

4:1: *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, hath found according to the flesh?*

When Paul argued a point he often said, “*what then.*” This expression is found several times in this book (3:1, 9; 6:1, 7; 8:31; 9:14, 30). Since Paul has introduced Abraham, it seems he was still directing his thoughts toward Jewish readers. The Jews would have considered Abraham their forefather “*according to the flesh.*”

Paul has already stated that true Jews are not determined by their outward appearance (2:28-29). True Jews are those who are Jews *inwardly*. Paul demonstrated this point and his illustration involved Abraham. He asked what Abraham “*found*” (*heurisko*—a discovery or realization of the truth after reflection upon experience, CBL, GED, 2:648) *according to the flesh*. That is, did Abraham get any special spiritual benefits because he was *worthy* (he merited or deserved them)? Could the act of circumcision have been the basis (or a partial basis) for Abraham’s justification? Did Abraham have some kind of special family line that entitled him to justification? Since Abraham came from heathenism the answer was *no* (adopted from Whiteside, p. 88). By putting the verb *found* in the perfect tense, Paul suggested this conclusion was still accurate when this letter was written.

In this chapter, Paul argued that Abraham was justified before he was circumcised (circumcision may be thought of as a work). Because Abraham’s justification was *before this work*, Abraham did not earn his justification. The same is true for us. Salvation is a gift that comes to those who are obedient and “in Christ” (2 Tim. 2:10).

This chapter shows that Paul used Abraham as a test case for the material in 3:21-31. Paul’s argument flows like this: If an examination of Abraham’s life shows that works justified him, Paul’s teaching was false. On the other hand, if faith justified Abraham, no Jew would have had the nerve to step forward and argue with Paul. Proving that Abraham was justified by faith would also show that Paul taught the truth. Furthermore, any Jew dissenting with Paul would have said that works did not justify Abraham, but works justified the Hebrew nation. This conclusion would have been unacceptable to any Jew. The Jews knew how God had viewed Abraham (Isa. 41:8), and because Paul used him to make a point, this chapter is very significant. This chapter deserves careful study because it is frequently misunderstood and misapplied.

4:2-3: *For if Abraham was justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not toward God. 3 For what saith the scripture? And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness.*

In verse 2, Paul continued to deal with how men are made righteous (Owen, p. 26). If good works are the way to make men righteous, Abraham was entitled to “*glory*” (boast). However, this type of glorying (boasting) would not have been directed towards God. Abraham would have boasted about himself since he would have “*earned*” salvation.

Paul affirmed that works did not justify Abraham (verse 3). Abraham was justified by *faith* (belief) and Paul proved this with the Scriptures. As Paul discusses this point it is important to comment on the word “*justified*” (*dikaioo*) in verse 2. A study of this book reveals Paul used this term in 2:13; 3:4, 20, 24, 26, 28, 30; 4:2, 5; 5:1, 9; 6:7; 8:30, 33. A study of the entire New Testament shows that Romans is probably the best book to see that *justification* means “God does not ascribe to the sinner the penalty for his sin” (CBL, GED, 2:142).

Since Paul appealed to the Scriptures, he viewed them as authoritative. They were sufficient to settle all arguments and provide man with everything he needs (2 Tim. 3:16-17). In this book Paul made full use of them (see 1:17; 2:24; 3:4, 10-18, 20). Here, two small points of grammar contain additional insight. When Paul described the Scriptures he spoke of them in the singular (“*Scripture*”). There were many books in the Old Testament, but Paul viewed them as a composite work. Furthermore, when he said the Scriptures “*say,*” he used the present tense. God’s word speaks to us when we read and study because heaven’s word is “*living*” (Heb. 4:12) and God’s word “*works*” in us (1 Thess. 2:13). Today, the Scriptures should be used just as much and for the same purposes. We need to be familiar with the Bible, use it as our sole authority, and insist that others do the same. God’s word will never be a book of dead

letters or some kind of disjointed series of stories.

