

RECKONED RIGHTEOUS

Romans 4

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Paul has made it clear that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (3:23). None of us have been good enough to experience God's glory. He has told us that there is no partiality with God, that we're all condemned (2:11).

Those who have the Jewish law are condemned by the law. And those who don't have the Jewish law are condemned by not obeying what they know is right – the law written upon their heart (2:12; cf. 1:18-20). At the end of chapter 2, he says that we're not part of God's people if we're circumcised of the flesh; rather, it's a circumcision of the heart that makes us part of His people.

At the end of chapter 3, Paul reminds us that Jesus has paid the price to set us free. But he knows the Jews will, nonetheless, keep pointing to Abraham, so he turns the argument of Abraham upside down in chapter 4. The Jews were arguing, "Abraham is our forefather, so we don't have to live a life of faith."

When I was a graduate assistant for an institution of higher education, I graded a New Testament survey class of 50 plus students. In that class was a relative of one of the most famous preachers in the world. This student will breeze through the class, I assumed. On the contrary, had it not been for a curve applied to the class, this direct descendant of a world famous theologian would have failed a basic New Testament survey class.

"Don't rely on your relative Abraham for your righteousness," Paul tells the Jews. "All that matters is where you yourself are on your journey of faith."

I gave the professor a heads-up, "I just want you to know that you're about to give a failing grade to a family member of the famous preacher." To which he replied, "I'm not giving anything good or bad; they are earning their own grade."

I. Found grace (vs. 1-5)

"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?" (v. 1). "According to the flesh" is clearly a reference to their lineage, their family tree. Abraham's natural offspring, the Jews, took for granted that he was their forefather (Psalm 105:6; Isaiah 41:8), and, they, therefore, were God's chosen ones, the rightful heirs of God's promises to Abraham. Having refused the arrival of their redeemer, they point back to their position in their patriarch, Abraham.

But what did Old Father Abraham find? The answer is he found grace and discovered that he was justified by faith. And the true descendants of Abraham, therefore, are found not by their fleshy

descent but by their faith. If you want to follow the footprints of Father Abraham, you must be a person of faith because he trusted God.

In Galatians, Paul, puts it this way “Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the nations will be blessed in you.’ So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer” (Galatians 3:6-9).

Backed into the corner by the Jews, who point to their inheritance in Abraham, Paul radically reinterprets Abraham’s story by reading it sequentially. “Let’s look at Abraham’s story,” Paul seems to be saying. “Was it works, was it law that made Abraham A-OK with God? I don’t think so,” Paul proclaims.

Now the Jews had pictured Abraham as being justified, or made righteous, based on all the good deeds he had done. If that were the case, however, Abraham could pridefully pat himself on the back. Paul takes the Jews back to their own scripture. What does God’s word say? “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:3).

Eleven times, the verb translated “reckoned” or “credited” occurs in this chapter. And ten times, the word “righteous” or “justified” is used (in either noun or verbal form). Obviously, knowing how to be seen as righteous by God is pretty important to Paul. “Reckoned” has the mercantile meaning of crediting someone’s account. Humans cannot attain righteousness from their own resources. But God credited Abraham as righteous in the divine ledger.

How then was Abraham reckoned as righteous? Because he was circumcised or because he was willing to do the work of obedience (sacrifice his son)? No. Back in Genesis 15:6, Abraham believed – long before he was ever circumcised (Genesis 17), before he ever attempted to sacrifice his son in obedience. In his faith, he found God’s grace – not in any deed that he had done.

In fact, at the time when Abraham was reckoned as righteous, he belonged to the ungodly. He was a moon-worshipping Mesopotamian. He had no grounds to demand anything from the Divine. Notice what Paul has done? Paul has made the pattern of Gentile righteousness by faith normative for Jewish righteousness. Abraham – a Gentile at the time – believed. God didn’t owe him anything. It wasn’t a wage (v. 4) he had worked for. Rather, it was a gift from God.

So, first of all, Abraham found grace.

II. Forgotten sin (vs. 6-8).

Look at verses 6-8. Paul used a Jewish method of interpretation (*gezerah shawah*), using one text to explain another text when they both share a key word. The key word is “reckoned.”

Look at verse 3 (from Genesis 15:6). “Abraham believed and it was reckoned (we might say accounted) to him as righteousness.” Then in verse 8 (from Psalm 32:2). “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account” or “reckon” into his account.

Abraham has been an example. Now, David is drawn into Paul's reasoning (v. 6). In Psalm 32, nothing is said about David's work or his deeds. Rather, David confesses his sins and clears his account before God. When God forgave David's sins, it set him free from the past and set him in right relationship with God.

