

JUSTIFIED

Romans 3:21- 4:3

Put yourself in the position of most of the world in the middle of the first century some two thousand years ago. You've grown up believing that you need keep all the rules, dot the "i's" and cross the "t's" and practice certain rituals, then you will be ok, maybe. Everything was merit based and that was somewhat appealing to those who had aspirations of high achievement. There was recognition of those who were good at it. These people were held in high esteem and they were proud of their achievements. Such meritocracies were not exclusive to the Jews. Pagan religions had achievement levels or degrees that one could attain by hard work. That same concept is alive and well today in most (all) pagan religions even if the practitioners don't admit that their practices are religious or pagan.

If you are in such a culture and someone comes along with a different message that says that you don't have to work or pay a price to be "acceptable" to the Supreme Being, then I'm sure that would sound "too good to be true." The question was then how can I get in on this if it does not involve working for it or paying for it? The simple answer is that it is through faith.

Through Faith – 3:21-24

²¹ But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; Romans 3:21-24 (NASB95)

In the early part of the letter to the church at Rome, Paul focused on the "natural light" or laws of nature and inner conscience that were guides to all people (Gentiles and Jews) with regard to what was acceptable and unacceptable behavior. The purpose was to reveal the relationship of God's will with man conduct. Those who did the right things (being obedient to the basic tenants of their conscience and observance of cause and effect) were "rewarded" with good health, long life, a measure of success, etc. Those who ignored the available wisdom suffered the consequences of their wrong behaviors.

Paul then moved to those who had been blessed with the Law (given by God through Moses) which was a better revelation of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and what God expected from people. In both cases, that which was revealed (by nature and by the Law) were the attributes of God: God is good, He is a God of grace, God abhors wrong and uncompassionate behavior, God is all powerful, God is divine, He is eternal, God is set apart (holy), etc.

God's revelation of Himself was not simply so that we could "know" but that we would take action or "do" or be obedient to the law which also prescribed the consequences of disobedience. The light of the "word" that shows us the next appropriate step along the path in which we are to walk and be pleasing to God also shows us the results of deviation from the path. This latter part of the revelation could be called "conviction." Without conviction, we are left to drift off the path with nothing to warn us or to draw us back to where we should be. Conviction is a requisite for repentance and repentance is a requisite for forgiveness. Alexander MacLaren calls "conviction" a merciful gift.

While the Law and the words of the prophets prescribe "requirements" along with the prosperity of obedience and the penalties of disobedience, these do not give us the power or the means of obedience. A "poet" (perhaps John Bunyan) was credited with the following:

"Do this and live, the law commands,

but gives me neither feet nor hands.
A better word the gospel brings.
It bids me fly and gives me wings.”

However, both the Law and the Prophets do point us to the ultimate revelation of God’s provision for dealing with sin which is separate from either of these witnesses. Paul had already told his readers (in verse twenty) that no one could attain a condition of righteousness in God’s sight by keeping the law. We know one reason is that people will make errors and miss the mark in spite of their best efforts. There is also an additional situation in our failing to have “righteousness before God” in that God looks not only on the “external behavior” but also examines the “motives.” So even if a person were able to keep the “letter of the law,” there would be errors of motive that would be disqualifying for earning righteousness.

We see further emphasis of this point in verse twenty-three where Paul declared that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” We understand the idea of sin or missing the mark either in our actions or motivation. What does the second part of “falling short of the glory of God” actually mean? We may have thought or been told that this means our errant behavior or motives do not bring glory to God. While that is true, the emphasis here is that our sin does not result in honor, approval or praise from God. In fact it does just the opposite. The word translated as “glory” is (in the Greek) “doxa” which we find in such verses as John 5:44 and John 12:43 where Jesus warned us that many will seek the “doxa” (approval or praise) of men and not seek the “doxa” (approval or praise) of God.

