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## Romans 4: OT Illustration of Justification by Faith

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## Chapter 4 OT Illustrations of Justification by Faith

There is a common thread that ties all religions of the world into one bundle, except one. They all teach that man can become acceptable to God by being good enough, that is, by doing more good works than bad ones. Only one religion says that this is a wasted effort because a sinner is already condemned even if he sinned only once (as Adam), and no amount of good works can undo his sinfulness (Jas 2:10). Only biblical Christianity teaches that sinful man can become perfectly acceptable, in fact perfectly justified, before a holy God by faith, without works.

Paul chose Abraham as a classic illustration of how God has always and only accepted sinners who came to Him through faith in His promises, also because Abraham was the father of the Jewish nation and he lived six-hundred years before the law was given so he had no laws to obey.

However, Paul was also confronting a false notion about Abraham in the first century. The Jews believed that Abraham was the most righteous man on earth in his day and was acceptable to God because of his own righteous character. They understood the passage in Gen 26:4-5, “Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws,” to prove that justification could be earned through one’s efforts to be faithful. They prefer to translate Habakkuk 2:4, “The just shall live by his faithfulness,” rather than “by his faith.” Instead of seeing faithfulness as a fruit of faith, they see “his response of faith [they prefer, faithfulness] as proof of genuine loyalty.”

Barclay cites articles in *Ecclesiasticus*(44:20-21) or *The Wisdom of Sirach* (Jewish apocryphal books) where Abraham was suppose to become right with God because of his righteous acts. *The Prayer of Manasseh* even declares Abraham’s sinlessness. He cites the writer of the *Book of Jubilees* who said, “Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life” (23:10). Paul intentionally chose to argue that Abraham was not justified by works in order to destroy the Jewish teaching that man is made acceptable by attempting to obey the law. If Abraham could not, and did not, become justified by keeping the law then no one could. On the other hand, if Abraham needed to be, and in fact was, justified by faith in God’s promises, then every sinner and moral person must be justified in the same way.

### I. How was Abraham justified? (4:1-2)

<sup>NET</sup> **Rom 4:1** What then shall we say that Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh, has **discovered** regarding this matter?

<sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was declared righteous by the works of the law, he has something to boast about— but not before God.

**4:1 If the Jewish reader disagreed with the Apostle Paul, the message of highly respected Abraham could not be ignored.** “What then” ties this verse with the preceding chapter which concluded that both Jews and Gentiles are under sin and both must be, and can be, justified from their sins (3:30). The rabbis taught that Abraham was the greatest example of how man is justified by works, so Paul will contradict this false idea to teach that he too

was saved by faith alone. Think of the godliest person you know or have heard of. Can you see them as a guilty sinner with no hope of being good enough for God's acceptance?

**4:2 Abraham was chosen to be the father of the Jewish people**, with whom He made an unconditional covenant for his descendents, the Jewish people. Every Jew descended from Abraham, so whatever was true of how he was justified before God must be applied to all his descendents. Paul starts with a hypothetical case: IF Abraham was justified by his works then he could "**boast**" about it (*kauchema*, "ground for bragging or being proud"). Striving to be "good enough" only generates a self-righteous pride and false notion that one is "good enough" or "better than most" or "worthy of" God's acceptance. Paul destroys this misguided notion with the final phrase: "not before God." Humans can think they are good enough, but in comparison with a holy God, the sinfulness of all men becomes horrible and unacceptable. No amount of goodness can overcome this sinfulness. What is one of God's purposes of justifying sinful men by faith alone according to Eph 2:8-9?

## II. Abraham is justified by believing (4:3-5)

<sup>3</sup> For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

<sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, his pay is not credited due to grace but due to obligation.

<sup>5</sup> But to the one who does not work, but believes in the one who declares the ungodly righteous, his faith is credited as righteousness.

### 4:3 Paul begins his argument for justification by faith by referring to the OT Scriptures.

He quotes from Gen 15:6. At the time Abraham was coming from a pagan Gentile background, but as the father of the Hebrew nation, he was given the gift of righteousness because of his faith. The text is clear: only because Abraham believed God he was given or accredited with perfect righteousness, which he neither deserved nor earned. What is Abraham called in Gal 3:9? What does it mean to be a "son of Abraham" in Gal 3:6-7?

