

3. Justification by Faith Exemplified (4:1-25)

In the fourth chapter Paul continues his emphasis upon the doctrine of righteousness by faith, turning to the person and circumstance of Abraham to further establish and exemplify it to his Roman readers. Paul found in Abraham and his relationship with God an eminently suitable subject to consider in his apologetic for the gospel, and that for the following reasons:

- Abraham's righteousness before God was apart from *works* (4:1-8);
- his righteousness was apart from *circumcision* (4:9-12);
- his righteousness preexisted the *Law* (4:13-15);
- his righteousness was solely by his personal *faith in God's unrealized promises* (4:16-22).

In turn, Paul employed these qualities of Abraham's righteousness to establish a series of pointed contrasts whose purpose was to advance his doctrine of justification by faith. Specifically, each of the above aspects of Abraham's life serves as the foundation of a given point of contrast, and together they form the chapter's structural outline.

It is also important to note at the outset that the core text for Paul's treatment of Abraham is Genesis 15:6. His central thesis and point of interaction throughout the fourth chapter is that "*Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness*" (cf. 4:3, 9, 22). Proceeding upon this overarching truth, Paul goes on to explain how it implicated Abraham's personal works, his circumcision, and his relationship to the Law.

The fact of Abraham's righteousness having been reckoned to him by faith makes him an obvious example for Paul to draw upon. But Paul understood as well that there are other important considerations pertaining to Abraham that make him crucial to his argument concerning the gospel. These considerations are *redemptive-historical* rather than ethical, and are sadly often overlooked by expositors. Paul knew that, in the upward movement of salvation history, Abraham held a singular place of significance. As much as Moses and David were focal figures in the Old Testament revelation of redemption, Abraham was greater, for both of those individuals and the covenants associated with them *presupposed* Abraham and God's covenant promise to him. The Jews well understood the preeminence of Abraham, and their confidence before God was inseparable from their ethnic and covenantal connection with him.

- 1) The nation of Israel had its origin in Abraham and God's covenant promise to him. When God later raised up Moses it was for the express purpose of fulfilling His promise to Abraham, and the Law of Moses (Old Covenant) was itself simply a secondary covenantal vehicle by which God would accomplish the first-level, typological fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant in all its particulars (cf. Genesis 12:1-2, 13:14-16, 15:13-16, 46:1-4; Exodus 6:1-8, 19:1-6, 32:1-14; etc).

- 2) For his part, David brought the theocratic kingdom promised to Abraham and inaugurated by Moses to its pinnacle of fulfillment. Through him God extended the borders of Israel's control to the Euphrates River in the east and the Nile River in the west, just as He had promised (cf. Genesis 15:18-20 and 1 Kings 4:20-21). Furthermore, in possessing the gates of their enemies Abraham's offspring had become as numerous as the stars of the heavens and the sand of the seashore (Genesis 15:1-5, 22:15-17). Like Moses before him, David was God's chosen instrument to fulfill His oath to Abraham.

Every Israelite understood this, and so recognized that his own identity and relationship with God were grounded in God's ancient promise to Abraham and his own personal connection with him. As much as a first-century Jew found his confidence in the Law as a disciple of Moses, he found it equally in his ethnic and covenantal relation to Abraham (cf. Matthew 3:1-10; John 8:31-58). First and foremost, a Jew was a son of Abraham, and for that reason was a "son of the covenant" and an heir of the promises made to him.

- 3) At the same time, Abraham's significance did not end with his foundational role in the Israelite kingdom. For as the theocracy declined following David's death, the writing prophets emerged with a two-fold message. The first was that God had decreed the destruction of theocratic Israel, and the second was that His promise to David concerning the perpetuity of his throne and kingdom would nonetheless be fulfilled in a future raising up of David's "fallen tabernacle" (Amos 9:11-15; cf. 2 Samuel 7:1-29; Psalm 89; Isaiah 9:1-7, 55:1-13; Jeremiah 23:1-8, 33:1-26; Ezekiel 34:1-31, 37:15-28; Hosea 3:1-5; etc.). David's earthly kingdom did indeed constitute a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, but the prophets made clear - most especially through their proclamation of the demise of that kingdom - that the true Davidic kingdom awaited the coming of David's great Son. The Israelite theocracy was but a shadow and foretaste; as God's oath to Abraham looked first to David's Israel, so it looked ultimately to another "David" and His everlasting kingdom whose citizens comprise the true "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:12-16; cf. Exodus 19:1-6 with 1 Peter 2:4-10; Revelation 5:12-10; also ref. Isaiah 51:1-52:10; Micah 7:1-20; Galatians 3:1-29; Ephesians 2:11-3:6).
- 4) The centrality of Abraham to God's relationship with Israel provoked in the Jews a sense of awe for him, and the legacy of tradition that accompanied it left Paul with the additional need to provide a corrective to Jewish thinking. For extra-biblical Jewish writing went so far as to regard Abraham as "perfect in all his deeds with the Lord." It was written that he did not sin against the Lord, and that "no one has been found like him in glory." In fact, the Jews' preoccupation with conformity to the Law as the basis of righteousness led some to argue that Abraham's righteousness in God's sight was the result of his blameless obedience to the Law, even though it would not be formally given to Israel until much later under the mediation of Moses. (Interestingly, many Reformed theologians argue similarly that Abraham was subject to the "moral law" which they maintain comprised the essence of the Law of Moses).