The righteousness of God (seen in verse twenty-one) would be better translated simply as “God’s righteousness.” This is not a reference to an “attribute of God” (although God is indeed righteous or just). Instead, this is a reference to that “status” which God has declared or imputed to us that is not associated with (apart from) the law. This righteousness is revealed in the good news of God’s salvation in the completed work of God Incarnate (Jesus, the Christ) and is available to all who believe (rely on, trust in) what God has by His grace given to us.

In Jesus – 3:25-26

²⁵ whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 3:25-26 (NASB95)

Paul then moved to the next step in the revelation of God’s righteousness (imputed to us who believe) that does not use “nature” or the Mosaic law and that is His righteousness revealed in and through Jesus Christ. This righteousness (justification) which is obtained through (or by) faith in Jesus Christ is available to all people (Jew or Gentile) who believe and trust in the completed work of Jesus Christ as the necessary and sufficient remedy for the sinful condition of all people. This sinfulness was a problem not only for the Gentiles but also for the Jews; therefore, all are in need of the remedy that God provided (impartially) through Christ. Paul clearly states that this righteousness is a gift of God’s grace and, therefore, is not dependent on our works or deeds to partake of His righteousness or to be justified in His sight.

Here we see the ultimate outcome of God’s patience and tolerance in that He does not make us pay the penalty for our sins (the wages of sin is death) if we would accept and receive the redemption that God provided for us in Christ Jesus.

For All People – 3:27-31

²⁷ Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. ²⁹ Or is God *the God* of Jews only? Is He not

*the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also,*³⁰ since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.³¹ Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law. Romans 3:27-31 (NASB95)

The boasting mentioned here may be a reference to what Paul pointed out in Romans 2:17 regarding their identification as Jews, their familiarity with the Law and their association with God.

Verse 28 is an elaboration on the answers to the questions Paul raised in verse 27. The first question was essentially “what is the basis for your being proud of having God’s favor or being acceptable to Him?” The obvious answer is that there is no basis for boasting. The second question touches on the principle behind this conclusion; namely, that this “favor” is obtained by faith and not by doing the deeds of the Law. If we keep Paul’s argument in context, we cannot separate these verses from those starting in verse 21 where he introduced the concept that God’s righteousness is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul told us that God’s righteousness is available for all who believe in (have faith in, trust in, rely upon) what God did for us in Christ. Christ fulfilled all the requirements of the universal law of sin and death by dying for us.

Paul now returned to this assertion by reaffirming that what God did for us in Christ was **not** dependent on the Law given through Moses but that our standing before God is a matter of belief and trust (faith) in His grace or free gift.

Paul then raised two additional questions. Is Jehovah for the Jews only and is He the God of the Gentiles? The first question was asked since the Jews had the idea that since God gave His laws to the Israelites (and not to other nations) that He belonged exclusively to them and that God was not concerned with the other nations. This belief was reinforced by the fact that the “nations” worshiped idols or the planets or animals. To refute such a belief, Paul reminded them of one of the tenets of their belief that is found in Deuteronomy 6:4 and that is “there is only one God.” Logically, Paul could argue that if Jehovah is not God of the “nations” then there must be another god who is over them. But since there is only one God, then Jehovah has to be God over the nations also. Whether the “nations” acknowledged Him or not did not have any bearing on the truth that Jehovah is the Creator God who is the beginning of all things physical and spiritual.

We can carry the argument even further and conclude that since the “Lord is one,” He does not have two sets of principles by which He operates. Since He justifies those who had the Law by faith, then He also justifies those who did not have the Law through faith also.

The fifth and final question that Paul raised (see verse 31) had to do with whether or not the Law was still in effect since our justification is by faith and not by the keeping or doing the Law. Paul began (in Chapter 1) by citing that God’s attributes were evident in the natural order of things and that even our conscience affirms that “God is” and that there are right and wrong ways to live. He then moved to the fuller revelation of God’s attributes in that which can be seen in the Law given through Moses and ended up concluding that the fullest manifestation of God was seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. So we have moved from natural law (available to all) to Mosaic Law (available mainly to the Israelites) and finally to trust in God’s free gift (available to all) and each fuller revelation of God did not negate the previous revealed truths. Truth does not change just because we obtain a better understanding of the truth. Therefore, since the Law is truth, it cannot be made ineffective or declared to be of no use. The purpose of the Law was to reveal the sinfulness of man and to cause us to realize that we needed salvation from the penalty and power of sin which leads us to faith in Jesus Christ. That has not changed. The thing that faith has accomplished is that it confirms the truth of the Law in that it shows us God’s righteousness (imputed to us).

