

Justification in the Old Testament

📖 Romans 4:1-8

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We are continuing Romans 3:21-5:21, Paul's discussion of Justification. Justification is the past tense of salvation. It means you have been saved from the penalty of sin which is eternal condemnation. So if you have been justified then you have eternal security. Justification is an imputation of Christ's righteousness, a legal declaration of righteousness in God's court of law in heaven. It is based on God's grace as demonstrated by Christ's propitiatory sacrifice. The declaration occurs through faith and at that time forms the legal basis for Sanctification, which is the present tense of salvation where you are being saved from the power of sin. So the legal basis for sanctification is justification and if you are not justified you cannot be sanctified. The legal ground must be laid first and then you can be sanctified. Sanctification is the present tense of salvation where we are being transformed into Christ-likeness. But until we are justified we cannot be sanctified and so it is critical to understand this vital doctrine of God providing a legal basis up front through a declaration of righteousness through faith so that we have a firm footing with God and surety of our relationship to Him through faith in Christ.

Last time we worked our way through some of the most pertinent verses for the truth of faith alone in Christ alone in opposition to works. Note again Romans 3:27 where Paul shows that because we are shut up to faith and faith is not a work then all boasting is excluded. The only place for boasting is in the Lord. In 3:28 the reason for no boasting is because a man is justified by faith apart from works. If it was by works then we could boast. But you see that it is by faith which is juxtaposed to works in order to make crystal clear that faith itself is not a work. Faith then is not a contributing factor in our justification. Faith is not doing something; it is receiving something. It is like the hand of the heart that receives the free gift of salvation, the first aspect of which is our justification, the legal declaration of righteousness. The Bible could not state in clearer terms that this occurs through our faith. In 3:29-30, since God is the God of both Jews and Gentiles then the way of justification through faith is the same for all men. Finally, in 3:31 some Jews may think that if this is so then faith makes the Law invalid. On the contrary Paul says that could not be further from the truth, faith instead establishes the Law because it serves to show man that he is under sin and thereby draws attention to the need for faith.

We come to chapter 4 and what do we find here? Paul has just laid out for us the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Now he sets out illustrations of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Let's make several observations. First, who are the two personages he uses to illustrate the doctrine? In verses 1-5 who does he use? Abraham. In verses 6-8 who does he use? David. So in particular the first eight verses are directed to the Jew. These two men were Jews and they were justified by grace through faith. Why Abraham and David? Both were great men according to the Jews. Think about when Abraham lived vs when David lived? What came in between when the two men lived? The giving of the Law! Abraham lived before the Law was given. David lived after the Law was given. How was Abraham justified? By faith. How was David justified? By faith. So we see that whether a Jew lived before the Law or after the Law he was justified by grace through faith. How then could a Jew be justified by keeping the Law? He couldn't! And so Paul is showing by illustration that whether you lived before the Law or after the Law you were justified by grace through faith and never by works of the Law. And to convince a Jew of this he would need to have Scriptural evidence from the OT and so with Abraham he quotes Gen 15:6 and with David he quotes Ps 32:1-2. By Scripture Paul seeks to prove the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone.

Second, what did the works of Abraham and David look like? Think about their lives and their deeds. What do you think of Abraham's deeds? How did this man fare in his experience? Apparently this man believed and was justified before God while in Ur of the Chaldees as recorded at the end of Gen 11 and yet how did he live after that time? Did he continually trust in the Lord? I think not. Remember the Lord told Abram to go forth from Ur *without his relatives* and yet who did Abram take with him? Lot. Was that living by faith? That was a failure to live by faith that cost him dearly. Lot was a thorn in Abram's side. Remember the time when there was famine in the land and so he went down to Egypt and because of fear for his life he told his beautiful wife Sarai to say she was his sister instead of his wife. Was that living by faith? No. This story goes on and on. Abraham had some experiential victories but he had just as many, if not more failures. What am I getting at by pointing this out? That just because you had faith and were justified does not guarantee that your behavior will always be one of trusting the Lord. And this is what that famous Latin saying of Luther that you should burn on your brain was trying to communicate; *simil iustus, et peccator*. At the same time just and a sinner. You see that Abraham was at the same time just before God and yet a sinner. So then just because you are justified it does not mean you are always going to act like you are justified.

