JUSTIFICATION IS AS OLD AS ABRAHAM

Justification by faith apart from works isn't something Paul invented. According to Paul’s careful reading of Genesis, Abraham was justified by faith (Romans 4:3; Genesis 15:6). Paul wasn’t teaching a new theology. He was bringing to light what Scripture had taught from the very beginning.

Paul continues his discussion of justification by faith by looking at Abraham’s life. Abraham was the prototypical righteous man and the father of the Jewish nation whom God had given the covenant of circumcision (Genesis 17:10–27). In the Jewish community of Paul’s time, there was an decided connection between works like circumcision in the Jewish ethnic identity and justification or righteousness before God. Since circumcision was the command of God, it was unthinkable that anyone could be a righteous person who was not circumcised.

Through a careful examination of the life of Abraham, Paul discovers that circumcision wasn’t necessary for righteousness before God. Amazingly, Abraham was righteous by faith before his circumcision (Romans 4:10; Genesis 15:6; Genesis 17:10–27). Since Abraham was declared righteous before any works, anyone can be righteous by faith apart from works. When it comes to justification, our works and ethnic identity don’t matter. What matters is receiving God’s gracious gift of justification (Romans 4:7, 8). Righteousness by faith apart from works transcends ethnic boundaries and can create a new community of those untethered by ethnic identity markers.
Write out Romans 4 from the Bible translation of your choice. If you are pressed for time, write out Romans 4:9–12. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
NOT NOW AND NOT IN THE JUDGMENT

Last week we learned that justification is courtroom language. In a judicial proceeding, a person can be justified or condemned. We would expect that a just judge would justify or condemn based upon the righteousness or unrighteousness of the defendant. If the defendant is found to be unrighteous, then they would be condemned. If they are found to be righteous, then they would be justified.

Shockingly, this is not how it works for those who believe in Jesus. Through faith, we are accounted righteous (Romans 4:3) even though we are ungodly (Romans 4:5). In this incredible, unexpected turn of events, God credits those who believe with righteousness as a result of Jesus’ death and resurrection (Romans 4:24, 25).

Paul’s teaching about justification by faith would have been so new and so contrary to established patterns of belief that Paul’s audience would have required him to give strong scriptural evidence. What biblical support could he provide? None other than the first great man of faith described in the Bible, Abraham. According to the Genesis account, Abraham believed God, and his faith was accounted to him for righteousness (Romans 4:3; Genesis 15:6). This righteousness by faith wasn’t only for Abraham. Abraham was the prototype. He was to be the father of a great nation of people who shared his faith (Romans 4:11, 12, 16–18; Genesis 17:5). If we share the faith of Abraham and are righteous like Abraham, we don’t need to fear condemnation in the judgment (Romans 4:6–12). Condemnation is only for the unrighteous, and believers are not unrighteous—they are accounted righteous through faith in Jesus.

Paul gathers additional biblical evidence for his teaching about justification by faith in the writings of David. He quotes David, who said, “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin” (Romans 4:7, 8; cf. Psalm 32:1, 2).

This verse may be one of the most comforting, assurance-filled texts in all of Scripture. It describes the blessedness of those whose sins and lawless deeds are forgiven. More than that, it promises that God shall not impute sin to those who have faith. The assurance of this verse extends from the present into the future. Sins are forgiven and covered in the present. Sins shall not be imputed to you in the future. As long as your faith is firmly rooted in Jesus Christ, you can be confident that your sins are forgiven and that they will not be held against you in the future.
At almost every major turn in the book of Romans, Paul returns to a conversation about the law. Helping the Roman Christians understand how to have a proper relationship with the law was one of Paul’s principal reasons for writing the book. Without a correct understanding of the appropriate relationship with the law, people can’t have the kind of assurance they need for a healthy spiritual life, and the church can never become the kind of community God intends it to be.

The law is vital to the apostle Paul, and his readers must understand its proper function. The appropriate role of the law isn’t to save. God’s promise to Abraham did not come through the law. It comes through faith (Romans 4:13). This has to be the case because if God’s promise came through the law, then the promise would forever fail to be realized (Romans 4:14). After all, no one (except Jesus) has ever perfectly kept the law. All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23). As a result of sin, the law can only produce wrath for the transgressor (Romans 4:15). When we violate God’s law, we are subject to the just judgment of God’s wrath. Since we all have sinned, we all deserve a judgment of condemnation. If God’s promise comes by the law, then we are all doomed. Paul is clear: the promise can’t come by the law.

Additionally, God doesn’t eliminate the law to bring about His promise. If He did that, He would be eliminating transgression (Romans 4:15). That is preposterous. God has a better solution to the sin problem than saving by law or by doing away with the law and pretending sin doesn’t exist. His solution is to provide a Savior.

