

Romans: Justification by Faith Alone Verified from the OT, Part 4c

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EXPOSITION: Chapter 4:1-25

The Problem of Gospel Myopia

Gospel Clarity

With his progressively prosecuted argument from 1:18 to its brilliant climax in the passage 3:21-31, the question must be asked as to why Paul continues with another chapter. Surely it is a case of overkill! Not at all, the apostle now goes for the jugular—the chapter is pure polemics and highly strategic. It was designed to rescue the Gospel from parochial and short-sighted agendas, from the grasp of autonomous man. In rebellion, the Jews had subverted Abraham – and hence his significance in the divine economy – to their own agenda, claiming him as their "father" and boasting in their natural descent, to which Jesus rather re-joined, "You are of your father the devil." (Jn 8:31-59). Why such strong language? Ironically, the very one that God called to be "heir of the world [*kosmos*]" (v. 13) through the righteousness of faith (Gen 15:6), the Jews commandeered for their own righteousness and exclusion from the world (Gentiles). Indeed, they even claimed that Abraham's obedience earned him his righteous status with God and thus his mediatorial role, and that he had obeyed the law even before it was given (Moo, *op. cit.*, p. 256). This subversion of the Gospel is exposed by Jesus for what it is: diabolical. Rather than mediate covenant status by faith Abraham now mediates it by virtue of natural descent. Ethnicity, or birth, has historically provided the justification for elitist tyrannies and policies of ethnic cleansing. Hence, when justification by faith is usurped by works (i.e. ethnic status), injustice and tyranny result. The Gospel thus has a scope that includes society, mediating true justice. The tragedy, though, is that the Christian church has repeated Israel's error. She too has commandeered the Gospel for her own ends. She has subverted, in many cases, even the message of salvation through grace by faith to a shibboleth of cultic membership, domesticating and reducing it exclusively to "personal salvation". The world or culture-scope of the Gospel is conveniently ignored or theologically obfuscated. And thus, the agency of true justice for the world is suppressed.

Gospel Scope

How does the apostle establish the scope of the Gospel? Through this chapter, Paul further amplifies the antithesis between the 'Gospel of God' (faith) and the 'Gospel of Man' (works), demonstrating that the former was never based on "boasting" (3:27) – autonomous man's merit – verifying it from the OT. To do so, he appeals to the two most iconic people in Jewish tradition, Abraham and David. Paul's Gospel is no new innovation (Acts 24:14). It has been said that the NT believer relates typologically to four OT people: to Adam *racially*, to Abraham *redemptively*, to Moses *corporately*, and to David *regally*. This suggests that the apostle is not only stopping the Jews and the Judaizers in their tracks – by appealing to their own authorities – but even more strategically establishing his Gospel as the Gospel of God's government (David) for the redemption of the world (Abraham). God's promise to Abraham – to inherit the world (v. 13-16) – guarantees the conversion of the nations by pulling the rug from under autonomous man's self-justification and hence humanist tyrannies. Not only are individuals 'justified by faith alone' – granted covenant status – but also nations and cultures. This chapter, accurately exegeted, exposes the exclusive focus on "personal salvation" as a myopic and truncated gospel. It debunks the claim that the notion of a "Christian nation is a myth". Not only is this claim a denial of history but more importantly a denial of the Gospel as revealed to Paul. From the beginning the Gospel's scope was designed to extend from *personal renewal* to *cultural reformation*—to the renewal of the world. It is, in fact, the Gospel of God's government for the world, the *kosmos*, which in the NT not only signifies "the inhabited globe as the theatre of history" but also "the universe as the sum of all created things". In its classical usage it was associated with the sense of "order", of "what is constructed from its individual parts", and what is well ordered is also beautiful, an "adornment". The scope of the Gospel thus covers not only the harvest of the inhabitants of the world but also the re-ordering of all created things, of every sphere of life, restoring them to God's original purpose, and this realised in space-time history (Eph 1:10). It is the Gospel for the family, for education, for justice, for economics, for international relations, and so on. It is, in fact, the divine manifesto for the re-ordering and thus beautification of the universe, for paradise restored.

Furthermore, in the face of the impossibility of inheriting the world, the Gospel is the power of God to salvation (1:16); indeed, it is the word of God's power that calls the things that do not exist into being (4:17), calling forth order from chaos (Gen 1:1-3) and the generations from the beginning (Is 41:4). What is impossible with man is possible with God (Lk 8:27). Before history

is wound up, God's people will inherit the earth (Mt 5:5), they will love the Lord with their entire heart and mind – thinking God's thoughts after him (Mt 22:37) – loving their neighbour as themselves (Mt 22:38), and completing the mandate to teach the nations all that Christ commanded (Mt 28:18-20). And as a consequence,

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

Ps 22:27-28

In outline the chapter breaks down into four parts: *first*, v. 1-8, showing the antithesis between "faith" and "works" by appealing to Abraham and David as the paradigm for 'justification by faith alone'; *second*, v. 9-12, showing that Abraham's circumcision was subsequent to his justification, received as merely a sign and seal of justification; *third*, v. 13-22, demonstrating that God's promise to Abraham of inheriting the world was guaranteed, not by works of the law but by the righteousness of faith, and called into existence by the word of God's power; and *fourth*, v. 23-25, applies the faith of Abraham as paradigmatic for the new covenant believer, concluding the whole division which began in 1:18.

