

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH: SINCE WHEN?

Romans 3:27 – 4:25

Etched in my memory is a classroom exchange between myself and Professor Stanley Toussaint. Dr. Toussaint was a stately, beloved professor at Dallas Theological Seminary. It was a privilege to study under him. It was in his course on the Book of Acts. I prefaced my question by saying, “In the Old Testament the Jews were saved by keeping the Law, but...” Dr. Toussaint didn’t even allow me to finish my question. “Keeping the Law has never been the means of salvation. Salvation has always been by faith in both the Old and New Testaments!” I was embarrassed, but clear: salvation has always been by faith!

Our words often imply that people in the Old Testament were saved by the Law. We say people in the Old Testament were “under the Law”, but we are “under grace”. It is easy to see how we can misunderstand.

God’s means of salvation has always been by faith. Justification by faith is not a New Testament thing.

This is the message of Romans 3:27-4:25.

FAITH HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE BASIS BY WHICH GOD DECLARES SINNERS RIGHTEOUS (3:27-31)

Judaism, particularly pharisaic Judaism, taught that by keeping the Law, a Jew could merit justification; obedience to the Mosaic Law could earn a right standing before God. This is the *boasting* Paul refers to in 3:27. It is pride in believing that I, by my good works, have earned God’s approval. But in 3:20-26, Paul makes clear God declares righteous only those who *believe* in Jesus.

In verses 27-31 Paul drives home the fact the God declares sinners righteous on the basis of their faith not their obedience to the Law.

Romans 3:27–31 (ESV)

27 Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. **28** For we hold that one 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 God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. **31** Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

No one keeps the Law perfectly. This is the primary reason no one is declared righteous by God by *works of the law*.

Paul reveals a second reason. If keeping the Law of Moses was the means of justification, Gentiles would be excluded. Not having the Law of Moses, they would have no means of making themselves right with God. God’s heart is for both Jews and Gentiles. Both can be saved by faith.

To prove his point, Paul presents Abraham, father of the Jews, as the prime example. Abraham himself was justified by faith.

Paul draws from an exchange between God and Abraham recorded in Genesis 15. At this time, Abraham’s name was *Abram*.

Genesis 15:1–6 (ESV)

1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” **2** But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” **3** And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” **4** And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” **5** And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” **6** And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Abram and his wife Sarai were well beyond child bearing. Abram believed God in spite of the circumstances. His faith in God was credited to Abraham as righteousness.

Abraham was *justified* by faith; he was declared righteous by God on the basis of his faith.

ABRAHAM WAS JUSTIFIED BY FAITH (4:1-12)

Romans 4:1-12 (ESV)

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."

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.

Abraham is the father of the Jews. But with regards to *justification by faith* Abraham is the father of all Jews and Gentiles who are justified by faith.

Not only was Abraham justified by faith, it was also by faith that he received God's promise.

Paul draws from another exchange between Abraham and God that took place several years after Genesis 15. Abraham was 99 and Sarah 89.

Genesis 17:1-8 (ESV)

1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, **2** that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly." **3** Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, **4** "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. **5** No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. **6** I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. **7** And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. **8** And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

These are unconditional promises. God did not require Abraham to earn these promises.

ABRAHAM RECEIVED THE PROMISE BY FAITH (4:13-25)

Romans 4:13-25 (ESV)

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,

If obedience to the Law was required to receive the promise, then transgressing the Law would forfeit the promise.

I make a deal with my kids to take them to Disneyland if they keep their rooms clean for a month. What happens to the deal if they don't keep their rooms clean? The deals off.

But what if I make a deal with my kids to take them to Disneyland. No requirements. There's nothing for them to transgress. There's no way for them to blow the deal.

That's what Paul is talking about in verse 15. Keeping the Law wasn't a requirement to receive the promise. God's promise was based on grace. There is no way Abraham can blow the deal. The promise is guaranteed.

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." **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.

Isaac was born in Abraham's 100th year. Abraham's descendants number in the millions.

Abraham received the promise by faith.

Abraham was justified by faith.

Salvation has always been by faith, never by the works of the Law.

This week in study group we discussed how to bring precision to the way we talk. I tend to say that there is nothing we can do to make ourselves right with God and in the very next sentence invite people to do something - put there faith in Jesus for salvation!

More precisely the truth is this: as sinners, there are no good works we can do to earn a right standing before God. The one thing we can do; the one thing we must do is put our faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

O how sweet to trust in Jesus,
 Just to trust His cleansing blood:
 Just in simple faith to plunge me
 'Neath the healing, cleansing flood!

Chorus

Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him!
 How I've proved Him o'er and o'er!

Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!
O for grace to trust Him more!¹

QUESTION: what evidence in the passage indicates Abraham's faith was not "blind" but a reasoned faith?

NEXT WEEK: Voice of the Martyrs: *International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church*

¹ Logos Hymnal, 1st edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995).