

Righteousness apart from the Law  
Roman's 4

Ephesians 2:1-10  
Ephesians 2:11-22  
Psalms 20

Last week we wrapped up chapter 3, in which Paul corrected any idea that Israel's history and calling was for nothing. Verse 1 of chapter 3, he asks, "What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God." They were given God's revelation and were a part of his work in the redemption of mankind. Through Abraham, the father of the Hebrews came the Messiah, the promised one who would come to take away the sins of his people. Paul also confronted another idea, that since God is glorified by the just and righteous judgment of Sin, some were arguing that Paul was teaching that we should therefore sin so that God maybe all the more glorified. But as he points out, they were slandering him, in an attempt to discredit and silence him from sharing the gospel of Christ. Twisting what he was saying to falsely accuse and deceive. Paul emphasized that both the Jews and the Gentiles share the same fallen condition, both are in danger of judgment, and he uses the examples in the old testament by pointing to Israel's exile showing that Israel, just like the Gentiles is alienated from God.

But, it is not that there is no hope, for the salvation that God has brought is for all of mankind, there is no distinction or partiality. He uses the redemption language of the old testament account from the releasing Israel from the bondage of Egypt, and points to the reality of today showing a second exodus if you will, one that is the fulfillment of the prophets, and the promises of God. This new exodus enacted since the cross, is only possible because God put forth his son as the propitiatory sacrifice for his people's sin. In chapter 3, we see how Paul links the exodus of Israel, both in Egypt and in Babylon as a picture of redemption for his people. A people separated from God by their sin, but reconciled by God bringing them back to himself. Essentially Paul is not bringing any new theology or belief system to the church, but rather pointing out that this exodus of God's people, from a sinful separation of God, to a righteous redemption was talked about in Ezekiel. Paul did not invent something new, but rather taught the true meaning of the law and the prophets through the revelation of the Son. He was building upon an already existing model to help build a theological system that was especially supportive of bringing Gentiles into the new exodus community apart from conversion to Judaism. For though the law had its purpose, it had been served, and fulfilled through the Son who fulfilled its righteous requirements, and took its punishment upon himself, satisfying God's holy justice and wrath against sin in our stead.

Paul used this model of a new exodus community, brought forth out of the bondage of sin, and set free through the blood of Christ to build a doctrine of justification that remained true to the Old Testament understanding and that was able to bring in and embrace the Gentiles apart from circumcision, and conversion to Judaism. In chapter 3, Paul's conclusion is that the Jews no longer have anything to boast about. God is now dealing with them on the same level as the Gentiles, implying that Israel's special status is over and the bride of the new covenant includes all with no partiality, Jews, Gentiles, men, women, slave and free, and that it is those who are of the faith of Abraham who are called the Israel of God having our spiritual national identity being found in Christ, and becoming a nation of people from all corners of the world. As we continue through this letter Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, the redemption of God's people will become clearer, that the ultimate conclusion of this glorious redemption is the divine marriage of which the bride will include both Jew and Gentiles who have been delivered from the kingdom of Darkness and brought into the kingdom of God's Son.

Which brings us now to chapter 4 this morning, let us read starting in verse 1, to verse 9 While studying this week on these passages one of the commentaries that I have been using went into an entire chapter talking specifically about justification which is the main thrust of what Paul has been talking about so far in this book. Instead of diving as deep into that discussion as Tom Holland did in his commentary, I just want to take a moment to read his conclusions for I think they are helpful in understanding and giving us a broader meaning of the word justification. In conclusion he says

“It is clear that the justification language is more exclusive than just merely the legal and accounting metaphors of traditional understanding. It is not a one-size fits all doctrine, and that attempts to make it so result in losing the richness of its various hues, and how one applies the various meanings to any one scripture depends on the context and argument of the passage under review.

Many meanings fall under justifications semantic domain. At times, its about acquittal and imputation as taught by the Reformers as we see in Pauls use in Psalm 32 regarding the sin of David, the same sin for which God gave Israel the Mosaic law so that, in its keeping she might be forgiven of her sin and made righteous. However this was a work that she failed to do, and instead of being a blessing, the law brought condemnation and guilt, and in the end became a curse from which only Christ could deliver them from. We have also seen how circumcision plays a part in justification; for Israel, in its national circumcision as a prerequisite for sharing in the Passover, and for the new covenant community in its spiritual circumcision through Christ.

We have also seen within justification the theme of salvation; God delivering his people from captivity as in the first exodus when Moses led Israel out of Egypt, returning his people from exile as in the second exodus when he brought them into a new covenant, and redeeming his people from sin as in the new exodus in Christ, which is something that Paul will build upon in chapter 5. Within each of these moments in salvation history, there exists the theme of justification largely as a corporate event, with God not simply declaring his people to be in a covenant, but with him taking the step of bringing his collective corporate community into a new relationship with him. While there remains a place for individual justification, we have seen this is only accomplished through the individuals participation in the corporate righteousness which has come to God's entire community of the faithful- the descendants of the faith of Abraham whose number is as the stars in the sky.

