

Justification in the Old Testament

A Study on Romans 4:1-8

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The Apostle Paul has declared that there is a righteousness that God approves and gives to men apart from the Mosaic Law (Rom. 3:21), and that this righteousness is in Christ (Rom. 3:22). He has positively concluded that by keeping the Mosaic Law no person can be justified (declared righteous). This was a blow to the spiritual pride of the Jew who placed his hope for salvation on how well he kept the Mosaic Law. The Jew was so steeped in tradition, culture and religion that he felt by keeping the Mosaic Law — being as good a Jew as possible — he would be right with God. But Paul destroys any hope for salvation in the Law or good works. He declares that salvation is by grace through faith in the person of Jesus Christ and his perfect work for sin at the cross.

There are many people who have been raised in a Christian culture and are acquainted with Christian tradition, and who may even be religious at heart, who are trusting their baptism, church membership, good works, Christian background, etc. to save them. But these things are worthless unless one has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and knows that he has been saved from sin by grace through faith.

In Romans 4:1-8 Paul shows that salvation was by grace through faith for people in Old Testament times — that men have always been saved on that basis and no other. He uses Abraham and David as prime examples. These two men held in highest esteem in the Old Testament.

ABRAHAM — Romans 4:1-5

“What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh hath found?” What about Abraham? A Jew might reason that if the Mosaic Law is abolished as a means of justification, then the rest of the Old Testament must go with it. So Paul goes back to the time when the Law was not yet in existence to prove that all persons in the Old Testament were saved by grace through faith based on the death of Christ. (Old Testament truths on justification are relevant even for today; God’s method has not changed.) If Paul can prove that Abraham was justified by faith, then it will be clear that all Jews and all others must be saved on the same basis.

Abraham had a very high position. He was the originator of the Jewish race and was called “the friend of God.” His is one of the great religious names of all time. He is honored in three prominent religions: Judaism, Islam and Christianity. According to Scripture,

Abraham was given tremendous position and favor with God. Did he acquire this through a lifetime of good works and pleasing God? No! His life had some very bright spots, but also some extremely dark ones. All that Abraham had was by the grace of God!

“For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God.” Paul assumes the argument to tear it down. If Abraham were justified by his good works, he could boast in his own attainments, but he could not glory in God.

Men who think they are right before God because of good works always boast of their own attainments. Only those who are justified by grace through faith can glory in God who has done it all.

“For what saith the scripture?” Paul appeals to Scripture to prove his point. He does not go to reason or philosophy, but to the inspired, written revelation of God, the Bible. The Scriptures are the absolute authority for the Christian, not rationalism or empiricism.

“Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.” Paul cites Genesis 15:6. God had promised Abraham that his seed would possess the land forever and that out of his loins would come a great nation to possess the land. At this point Abraham had no children to carry on his line. But God had promised a seed, and Abraham believed this promise. God counted that faith for righteousness. There is no indication that Abraham did anything but believe the promise. On that basis God justified him or declared him righteous.

The word “counted” is a bookkeeping term which means to “credit” or “put to one’s account.” Man is operating in the debit column of the ledger because of sin. The moment he believes God’s promise of salvation through Jesus Christ, God puts to his account a perfect righteousness and declares that person righteous or justified. This credit of perfect righteousness puts the account in the black.

When Abraham believed God, he did the one thing that a man can do without doing anything. God made a promise, and he undertook fulfilling it. Abraham believed in his heart that God told the truth; that is all. Abraham’s faith was not an act but an attitude. His heart was turned completely away from himself to God and God’s promise, leaving the fulfillment to God. This faith was neither a meritorious act nor a change of Abraham’s character or nature; he simply believed that God would accomplish what he had promised.

What does it mean to believe? The word has been so twisted and misused that it has lost its meaning in the mind of modern man. To believe means “to be persuaded of, to place confidence in, to trust, to entrust.” It signifies reliance upon God. This involves:

1. *The mind:* one must have adequate knowledge of the person and work of Christ. He must have facts before he can believe. With proper knowledge he can become convinced.
2. *The emotions:* The facts about Christ must become personal. There must be an application of the facts so that one is involved with the person of Christ. When this is done it produces confidence.
3. *The will:* Volition is employed. Faith is knowledge passing into conviction, and conviction passing into confidence. It is a commitment.

We must hasten to add that it is possible to have knowledge without commitment and involvement. This is intellectual assent. It is possible to have commitment without knowledge and involvement. This is false dedication. And it is possible to have involvement without knowledge and commitment. This is religious, emotional experience.

The cause of salvation is God, but the means God uses to bring men to himself is faith — a gift of God exercised by man. God has promised to justify all who will receive Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Saviour. Will you, as Abraham, believe God's promise?

“Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.” A workman is paid wages by his employer for the services he renders. A man works for so much an hour or is paid so much for a job he has done. If the laborer is paid for work that he does, the employer is not exercising grace by paying him. However, if the employer gives money to the laborer gratis, he is acting in grace and the laborer can only receive it.

Abraham was not justified by his good works. The harder one works for justification, the deeper in debt to God he goes and the further he removes himself from God's grace. He cannot meet God's standard for righteousness (he cannot perform the work necessary for the wages). Only salvation received through faith is consistent with God's grace.

“But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” Those who do not work for their salvation but believe God's promise of justification in Christ shall be saved. This verse says that “God justifies the ungodly.” He will not justify good people. He will only justify those who admit that they are ungodly sinners who have no righteousness in themselves.

God is more likely to justify a “down and outer” at the Rescue Mission who realizes his need than he is to justify a cultured “up and outer” who sees no need for righteousness. The moment a person turns to Christ, God puts to that person's account the very righteousness of Christ.

DAVID — Romans 4:6-8

“Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works.” Paul also uses King David as an illustration. David lived under the Mosaic Law, but he was not justified before God by keeping the Law. He was justified apart from works.

“Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.” This is a quote from Psalm 32 which speaks of David’s conviction of sin after he was guilty of adultery with Bathsheba and was directly responsible for the death of her husband Uriah the Hittite. Even though he was a believer, David had done the horrible acts of adultery and murder. He was the most miserable person on earth. He was unhappy and under great conviction. A believer out of fellowship with God is most miserable. Yet, David rested the hope of his salvation in God who forgives sin. He knew that God had forgiven him, and he rested on this wonderful truth. We should note that although David was forgiven, God did not overlook this sin. David was under the disciplinary hand of God for the rest of his life because of it. But he never lost his salvation. When he wanted desperately to run away and hide from God, he did not do it. Instead, he came to God and flung the whole dirty mess before him and asked to be forgiven.

“Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.” David lived in the light of God’s grace. Even when he was deep in sin, he knew that he had been counted righteous before God. This is the non-imputation of sin. God would not credit the sin to David’s account because he had already credited Christ’s righteousness to David’s account, and thus David had a perfect standing before God. There would be no eternal judgment for this sin because David believed God and his belief was counted for righteousness.

CONCLUSION

David and Abraham are two of the greatest names in Israel’s history, and both testify to the fact that nobody is declared righteous before God by good works, but rather by believing what God says.

God has unconditionally promised a perfect salvation to all who will receive Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Saviour from sin. Will you believe God and be justified, or will you not believe and pay the just penalty for your sins, which is eternal separation from God? The decision is yours. Your eternal destiny hangs on what you do with Jesus Christ in this life.