

***THE OLD, OLD STORY, PT. 1***  
***ROMANS 4:1-8***

Every child loves a good story. It was not uncommon that when the girls were still living at home — even when they were in high school — they would ask at the dinner table, “Daddy, tell us a story.” And with a little prompting about the kind of story they wanted, I’d try to come up with something.

In fact, it’s not just children that love a good story, is it? We all love a good story and good storyteller. And we dislike it when someone gets the story wrong, or tells it poorly.

This week I was surprised when a prominent pastor and theologian [blogged about a new Santa Claus](#) storybook that will be released this fall. It’s not the kind of thing he typically blogs about. The eternal sonship of Christ and Trinitarian relationships? Yes. Santa Clause? Nope. And then I read the article and the link he provided. It seems HarperCollins is releasing on Daniel Kibblesmith’s book, [Santa’s Husband](#) on October 10. The book “tells the story of a black Santa Claus and his white husband who both live in the North Pole. Santa’s spouse frequently fills in for his husband at malls, according to a description of the book...” As I said, no one likes a good story to be rewritten or told poorly, so the first tweeted response to Kibblesmith’s announcement about the book was, “Quit rewriting history.”

The same thing might be a summary of Paul’s defense of justification in Romans 4 — he is refuting those who assert that salvation might be of works by saying, “Quit rewriting history. Salvation has always been by grace alone through faith alone.”

The oldest and best story is the story of the gospel of salvation and how sinners can come to be right with God. And we (rightly) connect that story to Christ. But as Paul demonstrates in Romans 4, the story of justification is an old, old story that is connected to some of the oldest stories in the Old Testament. Justification by faith is not a new story or a new idea. It’s an old story with a contemporary relevance. And that’s what Paul will tell us in Romans 4 as he recounts the story of Abraham and how Abraham came to be justified.

What does Paul say in these verses? He teaches that:

***THE OLD TESTAMENT TESTIFIES TO JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE.***

Is that truth significant for us? It is *most* significant. It is, in fact, essential. It is essential:

- ✓ It is essential if we want to know and experience salvation from God’s wrath.
- ✓ It is essential if we want to know how to tell others how to experience salvation from God’s wrath.

If we are going to tell the story of the gospel rightly, we must know the process of justification accurately.

And Paul helps us with that in Romans 4.

In chapter three, Paul has explained justification by faith, and now in chapter four he defends justification by faith alone by using the illustration of Abraham. If Abraham, the father of Israel, was justified by faith, then certainly all men will likewise need justification by faith.

Let's look at these opening verses in chapter 4 by asking three questions:

1. What if Justification Was By WORKS? (vv. 1-3)

- ✓ There would be boasting for man (vv. 1-2)
- ✓ It would be contrary to Scripture (v. 3)

2. What is the NATURE of Justification? (vv. 4-5)

- ✓ It is by MERIT through WORKS (v. 4)
- ✓ Or, it is by GRACE alone through FAITH alone (v. 5)

3. What are Some BLESSINGS of Justification by Faith? (vv. 6-8)

- ✓ There is IMPUTED righteousness! (v. 6)
- ✓ There is FORGIVENESS for rebellion (v. 7a)
- ✓ There is GRACE for every sin (v. 7b)
- ✓ There is NO imputed sin (v. 8)

## 1. What if Justification Was By WORKS? (vv. 1-3)

- The book of Romans is Paul's defense of the gospel; remember that he is planning a westward venture to expand the influence of the gospel and he wants Rome to be his home and sending church for that part of his ministry. So he is writing this church where he has not yet been to explain his understanding of the gospel and a life of faith.
  - ✓ So in a book where Paul is attempting to be particularly careful with the gospel, he often anticipates the arguments of opponents to what he's saying.
  - ✓ And that's what's going on when Paul says, ***What then shall we say?*** He only uses that phrase in Romans and he uses it when he has said things that might be misunderstood or misused (e.g., 6:1; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14, 30).
  - ✓ And when he uses it here, he is going back to his original argument in 3:27-28 — there is no boasting in justification and justification is by works only and not by faith. And he proves that in the life of Abraham, and in doing that he answers the question, "what if justification was by works?"
- There would be boasting for man (vv. 1-2)
  - ✓ When Paul refers to Abraham, he refers to him as ***our forefather in the flesh***. When he says, "in the flesh," he's simply referring to the physical relationship and lineage that all Jews had to him.
    - But Paul is also anticipating what he will say in a few verses: that salvation for all people comes through Abraham and that he is the "father of all who believe" (vv. 11, 16).
    - So Paul is saying, "what applies to Abraham applies to all Jews...and ultimately all men. If Abraham couldn't be saved through works, then no man can be saved through works: Jew or Gentile."
  - ✓ So Paul takes up a hypothetical idea in v. 2 — ***If Abraham was justified by works...*** There were two reasons that Paul particularly identified Abraham:
    - Abraham was considered, as Paul said, the father of all Jews. All patterned their lives after him.
    - Many teachers in Paul's day taught that Abraham was justified by works:
      - ... "Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life." [Jubilee 23:10]
      - ... "We find that Abraham our father had performed the whole Law before it was given, for it is written, Because that Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws [Gen. 26.5]." [Mishnah Kiddushin 4:14]
      - ... "Thou therefore, O Lord, that art the God of the just, has not appointed repentance to the just, to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, which have not sinned against thee; but thou hast appointed repentance unto me that am a sinner." [Prayer of Manasses (8).]
  - ✓ So Paul addresses the premise of his opponents — ***If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about***; and if true, then his premise in 3:27 & justification by faith is destroyed.

