

*Crucial as “faith” is in Paul’s understanding of justification, it is imperative that we know what it is and how it works.*

## **“Justification By Faith”**

**Romans 4:13-25**

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The problem of human life, Paul has said, the fundamental tragedy of human experience and the ultimate predicament of mankind is not an economic recession or depression, it is not the sort of social or personal problems we suffer, however greatly, in this world; it is not even in and of itself the reality of death. It is that human beings are unrighteous in God’s sight and are therefore exposed to God’s holy judgment and to the punishment of their sins. This is true of every single person. The sin and judgment of sin we see everywhere we look in this world is an anticipation and echo of this ultimate reality. We have said so far, in our examination of Paul’s account of justification, an account that began in 3:21, that God’s solution to man’s dilemma as a guilty sinner in bondage to his sin was to provide righteousness for unrighteous men and women, boys and girls. They had no righteousness of their own and no means of obtaining it and so God, in love – Paul hasn’t yet explained God’s motivation, but he will – in love God contrived to provide the necessary righteousness himself. He *had* to do this because he is just and as the judge of all the earth he cannot clear the guilty. In order for man to escape God’s judgment he must first be made righteous; only then could God *judge* men and women to be righteous. And so God makes a man or woman righteous by crediting to him or to her the righteousness of Jesus Christ, the righteousness the Son of God came into the world to produce for sinful human beings.

That righteousness of Christ is the product of his work as our *redeemer*, laying down his life as the price of our liberation from sin and guilt, and as our *propitiation*, turning away God’s righteous anger from us by bearing in himself, in our place, the punishment we deserve. It is, as Paul has said in chapter 3, *by his blood* that we are made righteous, that is, by Christ’s sacrificial death, his substitutionary atonement, his dying *in our place*. Paul expects us to remember what he has said already in chapters 1 through 3 about the comprehensive, profound, and vicious sinfulness of all human beings. Our only hope in such a moral condition as we find ourselves in is that God should intervene to help us and that he has in Jesus Christ his Son.

Now we continue with Paul’s argument for and exposition of justification by faith and in, under, and through that argument his repudiation of the theory of justification by human works that was then so prevalent in the Jewish thought of the time and, in fact, had once been Paul’s own theology of justification and salvation; had been until he became a Christian. That is a story he will tell us in chapter 7. Paul knew very well that if he repudiated Jewish works-righteousness, by far the most serious, careful and sophisticated of all such theories in the world of that day, he would, in the nature of the case, repudiate all Gentile theories of salvation as well because they were based on the same principle. The problem with Jewish theology in the first century is that it had become very like pagan theology.

## Text Comment

- v.13 Remember that the Lord promised Abraham that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him. The Messiah was, from the very beginning to be the Savior of the world, not simply the Savior of the Jews.
- v.15 Paul is repeating himself. The law condemns all men because they are violators of the law. The law is no help to sinners! It reveals transgressions, but it cannot remove them. The promise God made would be void if, in fact, everything is actually suspended on the requirement of men meeting a legal condition, all the more one they are incapable of meeting!
- v.16 Now Paul makes explicit the principle he has expounded throughout the argument to this point. To say that justification – our being declared righteous in God’s sight, who is our Judge – comes through *faith* is to say that our justification is *by grace*; that is, it is God’s gift to us. To say that something is by grace is to say that it is undeserved; it is a gift. It also means that it is available to all: Gentile and Jew alike and that the requirement is the same for all, viz. faith in Jesus Christ. It is an easy thing to demonstrate that faith was the essential requirement of forgiveness and salvation in the OT as much as it is in the New and Paul is often at pains to demonstrate that fact, as he will several more times in Romans.
- v.18 Abraham’s *seed* Paul will say are all those who follow him in faith, whether Jew or Gentile.
- v.24 As Abraham believed in the Lord who gives life to the dead, as we read in v. 17, so we believe in God who raised Jesus from the dead. Faith is always in God’s power to give life to the dead!
- v.25 Once again Paul makes it clear that the basis, the ground, the reason, of our being declared righteous is what Jesus did and suffered on the cross. *That is the righteousness* that comes from God. Our problem was sin and Christ went to the cross *for our sins*. Again we hear of the various roles played by the persons of the Godhead. The Father delivered his son to death for us and then raised him from the dead. In the next few verses we will read of the Son himself dying *for* us. God in his fullness – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – accomplished our deliverance from sin, guilt, and death.

