

- 4) In verse 4:1 Paul introduced the person of Abraham to further establish his gospel thesis that righteousness comes solely by faith (3:21-30). At the same time, Abraham also provides a crucial contribution to Paul's summary insistence that faith establishes the Law (3:31). For faith establishes the Law in the sense that the Law *prophesied* of - and therefore *presupposed* - righteousness by faith (3:21); the Law served faith by advancing the promise of righteousness as a divine gift appropriated through faith (4:9-24; cf. Galatians 3:6-29). And because this gospel promise was first given to Abraham, it is eminently appropriate that Paul should refer to him in building his case for the gospel.

The present context consisting of verses 4:1-8 addresses the first of four points of contrast pertaining to Abraham and the principle of faith, namely that between *faith* and *personal works*. But whereas verses 1-3 are concerned specifically with Abraham's works in relation to his standing before God, the subsequent five verses of this passage are more general in orientation. That is, they are concerned with the inherent idea of *reckoning* associated with the contrasting principles of works and faith.

- a) In the instance of the former, Paul insisted that the reward reckoned to a person who works is simply what he has earned. For this reason it entails no *graciousness* on the part of the giver; it is a wage that is justly due for labor expended (4:4). Even though Paul's concern was with spiritual works as those which could issue in the "wages" of righteousness, it was nonetheless appropriate for him to draw upon the general relationship of work/reward to prove that works and grace are mutually exclusive (ref. 4:13-16).
- b) Conversely, where a person - *whom Paul openly acknowledges to be ungodly* - does not work for his righteousness, but simply believes in God who freely gives His righteousness to men through their faith, the righteousness of such a one is reckoned to him purely as a matter of grace; it is neither earned nor deserved (4:5).

By showing that the "reckoned rewards" associated with *faith* and *works* are exactly opposite - the one being an *earned wage* and the other a *free gift* - Paul insightfully demonstrated that works and faith cannot possibly operate together. Because the reward attached to each is acquired on the basis of mutually exclusive principles, a person's reckoned righteousness must be entirely and solely the result of one or the other. Furthermore, because faith and works are the *only* two possible realms in which a person can live and find his boast (3:27), so also the status of personal righteousness before God can only be the result of either earned wage or gift of grace; there are no other alternatives, neither can these two be combined. Every person lives according to the principle of faith *or* works, and each principle for living receives its appropriate reward.

- 5) By interacting with Genesis 15:6 Paul was able to demonstrate that Abraham was justified before God *by faith* entirely apart from his own personal deeds or efforts. Because of their innate self-idolatry, all men are startled, and even offended, by the concept of righteousness obtained as a gift of pure grace. But it was even more offensive to the first-century Jew. This is evident in the fact that the rabbis of that time commonly taught that even Abraham was justified by his personal deeds. And if the patriarch Abraham was so justified, certainly the Jews *living under the Law* did not expect to find their own righteousness apart from their compliance with that Law. For this much no Jew could deny: the Law of Moses was the covenant that brought Israel into relationship with God, and performance under its demands determined Israel's continuance in covenant with Him. Yahweh would be their God and they would continue to be His people if they kept His covenant (cf. Exodus 19:1-6; Jeremiah 7:23, 11:1-5). This being so, even if a Jew could possibly concede that Abraham - who preceded the Law of Moses - was himself justified by faith, surely it was undeniable that God's giving of the Law at Sinai introduced a new reality that rendered the principle of righteousness by faith no longer applicable.

Whether or not this thinking was behind Paul's statements in verses 4:6-8, his use of *David's* words brings compelling insight into the relationship between the Law of Moses and the reckoning of righteousness as a gift of grace apart from works. For not only was David a man who lived under the definition and jurisdiction of the Law, he, more than any other person, epitomized the theocratic kingdom under the Old Covenant. Three things are important to note about Paul's citation from Psalm 32:

- a) The first is that in this psalm David's focus was upon the **blessedness** that attends the person "*whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered*" (4:7). The concept of blessedness saturates the Old Testament and is used in various ways. Further, it is expressed by the use of two different Hebrew terms; the first is more common and is used most often of an endowment granted from a superior to an inferior, whether father to son, master to slave, etc. As might be expected, this term is used of God's condescension and favor toward men. The second term is the one David employs. It is important to note that it is never used of God's direct act of blessing men, but refers more to a recognition among men of the enviable circumstance or condition of another person. Nevertheless, *the happy condition it recognizes always has at least an indirect reference to a right relationship with God*. The majority of its occurrences are in the psalms, where in context it regularly contrasts the lots of the unbelieving, disobedient wicked and the righteous who put their trust in the Lord (cf. Deuteronomy 33:29; 1 Kings 10:8; Job 5:17; Psalm 1:1, 2:12, 33:12, 34:8, 40:4, 84:4-5, 94:12, 119:1-2, 144:15, 146:5).