- ✓ But Paul quickly dismisses that idea when he says, **but not before God**.
  - Paul is not saying, “If he was justified by works he could boast before men, but not before God.”
  - Paul is saying, “Could Abraham be justified by works? *Not before God*.” It is impossible for Abraham to be justified by works. He did nothing to merit God accounting him to be righteous.
  - As we noted recently, the natural (fleshly) inclination of man is to trust in himself and to reject his dependence on God; in **1 Cor. 1:26** Paul says the antidote to that pride is to consider our calling and what we were when God called us. There is no boasting before God (**v. 29**).
  - Actually, there *is* boasting, but it is only so that we boast in the power and authority of God to redeem and save us (**1 Cor. 1:31**; Gal. 6:14; 2 Cor. 10:17; 11:30; 1 Cor. 3:21; 9:16; Rom. 12:3).
- ✓ The problem with this boasting, of course, is that it tempts man to say, “I am not in need of God.”
  - One of my favorite stories is about Muhammad Ali; he was on a flight when the attendant reminded him shortly before take-off: “Please fasten your seat belt.” He replied with something of a sneer: “Superman don’t need no seat belt.” To which she quickly replied, “Superman don’t need no airplane. Buckle up, please.” Ali wasn’t superman and we aren’t God and we aren’t self-righteous.
  - Andrew Murray wrote, “There is no pride so dangerous, none so subtle and insidious, as the pride of holiness.” We think we are holy *enough*. We are not. There is no boasting, as one writer said: “You don’t impress the officials at NASA with a paper airplane. You don’t boast about your crayon sketches in the presence of Picasso. You don’t claim equality with Einstein because you can write H<sub>2</sub>O. And you don’t boast about your goodness in the presence of the Perfect.” We have nothing to boast about before God. And Paul proves it from Scripture.

- It would be contrary to Scripture (v. 3)

- ✓ To defend his statement that he says no one can boast he says, **What does Scripture say?** His appeal and defense is Scripture and Scripture alone.
  - He is affirming the inspiration of Scripture — and the OT — (that it is from God).
  - And he is affirming the authority of Scripture — that Scripture has the final word on debates.
  - And he is affirming the *current* authority of Scripture — what does it **say** (present tense)?  
Though Abraham predated Paul by 2000+ years, what was said about him was still powerfully relevant to Paul, and still is to us.
- ✓ And in this citation, Paul references **Genesis 15:6** (also Gal. 3:6; Js. 2:23). Not only is it a significant part of the story of Abraham, it was also the verse many works righteousness folks used to defend that Abraham was saved by his works: “So you find that our father Abraham became the heir of this and of the coming world simply by the merit of the faith with which he believed in the LORD, as it is written, ‘He believed in the LORD, and he counted it to him for righteousness.’” [Mekilta 40]
- ✓ **Genesis 15:1-5** is a reaffirmation of the promise of a seed that God made to Abraham in **Gen. 12:1-3**
  - Abram had been living in Ur, an idolatrous city of perhaps 300,000 people.
  - Abraham was raised as an idolater (**Josh. 14:2-3**).

