

Romans Four¹
June 23, 2004
Leon L. Combs, Ph.D.

Now I hope that we all clearly understand that nobody pleases God by their own initiative and that none of us can boast about our salvation! We can only continually praise the Lord for choosing us as His children and acting in our spirit for a rebirth. Paul does not stop here though. He continues to discuss this issue just in case there may be someone who did not thoroughly understand what he said. He starts to lift up some examples that someone may bring to argue with him. Paul uses a great strategy for debates and that is to know your opponent and to then put up as a straw horse the argument that the opponent might throw at you. He brings up the possibility and then thoroughly dismisses such as a possibility. He brings up some Old Testament examples to show that they too were saved by faith.

Rom 4:1 “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?

Rom 4:2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God.

Rom 4:3 For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."”

Who was Abraham? He was just an ordinary person of some considerable wealth (Gen 12:5) who was about 75 years old. God chose Abram (as he was known at that time) to leave his homeland (Ur of the Chaldeans, the heart of the area where writing was developed – implying that Abraham did have some written records of such a momentous encounter with God) and go to a place yet to be shown to him. Abraham was not chosen because he was an extraordinarily righteous person (remember chapter 3 of Romans), but he was chosen by God for His purposes. Similarly none of us were chosen because we were righteous, but just because God chose us. The first chosen person, Abraham, had no earthly reason to boast because of his justification. His justification (Gen 15:6) has the same basis as does my justification and your justification: believing God. And how do we come to believe God? We believe God because He gave us the faith so that we can believe Him. God acted first on Abraham and on each of us. Then based upon that faith we believe God and become justified forever:

"Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them." Hebrews 7:25

God then later changed Abram's name to Abraham to signify that Abraham was to become the father of a multitude of nations:

Gen 17:5 "No longer shall your name be called Abram, But your name shall be Abraham; For I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.

Paul then tells us in his letter to the Galatians that Abraham is the earthly father of everyone of all time who believes in God through Jesus:

Gal 3:6 Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Gal 3:7 Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.

Gal 3:8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "All the nations shall be blessed in you."

Gal 3:9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

We know that Abraham knew a lot about the coming Messiah (Gal 3:8, John 8:56) and he rejoiced at that coming day. Having received the necessary faith from God, he then believed in the coming promise and he was then justified. Salvation has always been achieved by God in His children by the same sequence: He gives faith and His people respond with belief. The same was true of Adam. After the fall, Adam realized that there was no hope for him on his own efforts so he used his faith to also believe and trust in God's future promise. How do we know about Adam? After the fall, he named his wife Eve, which means life-giver. Then they named their son Cain, which means "here he is!" They thought that their first son would be the one chosen by God as the Redeemer, but they were wrong about that. Although they missed the mark by thousands of years, they still trusted God in His promise of the One to come who would kill the serpent and be wounded by the serpent. Moses also believed the promise (Deut 18:18).

Today the main problem with the theology of many people who attend visible churches^{3,4} is that they think that "faith" is something that they develop themselves and God is waiting to see if they will develop enough faith to believe in Him. However the Bible clearly teaches us that FIRST God gives His chosen people faith and then those people can use that faith to believe God just as did Abraham (see my paper on "Faith"⁵).

Rom 4:4 Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due.

Rom 4:5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness,

Rom 4:6 just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

Rom 4:7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered.

Rom 4:8 "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account."

In verse 4 we are told that if indeed we could become righteous before God by our own works, then there is no Godly favor involved for we would be just receiving that for which we have worked. However we have clearly seen in chapter 3 that nobody can achieve righteousness by his own works. Verse 5 goes on to say that to those who do not achieve righteousness by works, but instead believes in Jesus Christ then the faith that allowed that belief is considered our righteousness. The word "reckon" is an accounting term that means a bookkeeping change has occurred. The columns containing our sins

are removed and put into the account of Jesus and the righteousness of Jesus is put into our empty columns of righteousness.

Not only is Abraham a correct example for us of the attainment of righteousness, but Paul says that David also spoke of the same accounting principle used by the Father. Our deeds done outside of the law and against the law have not only been forgiven but they have been made invisible. Indeed what a blessing it is to be one of the people whose sin the Lord will not take into account! Again, this is an accounting nomenclature in that nowhere in the records of our activities on earth will appear our sins! We will all one day go into the presence of God covered with the purity of Jesus Christ Himself! (Romans 8:1 needs to be sung here in a very loud voice!)

Rom 4:9 Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness."