Finally, there is a justification as God making covenant. This is the basis of his dealings with Abraham in Genesis 15 when the patriarch was justified-that is credited with righteousness- and promised descendants beyond his imagining solely because of his faith. We found that Gen 15, so central to the Reformers doctrine of justification and generally understood in relations to God's acquittal of sin, is not at all about sin, but rather about God making an covenant- initiating a new relationship, which is entirely his to uphold. In similar manner, Psalm 106 speaks of God justifying-again crediting righteousness- to Phinehas and his descendants by bringing them into a covenant because of his reaction to Israels sin, not the acquittal of his own sin. Covenant making is also at the heart of Pauls use of Gen 15 in Romans 4 and elsewhere when he speaks of those – Jew and Gentile alike- who are brought to God into a covenantal relationship with him and declared members of his covenant community in Christ. All of these means live within the doctrine of justification, with each meaning having its own part to play, at times on its own, and at times in partnership with one or the other. Running throughout from start to finish, seemly as a thread binding them all together, is justification as God making covenant in order to reconcile the world to himself, to restore that which was broken in the fall of Adam. Justification as an all encompassing doctrine cannot singularly be about any of these meanings, but working together, each compliments or enriches the other depending upon the context in which each is used. Paul understood this completely as we will see in chapter 4. “

I think seeing justification as being a multi-faceted doctrine will help us in understanding more as we begin to unpack chapter 4 here. Paul continues his line of rhetorical questioning here to build his point that he has been making, the salvation is apart from the law, it is through the covenant promise given to Abraham by faith, not of law that brings justification and righteousness before God. There can be no boasting in the flesh, for it is all of God, and the conclusion is that mankind is justified by faith, apart from the law as he wrote in verse 28 of chapter 3, And this justification by faith, is for all of mankind who believe, he is not merely the God of the Jews, but of the whole world. So, verse 1 of chapter 4, “What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? Paul here again continues to anticipate the difficulties of the Jewish believers in Rome will have as they listen to this letter. If he can demonstrate to them that the law was not at all instrumental in Abraham's acceptance before God, they might come to see that being justified by God does not depend on law keeping. If Paul can be successful in this attempt he will have silenced those who argue against the gospel message he has delivered. This is why he spends so much time and effort in explaining Abraham's relationship to the law so that this Jewish brethren may understand that the Gospel of Christ is not a challenge or stands against the covenant with Abraham, but rather it is the fulfillment of that covenant.

All Jews held Abraham in the highest regard, being seen as their national ancestor and father, but he was not only that, as Isaiah calls him, he was also the friend of God. The one in whom God had made a sacred covenant. All would know of Abraham's life, and the story of his act of obedience on Mount Moriah when he was sent to offer Isaac, the promised son as a sacrifice. So Paul is asking them the question, What shall we say about our father Abraham, or forefather discovered according to this matter? Verse 2, If in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about, but not before God. Paul starts to answer the question he posed in verse 1, by leading the Jewish reader in the direction of their own argument, but just as they would think that he was agreeing with them he turns his answer around by adding, “but not before God.” The point that he is now seeking to make, is that even if Abraham had been justified purely by his works, and therefore deserved the praise and admiration of men, God still knew the truth of his heart, and the Jewish readers should be well aware of this for the scriptures do not hide Abraham's weaknesses and failings. The accounts of Abraham show him as a flawed man, who God had raised up to be a great example of faith. God did not justify Abraham because he himself was a just and righteous person, but rather it was because of faith, by God's grace.

As we had previously mentioned the various degrees in which the term justification has been used, we see it here with Abraham. As the account in Genesis 15, “After these things the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision saying, “Do not be afraid Abram, I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.” But Abram said, Lord God, what will you give me seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? Then Abram said, Look, you have given me no offspring, indeed one born in my own house is my heir? Then he brought him outside and said, look no toward the heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them, and he said to him, so shall your descendants be. And he believed the Lord and he accounted it to him for righteousness.” This declaration of righteousness, and justification by God mentions nothing of Abraham's sin issue, but is purely worked out by Faith through God, for Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Showing that there is more to justification than just merely the acquittal and removal of sin, justification has everything to do with God delivering his people from a condition they can not change by the promised birth of Christ. This promise included to not only deliver Abraham and his seed from slavery and oppression, but the entire human race.

Paul sees the full impact of the promise given to Abraham when he reasons that the seed that was promised to bless the whole world is in fact Christ himself. He is the one who brings justification and righteousness to God's people because he is the one who has saved them from the sins that separate them from God. So as we can see, Abraham was not justified by his works, but he was rather justified by his faith. Verse 4, "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. Paul is using the example here of an employee to further push the point of Abraham's justification by faith. An employee earns a wage by doing a job, what they earn is the result of their employment, and the employer is obligated to pay that wage upon the completion of that job. However if money is given to someone outside of labor, it is a gift. It is still credited to that individual, as if they had labored, but having done nothing is given that gift. Paul is pointing out that there are 2 ways that an individual may be credited, either by works of his own effort, or by a gift. The covenant promise that God made with Abraham had no other demand but to believe. And since as Paul says, and we all know, faith is a gift of God, we can see that the justification of Abraham was not by his works, but rather was all of grace, given by God. So since justification does not come by works, we see in verse 5, "However to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."