One of the Scriptures used by Paul is Gen. 15:6. This passage says Abraham had righteousness *reckoned* to him. This means righteousness was *put into Abraham's account*. Righteousness (*dikaioisune*) is "the establishment of a right relationship with God" (CBL, GED, 2:138) and is considered one of Paul's "preferred words" (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 1:326). Righteousness was given, even though Abraham had not earned it. The basis for Abraham's righteousness was *belief*. The word translated "*reckoned*" or "*counted*" (*logizomai*) was an accounting term (this word is also found in verse 4). Some versions translate the original word as *impute*, but this is a very poor translation. A better understanding of the term is "*to enter into the books*" (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 2:355).

Paul's reference to Gen. 15:6 is somewhat amusing. Many Jews were very opposed to Paul's teaching that justification has always been by faith and not by works. When Paul responded to those who opposed him, he went to the source most valued by his foes. He showed his antagonists, from their own book, their belief was wrong and completely opposed to the Scriptures. God's word taught justification by faith long before Paul and his adversaries were born.

"The Rabbis taught that Abraham had a surplus of merit from his works that was available to his descendants" (Bible Knowledge, p. 453). If any of the people at Rome had this belief, Paul destroyed it.

4:4-5: *Now to him that worketh, the reward is not reckoned as of grace, but as of debt. 5 But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness.*

Since Paul introduced an Old Testament reference, he proceeded to show the significance of it. This tactic contains another lesson for teachers. Do not read or appeal to a Bible verse and stop. Show the significance of the passages that are read.

The 4th verse may be compared to an employee and an employer. When people work, they are paid. A worker is owed money because work is performed. Workers receive *pay* and not *gifts* to compensate them for their efforts. In this context, the word "*worketh*" (*ergazomai*—a present tense verb which also occurs in verse 5 and is again in the present tense) means *working for justification*. If a man were working for justification (as a man works at a job), God would *owe* salvation to people. It would not be a gift because it would be earned.

Salvation (or justification) is given to *those who believe but do not work* (verse 5). People do not work for salvation because the word *work* is associated with meritorious works and a perfect life. Neither of these methods can save us. Salvation can only come by "*believing*." Since *believing* is a present tense verb, and Rom. 1:5 says faith is obedient, Paul did not have in mind the modern concept of "faith only." Abraham had an obedient faith that was continually displayed because this was and is still the only way to find justification and salvation.

McGuiggan (p. 149) noted that in Psalm 106:30-31 we read about how Phinehas killed a rebellious Israelite prince and a woman with whom the prince committed fornication (take the time to read this short account). The writer of this Psalm also said this *act was reckoned to him for righteousness*. The verbal expression used in Ps. 106 is identical to Gen. 15:6 and Rom. 4:3. Hence, there is no point in trying to deny that *acts* (deeds) can be reckoned for righteousness. These deeds cannot be meritorious (Tit. 3:5), but they may be acts of obedience (Rom. 1:5).

Many denominational groups frequently appeal to this chapter to substantiate religious error. This chapter is usually used to affirm that Abraham was justified when he was an alien sinner. Since he was an alien sinner who was justified by *faith* (and this is interpreted as faith alone), modern day sinners are saved by faith alone. This is the common and popular assertion that appeals to scores of people, but it is false.

Abraham, contrary to what many assert, was not a condemned and unforgiven sinner at the time described in Gen. 15 (the Scripture to which Romans 4 refers). A study of Abraham's life reveals that he was already in a right relationship with God during the time described by Paul.

A study of Abraham's life must begin with Gen. 12:1-3 (this time period is also described in Acts 7:2-

3 and Heb. 11:8). Take a few moments to read Gen. 12:1-3. If, during the time described in Gen. 15, Abraham was an alien and ungodly sinner, how are we to understand the information in Gen. 12? The 12th chapter of Genesis (especially verses 6-8) shows that Abraham had a relationship with God long before the events in Gen. 15 (see also Gen. 13:3-4). Can any one believe that an unforgiven sinner was worshipping Jehovah, calling on His name, and receiving the kinds of responses from God described in Gen. 12-13!?