We understand how Christ’s death on the cross is related to our justification: it was the ransom price; it was the propitiation of God’s righteous anger – that is, on the cross Christ acquired the righteousness that now comes to us from God. Precisely how Christ’s *resurrection* is related to our justification Paul does not here explain. Again he seems to be anticipating remarks he will make later, especially in 5:9-11. Some have taken the view that Jesus rose from the dead *because* we had been justified and that is the connection between the two things, taking justification in this instance as equivalent to redemption and propitiation as in 3:24-25; that is as an objective, once for all accomplishment. On the cross, in the death of Christ we were justified. That usage of the

term justification seems to be what we find in 5:9. So it is a possible interpretation. However, more likely is the interpretation that Jesus was raised *so that we may be justified*. All through the argument to this point Paul has been speaking of justification as that which comes to pass when we believe in Jesus. And so, in Paul's usage here, we expect justification to be something that happens *after* the cross, not at the cross itself. We can, of course, easily see how the Lord's resurrection, after his death on the cross, completed our redemption and vindicated the propitiation of divine wrath on our behalf. It guaranteed that the benefits of the cross would be available to sinners. If Jesus had not risen to life again, it could only have been because his sacrifice was not accepted, the price he paid was not sufficient, and we, therefore, remained in our sins. Without the resurrection there would have been no victory over sin and death. [Murray; Cranfield]

Do you think you have a good idea of how radical, how utterly unexpected, how contrary to all conventional ways of thinking Paul's message was in that time? Do you have a good idea of how radical, unexpected, and contrary to all conventional ways of thinking Paul's message remains today?

In the ancient Gentile world it was axiomatic that the gods were to be served in hopes of securing from them some favor. One gave one's gifts at the altar and went away hoping that he or she would get something in return. This was the fundamental principle of ancient Near Eastern idolatry and of the religious practices of the classical world, of Greco-Roman culture. Tit for tat. Give to get.

And in the Judaism of that day, it had become substantially the same. The Jews, of course, had a very different message in their Bible, a message of God's mighty love, of his redemption of his people from bondage, of forgiveness through a sacrificial death; but these great truths were largely in eclipse in the first century. It is not as if words such as grace and mercy do not appear in the teaching of the rabbis. They do. But read the rabbis and you'll get nothing resembling what Paul says here in the second half of Romans chapter 4. The Jews were counting on their obedience to the law to put them right and to keep them right with God. Scholars of Second Temple Judaism, that is to say the Judaism that hails from the return of the exiles to Jerusalem in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and the development of Jewish thinking from that time and especially its culmination in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, have long observed that the law comes to the fore in the Jewish theology of that period in a way it does not in the Bible and God's redemptive covenant, the great scheme of salvation as it is revealed in the first 39 books of our Bible, what was the Bible of Judaism, that is largely relegated to the shadows. One rabbi puts it this way: "By covenant is meant nothing other than the Torah." And by Torah he meant nothing other than the commandments one keeps to accumulate merits before God, merits that will secure reward in this life and the life to come. First century Judaism no longer had a place for a redeemer who would die for the sins of the world.

Rather than God's amazing grace, rather than God's redeeming love, such as are front and center in Exodus and Deuteronomy and in the Psalms and Isaiah, rather than salvation as a free and utterly undeserved gift – the teaching of both Moses and the prophets – the emphasis began to fall on man's obedience to God's law and finally the great redemption of God was almost entirely overshadowed by the individual's obedience to God's law. Take this report of a

conversation between two rabbis who lived later in the first century and so were near contemporaries of Paul.

“Rabbi Eliezer said: ‘The scales are in perfect balance. [In other words imagine a fellow whose merits and demerits even themselves out. He had done as much good as he had bad.] On the one side are the sins, on the other, the merits. God makes the side with the merits go down. This is indicated in the phrase ‘full of mercy’ (Num. 14:18), because he inclines toward mercy.’”

Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah said: “The scales are in perfect balance.... Then God lightens the side of the sins, and the merits carry the day. This is indicated by the phrase, ‘He takes away sins.’”

