

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 4:1-8 (A)

Student Notes

Paul's prior statement: "But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify."

Chapter four: Paul demonstration of that statement through the lives of two Old Testament heroes – Abraham and King David.

- **Choosing Abraham:**

Abraham's exemplary life: Isaiah 41:8: God: "Abraham my friend". (Isaiah 41:8) See also: Genesis 26:5

Vv. 1-2: "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? 2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God."

- **A Translation Issue:** "Kata Sarka" – According to the flesh".

- NIV omits the two words "kata sarka" – According to the flesh". Many other translations, like the ESV, include "kata sarka".

2 ways of understanding this Greek sentence: 1. "What shall we say that Abraham has gained by his natural powers unaided by the grace of God?". 2. "What shall we say Abraham – our ancestor by natural descent – discovered in this matter?"

Probable meaning: "Our ancestor by natural descent". Abraham is "the father of us all"; and "our father -- if we share his faith."

- **Answering His Own Question:**

Paul Jewish friends would indicate that Abraham was justified by works. In verse 2 Paul makes a very important comparison. He says, 'If in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.'

Paul is heading his Jewish friends off at the pass. Abraham might have had something to boast about in comparison to other men – **but not before God**. No human can boast before God the Creator or Christ the Savior. -righteousness.

Paul's Second Reason: Abraham was not "justified by works": The Scripture itself. Some important notes on Paul's simple use of the question in verse 3, "What does the Scripture say?"

1. Paul uses the singular First, the singular form – The Scripture – in the same way we would say, "The Bible'. Paul recognizes a specific set of unified inspired writings – not just a collection of books.

2. Paul's personification of Scripture as being able to speak shows us that he makes no distinction between what Scripture says and what God says through it.

3. By using the present tense, Paul indicates that God's voice can be heard through the Scripture.

4. By using the question, "What does the Scripture say" – Paul establishes the authoritative nature of God's revelation.

- **Righteousness "Credited":**

Genesis 15:6: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

The significance of the Greek verb "credited" – "logizomai": The word "logizomai" means to "regard" or "reckon" something. In ancient Greece it had its source in the financial or commercial context. It signified to put something to someone's account.

2 different ways in which money can be credited to our account: Wages or a Gift. Vv. 4-5: “Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. 5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

There can be no crediting of justification by works. Even Abraham – who could have boasted before other humans – could not boast before God. He was not justified by works.

Justification by Christ’s Word: “The man who does not work, instead, “he trusts God who justifies the wicked, [and] his faith is credited as righteousness.”

- **“God who justifies the wicked”:**

See Romans 3:25-26; 28; 29-30. These are the background for Paul’s new statement in 4:5: “God justifies the wicked”. That’s really a remarkable phrase – “God justifies the wicked”.

The opposite of everything we might expect to encounter. For the Jew the clear theology would be that God condemns the wicked and justifies the righteous

Paul is insisting the opposite. Righteousness is credited to the wicked through faith; They are given righteousness as a free and unearned gift of grace by faith.

Note: Paul is not teaching that faith and righteousness are equivalents. He’s not saying that when righteousness is lacking faith is an acceptable substitute. That would make faith itself a meritorious work.

If faith itself was a meritorious work – it would bolster the Jewish Rabbinical view that Abraham was credited with righteousness – not because of faith – but because of his faithfulness.

The Rabbis would say God considered Abraham righteous because of his faithfulness. In that sense, faithfulness is a work in itself. That's critically different than being justified by faith in Christ's work at Calvary.

Paul's antithesis between verse 4 and verse 5: God credits or reckons the wicked as righteous as the result of a free gift – not by some works. This crediting of faith as righteousness is a free gift, not an earned wage. On top of that -- it happens not to those who work but to those who trust.

God is not justifying people because they are godly. Quite the opposite is true: God justifies those have faith in Christ's Work at Calvary while they are still ungodly. See Romans 5:8.

Next time: How David's experience is a corollary to that of Abraham.