Before dealing with Paul's quotation from Gen. 15, those studying this matter should read Gen. 15:1. The promise made in Gen. 15:1 has never been made to an alien sinner. It certainly was not made to an unrighteous and unsaved man named Abraham. Abraham was justified **before** Gen. 15:6, the passage cited by Paul in Rom. 4:3. Also, these passages show that justification is an ongoing process (this material is adopted from Whiteside, pp. 89-90).

Another of Paul's points related to the *object* of justification. That is, God has not limited justification to good men like Abraham. The "*ungodly*" (*asebes*) have also been the object of God's justification (verse 5). This term is found only a few times in the New Testament, and here is its first use. It next occurs in Rom. 5:6 (be sure to see this reference). Its other locations are 1 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 4:18; 2 Pet. 2:5, 6; 3:7; Jude 4, 15. These references all "indicate a lack of reverential awe, an impious attitude, and contempt towards God" (CBL, GED, 1:462). Even the *ungodly* can be justified by an obedient faith.

4:6-8: *Even as David also pronounceth blessing upon the man, unto whom God reckoneth righteousness apart from works, 7 (saying), Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, And whose sins are covered. 8 Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not reckon sin.*

Paul introduced one of the Jew's favorite people—Abraham. Here, he continued to build his case by mentioning another prominent Old Testament figure—David. The Jews, also, liked to hear about Israel's great king (Peter even alluded to him on the day of Pentecost, Acts 2:25f). Paul mentioned both characters because of a significant difference between them.

Abraham lived *before* the Law of Moses and he was justified. The Jews could have said, "Paul, you are right, but we are concerned about people who lived *under* the law." Paul met this objection before it could be offered. He appealed to David because this king lived under Moses' law.

Since Paul used both David and Abraham as illustrations, no Jew could argue (1) the example of Abraham did not apply, and (2) works had previously justified God's people. Paul may have also mentioned David for another reason. The life of David proved that Abraham was not an isolated case. Someone else besides Abraham had been justified by faith.

David pronounced a "*blessing*" upon those who had righteousness *reckoned* to them (verse 6). This *blessing* (*makarismos*), which is also found in verse 8, describes the "particular joy that accrues to the person as a result of salvation" (CBL, GED, 4:102). Here, Paul used three descriptions to further explain righteousness. The *negative* description of being right with God is in 6b (*apart from works*). The *positive* statement of righteousness is found in verse 7 (*Iniquities are forgiven and sins are covered*). The *summation* of righteousness is in verse 8. These three verses show that righteousness **covers sins, forgives iniquities**, and causes God to **not reckon sin**. These descriptions further show that God has removed all obstacles, so there can be fellowship between man and God.

Paul's quotation is found in Ps. 32:1f, and it indicates that those under the Old Testament could be and were forgiven of sins. Those who received this forgiveness were blessed because they were "*reckoned as righteous*" by God. The words "*forgiven*" and "*covered*" compliment each other though "*iniquities*" (*anomia*) is sometimes a stronger term for sin in the New Testament. In fact, *iniquities* is "probably the strongest word for sin that exists" (CBL, GED, 1:287). "There is a difference between violation of the law and lawlessness. Violation of the law means to break the law, but lawlessness means to abolish the law, or act as if the law did not exist" (ibid, p. 288). While this term can have a stronger sense, here, *being covered* "equals 'being forgiven'" (CBL, GED, 2:539).

No matter how deeply and fully someone sins, forgiveness is available. In verse 7 "*blessed*" (*makarios*—a word related to but different from the one in verse 6) is the same word Jesus used in the

Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:8, 9, 10, 11). Fortunate (or well off) is the person whose sins are forgiven by God.