4:1-8—Faith & Works

1 *What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather[,] according to the flesh?* **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 counted to him as righteousness."* **4** *Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.* **5** *And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,* **6** *just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:*

7 *"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; 8 blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."*

We have taken the liberty of introducing a comma to v.1 after the phrase "our forefather" to more accurately express the apostle's intent (see ASV; also Meyer, Godet, Philippi, Hodge). The question is thus, "What was gained by Abraham (our forefather) according to the flesh?" That is to ask whether any human merit (i.e. the flesh) provided him an advantage. Paul uses the term "flesh" in this sense when he declares in Philippians 3 that he "...put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh ... circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ... a righteousness of my own that comes from the law..." (v. 3b-6, 9). In the same passage Paul then contrasts "confidence in the flesh" with "...the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (v. 10b). So, what Paul is saying in 4:1-8 is that Abraham, if "justified by works" (i.e. by the flesh), certainly has something to boast about, "but not before God" (v. 2). This is an important phrase; the notion of standing before God (i.e. in God's sight) hearkens back to 2:29 where Paul in defining the true Jew claims, "His praise is not from man but from God". Likewise, the Judaizers in Galatia circumcised the Gentiles to "boast in their flesh", hence gaining approval from the Jewish authorities (Gal 6:12-13). In other words, the "Jew who is merely one outwardly" (2:28), that is to say, according to the "flesh", finds their praise – or authentication – from man rather than God. Clearly, "boasting" (2:17, 23; 3:27) is motivated by the need for justification; if this is not received from God by faith it is received from man by works. As a covenant creature, man will either derive covenant status from the living God or from from autonomous man as a pseudo god (Gen 3:5). This will be found from religious and societal elites.

Applying the principle of Genesis 15:6 (v. 3), Abraham thus gained nothing by the flesh; works play no part in justification. Wages are obligatory when work is performed, they are not a gift. However, for the one who believes in the God who "justifies the ungodly" (v. 4), covenant status is credited gratis—freely as a gift. This was scandalous for the Jew. First-century Judaism believed in God's grace, but for those who deserved it; a *non sequitur*, and a diametrically opposed concept to Paul's teaching of grace—it was for the "ungodly", those whose justly earned wage was death. If faith were not apart from all works it would not be grace (3:28). In other words, grace demands that justification be by faith alone—"through grace by faith" (Eph 2:8).

"Abraham believed God, and it was counted [*logizomai*] to him as righteousness." (v. 3). This is the first time in Romans Paul uses *logizomai* in the sense of "imputation"; it means "to reckon, to count, to calculate", hence "to transfer to one's account". It is an accounting and forensic term, also used in this sense in vv. 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24; 6:11. On one hand, sin's

committed are not counted and thus forgiven, on the other, righteousness not performed is counted and thus credited (vv. 3, 6-8). Our sins are not imputed but righteousness is.

4:9-12—Faith & Circumcision

9 *Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.* **10** *How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.* **11** *He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well,* **12** *and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.*—Because righteousness was accounted to Abraham through faith before circumcision he is thus "the father of all who believe" (see v. 16), whether circumcised or not, whether Jew or Gentile. Circumcision was merely the sign and seal of covenant. Hence, descent from Abraham is by virtue of faith, not natural birth or by circumcision. Faith alone mediates covenant status for both Jew and Gentile, it is universal. Therefore, the promise to Abraham guarantees the success of the Gospel's missionary mandate to the entire world, and hence, provides an eschatology of victory, as the next paragraph demonstrates.