In verses 6-8, we learn about forgotten sin – both David's sin and our sin. How would it change your life this morning if you really believed that God would not reckon your sins to your account? "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account" (4:8). What old burdens have you been bearing that you need to give over to God and His grace? How would it change your life if you could hear God's word this morning, walk outside these doors and put your sins of the past behind you? It could absolutely transform you – knowing that God remembers your sins no more, knowing that God does not reckon them to your account. God releases you from yesterday's failure.

The small house was simple but adequate. It consisted of one large room on a dusty street. Its red-tiled roof was one of the many in this poor neighborhood on the outskirts of the Brazilian village. It was a comfortable home. Maria and her daughter, Christina, had done what they could to add color to the gray walls and warmth to the hard dirt floor: an old calendar, a faded photograph of a relative, a wooden crucifix. The furnishings were modest: A pallet on either side of the room, a washbasin, and a wood-burning stove.

Maria's husband had died when Christina was an infant. The young mother, stubbornly refusing opportunities to remarry, got a job and set out to raise her young daughter. And now, fifteen years later, the worst years were over. Though Maria's salary as a maid afforded few luxuries, it was reliable and it did provide food and clothes. And now Christina was old enough to get a job and help out.

Some said Christina got her independence from her mother. She recoiled at the traditional idea of marrying young and raising a family. Not that she couldn't have had her pick of husbands. Her olive skin and brown eyes kept a steady stream of prospects at her door. She had an infectious way of throwing her head back and filling the room with laughter. She also had that rare magic some women have that makes every man feel like a king just by being near them. But it was her spirited curiosity that made her keep all the men at arm's length.

She spoke often of going to the city. She dreamed of trading her dusty neighborhood for exciting avenues and city life. Just the thought of this horrified her mother. Maria was always quick to remind Christina of the harshness of the streets. "People don't know you there. Jobs are scarce and the life is cruel. And besides, if you went there, what would you do for a living?"

Maria knew exactly what Christina would do, or would have to do for a living. That's why her heart broke when she awoke one morning to find her daughter's bed empty. Maria knew immediately where her daughter had gone. She also knew immediately what she must do to find her. She quickly threw some clothes in a bag, gathered up all her money, and ran out of the house.

On her way to the bus stop, she entered a drugstore to get one last thing. Pictures. She sat in the photograph booth, closed the curtain, and spent all she could on pictures. With her purse full of small black and white photos, she boarded the next bus to Rio de Janeiro.

Maria knew that Christina had no way of earning money. She also knew that her daughter was too stubborn to give up. When pride meets hunger, a human will do things that were before unthinkable. Knowing this, Maria began her search. Bars, hotels, nightclubs, any place with the reputation for street walkers or prostitutes. She went to them all. And at each place she left her picture – taped to a bathroom mirror, tacked to a hotel bulletin board, fastened to a corner phone booth. And on the back of each photo she wrote a note.

It wasn't too long before both the money and the pictures ran out, and Maria had to go home. The weary mother wept as the bus began its long journey back to her small village.

It was a few weeks later that young Christina descended the hotel stairs. Her young face was tired. Her brown eyes no longer danced with youth but spoke of pain and fear. Her laughter was broken. Her dream had become a nightmare. A thousand times over she had longed to trade these countless beds for her secure pallet. Yet the little village was, in too many ways, too far away.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes noticed a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother. Christina's eyes burned and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back was this compelling invitation: "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home."

She did. (Max Lucado)

Abraham, first of all, found grace. And, second of all, David's sins were forgotten.

Have you found grace? Have your sins been forgotten?

III. First father (vs. 9-12)

Paul takes for granted that Abraham is the forefather of the Jews. He says so in verse 1. But he also wants to prove that Abraham is the spiritual forefather of the Gentiles.

Remember I told you earlier that Paul ponders the Abraham saga sequentially. He takes things in historical order. So he asks in verse 9, "Now who is blessed? Just the Jews, or also the Gentiles. When we say "Abraham was reckoned as righteous," whose account gets credited – just the Jews or also the Gentiles?"

"Well, let's look at the sequence," Paul says in verse 10. Was he reckoned righteous while he was circumcised or uncircumcised? "Oh," says verse 10, "it was before he had the mark of a Jew." For you see, Abraham is called righteous based upon his belief back in Genesis 15. He is not circumcised until Genesis 17.

Therefore, Paul is arguing that at the point when Abraham was reckoned as righteous, he was the equivalent of a Gentile – without circumcision, without the law. God, therefore, could not have reckoned Abraham as righteous because he obeyed the law and performed Jewish rites. It was only because of his faith that he was found righteous.

Therefore – follow the story – God does not restrict salvation which comes from being declared “upright” or “righteous” only to the circumcised who live under the law. So Abraham is, first of all, father of the uncircumcised.

“First of all, being a Gentile at the moment of his faith, Abraham is father of the Gentiles.” And only much later does he become father of the circumcised, when he became circumcised (Genesis 17).