- **His background:** In Gen 11:31 (15:7) we learned that Abraham came from Ur of Caldea (later to become Babylonia), which was a pagan idolatrous city. Archaeologists estimate that the city had 300,000 inhabitants at this time, were highly educated being advanced in math, agriculture, weaving, engraving and astronomy, as well as writing skills. His father, Terah, was an idolater (Josh 24:2).
- **His encounter with God's Word:** God appears to Abram (Abraham to be) when he was sixty years old to tell him evidently in some audible and/or visible form to abandon his earthly security for a future of uncertainty, but promise. The land he was promised was inhabited by peoples more wicked and idolatrous than his home city and he would become a "great nation" in spite of the fact that his wife was barren. However, his obedience was partial, in that he did not leave all his family, but brought his father and nephew Lot with him. As a result they detoured to Haran until Terah died (Gen 11:32) delaying God's plan for fifteen years. Abraham was seventy-five when he arrived in Canaan. At Shechem God appeared to him a second time saying, "To your descendants I will give this land" (Gen 12:7). Wherever he went he built an altar to call "upon the name of the Lord" (v.8).
- **His tests of genuine faith:** a famine in the land brought a challenge but he avoided it by going to Egypt, which led to a need to deceive the pharaoh, thus dishonoring the Lord and causing plagues to appear in pharaoh's family (Gen 12:10-20). When they returned to Canaan his wife Sarah, now beyond child bearing age, convinced him to have a child with her maid (a cultural practice to create an heir). Once again his human solution brought conflict and misery to the innocent (Gen 16:1-15) as well as long-term conflict between Ishmael, the son of the maid Hagar, and the heir that God

was to provide, Isaac. In spite of his imperfect faith, Abraham returned to the Lord and God honored his faith, continued to give assurances, and fulfill his promise of a son. His greatest test came after the child was born when he was told to sacrifice his only son while trusting God to fulfill His promise of a “great nation.” This time Abraham did not hesitate, and God provided a substitute for Isaac (Gen 22:1-18).

<sup>NET</sup> **Hebrews 11:17** By faith Abraham, **when he was tested**, offered up Isaac. He had received the promises, yet he was ready to offer up his only son. <sup>18</sup> God had told him, “Through Isaac descendants will carry on your name,” <sup>19</sup> and he **reasoned that God could even raise him from the dead**”

- **His patience in confidence:** Neither Abraham, nor his immediate heirs received the fulfillment of the promised land, in fact, it would be nearly 500 years before his descendants would claim the land under Joshua. It was not Abraham’s perfection that God honored, but his faith in God’s promise that “was **reckoned** to him as righteousness” (*logizomai*, aorist tense: “at one time in the past” – “to credit to someone’s account, compute, calculate.” This word occurs 11 times in this chapter – vv.3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,22,23,24). Thus God credits the sinner’s personal account with a perfect righteousness as a response to his faith in God’s promises.
- Faith is not the reason for justification, but the only means by which the convicted sinner can appeal to God’s free and undeserved gift of salvation. How would you explain a salvation by faith?

**4:4-5 The Principle of Faith:** It is understood that salvation is granted by God to man. The question is, on what basis is it granted? There are only two options: works or faith, and the two are mutually exclusive, that is, they cannot be mixed (for example, 50% works-50% faith). The truth must be either one option or the other.

- **The first option** (v.4): if man were able to save himself by his own good works, then God would be “**obligated**” to grant his salvation (*opheilema*, “what is owed, have to pay, be a debtor,” LIDDELL-SCOTT). This would make God a debtor to man. Furthermore, it would make Christ’s death on the cross unimportant and virtually valueless, except as an example of faithfulness. If man can become good enough for heaven then he gets all the glory and has little or no need of God’s help. There are several reasons why man cannot save himself:
  1. No matter how little or how much man has sinned, he has sinned and thus cannot measure up to God’s standard. It only took one sin for Adam and the whole human race to be condemned and rejected.
  2. Regardless of how much a person sacrifices, penalizes himself, afflicts himself or benefits others, nothing he can do can atone or pay for any of his sins. A sinner cannot pay any acceptable sacrifice for his own sins. He is contaminated with sin and thus anything he does is unacceptable.
  3. If man could save himself, man would be self-sufficient and independent of God’s provision of redemption. Christ would be meaningless to him.
  4. If man could become acceptable to God by his own effort and good deeds, he would be filled with pride and boasting of his own honor and glory, making God insignificant in comparison.