Who's the second illustration here? David. What do you think about David's spiritual experience? How did he fare? This man too had faith as a young man, long before he was King of Israel and so he was justified. And yet what did his spiritual experience look like? He had many victories in his early years. Yet later he committed adultery with Bathsheba. She got pregnant so what did he do next? Tried to cover it up. But that didn't work so he killed her husband Uriah. That's one way to solve your problems. Just

murder the husband. Was David continually living by faith? No. So he too had spiritual victories but he also had spiritual failures. Why would Paul cite David as a man justified by faith? To show that just because you are justified does not mean that your works will continually be good. The legal declaration in heaven does not have some kind of transformative power that produces good works. It is plain and simple a legal declaration in a court of law. So no matter how you live after the justification it cannot effect or give evidence of whether you are justified in heaven. This is not to say that we should go and live however we like. It is simply to point up the fact that there is not a transformative element to justification in our inner being. It happens solely in heaven, in God's court of law.

So both Abraham and David show that one can be justified and not have good works. They were at the same time just and a sinner and that was Luther's battle cry at the time of the Reformation. How did the Roman Catholic Church respond to Luther's battle cry? Oh no, they said, that's a legal fiction! You can't be at the same time just and a sinner. What was their view of justification? They had a different definition of justification. Father Mitchell Pacwa, the Catholic priest who debated justification with the Protestant Walter Martin, defined justification this way: "Justification is the process of transforming the total person throughout his entire life." Now do you see in that definition that the righteousness of justification is being infused gradually into the person to change them so that they become righteous? That's different and that's not what Luther or the Protestants are saying. Protestants are saying: "Justification is the instant legal declaration of a sinner as righteous in heaven." Alright, so here we see that the righteousness is not infused into us gradually but it is imputed instantly to our account when we by grace have faith in Christ. This is very different. The Catholic is a transformation within us; the Protestant is a declaration outside of us.

Luther used a vivid example to get across this difference. It's an example that has been used by both Protestants and Catholics so I don't think I'm misrepresenting or slighting in any way what is taught by either side and you need to understand because most Protestants today are functioning as Catholics. They think like Catholics. Luther said, "Each human being is a pile of dung and at the moment of faith Christ's righteousness covers that pile of dung like a covering of snow. The Catholic Church says, "No, it's not merely an imputation that simply covers over the fact that you are still dung underneath. But rather, justification also includes the sanctification and the transformation, the re-creation of the whole person into Christ." Now do you see the difference? In the Protestant view of justification the dung is covered by a blanket of snow. In the Catholic view of justification the dung is actually being turned into snow. My big problem with the Catholic view is that they're mixing together justification and sanctification and regeneration all into the same thing so that the whole thing is a process and I'm in process and if I'm in process how can I know if I'm right with God or not? I can't know in Roman Catholicism. Ask any Roman Catholic if they know they're saved and going to heaven and you'll get a lot of funny looks. You can't know because you're still in process and to think that you could know is crazy.

Now I'm looking at Rom 3-4 and I'm saying that justification is not us being turned into godly people through a process. I see Rom 4:5 and Paul clarifying what happened as a result of Abraham's faith and what does he say? He says, "God who justifies the ungodly." I don't have to undergo some transformative process in order to be justified by God. I'm ungodly and yet God justifies me. In other words, the dung that you and I are does not have to be turned into snow in order for God to look at us as if we are as white as snow. Oh no, we remain dung but He puts a covering of snow over us, which covering is Christ and declares us righteous so that when He looks upon us He sees us as white as snow.

Now I'll also say that then there is sanctification and that is where we talk about God's transformation of us but we don't want to confuse that with justification. They are not the same thing. What we are looking at in Rom 3-4 is a legal context and the formation of a legal ground so that we can stand in a legal relation to God that sets Him free to work with us in sanctification. But sanctification is the present tense of salvation and not the past tense. You can't confuse the past with the present. That blurs everything. That's confusing the legal basis with the actual transformation of the person. All I'm saying is that these should not be confused and that the legal ground work of justification must be laid first and then we can talk about sanctification. And I think that is why Paul is using men like Abraham and David here as illustrations. The OT shows that both these men were justified up front, legally declared righteous and then went on into sanctification where there was some transformation but which was imperfect. James 2, by the way is saying that Abraham's initial justification met its aim or goal when he offered up Isaac some 50 years later. The point is that God justifies us up front for a purpose and that is to provide the ground for sanctification. And when we demonstrate sanctification before men then God says our justification met its goal, its aim.