God’s promise doesn’t come through the law, and it doesn’t happen by getting rid of the law. God’s promise comes as a gift of grace accessed by faith (Romans 4:16). Since it is a gift of grace accessible by faith, it is certain (Romans 4:16). In a world of uncertainty, certainty is comforting. God’s promise is certain because it doesn’t depend upon our performance; it depends upon God and His good grace. Since our performance is spotty at best, reliance on our obedience will always lead to uncertainty. Uncertainty leads to anxiety and anxiety to despair.

In place of uncertainty, anxiety, and despair, there stands God’s sure and certain promise fulfilled in Jesus’ death and resurrection (Romans 4:24, 25). His promise is guaranteed to all who have faith. All who access God’s gracious promise by faith are a part of a new community—the trans-ethnic family of Abraham.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Galatians 3:1–25
Titus 3:3–8
Deuteronomy 9:4–6
Hebrews 11:8–12, 17, 18
Genesis 17:9–14

What other verses come to mind in connecting faith with Abraham?

Review your memorized verse from Romans 4.
The story of Abraham teaches us that the life of confident faith is a dynamic journey with ups and downs. Our gut reactions aren't what matters so much as where our confidence eventually lands. God first promised Abraham that he would have a family when he was seventy-five years old (Genesis 12:4). Over the next several years, it became clear that Abraham's wife, Sarah, wasn't going to have a child. After eleven years of trying, Abraham and Sarah decided that Abraham should have a child with Hagar, Sarah's servant (Genesis 16:1–3).

Twenty-four years after God first promised Abraham that he would have a child, God reminded Abraham of His promise and let him know that he was going to have a son through his wife, Sarah (Genesis 17:15, 16). Abraham's first response was to fall on his face and laugh (Genesis 17:17). Sarah responded the same way (Genesis 18:12, 13). Abraham and Sarah's initial response would not win an award for best faith. However, their initial reaction wasn't their final response. God appealed to them by asking, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Genesis 18:14). In response, they became strong in faith. They didn't let the deadness of their bodies keep them from believing (Romans 4:19).

Abraham's life of faith continued and came to full expression when God asked him to sacrifice his only son. When faced with such a painful and heartbreaking command, what would he do? Abraham believed in a God who could give life to the dead (Romans 4:17). Abraham was convinced that God could make him a great nation even if he sacrificed his only son, because God would keep His promise by resurrecting Isaac from the dead. By his act of faith, Abraham did, in a sense, receive his son from the dead (Hebrews 11:12, 13).

Though Abraham initially laughed at God's promise, his faith landed with certainty on God's power promise to give life. It is because Abraham's faith landed on God's ability to perform all that He promised, including raising his son from the dead, that his faith was credited for righteousness (Romans 4:21, 22).

God's life-giving power was fully and finally demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. If our faith lands on the same life-giving power that Abraham's landed on, we will be counted righteous just as he was (Romans 4:23–25). Faith isn't a feeling; like Abraham's, it doesn't always start strong. Faith sometimes begins by laughing at God’s extraordinary promises. But if, in the end, it lands on the resurrection of Jesus, it brings in the guarantee of righteousness and everlasting life.
PROMISES AND CONDITIONS

“Without the grace of Christ, the sinner is in a hopeless condition; nothing can be done for him; but through divine grace, supernatural power is imparted to the man and works in mind and heart and character. It is through the impartation of the grace of Christ that sin is discerned in its hateful nature and finally driven from the soul temple. It is through grace that we are brought into fellowship with Christ, to be associated with Him in the work of salvation. Faith is the condition upon which God has seen fit to promise pardon to sinners; not that there is any virtue in faith whereby salvation is merited, but because faith can lay hold of the merits of Christ, the remedy provided for sin. Faith can present Christ’s perfect obedience instead of the sinner’s transgression and defection. When the sinner believes that Christ is his personal Saviour, then according to His unfailing promises, God pardons his sin and justifies him freely. The repentant soul realizes that his justification comes because Christ, as his Substitute and Surety, has died for him, is his atonement and righteousness.

‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness’ (Romans 4:3–5). Righteousness is obedience to the law. The law demands righteousness, and this the sinner owes to the law; but he is incapable of rendering it. The only way in which he can attain to righteousness is through faith. By faith he can bring to God the merits of Christ, and the Lord places the obedience of His Son to the sinner’s account. Christ’s righteousness is accepted in place of man’s failure, and God receives, pardons, justifies, the repentant, believing soul, treats him as though he were righteous, and loves him as He loves His Son. This is how faith is accounted righteousness; and the pardoned soul goes on from grace to grace, from light to a greater light. He can say with rejoicing, ‘Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; that being justified by His grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life’ (Titus 3:5–7).”

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How could the early church’s debates about circumcision help your church’s unresolved discussions?

How can you contribute to this trans-ethnic family of faith?

How have you been able to embrace righteousness by faith at the heart level?

How does God’s promise that He is not and shall not count your sins against you make you feel?

What does faith mean to you?

How does one believe as Abraham did?

How does grace guarantee salvation?

Is it presumptuous to have assurance of salvation? Why?

Why or why not is salvation by grace lawless?

Abraham and Faith