Rom 4:10 How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised;

Rom 4:11 and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them,

Rom 4:12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.

Now Paul goes on to make a very important point. When was faith reckoned to Abraham as righteousness? Did this miracle occur after he had made an "act of faith" by becoming circumcised or did it occur before he was circumcised? We could take this question on to our time by asking when was our faith reckoned to us as righteousness. Did this occur after or before our baptism? Did this occur after or before we made a statement of confession? Did this occur before or after we "walked the aisle"? Paul tells us clearly that the double imputation (our sins imputed to the account of Jesus and Jesus' righteousness imputed to our account) occurred before Abraham was circumcised. Paul then tells us that Abraham is then the father (meaning the first, not the one who actually does anything for us) of faith to both the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Absolutely nothing that we do precedes the wonderful double imputation that God performs in the lives of His chosen children. Jesus Christ is actually the author and perfecter of our faith and it is upon Him that we should always focus our minds:

Heb 12:2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Rom 4:13 For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.

Rom 4:14 For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified;

Rom 4:15 for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

Rom 4:16 For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

Rom 4:17 (as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you") in the sight of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

There are three purposes of The Law:

1. To reveal sin to the world and hence somewhat control the actions of the world. I would call this the primordial conscience that is given to everyone.
2. To bring people to the understanding that there is no obeying of the law within ourselves and that the only way we can be righteous before God is through God's plan with Jesus.
3. To help God's people walk a path with full knowledge of what is sin and how we continually need the help of God to walk in this world (an aid to our sanctification).

As Paul states, if God had never given the law then there would not be any people in violation of the law. But The Law has been given to mankind and everyone is in violation of all aspects of it, so the result is that God's wrath is brought against everyone who is in violation of the law. The Law is upon everyone and only by double imputation through Jesus are there any people who are free of the curse of the law as we see in the following:

John 3:36 "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

A correct statement to the non-Christian is "the wrath of God abides upon you forever unless you believe in Jesus Christ as the perfect propitiation of your life". We then ask people if they have been saved from the wrath of God.

Paul also says that if anyone could perfectly obey the Law and then by works become God's heirs then the concept of faith would be void and meaningless. God acted by giving His children faith because nobody could obey the Law.

So God's plan from before the foundation of the world was to one day implement His plan of the only way to bring people into His righteous presence. The plan began with Abraham long before the time when Jesus actually lived and died perfectly on earth and it continues now to all of us who are also children of Abraham. God then brings life to the dead (spiritual and eternal life) as Paul also clearly state in his letter to the Ephesians⁶:

Eph 2:1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins,

Eph 2:2 in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

Eph 2:3 Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Eph 2:4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, Eph 2:5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),

Eph 2:6 and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus,

Eph 2:7 in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Eph 2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;

Eph 2:9 not as a result of works, that no one should boast.

Rom 4:18 In hope against hope he believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, "So shall your descendants be."

Rom 4:19 And without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb;

Rom 4:20 yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God,

Rom 4:21 and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform.

Rom 4:22 Therefore also it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Rom 4:23 Now not for his sake only was it written, that it was reckoned to him,

Rom 4:24 but for our sake also, to whom it will be reckoned, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,

Rom 4:25 He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

About all I can think of to say here is "Amen!" Abraham totally believed God throughout his life and never became weak in the faith that God gave him. Rather he grew in faith and gave glory to God. We see again that the wonderful double imputation accounting process was done not just to and for Abraham but for all of God's children throughout all ages who believe in God. God delivered Jesus to death because of our transgressions and then raised Him from the dead for our justification (double imputation again).

Praise God! Remember that Paul did not write in sections as we have them numbered. We will see that the next chapter of Romans begins with the word "therefore", which refers back to all that we have recorded as chapter four. So read, meditate, and pray more on chapter four before proceeding to chapter five.

References

1. All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, Moody Press, 1975.
2. James Montgomery Boice, "Romans, Volume I, Justification by Faith, Romans 1-4, Baker Book House, 1991
3. The visible church is any organized group of people who claim to be Christians such as Baptist, Presbyterian, etc. This group is made up of people who are not really Christians and those who really are Christians. Of course only God and the person really know the true state of their being.
4. The invisible church is the true people of God, the ones who have truly accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and have been reborn spiritually by the Holy Spirit of God.
5. <http://livingtheology.com/Faith.htm>
6. See <http://livingtheology.com/Ephesians%20Two.htm> for a fuller discussion of this wonderful event in the life of the child of God.