You see, as Jews they still thought of God’s mercy, of God taking away sins, because those concepts were in their Bible. But in fact God’s judgment was, in their view, according to merit or demerit. You have to have the merits first. God’s grace is reduced to nothing more than leniency, giving the worthy man or almost worthy man a bit of a boost or the benefit of the doubt. The fact that God adds weight to the merit side or lightens the sin side leaves man’s obedience still fundamental to the outcome of his judgment and the weighing of merits and sins continues to be the principle of judgment. There is, of course, as you well know, nothing like this anywhere in the ancient Scriptures including the books the Jews revered as the Word of God in Paul’s day. Neither in Moses nor the Psalms, neither in the Law nor the Prophets does God ever tote up our good and bad and judge our lives accordingly. In the Judaism of Paul’s day, however, it was axiomatic that there were some people who didn’t need God’s mercy at all, literally, they were so good they did not need any extra weight on the merit side or any lightening of the sin side; they thought God judges according to the majority of one’s deeds – that is a phrase from the rabbis – and some had more than enough good deeds to outweigh their sins. No one with this theology, this understanding of salvation no matter how seriously he took it, would ever have written Psalm 103, or 32 or 51; nor would he have written “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!”

This accumulation of merit, Paul says, is not what we find in the Word of God. Paul’s argument is always biblical. It is always an appeal to Holy Scripture as well as to the facts of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. Abraham was the quintessential Jew. His life was the paradigm for the life of every Jew. In Abraham the Jew found his patriarch and forerunner, but also his paradigm and example and model. And, says Paul, in the life of Abraham one does not find such a view of justification as was taught in the Judaism of that day; the view he used to teach as a Jewish theologian. Justification by our own works is the furthest thing from the burden of the narrative of Abraham’s life and every Jew wanted to be like Abraham. Indeed, Abraham lived by a very different principle than the Jews are living by today, Paul says; Abraham lived by faith.

And remember, when Paul turns to Abraham as an example of justification by faith *in Christ* he is not comparing apples and oranges: as if he means to say that Abraham believed this kind of promise and that helps us see how we should believe this other kind of promise. Abraham believed for a baby, but we are believing for the forgiveness of our sins. The promise made to Abraham was that the world would be blessed through him, by which Abraham understood the

world would be *saved* through his descendants and, in particular, through one of his descendants, who happens to have been Jesus Christ himself. The promise Abraham believed was the promise of the Savior! In the Gospels Jesus tells us that Abraham rejoiced to see Christ's day from afar and was glad. Abraham knew more about the way of salvation than some might suppose. So when Paul says in Galatians 3 that *the gospel, the Good News*, was preached to Abraham he means that the message of God's gracious salvation through the Redeemer who was to come was preached to Abraham. And by believing that promise Abraham obtained what was promised for himself and for his household. It was by faith and not by obedience that Abraham obtained God's righteousness.

Paul is cutting right across the religious mind of all human beings. The notion that we should have our salvation, our eternal welfare in our own hands, that we should be the captains of our own souls, is so powerfully the tendency of our pride that only the Spirit of God can overcome it. Even experienced Christians know very well how deeply ingrained is the conviction that everything depends on us. We know very well how unnatural it is for us to live by faith, by dependence upon God. Proof of that is the difficulty we find being faithful and eager and expectant at prayer. It is not easy for us to believe – as our practice too often reveals – that our hope is in the Lord and not in ourselves. And the difficulty Christians have, who know better, is the evidence of how ingrained that prejudice is in every human heart.

Similarly, the notion that we are so bad that we are helpless apart from the intervention of God is such an offense to our pride that apart from the working of the Spirit no one ever believes it. We know very well how quickly resentment rises in our hearts when someone else accuses us of even a comparatively minor offense or fault. How difficult it is for us to think the way St. Teresa did, who said of one persistent critic, "I am so glad he told a trifling lie about me, rather than the whole terrible truth!" Our readiness to defend ourselves, our taking offense at the suggestion that we have done some minor wrong or failed in some way, is demonstration enough of how deep-rooted pride is in the human heart and how difficult it is for people to absorb Paul's thoroughgoing demonstration of every human being's catastrophic moral failure. Even Christians, who *believe* what Paul says about how sinful we are, have difficulty taking that belief seriously.