The circumcision, therefore, was only a visible mark or sign that confirmed Abraham’s righteousness that he found by faith. You might say, Abraham is the father of the circumcised if they, too, follow in his footsteps and are saved by faith.

IV. A future promise (vs. 13-22).

Yes, God declared Abraham as righteous, but there is more to the story. God also promised to bless Abraham and to make his descendants a great nation (Genesis 12:2). His offspring were going to be like the dust of the earth (Genesis 13:16), the stars of heaven (Genesis 15:5), the sand of the sea (Genesis 22:17). He also promised to give Abraham’s descendants a vast expanse of land (Genesis 13:15-17; 15:18; 17:8). But, most importantly, God promised that all the families of the earth – not just the Jews – would be blessed in Abraham (Genesis 12:2; 18:18; 22:18), and that he would become the father of a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:5). God never intended to restrict those blessings to Abraham’s biological heirs. Just read Genesis. Start with the beginning of the story.

In fact, in Galatians Paul reminds us that Moses and the Law didn’t come until 430 years after the call God placed on Abraham. The faith of Abraham precedes the Law of Moses. And all the law does, he reminds us (v. 15), is show us that we are falling short of God’s expectations.

In verse 13, you notice the promise to Abraham and his descendants that they would be “heir of the world.” Jewish interpretation over time expanded inheritance of the Promised Land to include the whole world. It began to take on the context of the kingdom of God.

Notice how many times Paul says “the promise” in this part of the passage. Look at verse 13, “the promise to Abraham.” Look at verse 14, “the promise.” Verse 16, “the promise may be certain to all the descendants.” Verse 20, “yet, with respect to the promise of God.”

Promise of a blessing. Promise of descendants. Promise of the inheritance of the land. There is another part of this promise, and it’s the best part of all.

I want you to notice verse 17, the best part of the promise. Abraham “believed him” – that is, he believed God – “who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.” There it is. Paul is piling hope upon hope about this promise. Look at verse 18, “Hope against hope.”

Hope is a perception of the present based on the premise of God's presence and power. Hope is that which enables us to move into the future because of the reality of God's presence in the "now" time.

Are you living with hope today? Do you have a perception that the present is based upon the premises of God's presence and power? Are you able to move into the future because of the reality of God's presence right now?

What does hope help today?

- Hope that your O2 levels will stay high enough to keep you out of the hospital?
- Hope that a vaccine will be here soon?
- Hope that you don't bring the virus home from the hospital to your kids.
- Hope that everyone emerges from Covid forever changed but also kinder, more generous, and more Christ-like.

The best part of the promise is that God brings new hope, a new reality, and new life. Look at verses 19-22. He uses the example of Abraham and Sarah. They were as good as dead. Abraham was about 100 years old and had a corpse-like body. Sarah's womb was a tomb. But God kept putting the promise out – not on their timetable, but on His. Are you waiting on God today?

V. Final victory (vs. 23-25)

Paul, always pointing to Jesus, brings us to a culmination of Jesus in the Christ story in verses 23-25. Christian faith is Abraham's faith born all over again. Faith in the same God who had now demonstrated His power afresh with the wonderful resurrection of our Christ. Just like Abraham believed that life would come from the dead womb of Sarah, Christians have believed that life has come from the tomb once inhabited by the dead – the tomb of the Christ. And it reminds us that although the wrath of God is poured out against all unrighteousness on the cross. He, the crucified Christ, was raised from the dead.

Chapter 4 teaches us that our right standing before God, our righteousness, is totally divorced from our human performance. It depends entirely on our faith and response to God's promises. We're just like Abraham. We're sons and daughters of our forefather in the faith, not our forefather in the flesh. God always begins with nothing – from a wandering, moon-worshiping Mesopotamian to a deceiver named Jacob to a no-name, stiff-necked throng of slaves working in Egypt in a brick factory to a little baby in a Bethlehem manger to a thief on a cross to an anonymous Roman executioner on Golgotha. God begins with nothing because humans lack any capacity to save themselves and lack any merit worth mentioning that God can use to their advantage. Our salvation is like God standing before a dark void and creating the world. Standing before Sarah's withered womb and bringing forth a child. Standing before the dank tomb and raising Jesus from the realm of the dead. Humans can only receive God's salvation by faith. And those who say yes to faith have been woven from every race and tribe and clan and caste into a new people of God, a single spiritual family called the church. The world does not consist of Jews and Gentiles but, instead, of those who say yes in faith and those who are faithless.

What did Abraham find? Abraham found grace, the grace of God. I hope you find it, too.

Whatever you've done, whatever you've become, it doesn't matter. Please come home!

Let us pray.

Source: David Garland, forthcoming *Romans* commentary.