Ultimately, it was not Abraham's example of faith, but his central place in redemptive history that made him essential to Paul's argument concerning the gospel of righteousness by faith. Certainly, the Gentiles' share in Christ's kingdom depended upon the crucial truth that the promise to Abraham was not constrained to his physical offspring, as had been the case with the Israelite kingdom (ref. 4:9-17, 23-25). *It was their physical descent from and covenant connection with Abraham that led the Jews to venerate him, but ironically their misunderstanding of his role and significance in God's purpose caused them to erroneously view him as the epitome of their own aspirations under the Law.* Paul will later argue that, as a nation, Israel sought to establish its own righteousness by the Law rather than submit to receive God's righteousness through faith (9:30-10:3). This being the case, it is not at all surprising that the Jews would impose their own works righteousness perspective and orientation upon the man they ought rather to have regarded as the father of all who are justified by faith.

- a. The first point of contrast in this context involving Abraham concerns *faith* and *personal works* (4:1-8). Despite the common Jewish conviction regarding the basis of Abraham's righteousness, Paul stated unequivocally that he, too, had been justified by faith. And since the obtainment of God's righteousness by faith leaves no room for boasting (3:27-28), so also Abraham was left without a boast before God: *"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.'*" (4:1-3)
 - 1) Paul's introduction of Abraham follows the same diatribe pattern, and begins with a question that appears to reflect the Jewish belief that Abraham was justified by his own works. If this were indeed the case, it would effectively exempt Abraham from Paul's previous contention that all boasting is eliminated by God's redemption in Christ: *"If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about..."*
 - 2) To this Paul supplied the immediate retort: *"...but not before God."* The prepositional construction carries the sense of a boast that is directed toward or has reference to God, which boast Paul refused to grant to Abraham. At face value this limitation would seem to leave open the possibility of Abraham having *some* occasion for boasting, but just not with respect to God. In other words, he was properly able to boast of himself to men - perhaps even concerning the righteousness of his works - but had no such right with God. But two things argue against this conclusion: the first is that Paul's concern was with *justification* and not simply good works, and the second is that his whole point was to show that *all* boasting is excluded by virtue of God's demonstration of His own righteousness in Christ's atoning death. This being so, if Abraham had no platform for boasting before God, neither did he have such a platform before men. The God who justified Abraham *apart* from his own works would surely not permit him to boast of those works to his fellow men.

- 3) Lest there be any doubt among his readers that Abraham - the great progenitor of Israel and friend of God - had no boast of self-righteousness, Paul cited from the inspired Scripture itself: "*Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.*" As noted, this citation is from Genesis 15:6, and it stands as the central thesis of the entire fourth chapter of Romans. From this point forward all of Paul's argumentation through the balance of the chapter interacts with it in some way.

The context for this affirmation is God's intention to ratify His covenant with Abraham. On at least two previous occasions God had communicated to Abraham the substance of His covenant promise (ref. Genesis 12:1-3, 13:14-17), and now the time had come for the covenant to be formally ratified (15:1-21). Specifically, the "faith" that was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness pertained to his settled confidence in God's promise to give him a multitude of descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. Even though he was well advanced in years and had never had children, God promised Abraham that an heir would come from his own body, and he believed that what God promised would indeed come to pass (15:1-6).

This is a crucial passage - not merely because it is the first time the verb *believe* occurs in the Scripture, but more importantly because this belief is declared to be the direct and sole basis of Abraham's righteousness before God. Specifically, it was through his faith that he became the recipient of a righteous standing that had nothing to do with his own works; his righteousness was *reckoned* to him. Thus, from the very beginning the Bible establishes the inseparable connection between *faith* and an *alien righteousness*, and this connection must condition one's understanding of all subsequent revelation regarding men and their relationship with God. Though faith as the basis of righteousness is rarely addressed directly and explicitly in the balance of the Old Testament, the principle of *submissive, confident trust in God* in contrast to *self-confidence* and *self-righteousness* is repeatedly shown to be the fundamental point of distinction between the wicked man and the righteous man. Unlike the ungodly who trust in themselves, men, horses, chariots, and other "gods," the righteous are those who put their trust in the Lord, finding in Him a bulwark and refuge.

At the same time, because Paul's concerns were principally redemptive-historical, he drew from a context that is profoundly significant in that regard. For, even as Abraham believed God's promise of an heir and countless descendants to come from him, so the promise of offspring had its terminus in a blessing to come upon *all* the families of the earth (Genesis 12:1-3). The man *Abram* would become *Abraham* - a father of a multitude of peoples (Genesis 17:1-5). Corresponding to the kingdom promised to him, God's promise of a vast seed would find its fulfillment first in a physical progeny, and then in an innumerable multitude out of every tribe, tongue, nation and people (Galatians 3:29; Revelation 5:1-10).