The quotation from David has caused some to ask how sins could be forgiven prior to Christ's death. Did David and Paul mean there was forgiveness before Christ actually set foot on the earth? The answer is yes. Though some have alleged that sins in the Old Testament were "rolled forward" and not forgiven (Heb. 10:3), the "*remembrance*" of sins was in the conscience of the worshipper (Heb. 10:2). Sins were forgiven on the basis that Jesus would come and die for all transgressions (1 Pet. 1:19-20). This is why David could speak of situations where God did not *reckon sin*. That is, sin was not laid to the account of those who were guilty (*reckon* occurs throughout this chapter and is explained in the commentary on verses 2-3). David believed the sins during the Old Covenant period were covered and forgiven. Since this was true for the Old Testament era, it is certainly true for all who live under the New Testament. Because of Christ's sacrifice, sins are *not put to our account* (we commit them but they are not charged to our account). The thought is parallel to 1 Jn. 1:7. This is a great spiritual blessing possessed by Christians. What Paul wrote should comfort each person who is a faithful Christian.

W. E. Vine (1:355) said "The word rendered 'are forgiven' is in the aorist tense, expressing the definiteness of the act." Paul also used the aorist tense when he penned the word *covered* (*epikalupto*). This word "is used here only in the New Testament and is the equivalent to the Hebrew word for 'to atone.' It signifies, not merely a covering, but the removal of guilt under the covering; this involves the removal of divine wrath from the sinner" (Vine, 1:355).

Paul realized that some may have misunderstood or misapplied his point. To prevent people from thinking that sin is not charged and this allows us to do whatever we want, he provided some additional material later in this book (6:1-2).

Both Paul and James appealed to Gen. 15:6 (be sure to read Jas. 2:23). Paul used Gen. 15:6 to say that works did *not* justify Abraham (4:1-5). James used this same quote to say that works *did* justify Abraham. Many in the denominational world emphasize the material in Rom. 4, but pay little attention to the material in Jas. 2. Those who do try to explain Jas. 2 often argue that James spoke of justification from the standpoint of those who are already Christians and Paul spoke of the unsaved. This explanation is unacceptable for both spoke about the same person (Abraham) and used the same passage to describe him.

What many fail to realize is that the word *works* is used in different senses. In Rom. 4 Paul described *meritorious* works. Abraham did not earn his salvation because such is impossible (Tit. 3:5). Abraham did, however, engage in acts that were *obedient*. James described works that are obedient. We too must be obedient (compare 2 Thess. 1:8) if we want to be saved. Part of our obedience is the "*work*" of faith (Jn. 6:29).

4:9-10: *Is this blessing then pronounced upon the circumcision, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say, To Abraham his faith was reckoned for righteousness. 10 How then was it reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision:*

In studying these two verses it is important to remember two facts about the previous material. (1) The Jews were no better than the Gentiles. (2) Works did not justify any Old Testament character. These facts were so obvious no Jew could attempt to contradict or refute them.

In these two verses, Paul dealt with another argument that some might have made. The thought is something like this: "Paul, your two points are true. However, we are not saying that Old Testament characters were justified because they were better than the Gentiles, or because of their works. We believe that Old Testament characters were justified because they were circumcised!"

For the Jews "*circumcision*" (see the commentary on Rom. 2:25-27 for information about *circumcision* and *uncircumcision*) was the back door. If every argument failed and they still wanted to prove their point, they could appeal to circumcision (the book of Galatians deals with this subject at length). In these two verses, we might say that Paul "shut the back door."

Paul referred to the "*blessing*" (this goes back to verse 7 and the forgiveness of sins) and then asked

this question: *Who was forgiven of sins under the Old Testament—the circumcised or the uncircumcised?* The Jews were able to give only one answer (the circumcised). Saying that uncircumcised men had received forgiveness would have made them look foolish and was too distasteful to consider.

Paul argued that the proper answer is *uncircumcision*. His proof for uncircumcised people being blessed was Abraham, the patriarch highly esteemed by the Jews. The end of verse 9 affirms Abraham's faith was *reckoned for righteousness* (he was justified in the sight of God). This statement refers to the time described in Gen. 15:6. Thus, by the time of Gen. 15, and even before this time, *Abraham was justified*. He was justified *before he was circumcised*. To insure that his readers understood the point, Paul put this information into the form of a question: Was Abraham justified before or after circumcision (verse 10)?

