

Notes on Romans 4

Intro: Paul concluded chapter 3 with an affirmation that God's righteousness excludes boasting. Justification rests not on the law (rule or principle) of works but rather the law (rule or principle) of faith. Even, in the life of Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish people, one may clearly see that justification is by faith and not by the works of the Law.

Even Abraham (as well as David) was counted righteous by his faith (4:1-8).

v. 1-3 For the Jew, Abraham was perhaps the most likely candidate for justification by works. His obedience to law was heroic. Paul refers to him as “our forefather according to the flesh” because this is the relationship Paul has in common with those Jews yet unbelieving, to whom Paul now is making his appeal.

Paul has suggested that the law of faith excludes boasting. If Abraham were justified by works then he would have cause to glory or boast in his own accomplishments. But Abraham could not do this before God, in whose presence he saw himself a sinner in need of grace and who put his trust in the gospel promise of Gen. 15. So the Scripture explicitly states that Abraham was reckoned righteous by his faith.

v. 4-8 The contrast is between "working" and "believing". “Working” implies the obligation of God to give us what is due us, i.e. legal righteousness by perfection. “Believing” implies the grace of God in justifying sinners. This righteousness apart from works is the righteousness that comes through the forgiveness of sins. David speaks of this very thing in Ps. 32. David had sinned against God in the episode with Bathsheba. He had forfeited the possibility of righteousness by works. But now he speaks of the blessedness of being forgiven. This is a blessedness that Abraham also shared (v. 9) and to which Paul refers in v. 3 on the basis of his faith.

This righteousness was reckoned to him on the basis of faith in God’s promise rather than on the basis of circumcision and the keeping of the works of the Law. By this faith he became the father of all who, following in his steps, believe among all the nations and who are heirs of the promise of eternal life made to him (4:9-25)

v. 9-12 Now note that Abraham was forgiven of sin (pronounced righteous) while uncircumcised. Abraham was circumcised later as a sign of the righteousness that he had earlier through faith. This makes him the spiritual father of the Gentiles. And his circumcision makes him the father of those Jews who not only are circumcised but who also walk in his steps by trusting God for forgiveness of sins.

v. 13-15 What is abundantly clear is that Abraham was righteous before the Law was ever given. Consequently, the promise of eternal life came by means of the righteousness of faith, not the works of the Law. If as Paul argued similarly in Galatians the inheritance of eternal life came through the Law, then the promises themselves are nullified and faith is made empty or void. But actually rather than be the means of eternal life and blessing, the Law keeps working to bring about wrath. And wherever law exists, transgressions exist that bring about this wrath.

v. 16-17 So then the promise is received by faith in order to assure that all can benefit, not only the Jews who lived under the Law but also the Gentiles, who were not under the Law, but have Abraham's faith. This enjoyment of the blessing by both Jews and Gentiles fulfills God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 17, the very chapter where Abraham was circumcised!

Consider the “multitude” over which Abraham is father and consider that among them, for the most part, are those people described in chapter one as “worthy of death” and chapter six “enslaved to sin”. Yet, it is these that make up “the many” who are now righteous by faith!

v. 18-22 Abraham trusted a God who could raise the dead and create what did not exist. God began to fulfill the promise in the birth of Isaac but its ultimate fulfillment was in the host of spiritual descendants that Abraham was able to have through the righteousness of faith. That faith working in Abraham was counted to him for righteousness.

v. 23-25 In a similar way our faith is counted to us for righteousness when we, like Abraham, trust God to provide a way of forgiveness. Our faith and Abraham's are essentially the same; it is faith in a God who raises the dead and calls into existence what does not exist. We believe that Jesus died for us on the cross and that God raised him for our justification.