Reflecting this God-ward orientation, David uses a particular form that is an interjection best rendered as the exclamation, “Oh, how blessed!” And like the majority of the other passages in which this form occurs, David addressed directly the happy lot of the man who is right with God. But this particular context is unique in that it concerns itself with the *unrighteous* man who has been *reckoned righteous* by God on the basis of His own determination to not take into account the person’s sin and rebellion.

While this Hebrew term does not elsewhere refer to this specific kind of blessing, the principle of *faith in Yahweh* permeates the various passages containing this exclamation of blessedness. The blessed person is the one who fully places his trust in the Lord as his refuge, fortress, and provider. And just as the man who trusts in God is enviable, so also is the man whose sin and iniquity are not counted against him. *In both instances, blessedness is the result of submitting oneself without reservation or qualification to God’s lovingkindness, promise, power, and provision.*

- b) The second thing to observe is that this forgiveness - this “covering” - is set in a parallel structure with the man “*whose sin the Lord will not take into account*” (4:8). The significance of this parallel statement is that it qualifies its predecessor. That is, verse 32:1 alone could be interpreted as pointing to the forgiveness that came to the Jews through offerings presented under the Levitical sacrificial system. Such offerings for sin were thought to be themselves acts of righteousness under the Law. This was the reason Paul could insist that, with respect to the righteousness to be gained through the Law, he was blameless (Philippians 3:1-6). But when considered in the light of 32:2, it is clear that the covering and forgiveness David was speaking of were not the result of righteous sacrificial acts performed under the Law, but a *gracious reckoning* by which God would not to take sin into account.
- c) Third, the use of *imputation* language in Psalm 32:1-2 is central to Paul’s determination to draw upon this passage. For imputation speaks of a “reckoning,” and this is precisely his contextual emphasis in this section of the epistle. In this way Paul used an *Old Covenant* individual to substantiate his doctrine of justification; a justification that does not speak of a progressive transformation of the sinner into a state of personal righteousness, or even an endless series of righteous acts by which a person maintains his present righteous status. Justification is God’s “non-accounting” of sins; it is further His forensic imputation or *reckoning* of His own righteousness to sinners as a free gift of His grace, and yet only by virtue of “*the redemption which is in Christ Jesus*” (ref. 3:21-24).

Douglas Moo's observation in this regard is well worth noting: *"He [Paul] uses this quotation to compare justification to the non-accrediting or not 'imputing' of sins to a person. This is an act that has nothing to do with moral transformation, but 'changes' people only in the sense that their relationship to God has changed - they are 'acquitted' rather than condemned."*

Thus David's words do not pronounce blessedness upon those who address their own sin through works of righteousness - much less those who, under a religious or moral system of righteousness maintain for themselves a presumed righteous standing - but upon those who are the recipients of God's unilateral, gracious determination to not reckon their sin against them. Furthermore, the fact that this principle was articulated by David within the sphere of the Old Covenant's governance introduces important redemptive-historical implications not lost upon Paul.

- The first is that it shows that righteousness by grace through faith was indeed God's operative principle under the Old Covenant. Over the centuries many have noted the strict compliance standard imposed by the Law of Moses and have presumed that the Jews obtained their salvation by the works of the Law. Yet the purpose of the Law was preeminently *prophetic* in that it spoke of the perfection that marks every true son of God; a perfection that characterizes the whole man and not simply his outward conduct. In this way it spoke of Jesus Christ, the true Man and true covenant Son. Accordingly, at the heart of the human perfection embodied in the Old Covenant was the obligation to love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:34-40). Such love is shown throughout the Old Testament to consist not in obedience to commandments *per se*, but eager, full, and joyful submission in faith to God as Lord, Father, and covenant Husband.
- It is in this way that the Law witnessed to the gospel. It prophesied of Christ, but it further showed the sons of Israel that their hope of righteousness lay in God's grace alone, for only divine forgiveness joined to *reckoned* righteousness could render them the "covenant keepers" they were to be. *Since keeping God's covenant did not consist in outward morality or piety but entire conformity to the divine nature, it demanded a reckoning of that conformity contrary to a person's own status as a sinner.* For that reason it pointed the Jews away from themselves to God's mercy and provision of His own righteousness; a mercy and righteousness that were to be manifested in the last days in the grace of the One who is the perfect God-Man. David lived out his faith under the structure provided by the Old Covenant, yet his faith - because it was *faith* - recognized that his righteousness was a matter of divine reckoning.