Including Abraham – 4:1-3

¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.” Romans 4:1-3 (NASB95)

Up until this point, a skeptic (and there were and are plenty around) could make an argument that Paul’s claims are unsubstantiated. They could have asked, “where’s the proof” that a person can obtain a “right relationship” with God apart from keeping the Law? The answer is in the historical evidence related to Abraham. Paul identified Abraham from a historical perspective as being their physical “forefather” which he likely was making a deliberate effort to distinguish this from the reference to Abraham’s “spiritual fatherhood” which is mentioned later on in verses 11, 12 and 16 of this chapter.

The New Bible Commentary has noted that it was important for Paul to use the example of Abraham at this point for two reasons. First, the Jews viewed Abraham as a man who pleased God above all by his obedience to the law. Second, Abraham being the recipient of God’s promise and ancestor of the Jewish people, occupied a crucial place in the Old Testament salvation history. It was Paul’s understanding that one of the central errors of his Jewish contemporaries was to emphasize the Mosaic covenant at the expense of God’s covenant with Abraham some 400 years before the Law was given. Paul could then cite Abraham to show that his emphasis on justification by faith is not something new and revolutionary, but is the teaching of Scripture from the beginning.

It was also beneficial to reference Abraham since the Rabbis taught that Abraham had a surplus of merit from his works that was available to his descendants. Such an idea may have resulted from the concept of God’s blessing on those who honor and obey Him extending to a thousand generations. Paul did not try to argue against that idea, but used it to make the point that IF that were true and Abraham was justified by works, then he had something to boast about. However, that boasting could only be used with other people, but it was not something that could be used before God. The source of Abraham’s righteousness before God can be seen in Genesis 15:6 where we see that Abraham believed God and that faith (belief) was credited (or gifted) to him as righteousness or justification in God’s sight.

Addendum: The following notes and discussions provide a transition into the Bible Study for March 29, 2020 that begins in Romans Chapter five.

Not Wages and Not Rewards – 4:4-5

⁴ Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. ⁵ But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, Romans 4:4-5 (NASB95)

At this point, Paul went on to explain the difference in a gift and wages or a reward. A gift is always at the initiative of the giver and if it is truly a gift, then it is given for no other reason other than the pleasure or will of the one making the gift. The fact that faith is needed comes from the necessity of having faith in order to receive the gift. If I give you a present and you will not accept it, then the gift does not benefit you. On the other hand, if I pay you something for a job you did for me, then that payment is a reward for services or material that I received. It then becomes something that you deserve and it is not in any sense a gift.

If I expect to be saved because I have been good and/or because I have the right genealogy, then I would conclude that I deserve the benefit of salvation. The problem with such thinking is that I can never be good enough or have the right genealogy if I am a human being. But let’s take this a step further and say that we accept the gift of salvation realizing that we

haven't done anything to deserve it and we, indeed, don't have the right genealogy to deserve it since we are of the seed of Adam. But after we have received it, we then start to think that we need to do something to pay for the great gift that we received. Do we, in trying to pay for our salvation (after the fact), then turn the gift into wages and thus make the gift ineffectual? Are we then no longer under grace, but have put ourselves back under the law? The answer to that question is that you really can't go back under the law since the "old man" who was subject to the law has died and the "new man" which is spiritual will be totally frustrated and entangled and rendered ineffective by the constraints of religious rites and rituals. What happens is that we miss out on the benefits of being led by the Spirit and of having fellowship with Christ if we slip into the mode of trying to please God by doing religious things rather than by being transformed in the image of Christ.