Do any of these symptoms characterize anyone you know?

- **The second option** (v. 5): since man cannot save himself due to his own sin, his only option is to trust or believe in the only One who promises to justify the ungodly. In order to genuinely trust in a Savior, there must be an acknowledged distrust in one’s self ability. The offer of a gracious justification is only for the “**ungodly**” (*asebes*, “unholy, profane, without reverential awe toward God, impious, sacrilegious”). From God’s perspective, even the best of human efforts at perfection fall so far short of God’s standards that there is virtually no difference between the best and noble of

mankind and the vilest of sinners. Can you justify this last statement from Rom 3:22-23?

Who did Jesus say He was calling to repentance and salvation in Luke 5:32?

- If man is totally unacceptable by his own merits, there remains only one possible option for sinful man: God must give to sinful man an acceptable and perfect righteousness as a totally unmerited gift. God offers His righteousness; man can trust in God's generous offer becoming indebted to Him forever; then God "**credits**" him with righteousness (*logizomai*, "keeping a mental record, keep in mind, credit to someone's account," FRIBERG). God is willing to declare the believing sinner is perfectly righteous because he trusts in God's promise of the gift of righteousness.
- This "reckoning" is not blinking at sin, brushing it under the proverbial rug, or pretending that it is not as bad as it may seem, but rather it is a complete and systematic solution to man's sin problem because the penalty is paid in full (meaning of "redemption") by God who issued the sentence of condemnation. God was willing to be condemned Himself ("Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" – Gal 3:13). Isaiah gave a prophecy of the suffering of the coming Messiah in which he described the reason for his suffering. What were those reasons in Isa 53:4-5?
- MacArthur gives an acrostic from the letters of the word "faith" help understand the elements of saving faith:
  - F – **Facts:** faith is not based on unreasonable, blindly accepted ideas, but rather the revealed facts or truths of the redeeming work of God through Jesus Christ.
  - A – **Agreement:** not only is it necessary to understand the facts, but also to agree with them as revealed in the Scriptures, particularly the fact that the only way to God is through trusting in Jesus Christ.
  - I – **Internalization:** the inner desire of the believer is to accept God's gracious offer in order to open an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ that is totally undeserved. With all his heart the believer desires to have a personal relationship daily and forever with the God who has resolved all his sin issues and desires his fellowship.
  - T – **Trust:** the believer has an unconditional confidence in God, trusting Him to keep His promises to never forsake us and to make us completely acceptable before Himself. Genuine trust involves ceasing to trust in false ideas, sin and self-righteousness, turning to trust completely in the provisions of Christ's sacrifice.
  - H – **Hope:** the believer has the hope of spending eternity with the God who loves them. This hope fills their inner life: "the God of **hope** fill you with all joy and peace **in believing**, that you may abound in **hope**..." (Rom 15:13).

### III. The Blessing of the Justified according to David (4:6-8)

David's testimony is important for two reasons: (1) In the Jewish perspective, two witness were required to establish a truth (Deut 19:15) as Jesus taught (Mat 18:16) and Paul (2 Cor 13:1; 1 Tim 5:19). (2) Abraham was before the law, but David was justified by faith under the law. Abraham lived 600 years before Moses' Law and David was 400 years after the Law was given. Before and after the Law, righteousness only came through faith.

<sup>6</sup> So even David himself speaks regarding the **blessedness** of the man to whom God **credits** righteousness **apart** from works:

<sup>7</sup> "**Blessed** are those whose **lawless deeds are forgiven**, and whose **sins are covered**;

<sup>8</sup> blessed is the one against whom the Lord **will never count sin**."

**4:6 The greatest king of Israel also taught that justification is by faith alone.** The “blessedness” (*makarismos*, “privileged recipient of divine favor, fortunate”) that David describes was how a sinner like him (deceiver, disloyal, murderer, adulterer and corrupter of the nation) could still find acceptance with God. After Nathan confronted David concerning his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband, he depended completely on the grace of God, “Have mercy on me, O God, because of your loyal love!...wipe away my rebellious acts!...Against you—you above all—I have sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. So you are just when you confront me; you are right when you condemn me....Hide your face from my sins! Wipe away all my guilt!” (Ps 51:1-14). David knew only God could cleans sinful man from his guilt and create in him a pure heart. How would you define the meaning of being “blessed” by God?