What's more, the notion that God should have come into the world as a man to give himself up to ignominy and loss for us, that the Creator of heaven and earth should have suffered so for sinners, is so foreign to all our natural conceptions of God that, again, apart from the grace and the power of God nobody will believe it. And for these reasons again and again this grand discovery of God's grace to sinners, of the sinner's justification by faith in the Redeemer, slipped through Israel's fingers and we find her, during the days of Moses, then again in the days of the Judges and of the kings and prophets, and again in the time of Jesus acting like any other ancient near eastern people, or like the Greeks and the Romans, conceiving her relationship with God in terms of tit for tat. I *am* the captain of my fate. It is up to me, though God will help me *if I do enough*.

This revelation of God's grace in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ is *the world's one radical religious idea*. Everything else is simply a variation on the same theme: do something for God

and he may or will do something for you. Only here do we find another message, another hope altogether: you were helpless and God did for you what had to be done.

Here in this last section of chapter 4 the emphasis falls, however, not on the ground of our justification – the death of Christ on the cross though that is mentioned at the end – and not on the necessity of Christ’s atonement as it was at the end of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4 – as being the only way God could be both just and the justifier of sinners. Here the emphasis falls on faith as the means of obtaining this righteousness that God gives to the unrighteous.

Important as the term is, it is striking that Paul never defines it. We generally know and I think Paul expected us generally to know what faith is. It is the confidence we place in the word, or the character, or the actions of another. It is the trust we invest in someone else. We say, “we have faith in him,” or “we have faith in his word.” When faith is defined in the Bible it is defined in this way. In Hebrews, a book that lays great stress on faith in Christ as the way of salvation, we are given a definition of faith. In Hebrews 11 we read that faith is “the conviction of things not seen.” Abraham couldn’t see the child that was promised to him; he had to believe that a son would be born to him in his and Sarah’s old age. He was an old man when God promised him an heir through which the entire world would be blessed. He was old and his wife was old and they had never had a child. People in the ancient world were savvy about such things. They knew that after a certain age a couple were unlikely to have children and at some point, long before reaching Abraham and Sarah’s age, a couple would never have children. And then, to make matters worse, the promised baby did not come right away. Several years passed, more than ten after Abraham arrived in the Promised Land, and still no baby. As we read in v. 18: “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed...” He was placing his confidence in what God had said to him. He was taking God at his word.

And, in the same way, we can’t see Christ dying on the cross or rising from the dead. And had we seen the Lord while he was being crucified, we couldn’t have seen our sins being laid upon him, our guilt being punished and removed by his death. We have God’s word, his promise that that was precisely what was happening when the Lord was hung up on that Roman gibbet.

Usually, in the Bible, the nature of faith is put in more homely ways, as Paul does here using Abraham’s confidence that God would keep his promise for his illustration of what it means to believe in Jesus Christ. For example, elsewhere in the Bible faith is likened to *coming to Christ*. “Come to me,” the Savior said, “and I will give you rest.” Faith is like walking away from whatever you had put your confidence in before and walking right up to Jesus Christ and standing beside him. Can you see yourself standing beside Jesus every day of your life, all the time? That’s a way of conceiving of faith!

Or faith is said to be *receiving Christ*. Paul says to the Colossians, “You have received Christ Jesus the Lord.” It is akin to opening a door and welcoming Jesus Christ into your home. Can you see Christ walking through your door of your life? That’s a way of thinking about what faith means. Or faith is described as a *putting-on* of Jesus, as if he were a garment. Remember the Lord’s parable of the prodigal son: “Bring the best robe and put it on him.” And Paul tells the Galatians, “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.” Faith is like wearing Christ wherever you go. His righteousness is upon you. Can you see yourself putting on

Christ; as if his righteousness were a coat and you were wearing it wherever you went? That's faith; that is what it means!

Or faith is described as *laying hold* of Christ. We read in Hebrews that believers have fled for refuge to Christ and we hold fast to him. Like the ancient Jew who fled for sanctuary to the temple and grabbed hold of the horns of the altar, or like the drowning man who lays hold of the hand extended to him from the lifeboat. Can you see yourself with your hand on the Lord's sleeve, unwilling ever to let go? That's faith!