The answer to this question has already been given. Abraham was justified *before* circumcision (see Gen. 17:22-24; this passage records Abraham's circumcision). Since Gen. 15:6 (which says that Abraham was *justified*) is **before Gen. 17:22f** (the place that records his circumcision), there was no doubt that Abraham's justification had nothing to do with circumcision. In fact, circumcision came some **13-14 years after** Abraham was justified.

Paul's argument was brilliant. The Jews were unable to offer any objection to what he wrote. They could only ask, "If circumcision was not the basis for justification, why was Abraham circumcised?" This question was both logical and reasonable so Paul answered it in verses 11-12.

4:11-12: *and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision; that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be in uncircumcision, that righteousness might be reckoned unto them; 12 and the father of circumcision to them who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham which he had in uncircumcision.*

Circumcision served as a "sign" (*semeion*). In many New Testament passages this term refers to miracles performed to substantiate New Testament preaching (1 Cor. 14:22; Mk. 16:20). In this book the term only occurs twice (here and Rom. 15:19). In Rom. 15 the word describes miraculous signs. Here, however, the term means Abraham was justified while in a state of "*uncircumcision*" and then he received the *sign* (mark or seal) of circumcision. For Abraham the process was justification *and then* circumcision. Abraham was a special case because those who came after him were justified *after* circumcision.

Abraham's justification occurred *before* his circumcision for the reason given at the end of 11:1. He was justified first so he could become the *father of all believers* (Jews and Gentiles). Since Abraham was not circumcised when he was justified, his "spiritual family" would include both circumcised and uncircumcised people. It made perfect sense for God to justify Abraham before his circumcision. Perhaps to emphasize the point Paul used the word "*seal*" (*sphragis*), a term that often applied to instruments used for sealing things (i.e. cylinder seals, signet rings, stones, etc.) as well as the actual seal (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 3:316). Here, Gingrich and Danker (p. 796) say *seal* means righteousness through faith was present in the life of Abraham, and so God *sealed* (confirmed) it.

Saying Abraham had *received the sign of circumcision* as well as a *seal of righteousness* would not have made Jewish readers very happy. Jewish people sought to affirm that uncircumcised people were not entitled to any of God's blessings. Paul forced the Jews to acknowledge the falsity of their viewpoint. If uncircumcised people were not entitled to Abraham's blessings, Abraham was not entitled to what he received. In the eyes of God Abraham must have been a condemned man.

The 12th verse shows that Abraham was considered the spiritual father of all people. He was the father of the circumcised *who obeyed God* and he was also the father of the **uncircumcised** *who obeyed God*. Every Jew knew and agreed that Abraham was the father of the circumcised, but saying Abraham was the father of the uncircumcised would have disturbed any Jew. Another blow to Jewish pride is found in the word "*walk*" (*stoicheo*), a present tense verb meaning "*falling into the line of footprints.*" It was as if Abraham had become a pattern that Gentiles and Jews alike could emulate. Paul further drove home the

point with the word “steps” (*ichnos*): “following after a direction set by someone else, especially of someone who is/was a faithful leader or role model” (CBL, GED, 3:188).

4:13: *For not through the law was the promise to Abraham or to his seed that he should be heir of the world, but through the righteousness of faith.*

The ASV has a very good translation of this verse (*For not through the law was the promise to Abraham or to his seed that he should be heir of the world, but through the righteousness of faith*). Some believe the “law” in this verse refers to the Law of Moses. While this is a possibility, there seems to be a better explanation because Abraham lived before Moses’ law. Also, the book of Romans does not always use the term *law* to describe the Law of Moses. In many places, the word *law* means *flawless conduct*. In light of the context, it may be best to understand this “law” as *perfect behavior*. Try reading the passage and substituting the words *flawless conduct* in place of *law*.