- Notice how the past, present, and future has been provided in this “blessedness” through a once and forever action of God’s forgiveness. The **overall** promise that God “credits” (*logizomai*, present tense: “continuously” – “calculates, puts on the account”) “righteousness without works” to our personal account; the “lawless deeds” already committed in the **past** “are forgiven” (*aphiemi*, aorist tense: “at one time in the past...”- “to send away, disregard”); in the **present** his “sins are covered” (*epikalupto*, aorist tense: “at one time in the past...”- “cover over so as not to come to view,” THAYER); and in the **future**, “the Lord will not impute sin” (*logizomai*, aorist tense: action done in the past but will remain done in the future as well) because righteousness has already been credited to his account and the record can never again register our sins since they are all “covered.” If God is this generous with us, how should we think about the people around us according to 1 Peter 4:8?
- How could God be just and at the same time forgive an individual’s sins according to 1 Peter 2:24-25 and Isa 53:5-6)?

#### IV. Abraham was not justified by works or religious rites (4:9-12)

The early churches were a combination of Jews and Gentiles, which created a number of problems addressed in Romans. Paul began his argument for justification without works addressing those with a Jewish background, and now includes the Gentiles (the *uncircumcised*). Jews came to believe that circumcision not only set them apart as a unique people, but was, in fact, the means by which they were acceptable to God.

In the Midrash Millim, Jewish commentaries on the OT, Jalkut Rubem wrote, “God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised should be sent to hell” (fol. 7, col 2). Jews counted on this rite to get them to heaven. The early Jewish believers carried this idea into the early churches, which provoked the first council in Jerusalem, AD 49, to conclude that obedience to the Mosaic rituals, especially circumcision, was not necessary for salvation (Acts 15:19-29).

The circumcision rite later would be paralleled to infant baptism in the early churches with the same notion of an assured entrance into heaven. The Roman Catholic Church came to teach that Christian baptism (sprinkling on a newborn) confers the grace of an assured salvation, regeneration, forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit without any need of a personal belief or moral worthiness (impossible to a newborn child). Roman Catholic confirmation supposedly imparts the Holy Spirit for sanctification, the sacrament of the Eucharist (the mass) unites the individual to Christ and confession-penance assures the faithful of forgiveness by paying for it himself. Some Reformation groups carried a few of these practices into their Protestant theology: infant baptism which places a person into the New

Covenant without any individual faith required and the Eucharist, which unites the follower to Christ as it is partaken of. Frankly, all of these are little more than magic formulas dependent on the proper words being spoken during special rituals by empowered people. These *Christian* rites have become the same false teachings as the Jewish forerunners in the NT giving people the false notion that their religious practices assure them of acceptance before God. Trusting in the efficacy of these rites to actually accomplish something spiritual is in vain.

Paul now deals with the issue whether there is any connection between a religious rite (of any kind) and the blessedness of being declared righteous by God. A summary is given in Gal 5:6. Now he will build his argument.

<sup>9</sup> Is this **blessedness** then for the circumcision or also for the uncircumcision? For we say, "faith was **credited** to Abraham as righteousness."

<sup>10</sup> How then was it **credited** to him? Was he circumcised at the time, or not? No, he was not circumcised but uncircumcised!

<sup>11</sup> And he received the **sign** of circumcision as a **seal** of the righteousness that he had **by faith** while he was still uncircumcised, so that he would become the **father** of all those who believe but have never been circumcised, that they too **could have righteousness credited** to them.

<sup>12</sup> And he is also the father of the circumcised, who are not only circumcised, but who also walk in the **footsteps** of the faith that our **father Abraham** possessed when he was still uncircumcised.

**4:9-10 Paul's first question was to establish or disestablish a relationship** between the "**blessedness**" (being granted perfect righteousness) and a religious ceremony. Is this privilege just for the circumcision? The problem comes when the Genesis text is examined: Abraham was ninety-nine when he and Ishmael were circumcised. Ishmael was **thirteen years old** (Gen 17:23-25). Therefore Abraham was eighty-six years old (16:16) when Ishmael was born. He had been declared righteous by God before Ishmael's birth, (15:6); therefore, he was declared righteous fourteen years or more before he was circumcised. Abraham was seventy-five years old (Gen 12:1-4) when he was given the covenant of promise, that is, 24 years before being circumcised. Why is this chronology important to this subject?

