

A Study in Romans

Chapter 4

In this chapter, Paul continues to build on the essential truth of righteousness by faith in Jesus Christ. His focus is on the importance of justification, aka justification by faith.

[The following notes on verses 1–12 are by Peter Okrah, April 13, 2022]

In the last section of Romans 3, Paul declares that the gospel of salvation announces a righteousness from God, a righteousness that is given “through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (3:22). Believers are justified or saved by faith, not by observing the law (3:28).

Is Paul saying that the law is wrong? He answers: “By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law” (3:31).

In many ways Romans 4 gets to the foundation of the biblical doctrine of salvation by faith alone. Paul reveals three major stages in the plan of salvation: (1) the promise of divine blessing (the promise of grace), (2) the human response to that promise (the response of faith), and (3) the divine pronouncement of righteousness credited to those who believe (justification). That’s how it worked with Abraham, and that’s how it works with us.

Romans 4: 1-4: Abraham

Romans 4:3 (Genesis 15:6)

According to this Old Testament narrative, Abraham was accounted righteous because he “believed God.” Therefore, the Old Testament itself teaches righteousness by faith.

Romans 4:6-8: Paul expands on the theme of justification by faith

David: Psalm 32

David’s sin and restoration (2 Samuel 11; 12; Psalm 51)

Certainly, it wasn’t law-keeping that saved David, for he violated so many principles of the law that it condemned him on numerous counts. Paul sets forth David’s restoration to divine favor as an example of justification by faith.

Romans 4:9 – 12:

Paul then continues, explaining that salvation by faith is not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. In fact, if you want to get technical about it, Abraham wasn’t Jewish; he came from a pagan ancestry (Joshua 24:2). The Gentile-Jewish distinction didn’t exist in his time. When Abraham was justified (Gen. 15:6), he was not even circumcised.

Abraham was circumcised 15-25 year later after Genesis 15:6, when he was 99 years old. Genesis 17:24.

Genesis 17:1-14: Circumcision as sign of God's covenant with Abraham.

Thus, Abraham became the father of both the uncircumcised and the circumcised, as well as a great example for Paul to use in order to make his point about the universality of salvation. Christ's death was for everyone, regardless of race or nationality (Heb. 2:9).

(Selected Messages 1, p. 215) The sinner must come in faith to Christ, take hold of His merits, lay his sins upon the Sin Bearer, and receive His pardon. It was for this cause that Christ came into the world. Thus the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the repenting, believing sinner. He becomes a member of the royal family.

(The Desire of Ages, pp. 35–36) The principle that man can save himself by his own works lay at the foundation of every heathen religion. ... Wherever it is held, men have no barrier against sin.

(Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, September 3, 1889) When the Lamb of God was crucified on Calvary, the death knell of Satan was sounded; and if the enemy of truth and righteousness can obliterate from the mind the thought that it is necessary to depend upon the righteousness of Christ for salvation, he will do it. If Satan can succeed in leading man to place value upon his own works as works of merit and righteousness, he knows that he can overcome him by his temptations, and make him his victim and prey. Lift up Jesus before the people. Strike the door-posts with the blood of Calvary's Lamb, and you are safe.

The Heir of the World

(Romans 4:13–15)¹³ For the promise that he would be the heir of the world *was* not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if those who are of the law *are* heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, ¹⁵ because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law *there is* no transgression.

(13) "he would be the heir of the world"

In reality, the "he" should be capitalized. The promise here was not that Abraham would be the heir, but that the Messiah was the Heir.

(Romans 8:16–17)¹⁶ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together.

(13) “not to Abraham or to his seed through the law”

The promised blessing of the Messiah does not come to us personally by keeping the law. There are still people in the church who rely on their own obedience to be justified. This is the classic definition of legalism.

(Life Sketches of Ellen White, p. 22) Many have a vague idea that they must make some wonderful effort in order to gain the favor of God. But all self-dependence is vain. It is only by connecting with Jesus through faith that the sinner becomes a hopeful, believing child of God.

(Faith and Works, p. 19) Let the subject be made distinct and plain that it is not possible to effect anything in our standing before God or in the gift of God to us through creature merit. Should faith and works purchase the gift of salvation for anyone, then the Creator is under obligation to the creature.

The law only “brings wrath” (4:15) because no one can measure up to its requirements.

(13) “through the righteousness of faith”

Paul has introduced the antithesis between law and faith. The promise does not come “through the law” but “through the righteousness of faith.” This phrase is also translated “the righteousness that comes by faith” (NIV).

Paul began his letter addressing mankind’s need of God’s righteousness, something we do not innately possess as sinners. We have all “fallen short” of God’s perfect character (3:23). But Jesus did not fall short. His righteousness is perfect and available to all by faith.