Or faith is likened to eating and drinking Christ. That is what we do in the Lord's Supper, we eat and drink the Lord in this way and express by this action our dependence upon him, that our lives depend upon him as our body depends for life on food and drink, and that he alone can keep us alive. Jesus spoke of faith in him in this way when he spoke of his being the bread of life and the water of life. Can you think of Jesus as the food and drink that keeps you alive? That's faith!

Or faith is said to be a matter of *looking* to Christ. "Look to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth..." we read in Isaiah and in Hebrews it is the same: we are to run our race *looking to Jesus*. Remember Jesus harking back to the bronze serpent that Moses made. Those Israelites who had been bitten by the vipers had only to look to that serpent to be saved from the deadly venom. Can you see yourself, turning away from your sins and looking at Jesus, first on the cross and then now in heaven interceding for you? That's faith! And, finally, faith is likened to our committing of ourselves to Christ. Paul says that "he is able to keep what we have entrusted to him. We place our souls, our lives in his hands, and know that he will guard them and preserve them and bring them at last to heaven. Can you see yourself handing your life and your future over to the Lord Jesus and asking him to keep them for you? That's faith!

In all of these ways we are helped to understand what Paul means by faith and by believing. Abraham committed his future and the future of his posterity to Christ; he looked to God to provide what was impossible for him; he laid hold of the Lord and counted on him to act; he ate and drank the Lord as the nourishment of his life and hope, which is why, as we read in v. 20, that "he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God."

All of this means, as Paul puts it so memorably in verse 16, that by its very nature, faith is the repudiation of works, of achievement, and of merit before God. To say that justification is by faith is to say that it is God's doing and God's gift and God's grace. To say that justification is by faith is the same thing as saying justification is by Christ. He has done it and we have only to receive it from him. That is one reason why, I think, the resurrection is mentioned there at the end of this argument. If we are going to receive from Christ the righteousness we need to withstand the judgment of God, he must be alive and present to give that righteousness to us. And he is! He always is!

I know very well, from many conversations, that many consider the gospel promise – that God will sweep away the guilt of all your sins, all of them—past, present and future—will declare you righteous in his sight, that he will grant you an inheritance in the world to come if only you believe in Jesus, if only you count on what he did on the cross for our sins – I say many consider *that* promise to be as hard to believe as that a wrinkled, aged, long barren husband and wife

would conceive a son and see him born in their old age. They think it is more than they can believe. But remember, it is Christ who makes you right with God, not your faith. Your faith was not crucified for you. It was not your faith that rose from the dead. The great work is done. It was done by the Son of God. You have only to credit the word of Almighty God and the work of his Son, Jesus Christ. Remember, a son *was* born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age, that is why there are Jews in the first century; and Jesus, the Son of God did come into the world, died on the cross and rose from the dead.

Presume on the veracity of God [Calvin's ponderous way of putting it]! Take that look, that sip of the cold, fresh water of life; put on Christ for yourself to cover your sins; welcome him; go to him; lay hold of him; commit your soul to him for time and for eternity. And if you did that long ago, as most of you have, do it again every day. No other religion, no other philosophy of life will tell you to do such a thing. Paul himself would never have told you to do so. He would never have said before he became a Christian that the wages of sin is death but *the gift* of God is eternal life. But then, suddenly, there was the risen Christ himself, calling to him. And he came.

I was reading the other day of the coming to faith in Christ of a Japanese naval officer in an allied prison camp during the Second World War. A chaplain gave him a very simple explanation of the gospel – Christ on the cross for your sins and the summons to trust in him – and, this young man said, it was as if it wasn't the chaplain speaking to him at all, but the Lord Jesus himself, the towering personality of the Redeemer himself was suddenly in front of him and speaking to him. And he believed. Like Abraham, he couldn't not believe in a promise that God himself was making to him. He laid hold of Jesus, he put him on, he received him, he looked to him, and committed his life to him.

Paul is writing to Christians. But he was no doubt well aware that in the years to come many unbelievers would read his words. I wonder, I would like to know, through the ages, how many, for the very first time, had already believed in Jesus Christ by the time they reached the end of this magnificent chapter:

“He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”