- There was nothing in Gen. 12 or 15 or anywhere else in Scripture that gives a reason why God chose Abraham from the millions of other pagan idolaters. God just chose him (which is what He always does). He certainly was not a follower of God prior to His justification.
- And Abraham was not perfect after his justification either (**Gen. 12:10-17; 16:1-15; 20:1ff**).
- So Moses says **Abraham believed**. There is more to this faith than simply confidence in the promise of a land, seed, and blessing; it is an entrusting of his entire being to the care of God. Through his act of faith, the entire trajectory of Abraham's life was changed. Cf. **Heb. 11:8-10**.
- Belief is no work — when it says, “Abraham believed in the Lord,” it means he recognized that he could not do what God had promised. Working means doing, but belief means receiving. Working “is the result of one's own ability, but ‘believing’ relies on another.” [Schreiner]
- And this is the same kind of faith that sinners still must exhibit for salvation: to believe in God is to entrust oneself to His care and to affirm dependence on Him for salvation from His wrath. The believer entrusts Himself to the One who is justly angry with him, to spare him from His wrath.
- And through that faith, Moses says, **it was credited to him as righteousness**. The word “credit” is essential; it is used 11x in Romans 4 (vv. 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24).
  - ... The word is a financial term that means to credit something to another's account.
  - ... Notice that Paul says it was **to him** — he didn't make himself righteous by his faith, but through his faith, righteousness was imputed *to* him by someone else (God).
  - ... Abraham received a credit of righteousness that did not inherently belong to him. He *was not* righteous, but through faith and dependence on God's promise alone, God granted to Abraham His righteousness. Just as in the NT, it was an act of declaration, and a provision that comes by grace through faith alone.
  - ... Again, faith did not save Abraham, it was only the “channel” through which the sinner expresses his need and God grants His grace. “Faith is simply a convicted heart reaching out to receive God's free and unmerited gift of salvation.” [MacArthur]
- So what about Abraham — wasn't he saved by works? May it never be! To be saved by works would mean man could boast more than God and it would mean Scripture is a lie. Justification is not and never has been by works. For justification to be by works would leave mankind with nothing that we need from God.

## 2. What is the **NATURE** of Justification? (vv. 4-5)

- There are only two options for justification: it is either by man's good works and merit, or it is by God's grace, through faith. As one pastor said, it is either “earned and deserved,” or “unearned and undeserved.” There are no other options. Paul considers both those options in these two verses.

- It is by MERIT through WORKS (v. 4)

- ✓ Here Paul uses an analogy from the work place.
- ✓ If one works (in his workplace) the **wage** he receives from his boss is not **credited** (imputed, reckoned) as **favor**. The word “credit” is the same word he uses throughout this passage for imputation. And the word “favor” is usually translated “grace” or “gift.” Paul’s point is simple: if one works for something, what he receives in return cannot be considered to be grace. He has merited what he has received. “Grace is out of the question when wages are in question.” [Vincent]
- ✓ When one works, then he doesn’t receive grace, he receives **what is due**. He has received what another is obligated to give. The one who employs him is indebted to him until the wage is paid.
- ✓ No one says when he receives his paycheck, “You’ve given me a gift! Thank you!” (Now he might think he is being overpaid for what he does, and then it *is* grace, but that’s not Paul’s point.)
- ✓ Paul’s point in this verse is that merit is completely contrary to Genesis 15:6 — “if righteousness is by loyalty and obligation, then there is no possibility of any kind of grace.” And if there is no grace, then Abraham is (and we are) in trouble!
  - Paul hasn’t said it explicitly, but to say there is no need or possibility for grace at all had to make the works-righteousness people think again about their position.
  - Because no matter how righteous Abraham was, he did not meet the standard of perfection. He was a sinner both before and after his salvation (Rom. 1:18–3:20; 3:23)!
  - And no matter how good his works were, no finite work could satisfy an infinite wrath.
  - And if Abraham (or anyone else) could save himself, then the death of Christ is senseless and worthless. Then Christ died for nothing and for no one.
  - And if Abraham can save himself, then God is indebted to man and not man to God.
  - And if Abraham can save himself, then Abraham is glorified and God is not. And if Abraham is glorified and God is not, then God is not God.
  - When Paul says that if salvation is by works, then it is **what is due**, he really is asking his opponents, “do you *really* want salvation to be something God is indebted to give you? Really?”
- ✓ But there is another option for salvation — and that is that it comes by grace through faith...

- Or, it is by GRACE alone through FAITH alone (v. 5)

- ✓ The alternative to attempting to work for our justification is to be for **one who does not work**. Now by that Paul doesn’t mean that the person doesn’t ever attempt to produce good fruit after his salvation; he is simply saying that one is not attempting to work for his salvation. This one is in contrast to the person in v. 4.
- ✓ And instead of working, he simply **believes in Him who justifies**.
  - His belief is not a work and not a merit, but an act of dependence on God — “I can’t; you must!”
  - And he is careful about the object of his faith — he *only* believes in **Him who justifies**.
    - ... The world says, “you just have to have faith; as long as you have faith you will be ok.”
    - ... But faith will save you only if the One you are trusting has capacity to save.

... A dead man — no matter how great he was when he was alive — is still a dead man and he is incapable of saving himself, never mind anyone else!

... So let's think about a dead man: "Meditation on death would pull down the plumes of pride. You are but animated dust. Shall dust and ashes be proud? Your body will be turned into grass, and shall shortly be mowed down." [Thomas Watson, *The Christian on the Mount*]

... That's why Easter and the resurrection of Christ are so important. Christ is the first-fruit of the resurrection of myriads more; and He can resurrect because He *is* the resurrection...!

