (**Romans 4:11-12**). Abraham is the ‘father’ of all believers, whether from Jewish or Gentile background. And, as Paul wrote in **Galatians 3:17**, *“the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.”*

Heirs of the world. (4:13-15) Abraham had been promised that he and his descendants would be the heirs of the whole world (**Genesis 17:4-7, 22:17-18**). That did not come about out of following of any law, but *‘through the righteousness of faith.’* So, says Paul, if it were those who follow law who were the heirs, then faith would be made empty and the promise would be made totally ineffective. Law isn’t like faith; it only brings God’s anger (**Romans 3:20**).

The faith of Abraham, ‘the father of us all’. (4:16-25) In this letter to believers in a Gentile city, the capital of a Gentile empire, why has Paul spent so much time concentrating on Judaism? Yes, we know that there were Christians there from Jewish as well as Gentile roots, but in these first few chapters he seems to have been specially involved in questions about the Jewish Law.

We saw at the end of **Romans 2**, that Paul was already saying that *‘he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter’* (**2:29**) and in **ch. 3** he has emphasised *‘being justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus’* (**3:24**).

He is pulling all the strands together here, to bring Jewish and Gentile believers to an understanding of their **shared heritage**. Abraham is no longer the exclusive ‘property’ of Jews; he is no longer only the father of the Chosen People of Israel but is in reality *‘the father of us all’*, all those who *‘are of the faith of Abraham’*. (**4:16**). Now, at last, Abraham starts to become *‘a father of many nations’*, as promised to him by the LORD all those centuries before!

Just as Abraham and Sarah became Isaac’s parents at impossibly great age (‘as good as dead’¹), so – impossibly – Abraham now becomes the father of a ‘family’ that did not exist before, this newly-extended family of those who have believed into the the Lord Jesus Christ, the Church. Once again, God *‘gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist’* (**4:17**)!

Abraham’s faith – believing what the LORD said to him – was the reason that the LORD counted* him as being righteous (**Genesis 15**), *‘being fully assured that what God had promised, he was able also to perform’*. (**4:21,22**).

In the same way, says Paul, righteousness – justification in God’s sight – is accounted* to us *‘who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead’*. (**4:24**)

And here is a final thought to ponder from this chapter: Paul says that the Lord Jesus was *‘delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification’*. What part does Jesus’ resurrection have in our justification before God? Compare **Romans 3:24-26** & **Colossians 2:8-15**.

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¹ **Romans 4:19, Hebrews 11:12**