- Abraham was a recipient of God's covenant of grace long before being circumcised; however, Ishmael was circumcised, but he never was part of the covenant people. Circumcision was a **mark** of the covenant, but not the basis of establishing the covenant, nor a means of conferring any righteousness. Do you think people need to be church members, have received baptism, have received communion, or attend church regularly in order to be saved?
- The importance of this argument is two-fold: (1) Abraham was granted righteousness by faith at least fourteen years before being circumcised erasing any link between the "sign" of the covenant and the effective reception of righteousness; (2) Abraham was uncircumcised when he received God's gift of righteousness, thus he was, in effect, a Gentile when he was saved. There could be no question in Paul's day concerning the acceptance of the faith of Gentiles as the means of receiving righteousness. To question Gentile salvation in Paul's day was to bring into question the salvation of Abraham.

**4:11-12 Circumcision was only a "sign"** (*semeion*, "mark, a thing that is distinguished from others, points to something") and a "**seal**" (*sphragis*, "impression made by a seal, that by which anything is confirmed, authenticated, a proof"), but does not make it happen. It was

to be a reminder of God's righteousness that Abraham had received while uncircumcised because of his faith (not his works or any religious rite). How did Paul devalue the "outward" evidences of spiritual benefits or "signs" in Rom 2:28-29?

- How did Abraham become the father of Gentile believers (v. 12)
- How did Abraham become the father of believing Jews?
- What are the footsteps of the faith of Abraham?
- What were the implications of these truths to the congregation in Rome, which was made up of Jewish believers and Gentiles?

### V. Abraham was not justified by the law (4:13-15)

<sup>13</sup> For the **promise** to Abraham or to his descendants that he would **inherit** the **world** was not fulfilled through the law, but through the **righteousness** that comes by faith.

<sup>14</sup> For if they become **heirs** by the law, faith is empty and the promise is nullified.

<sup>15</sup> For the law brings **wrath**, because where there is no law **there is no transgression** either.

**4:13 Not only was Abraham not justified by the rite of circumcision, but secondly, neither was he made righteous by obeying the law**, which chronologically was not given for six hundred years after Abraham lived. He had no knowledge of the law. Abraham was given the gift of righteousness before circumcision was practiced and before the law was revealed, neither of which had anything to do with the promise of becoming heirs of the world (12:3; 15:6; 18:18; 22:18). The Abrahamic covenant or promise contained four elements:

- a. The promise of the LAND (Gen 15:18-21) to his descendants, but it would not be possessed until Joshua's conquest 600 years later.
- b. The promise of a PEOPLE who would be innumerable (Gen 13:16; 15:5), where Abraham would become the "father of many nations" (Gen 17:5; Rom 4:17) through the believers in his descendant, Jesus Christ.
- c. The promise of a BLESSING which would benefit the entire world (Gen 12:3), again through one of his descendants, Jesus Christ, who would grant to any follower His righteousness.
- d. The promise of a REDEEMER, who would be a descendant of Abraham through whom all people groups would be blessed with God's offer of a paid-for forgiveness and perfect righteousness. What did Abraham understand concerning these promises according to Gal 3:8?
  - How was it understood that the promise referred to a special descendant according to Gal 3:16?
  - How did Abraham understand that a Redeemer was coming according to John 8:56?
  - How are believers today, Jews and Gentiles, related to Abraham according to Gal 3:29?

- What are the implications of being a child of the Descendant of Abraham in Rom 8:16-17?
- Even though the Jews were the physical descendants of Abraham, who did God consider their real “father” in John 8:44?
- The promise does not refer to just physical descendants but spiritual descendants from Abraham, children of a like-faith. In fact, physical descendants or followers were not the important issue in 1 Cor 3:21-23, where we are all heirs of the world. Do you see an application here?
- The only righteousness that God has ever accepted is the “righteousness of faith.” Since the physical descendants of Abraham could not fulfill the law’s demands nor could anyone else, the only way any sinner could be made acceptable to God was, and is, by the gracious act of God in response to faith in His promises, man is freely given God’s righteousness. Can you see the motivation for praise and worship in this truth, clarified as well in these verses?  
1 Cor 1:30  
2 Cor 5:21

**4:14-15 Hypothetically, if one could become an heir “by the law”** (there is no article here – anarthrous- thus refers to any commands or legalistic standard) then “faith is **empty**” (*keno*, perfect passive tense:” has been made...” completed action with continual effect – “void, without content, valueless, no effect”) and God’s “promise is **nullified**” (*katargeo*, perfect passive tense:” has been made...” completed action with continual effect – “inactive, invalid, inoperative, deprive of force, influence or power, annul”). That is, if God’s promise can only be received by obedience to the law, which no one, including Abraham, has been able to obey, then the promise is meaningless and mute. What a person believes, which only God can see, has direct effect on how one stands before God.