Look at how Paul says these things starting with Abraham in Romans 4:1, **What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?** He's addressing Jewish people in particular because he says **Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh.** So unless you're descended physically from Abraham he's not addressing you directly. Abraham is the father of the Jewish people and his story begins at the end of Gen 11, long before the Law was given. What did Abraham discover? What did he find? The Greek word **found** is in the perfect tense and the perfect tense refers to completed action. What did he find once for all? Verse 2, that he had nothing to boast about before God. **For if Abraham was justified by works,** first class condition, assuming it is true for the sake of argument, **if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.** So if Abraham was justified by works then he would have something to boast about, just not before God. Well, if the boasting would not be before God who would it be before? Men. Who else is there? So then if he was justified by works then he was justified before men and he could boast before men but he could **not** boast **before God.** Why not before God? Because God doesn't justify on the basis of works, only through faith. And faith isn't doing anything, faith isn't a work, faith is receiving

something. Do you boast about receiving a present? You can't boast in receiving something. You can only boast if you do something. But you can't boast in receiving a present!

Now, as I implied, Rom 4:2 does open the door for the possibility that a man can be justified by works before men and that is point over in the controversial James 2. You may have been wondering about James 2. It is every Roman Catholic's favorite passage because they say that we have to harmonize the faith alone in Romans 3-4 with the works in James 2 and the way they do that is to say that justification is by faith and works. Their interpretation of Romans 3-4 is that faith begins us on the path of justification and to that we cooperate with Christ's grace in producing works that merit justification. We say no! James 2 we say is a justification by works that occurs before men and occurs in sanctification. But because the Catholics have confused justification and sanctification then they get into this crazy balancing act trying to get faith and works together when Paul sets them in utter opposition to one another.

Verse 3 is the scriptural proof that Abraham was justified by faith alone. Why would Paul give scriptural proof of Abraham not being justified by works? Because he's talking mainly to Jews and "The rabbis had a doctrine of the merits of Abraham who had superfluity of credits to pass on to the Jews (Luke 3:8)." In other words, Abraham worked so hard to be justified that he had extra merits he could share with other Jews in establishing their righteousness before God. So the Jewish rabbis who developed oral tradition had a false doctrine of justification just like the Roman Catholics and John the Baptist nails them on that in the gospels. "Don't think you can say, "We have Abraham for our father." They could not say that because Abraham was not justified by works and so could not share with them any of his righteousness. He didn't have any righteousness. And it's almost amazing that the Jews would leave out this verse that Paul quotes right out of the OT. But that's why he quotes it. These are their Scriptures and if justification is by works how could this verse be in their Scripture? **For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."** Where does the verse come from? Genesis 15:6. Let's turn to Genesis 15:6. The tense in 15:6 is very important and some miss it. Some think that what the text is saying is that Abraham at this time believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness, such that he was not justified before this. That is wrong. The sense of the Hebrew *waw* with the perfect tense believed is "Having believed..." We're being given a notice before the blood sacrifice that Abraham already had a legal standing with God. He wasn't justified at this time. At this time he was already in the Promised Land. He was actually justified way back in Ur of the Chaldees when God first appeared to Him and spoke to Him and made promises to Him. It was at that time that Abraham believed and was justified, before he ever set out on the journey to the Promised Land. The Bible Knowledge Commentary says, "Genesis 15:6 provides an important note, but it does not pinpoint Abram's conversion. That occurred years earlier when he left Ur. (The form of the Heb. word for "believed" shows that his faith did *not* begin after the events recorded in vv. 1-5.) Abram's faith is