None of the “promises” made to Abraham or his seed (this word is explained below) were based upon *flawless conduct*. If they had been, Abraham would not have received anything! God based the promises upon the *righteousness of faith* instead of a perfect life. Before studying the *promises*, Gen. 22:18 should be read (note the word “because”).

The material in Rom. 4:13 has the same contrast that is expressed in other parts of this book. Faith is contrasted with works. A system of works requires perfection; faith requires belief and obedience (Rom. 1:5). The promise made to Abraham was not based upon law (a system where the law keeper is perfect). Rather, he lived under a system based upon faith (a system of faith). If the promise to Abraham had been based upon the law, the promise would have failed because Abraham was not perfect.

The actual “promise” (*epangelia*) made to Abraham (verse 13) has been understood in various ways. Some interpret it to include everything that Abraham was promised. Others emphasize the land promises or spiritual promises made to him, because as the CBL, GED (2:491) noted, “Paul’s writings are replete with promise language. He, more than any other writer, assessed God’s promise to Abraham in light of the Law and new life in Christ.” A helpful cross-reference is Heb. 11:8, 13. Whatever the exact nature of this promise, Paul further described it as being “heir of the world.” *Heir* (*kleronomos*) is an especially important term in the writings of Paul (compare Rom. 8:17), and like the word *promise*, it points to the promise given to Abraham and his descendants now being “realized in Christ” (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 2:298). We, like Abraham, must take the promises upon a system of *faith* (13b) instead of a system of law.

The word “seed” (*sperma*, singular) should be tied in with Gal. 3:16-17, though an alternative explanation is offered by Cranfield (p. 90). This author said: “With regard to the words ‘or to his seed’, the suggestion has been made that Paul may perhaps be thinking of Christ as the true seed of Abraham (compare Gal. 3:16); but in view of verses 16 and 17 (Romans 4:16-17, BP) this is not likely.” A similar comment is offered by the Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (3:264): *Seed* is “a designation for Israel in its empirical existence as the chosen carrier of the promise.”

4:14-15: *For if they that are of the law are heirs, faith is made void, and the promise is made of none effect: 15 for the law worketh wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there transgression.*

These verses are a contrast to the preceding material. Paul’s readers were told if Jews could become *heirs* (same word as in verse 13) by obeying the law (i.e. flawless obedience to the law and thus earning salvation), faith has no part in the process. Faith can serve no purpose in a system if people are justified by flawless living. Paul stated this conclusion in two different ways: “*faith is made void*” and “*the promise is made of none effect*.” *Made void* (*kenoo*) has the sense of *worthlessness*. The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (2:282) goes even further and says this means “the *destruction of faith*.” *None effect* (*katargeo*) can be understood as “annul” (Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 2:267). Lenski (Romans, p. 311) says this graphic description is a *soap bubble faith* (a promise that is completely useless and without substance).

Beyond this description is another important point. If the promise made to Abraham is obtained by flawless living, the Jews and the Gentiles cannot receive it. The reason? All sin (Rom. 3:23). Since sin destroys perfection, and a system of law requires perfection for salvation, no one could ever be justified. This information is all related to verse 15.

In the first part of verse 15 we are told, “*the law worketh wrath.*” The meaning of this expression is not hard to grasp. If people try to be justified by law, the only thing they will receive is *wrath* (punishment). The reason? The answer has already been given. If anyone is to be justified by a system of law keeping, they must be perfect. The word *worketh* (*katergazomai*) emphasizes “the end result of the action rather than on the actual act or work itself” (CBL, GED, 3:302). In the Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (2:271), it is explained as “produce” or “create”—other terms which point to the end result which in this case is divine punishment (*worketh* is in the present tense so the law continually produced a sentence of guilty on people). At the end of verse 15, the thought is a little more difficult. Paul said, “*where there is no law neither is there transgression.*” To figure out what this means we must examine the context.

Paul has repeatedly said that *law* cannot justify man. This approach to justification is impossible because it requires us to perfectly keep the law. If men decide to reject law keeping for justification (and this is the right choice), they may choose the life of *faith* (this is the only way to heaven). We must reject good works as a basis for salvation because meritorious works cannot save us. Men can only be saved by a system of faith.