... So having faith and trusting in Christ is hopeful and having faith in anything else is hopeless.

✓ And then notice *who* God justifies: ***the ungodly***.

➤ What does it mean to be ungodly? These people are against anything that is pious and good. They are against pleasing God. They are irreverent. They abhor the idea of orienting one's life around God. They are enemies of God (5:8, 10).

➤ And notice this: the *only* kind of person that God ever justifies are the ungodly. He does not justify the righteous because no one is ever righteous. (And he does not justify the "self-righteous" because those will never rely on Him and Him alone for their justification.)

➤ And when Paul says this he's also implying something else: Abraham was ungodly. If God only justifies the ungodly, and Abraham was justified, then Abraham had to be ungodly and had to have recognized that ungodliness. (And that was a blow to the self-righteousness of Paul's opponents.)

➤ Some of you are struggling with some kind of ongoing sin. Let this verse encourage you:

... Your salvation is not dependent on your righteousness and your ability to stop sinning. Christ died to save sinners. He did not die to save anyone else; so if you are a sinner and only if you are a sinner, you can be saved!

"Until a person confesses that he is ungodly, he is not a candidate for salvation, because he still trusts in his own goodness....By God's standard, every person's work falls short of earning the redemption He provides. On the divine scale of perfect righteousness, even the most devoted and longserving Christian is not a hair's breadth closer to earning his salvation than the most vile criminal...." [MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*.]

... Your daily battle against sin is a reminder of the grace of God. Every day when you give in to temptation to be angry and covet and lust and be prideful, you have a reminder that you are a sinner and you are not God, but God is not a sinner and He has redeemed you and saved you anyway. In that sense, your struggle against sin is a good thing, for it leads you to the only One who can help you every day with that sin.

➤ Someone has rightly said that, "the whole...gospel could be summed up in this one word — God who justifies the ungodly."

- ✓ And finally, notice the end for the one who believes: ***his faith is credited as righteousness!***
  - This is the clearest statement in this passage about imputed justification by faith.
  - When one believes in Christ and rejects his own righteousness for salvation, that faith (that act of dependence on God alone) is credited — accounted, imputed — as righteousness. When he depends on God, God saves Him. (Conversely, if he refuses to depend on God, God will not save him.)
  - This is gloriously good news. But not everyone in Paul's day and not everyone in our day believes it to be good news. Some are just bent on attempting to be good on their own. So one Roman Catholic writer said, "The reason for the uncertainty of the state of grace lies in this: that without a special revelation nobody can with certainty of faith know whether or not he has fulfilled all the conditions which are necessary for achieving justification." [Quoted in James White, *The God Who Justifies*, 196.] He doesn't know about his condition before God because he never knows if he's done enough. And Paul would say, "no matter what he's done, it's *never* enough." God will never be satisfied with any sinner until that sinner learns to be satisfied in Christ alone.
- What is the nature of justification? It is never by works and it is always and only by grace thru faith.
  - ✓ If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, give thanks that you were a sinner and God still saved you! Never get over the wonder of your salvation, which was infinitely undeserved.
  - ✓ If you are assuming you have enough righteousness — 50.5% good works — to save you, you are hopeless. You are still in your sins and you are condemned. But there is still future hope. You can repent. You can still trust in Christ and if you give up trusting yourself and begin trusting Him, He will save you from the infinite and eternal wrath of God that you deserve.

### 3. What are Some BLESSINGS of Justification by Faith? (vv. 6-8) — next time

- There is IMPUTED righteousness! (v. 6)
- There is FORGIVENESS for rebellion (v. 7a)
- There is GRACE for every sin (v. 7b)
- There is NO imputed sin (v. 8)



**CONCLUSION:** Horatius Bonar captured the wonder of justification by faith alone when he wrote in 1861:

Not what these hands have done  
Can save this guilty soul;  
Not what this toiling flesh has borne  
Can make my spirit whole.

Thy love to me, O God,  
Not mine, O Lord to Thee,  
Can rid me of this dark unrest  
And set my spirit free.

Not what I feel or do  
Can give me peace with God;  
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears  
Can bear my awe-full load.

Thy grace alone, O God,  
To me can pardon speak;  
Thy power alone, O Son of God,  
Can this sore bondage break.

Thy work alone, O Christ,  
Can ease this weight of sin;  
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God,  
Can give me peace within.

I bless the Christ of God,  
I rest on love divine,  
And with unfaltering lip and heart  
I call this Savior mine.

This is the story we must believe for our own salvation: Christ alone died for our sins to redeem and save us from the wrath of God. And this is the story we must tell to those who are in need of a Savior. It is an old story, it is a true story, and it is the ultimate story.

**BENEDICTION:** Jude 24-25