Paul had a lot to say about this situation in his letter to the Galatians in the first few verses of chapter five if you want further study on this situation.

It's by Grace - 4:16-19

¹⁶ For this reason *it is* by faith, in order that *it may be* in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, ¹⁷ (as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, *even* God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. ¹⁸ In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE." ¹⁹ Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; Romans 4:16-19 (NASB95)

The "reason" Paul referred to in verse 16 is found starting in verse 13. When God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees, no "laws" and prescribed rituals had been given. God gave certain promises to Abraham regarding what he and his descendants would have by virtue of being "God's people." One of the promises was that Abraham was to have a son by his wife Sarah and this son was to be his heir. Abraham believed God would do what He said and that belief formed the basis of the relationship between them. Abraham was in "right relationship" with God as a result of his believing God. This is what Paul meant by "the righteousness of faith."

The argument Paul made regarding the impossibility of "inheriting the earth" by keeping the law (v.13) was illustrated in the life of Abraham and Sarah by the fact that the trusteeship for God's Plan of Salvation was passed on to Isaac rather than Ishmael even though Ishmael was Abraham's first born. If Abraham could have accomplished what God wanted him to do by having a son with Sarah's slave girl Hagar, then he did not need the miracle that God provided in the birth of Isaac. As Paul said, "Faith would not be needed." We could make a similar argument regarding our being saved by keeping the law or by doing good works. If that were possible, then Jesus died in vain.

All the promises were to Abraham and his "seed" or descendant. The distinguishing characteristic of Abraham was his faith. This means that the true "seed" of Abraham are not confined to (and does not include all of) his physical descendants. As Paul stated in Galatians 3:29, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

God had referred to Abraham as the father of many nations even before it happened. Since God sees the end from the beginning, He knew there would be many physical descendants of Abraham. God also knew many would believe even as Abraham believed and both these (the physical and spiritual descendants) were realities to God even though it had not occurred in a historical sense. If "seeing is believing" as many say today, then Abraham had no reason to have

any hope. God had told Abraham to look up into the sky and see if he could count the stars. His descendants would be as that – too many to count.

It's Assured - 4:20-25

²⁰ yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, ²¹ and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. ²² Therefore IT WAS ALSO CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. ²³ Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, ²⁴ but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵ *He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.* Romans 4:20-25 (NASB95)

Based on the physical evidence, it would seem impossible for Sarah and Abraham to have a child. Nevertheless, he believed that God would accomplish the promise even though he could not figure out how it would be done. As we know from the account given in Genesis, the fact that Abraham discounted their ability to have a child did not prevent them from trying to “help” God accomplish the promise. Abraham was convinced that what God had promised would happen and God was pleased with that trust relationship. God declared Abraham to be righteous.

The terms and conditions of salvation have not changed from the beginning. God's everlasting covenant with mankind was simply, "If you obey Me, I will be your God and you will be My people." [Lev 26:2,12; Jer 7:23, 11:4, 30:22; Eze 36:27-28] Obedience is a result of faith as expressed in the verse "The just (righteous) shall live by faith." Since God does not change, then the same terms and conditions applied to Abraham are applicable to us. God imputes His righteousness to us in the same way He did to Abraham when we exercise "the faith of Abraham." The revelation of the Plan of Salvation has progressed throughout the history of God dealing with mankind so that the promise to us is not of a physical son to be born to us in our old age, but it is a promise of everlasting life through the completed work of the Son of God Who died for our sins and was raised for our justification. Our faith finds expression in the fact that it is this same Jesus Who lives in us as we identify with Him in His death on the cross. As He died and was resurrected, we too have died to our old nature that we may be raised to a new life with the **life source** being God's Spirit.

This condition of being rightly related to God is plainly seen to be "not something that we can earn" but it can be ours only as we receive it as "a gift from God Himself." Our response is to receive it and to show our appreciation through obedience to the commands of God. For those who are born again, this is not a burden because it is Christ Who lives in us and we become expressions of Him to the world around us.