- **4:15a The reason:** the law “**brings**” wrath (*katargazomai*, present tense: “continually...”- “to accomplish, result in, render one fit for a thing”). It does not result in righteousness, because no one can keep the law perfectly. Adam could not keep one law, how could the Jews keep the 613 commands of Moses, much less the Ten Commandments? If he is honest with himself, the more a person attempts to justify himself by keeping the law, the more judgment he brings against himself because he is unable to be sinless. What is the result of disobeying one command one time in Gal 3:10?
- **4: 15b A general principle:** “Where there is no law, there is no transgression.” Thus a person could be committing a sin, but if there is no law prohibiting this action, then it is not considered a “**transgression**” (*parabasis*, “going over, violation”). How was this principle applied before Moses in Rom 5:13?
- What is the purpose of the law according to Gal 3:24?

## VI. Abraham was given righteousness because of God’s grace (4:16-17)

<sup>16</sup> For this reason it is by faith so that it **may be by grace**, with the **result** that the **promise may be certain** to all the descendants– not only to those who are under the law, but also to those who have the **faith of Abraham**, who is the father of us all

<sup>17</sup> (as it is written, "I have made you the **father of many nations**"). He is our father in the presence of God whom he believed— the God who **makes the dead alive** and **summons the things that do not yet exist as though they already do**.

**4:16 The key to understanding God is that He wants to offer His perfect righteousness “by grace”**(*kata*, “according to the standard of”). The only way to access this grace is by faith (not by doing good works or obeying the law). The power of the gospel of justification is in the “grace” which provides God’s righteousness, not in the faith which merely appropriates what God offers. Faith is not a “work,” as some suppose, but simply a willingness to trust completely in God’s offer.

- **The “result”** of such a gracious offer is “that the promise may be **certain**,” (*bebaios*, “stable, firm, guaranteed,” “legally enforced, trustworthy,” literally, of “an anchor”). The only way it could be “certain” is if the transaction did not depend on the sinner’s performance, but on the sure promise of an infallible God, whose promises never fail. What is the purpose of inspiring the written Word of God according to 1 John 5:13?
- **Recipients:** “to all the descendants” is carefully defined in two parts: (1) to “those who are of the Law” refers to the early Jewish believers and (2) “to those who are of the faith of Abraham” (who was an uncircumcised pagan when he trusted God’s promise by faith). Therefore, Abraham’s faith is universal, which applies to all mankind, thus Abraham becomes the “father of us all” who believe (v. 17). Why is it that the only way salvation could ever be a “certain” transaction is if it were by faith, not our good deeds?

**4:17 When understood properly, Abraham is not just the father of the physical Jewish nation**, but primarily, he is the “father of many nations” (Gen 17:5), that is, of any people group which has heard and believed in God’s promises in the same manner that Abraham did before he was circumcised. God promised Abraham that he would bless all the nations, which he did through the preaching of the gospel and the believers everywhere who response by faith in God’s Word. The physical aspects of the promise to Abraham pertain to the physical descendants of Abraham (the Jews, as well as the land), but the spiritual aspect of the promise (being counted as righteous because of one’s faith in God’s promise) refers to all peoples who have exhibited the same faith in God’s grace for sinners.

- **To clarify what God Paul is referring to**, he gives two qualifications: (1) It is the God “who gives life to the dead”—Abraham experienced this when Isaac was born long after Sarah could physically bear a child at 90 (Gen 17:17; Heb 11:11-12) and Abraham was “as good as dead” – sexually dysfunctional at 100 (Gen 21:5; Rom 4:19). Therefore He is an all-powerful God who can be trusted. (2) It is the God who “calls into being that which does not exist.” This is a reference to the creation – “what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” (Heb 11:3) – and to His providential dealings with men to bring all people to hear the good news of Christ Jesus. Why here and in Gen 17:1 would it be so important to emphasize the power and character of God in granting these promises?