4:13-22—Faith, Promise, Law, & the Nations

13 *For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.* **14** *For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.* **15** *For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.* **16** *That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,* **17** *as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.* **18** *In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be."* **19** *He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.* **20** *No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,* **21** *fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.* **22** *That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness."*—Paul now begins to show how "the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith" (v. 13). "Promise", as either noun or verb, features five times in this passage. While the term "heir of the world" is not literally found in the promise to Abraham, it provides a succinct abbreviation of the Genesis promise: that he would be the progenitor of a vast number of descendants, embracing "many nations" (12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:4-6, 16-20; 22:17); that he would possess "the land" (13:15-17; 15:12-21; 17:8); and that he would mediate blessing to "all the peoples of the earth" (12:3; 18:18; 22:18). Of special note is the promise that he would "possess the gate of his enemies" (22:17b), an adumbration of Jesus' promise concerning his church that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt 16:18). While "gates" signify authority and power they are, nevertheless, as part of the ancient city wall, defensive in nature. God's people will not ultimately be withstood as the Gospel's power overruns the satanic power structures of the world (Rev 11:15; Dan 2:44). This promise had been in the consciousness of man from the beginning, passing through the generations. It was, in fact, the *protoeuangélion* of Genesis 3:15—the promise of victory over our enemy – that is, the Serpent, the Devil – that while his seed would crush the seed of the woman's heel the seed of the woman would crush the Serpent's head (Gen 3:15; Rev 12:9). While the former is an injury the latter is fatal, the head representing the authority and control centre of evil. Christ, as the seed of the woman, conquered Satan definitively in history, in the cross: "Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out." (Jn 12:31). Furthermore, the prophets show that the promise of "the land" is merely an adumbration, a down-payment on the whole earth, foreshadowing the turning of the nations to the Lord and the restoration of the earth as a garden-temple (Ex 3:8, 17; Num 13:23; 24:1-7; Dt 11:10-12; Is 51:3, 11; Ps 2:8; 22:27-28; 47:8; Is 55:3-5; Obad 21; Zech 8:22-23; 14:9). Israel's subduing of "the land" and its righteous governance was only ever designed to be a teacher, a modelling of the government of all nations through the final economy in Christ (Ex 19:5-6; Eph 1:9-10; 3:10). It is often overlooked that "the promise" to Abraham was not of "personal salvation" or of "individual righteousness" – as promoted by the truncated gospel, the gospel according to "St. Evangelical" – but rather of inheriting the world through his progeny. In other words, Abraham was not envisioned or motivated by his own salvation, temporal or eternal. It was rather, his faith in the promise of his seed inheriting the world – of their victory in history – that was credited to him as righteousness. Accordingly, the gospel of exclusively "personal salvation", is the very one that also denies its victory in history, deferring it to a wished-for future kingdom age, depending on the Second Advent to accomplish what the first, supposedly, could not. You can decide which view is more Christ glorifying.

The victory of God's people in history is the reason why the promise did not come by law. Such a promise – humanly impossible – could only come to pass through the miraculous intervention and action of God, and hence through faith (v. 14, 17-19). Approaching one hundred years of age, no amount of human works could raise Abraham and Sarah's bodies from the dead so as to produce an heir, likewise, the harvest of the nations and the renewal of the world as a cosmic temple. Furthermore, it was by the law that wrath came because of its sin-defining role, and hence escalating sin to "transgression" (v. 15), that is, "passing beyond" the set limits of a command, attracting God's judgement. Hence, the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise awaited the inauguration of the new economy in Christ, the God-man, guaranteeing through grace and faith the promise to *all* his descendants, believing Jews and Gentiles, that is, *all* nations (v. 16).

4:23-25—The Faith of Abraham & the Believer

23 But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, **24** but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, **25** who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.—Paul leaves no doubt as to the application of "the promise" to all believers in the new economy. Our faith in the promise of the victory of God's people *in* history is the stuff of right standing with God; it is the faith that justifies. But why does it justify?—because of its reliance on God's promise, his word. To deny the veracity of this promise to Abraham and his seed is to deny the faithfulness of God and hence one's own covenant standing. And therefore, any eschatological scheme that robs God's people of inheriting the nations this side of the Second Advent – that is, in Gospel time – is to render God's covenant with Abraham null-and-void. It is unalloyed unbelief. As Abraham's seed, Christ was delivered up to death and raised for *our* justification that *we* might inherit the nations. This is the Gospel.

In summary, we now conclude the section that began at 2:1 ([Judgement & Justification: Justice Promised](#)), having traversed the apostle's whole argument from 1:1-17 ([Caesar & Christ: Gospel Declared](#)) and 1:18–1:32 ([God Revealed & Man Judged: Covenant Disobeyed](#)). Paul has introduced the Gospel in the form of an imperial epistle declaring that Christ is the new order of God's government for the world. And this is presented in antithesis to Caesar: the 'Gospel of God' versus the 'Gospel of Man'. He has then prosecuted the covenant lawsuit not only against the Jews but also the Gentiles – all mankind – on the ground that God has revealed himself clearly; he shows that autonomous man is a covenant-breaker, in ethical and intellectual rebellion against God, actively suppressing his knowledge, and hence under his judgement. Based on this, he then argues that man is restored as a covenant-keeper by an act of God that is just and also justifies. Through God's act in Christ, the God-man, God's justice is vindicated by being served on man; sin is expiated and God's wrath propitiated. And because any attempt at covenant-status through merit is an act of rebellion, man is cast on God's act in Christ, performed on man's behalf, as the solution to his covenant dispossession. Covenant status is thus declared by faith alone, by relying on Christ and his work to justify the ungodly. Paul then validates his argument from the OT, appealing to the Jew's two greatest authorities, Abraham and David. Through the promise to Abraham he enforces the cosmic scope of the Gospel; it is God's re-ordering of the universe as his temple.

On the forensic basis of justification, Paul is ready to show that it guarantees glorification—the restoration of man and the created order to the manifest glory of God. By utilising the Adam-Christ parallel (ch. 5), this is the argument of chapters 5-8, which we have entitled, 'De-Creation & Re-Creation: *Paradise Restored*.'

Onward into the glory of God!

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