We must be a bit careful here in the understanding of this passage, for Paul says, that God justifies the wicked, yet we also know that God can not abide, nor tolerate sinfulness. But as we all know, it is God who has sent his Son to satisfy this dilemma, so that the sins of the wicked are paid and that through Christ we may stand justified in our faith. The fact that all outside of Christ are wicked, there is none righteous, but God who is rich in mercy and grace has offered up for himself a way to reconcile us to him. So that his justice in the punishment of sin is fulfilled, and also his grace and mercy is shown. In this statement here Paul is saying that the unbeliever, is outside of any relationship with God because of his sinful condition brought down from the sin and subsequent curse of Adam. Unbelieving man is ungodly, and therefore unable to meet the perfect demands of God, therefore his acceptance before God is only possible through Christ, and it is those who are of faith, who believe in God's free gift, that will be counted as being righteous.

This work is all of God's, he grants us the faith, and he gifts us the righteousness by that faith. We have been brought into a covenant relationship with him, through Christ we are accepted by God as though we have kept the entire law and have done nothing to offend. He has removed us from this kingdom of darkness and must us share in all the promises of his mercy and grace. Such a deliverance is the hope of mankind, the blessing promised to Abraham, that through his seed, that is Christ, all of the nations shall be blessed. Being credited righteousness in response to faith is far greater than just merely being treated as being innocent. It speaks about being the recipient of these covenant promises and blessings. And this is Paul's argument showing that salvation has likewise come to the Gentiles, that they to have entered into a covenant promise with God through faith, just as Abraham, and the Abraham is just as much a father to the gentiles as he is to the Jews. Paul goes on to show, that this idea that Abraham was justified by faith, and so to are all who believe both Jew and Gentile isn't just some random few verses taken out of context, but is in fact the entire message of the old testament, Paul points to David in verse 6, showing that David also understood this reality.

“Just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works, Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute sin. Paul is pointing to 2 of the key figures in the Jewish history and faith showing David's justification was also by faith. Abraham and David are heroes seen by the Jews as great examples of men who pleased God. Abraham was a gentile, and David a sinful Jew, yet these two men were credited by God as being righteous. Paul in his account of David here focuses upon the joy which floods into the forgiven person when he says, David speaks of the blessedness, the pure joy of the reality of God's grace imputed righteousness which takes away our sin and guilt. We all know the stories of David, his failings and shortcomings, his struggle with sinfulness, how he went from lust, to adultery to murder. Through an attempt of self preservation and protection he sunk deeper and deeper into sin and guilt. The one who was the pride of Israel, her glorious King became nothing but a twisted liar trying to avoid shameful exposure. In Psalms he records his depression, his inability to sleep and the declining of his health as he felt overwhelming guilt and despair for his sins. His entire world, the prestige, his achievements all collapsed into ruins around him because of his sin, and it is in this setting that David wrote of the blessedness of those whose sins are forgiven.

By setting up these 2, Abraham and David Paul delivers a metaphorical death blow to all who would read this letter who dare to think that they themselves are special having all that they need within their religious traditions and understandings of the law. He uses the examples of these 2 men to point to the fact that all men need to be made right before God, if these 2 pillars of Jewish history needed to be credited righteousness from God, it stands to show that it is impossible for anyone to whom Paul is writing to deny their need for a righteousness from God also. These 2 old testament champions of the faith, were both flawed men whom God used mightily, but it was not of themselves, nor of their works, but it was God who fulfilled his promises through them. And we today, who believe are likewise recipients of those same promises. Being justified by faith, through Christ by the free and gracious gift given to us apart from our works. Salvation and the ability to believe God is a gift given to us, not a wage we earn from laboring. And it is a gift given to sinners, so that we may know the blessedness of God's mercy, that apart from him we are lost and undone, but in him we have hope, life, and joy. Do you have this blessedness that David wrote about? Do you have this righteousness that Paul writes about? Do you have a faith like Abraham to believe God and be counted righteous? Christ said, repent and follow me, there are some who repent when caught but they do not follow Christ, and there are those who claim to follow Christ who have no repentance in their hearts. Both of these are a false faith, a delusional lost person trying to make themselves righteous, Christ said, repent and follow, The marks of a Christian are those who put their trust in him for forgiveness and righteousness, and out of love seek after him.

As the author of Hebrews wrote, quoting Psalms, Today, if you hear his voice do not harden your heart, today if the calling for repentance and belief has come do not wait, for tomorrow is not promised, but we have today which God has so graciously given. Set aside the works, and self justification and rest in Christ who has established it all, in his blood, for his people. And to those who are in Christ, I would say the same, repent, believe, trust and lean upon him for he is your salvation, and he is your hope. Embrace, and enjoy the blessedness of his salvation who by his mercy has saved us.