## VII. Analysis of Abraham’s faith

<sup>18</sup> Against **hope** Abraham **believed** in hope with the **result** that he became the father of many nations **according to the pronouncement**, "so will your descendants be."

<sup>19</sup> Without being **weak in faith**, he **considered** his own body as dead (because he was about one hundred years old) and the deadness of Sarah's womb.

<sup>20</sup> He did not **waver** in **unbelief about the promise** of God but was **strengthened in faith, giving glory to God**.

<sup>21</sup> He was **fully convinced** that what God promised he was also **able to do**.

In this portion Paul lists **seven characteristics** of Abraham's faith, which result in salvation:

**4:18 First: Abraham believed when human possibility was lost:** “**against** hope” (*para* with accusative: “contrary to, without regard for”) and “**in** hope” (*epi* with dative, emphasizing cause, “on the basis of,” or “from *the fact of*”). Abraham “**believed**” (aorist tense: at one time in the past) in the context of hope, which refers to the confidence of a thing happening in spite of the human impossibility. It is not a blind faith or hope-so faith, but a faith based on the clear declaration of the all-powerful God of creation (v. 17) that he would become the “father of many **nations**” (*ethnos*, “race, people group,” *ethnic* people), not just the Jewish nation. In Gen 15:5-6 the Lord took Abraham outside at night to look at the stars saying, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them... So shall your descendants be.” “Then [Abraham] believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.” This is like when anyone realized the impossibility of being good enough to be accepted by God due to personal sin, yet we believe in God's promises. If you see being righteous as impossible as Abraham saw it impossible to have multitudes of descendants, then the only way solution is to trust in God's promises.

**4:19 Second:** Abraham did not become “**weak** in faith” (*astheneo*, aorist tense, “powerless to act”), that is, he did not allow doubt to discourage his belief. Abraham had been trusting God for 25 years, but evidently had seen no miracles. He had never seen God raise the dead or create something from nothing (4:17), yet Abraham trusted in the **character of God** to do so. When told to offer up Isaac (Gen 22) he did not hesitate because he believed that God could restore Isaac to life, even if he were killed (Heb 11:17-19). In our case, no matter how big or small our sin debt, we can trust Him to cover it.

- **Third:** Abraham's own physical limitations or circumstances were not a negative factor or discouragement to his faith. “He **considered**” (*katanoeo*, aorist tense: “at one time in the past...” – “to consider attentively”) his natural impotency at 100 years of age, because his faith was in the Creator God who was never limited. Today, we must recognize our physical inability to be perfectly obedient to God's laws, which only forces us to cling to our Savior by faith.
- **Fourth:** Sarah's physical limitations at age 90 were no discouragement to Abraham's faith. Gen 18: 11-14 makes it clear that it was physically impossible for them to bear a child, and they knew it, but the apparent facts did not discourage their faith. This was God's plan, not Abraham's. It was God's responsibility, not Abraham's. They would take all the steps necessary, but only God could make it happen. Today, whatever the circumstances of one's life, family ties or culture, nothing will impede Him from granting His promise of righteousness.

**4:20 Fifth:** Abraham did not “**waver**” (*diakrino*, aorist tense: “at any time in the past...”- “to evaluate the difference between things:” in the aorist tense, “as debating an issue, argue, be undecided within oneself, doubt, hesitate,” FRIBERG) ... “in **unbelief**” (*apistia*, “not believable, impossible to be true”). It is easy to trust God when things are going well and are seen as highly possible, but when it seems impossible to continue, it is easier to distrust and rely on human solutions. Abraham could not understand how God's promise of an heir would be fulfilled (Gen 15:1-3). Sarah was a woman of faith: “she considered Him faithful who had promised” (Heb 11:11), though she initially laughed at the promise God made to her husband Abraham (Gen 18:12). Faith often is not easy. Struggling with God's promises is not doubt, anymore than being tempted is sin in itself. Abraham's cultural

reactions (adopting a servant and having a child with a servant) were human attempts to fulfill God's promise. Weak faith (especially in the character of God) yields to doubt. Strong faith never doubts God's character in the midst of testing and impossibilities. It is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). Today, the human efforts of self-affliction, penance, or self-abasement are useless because God will grant feely to the most sinful believer who trusts Him and repents of self-efforts or failures.