recorded here because it is foundational for making the covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant did not give Abram redemption; it was a covenant made with Abram who had already believed and to whom righteousness had already been imputed.¹ Tom Constable agrees saying, "When *waw* occurs with the perfect tense verb following, as we have here, it indicates disjunctive action and could read, "Now Abram had believed . . ." (cf. 1:2). God justified Abram (i.e., declared him righteous) because of his faith, evidently when he left Ur."² The Expositors Bible Commentary agrees saying, "The syntax of v.6 suggests that it is to be read as "background" information for the scene that unfolds in v.7. God was about to enter a "covenant" with Abraham that would lie at the base of all God's future dealings with him and his seed (vv.7-21). Verse 6 opens the scene by setting the record straight: Abraham had believed in Yahweh and had been accounted righteous. The "covenant" did not make him "righteous"; rather it was through his "faith" that he was reckoned righteous."³ Why am I making this point *ad nauseum*. So you see clearly that Abraham was counted righteous at the beginning in Ur and not somewhere in the middle such as at Haran or at the end in the Promised Land. It was a legal declaration made of him before he ever left Ur that had to be in place prior to God entering into a covenant with him.

Now you say, what did Abraham believe in order to be justified? Well, he didn't believe in Jesus Christ who died for his sin and rose again. That hadn't happened yet. That was the subject of progressive revelation and now that that has happened that is what we must believe. But what did Abraham have to believe? In the seed! The seed promise made to Adam and Eve that was repeated to Abraham. He was believing in the seed who was to come, which seed, of course, ultimately is Christ. But they were counting on the seed to come and solve their sin dilemma.

Alright, when did all this happen in Abraham's life? How old was Abraham? About 70 years old. Keep that in mind because the event in James 2 occurs about 50 years later. Abraham lives a long time. He actually lives to be 175. You say "That's old!" But in the world before the Flood people lived to be over 900 and if you doubt this then you have Manetho who says this and Josephus who says among others and Josephus' explanation is that it was the quality of the food in the world before the Flood. The food was so much better for us and all you needed was in the fruits and vegetation and seeds. Now after the Flood we have to have meat because there are nutrients in meat that we can't get in the same way from vegetables. But even then the nutritional value of the food after the Flood is so much less that lifespans decrease dramatically after the Flood. Actually, if you plot the lifespans you see an exponential decay and Abraham is along that decay curve and so he lived a mere 175 years, which we say is a long time (Genesis 25:7-8), but was actually not long in those times. So we have to keep in mind that Rom 3-4 is recording what happened when he was 70 years old and James 2 is recording what he did when he was about 120 years old. So are those the same event? No. they're separated by over 50 years. And it was when Abraham was 70 that it was said of him, "**ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.**" That's justification by faith and it was at the beginning that God credited it. See that

word **CREDITED**, it means “calculated, reckoned, it’s a mathematical term. Abraham had short accounts with God so to speak, -1, owed God, but now through faith Abraham is +1, has an abundance of credits in his account. No problem.

Verse 4, **Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor**, or grace, the Greek word translated **favor** is “grace” and of course, if you work all day the pay you get at the end of the day is not credited as grace. It couldn’t be grace because grace is unmerited favor and you merited it, you worked for it. So you get the first glimpse here that if you ever try to put grace and works in the same sentence, well, it’s gobbledygook. Grace and works are antagonistic to one another. I don’t want to hear anyone around here ever saying it’s God’s grace and my works are in cooperation to merit justification. That is a bogus sentence. Basically it means you got something for free that you worked for. And that’s nonsense. It is a contradiction of terms. That is why if you drop down to verse 16 see that faith and grace go together all the time. “For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace.” Because if it’s by works it’s not in accordance with grace. Works and grace don’t go together, can’t! Also turn over to Rom 11:6 and you’ll see the same type of thing again. Here Paul says, “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.” Try as you may to get grace and works together you will never succeed because they are polar opposites. One means merit; the other means no merit. And yet that is what Roman Catholicism is trying to put together. They’re trying, as one Catholic theologian says, to keep this crazy balance. Yeah, it is crazy. They say that we have congruous merit, which is working or cooperating together with Christ’s grace in the process of justification. And we say, no, it cannot be, and if it is then when we get to heaven we will have some praises to sing to ourselves because by an act of our free will we cooperated with Christ’s grace and therefore there is boasting. And that cannot be. We will boast in one only, Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He alone is my justification. He alone is the white snow that covers me, the pile of dung. To Him be all praise and glory forever and to Him alone!

¹ Allen P. Ross, “Genesis,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 55.

² Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ge 15:6.

³ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 129.