(The Review and Herald, July 1, 1890) Genuine faith appropriates the righteousness of Christ, and the sinner is made an overcomer with Christ; for he is made a partaker of the divine nature, and thus divinity and humanity are combined.

He who is trying to reach heaven by his own works in keeping the law, is attempting an impossibility. Man cannot be saved without obedience, but his works should not be of himself; Christ should work in him to will and to do of His good pleasure.

Verse 5 says that “to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness...” Faith is belief in our Advocate to credit to our account His righteousness when we ask.

(1 John 2:1) My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Jesus earned the right to advocate for us because He took our sin upon Himself and paid for its penalty, which is death.

(Galatians 3:13–14)¹³ Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “*Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree*”),¹⁴ that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

(14) “if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect”

Paul’s purpose here is to establish faith and the mechanism of action that credits righteousness to our life account. The Jewish leaders have made faith “void” by replacing it with perfect law-keeping.

The Jewish leaders were perfect law-keepers in their own eyes. By their commitment to keep the law, they instead make the promise ineffective.

(The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials, p. 822) While one class pervert the doctrine of justification by faith and neglect to comply with the conditions laid down in the Word of God—“If ye love me, keep my commandments,”—there is fully as great an error on the part of those who claim to believe and obey the commandments of God but who place themselves in opposition to the precious rays of light—new to them—reflected from the cross of Calvary. The first class do not see the wondrous things in the law of God for all who are doers of His Word. The others cavil over trivialities, and neglect the weightier matters, mercy and the love of God.

(15) “where there is no law there is no transgression”

Without the law, there is no sin. It is the law that brings conviction, “for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (3:20). For those who remain in their sin, the law brings wrath.

By Faith, According to Grace

(Romans 4:16–22)¹⁶ Therefore *it is* of faith that *it might be* according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all¹⁷ (as it is written, “*I have made you a father of many nations*”) in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did;¹⁸ who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, “*So shall your descendants be.*”¹⁹ And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb.²⁰ He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in

faith, giving glory to God,²¹ and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.²² And therefore *“it was accounted to him for righteousness.”*

(16) “it is of faith that it might be according to grace”

The grace of God is bestowed upon us through faith alone. If righteousness could come to us in any other way, then it would not be by grace. Even if we are very law-abiding citizens, the goodness we have would still not bring God’s righteousness to us. It comes by faith in Jesus Christ, God’s gift to humankind.

(The Review and Herald, November 4, 1890) Without the grace of Christ, the sinner is in a hopeless condition; nothing can be done for him; but through divine grace, supernatural power is imparted to the man, and works in mind and heart and character. It is through the impartation of the grace of Christ that sin is discerned in its hateful nature, and finally driven from the soul temple. It is through grace that we are brought into fellowship with Christ, to be associated with Him in the work of salvation. Faith is the condition upon which God has seen fit to promise pardon to sinners; not that there is any virtue in faith whereby salvation is merited, but because faith can lay hold of the merits of Christ, the remedy provided for sin. Faith can present Christ’s perfect obedience instead of the sinner’s transgression and defection. When the sinner believes that Christ is his personal Saviour, then, according to His unfailing promises, God pardons his sin, and justifies him freely. The repentant soul realizes that his justification comes because Christ, as his substitute and surety, has died for him, is his atonement and righteousness.

(16) “so that the promise might be sure to all the seed”

The promise comes to all people, not just the Jews. This is foundational to Paul’s letter. God wants all people to be saved, and this is the only way it can happen.

(19) “not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead”

When God made the promise to Abraham that His seed would be blessed to receive the benefits of His righteousness, Abraham did not look to his own body, or his wife’s, for the answer. They had not been able to have children. Instead, Abraham looked to God to fulfill His promise. This is how we must respond when we face impossible circumstances. Trust in God, who never breaks His promise.

(20) “did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief”

Abraham did not waver in trusting God’s promise. He did consent to Sarah’s idea of making the promise happen through her maidservant. But Abraham kept his faith in God throughout the ordeal.

(Hebrews 3:12) Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God

Unbelief is an act of departing from God and His promises.

(James 1:6–8)⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

When we doubt God, we are “double-minded” and “unstable.” Doubt is Satan’s temptation to take your eyes off God’s ability to then trust in mankind’s ability. Who would you rather trust?

(20) “strengthened in faith”

It takes time to grow into a mature faith—to trust that God will come through in every situation. But each time we exercise our faith, we grow stronger. It is easier the next time to trust God to handle your problem.

(Romans 1:17) For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.”

It’s one thing to say you believe. It’s another level to “live by faith.” This means every day trusting that God will help you make it through.

Are you giving yourself to God each morning? Giving yourself to God is the first act of faith each day. Without that first act of faith, the rest of the day makes it all the more difficult to trust Him. One reason for this is that Satan knows whether or not you started your day with Jesus.

This kind of faith is “being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform” (21). Any less is not really faith at all.