- **Sixth:** Abraham's faith is evident by his "giving glory to God." To "**glorify**" (*doxa*, "good opinion concerning one, magnificence, a manifestation of God's excellent power") means to demonstrate the trustworthiness of God's character. To accomplish this, God often brings His followers into impossible situations that only God can resolve. These are very uncomfortable for us, but when God brings us through them, we know it was His doings and not our ingenuity, thus He is glorified. When tested, how did Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego respond to their impossible test in Dan 3:16-18?

How did Paul "glorify" God in the impossible situation of his journey to Rome in Acts 27:21-25?

**4:21 Seventh:** Abraham was "**fully assured**" (*plerophoreo*, aorist tense: "one time past action..." – "cause a thing to be shown, carry through to the end, be fully convinced, to be completely certain")... "that what God promised he was able to do." Thus Abraham's faith was unconditional and without limits. Whatever God said, he trusted it with all of his heart and life and actions. This is faith.

### VIII. Response to Abraham's faith

<sup>4:22</sup> So indeed it was **credited** to Abraham as **righteousness**.

**4:22 When Abraham passed** from ignorant unbelief, to knowledgeable confidence in God's Word, God overlooked his sinfulness and accepted him in perfect righteousness. This is the blessing of Abraham that is available to all men everywhere that hear His Word. The one who accepts and receives and trusts in God's promises in His Word is conferred a perfect righteousness which makes him fully acceptable before a holy God. Faith is not a meritorious act, but simply the willingness to trust in God's offer and promise without any self-confidence, then quite undeservedly and beyond expectations, God generously and graciously grants His righteousness (2 Cor 5:21) so that He can enjoy the fellowship with His believing children. This is God's way of salvation for sinners. Quite amazing!

### IX. Application of Abraham's faith

<sup>23</sup> But the statement it was **credited** to him was not written only for Abraham's **sake**,

<sup>24</sup> but also for our sake, to whom it will be **credited**, those who **believe** in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

<sup>25</sup> He was given over because of our transgressions and was raised for the sake of our justification.

**4:23 This is not a history lesson:** what was written about Abraham is the same principle and faith that can and will save anyone at anytime, anywhere that hears and trusts in God's amazing offer. What is "credited" to the believer's faith is righteousness. Why does Paul say the OT stories were recorded in sacred texts in Rom 15:4?

**4:24 The record of Abraham's faith is important** because all men at all times have only become acceptable to God on the same basis, in the same manner: "believing." In Hebrews 11 it was evident that the only ones who have ever been accepted by God are those who have trusted Him through His Word by faith. No greater impossible situation could be imagined than the death and burial of the promised Seed or Savior, but God's power was more than sufficient for even this (much greater than the impossible conditions in Sarah's womb). Our God is able to fulfill any and all things that He promises. He is worthy of our trust. The question remains: what are we to do about those who have never heard (Rom 10:14)?

**4:25 It is not just the power of God to do the impossible (resurrection) that makes Him trustworthy**, but the personal sacrifice of being "delivered up because of our transgression." His death was no accident, nor was it an unjust action. No human ever died under more guilt than Jesus Christ. "God made him to be sin for us" (2 Cor 5:21). He was "**delivered up**" (*paradidomi*, "give over from one's hand to another") which was a judicial term, referring to the commitment of a criminal to his punishment or "the consequences of his wrongdoing" (FRIBERG). This is the same verb used in Rom 1:24, 26, 28 to describe God giving people over to their sin, so Christ was "given over" to the darkness of sin and guilt, to pay for all its horrible consequences in one act of God's wrath against His Son, the Lord Jesus.

- The fact of the resurrection was not just a demonstration of God's power, but the stamp of absolute approval and acceptance by God of the payment for sins made by Jesus on the cross. No one was ever guiltier of sin than Jesus at that moment, nor deserving of the wrath of God, because He was "made sin," our sin, thus His death paid in full sin's entire penalty for all mankind. The fact that God raised Him from the dead to sit on the right hand of the Father shouts to the entire world that the Father accepted the Son's payment for all sins (Rom 1:4) and is willing to grant full "justification" to all who believe in the promise of salvation. How does this chapter expand the concept of the conclusion of chapter 3 regarding this generous salvation (see 3:24)?
- Because Christ is a living Savior he can credit to any sinner's eternal account His own righteousness for every person who hears and responds by faith in Him and His Word.