The end of Rom. 4:15 is perhaps best explained by Rom. 6:14, a passage that should be read. According to Rom. 6:14, Christians are *not under law*. We have been discharged from the law (Romans 7:6), and we have been *made dead to the law* (7:4). Since Christians are living by a system of faith, there is not a legal arrangement for justification. Christians cannot be and never will be justified by a system of law keeping because they cannot be perfect. Thus, Paul said in 4:15b that God’s people *cannot transgress*. We cannot break the rules of a system if we are not part of the system! Since we are part of a faith system, we are completely separate from a “work your way to heaven” arrangement. Lanier (p. 25) noted, “I understand Paul to say: ‘where there is no system of justification by law, there is no transgression which bars one from inheriting the promise.’ That is the negative. The positive would be, ‘Where there is a system of justification by law, there is transgression which bars one from inheriting the promise.’”

4:16: *For this cause (it is) of faith, that (it may be) according to grace; to the end that the promise may be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all*

Certain words in this verse deserve special attention. The first of these words is a conclusion indicator (the KJV has *therefore*; the ASV says *for*). Here, Paul concluded his argument about Abraham. He affirmed that justification is by “*faith*” and this has always been true. This *faith* (which is not faith alone) is part of God’s “*grace.*” For man to be saved, the “system” must be faith and grace, not faith and meritorious works. *Grace* is descriptive of what God has done. *Faith* stands for man’s obedience (see Heb. 11:7-9, 23, 29, 30, etc.). The Bible calls salvation a *gift* because we do not earn it (Tit. 3:5). Even God’s promise to Abraham was based upon grace and faith instead of meritorious works. Every covenant between God and man has consisted of grace and faith. Meritorious works have never been the basis for salvation and justification.

The system we live under is described in verse 16: “*the promise may be sure to all the seed.*” This means anyone can be saved by the plan revealed in the New Testament. Inspired writers were convinced that God’s plan is simple enough for all to understand and obey. Furthermore, God’s plan of grace and man’s obedient faith also make salvation sure. When Christians stand in the grace of God (Rom. 5:2) and hold fast the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1-2), they are continually cleansed from sin (1 Jn. 1:7, 9) because of God’s grace. God said things have been written so that we can “know” we have eternal life (1 Jn. 5:11). When we do what God’s word says, we are a true disciple (Jn. 8:31-32).

At the end of verse 16 Paul repeated the point made in 2:28-29. Abraham is the spiritual father of the Jews as well as the Gentiles when they are obedient. Another passage that makes this point is Rom. 9:6 (this is where Paul said that not all Jews are of Israel). There is more to being a child of God than coming from a certain race.

Since *true Jews* are those who are Jews on the *inside*, there is no longer such a thing as God's special people (i.e. no special race). Because we are under a new and different testament, race has absolutely nothing to do with our relationship to God.

God's view about race should be the one advocated by Christians. We should believe and teach that every race is of equal importance. A congregation in America is not more important or of more value than a congregation in Nicaragua. Though some may feel that an American church is more important because the building is fancier, the people are better dressed, the educational backgrounds are better, money is more available, the preachers are finer, etc., God sees all Christians and races as equal.

4:17: *(as it is written, A father of many nations have I made thee) before him whom he believed, (even) God, who giveth life to the dead, and calleth the things that are not, as though they were.*

Paul returned to the Old Testament for a quotation. He has already offered several citations (1:17; 2:24; 3:4; 3:10) and here he took one from Gen. 17:5 (take a moment to read this verse). God promised that Abraham would be a father to "*many nations*." Even Abraham's name reflects this promise. The beginning of this name (*Ab*) conveys the meaning of *father*. The remainder of it (*raham*) expresses the idea of *many nations*. After God made the promise in Gen. 17, Abraham *believed*. Paul said, "*before him whom he believed*." Abraham was sure that God would fulfill this promise even though he and Sarah were past their childbearing years (this thought will be developed in verses 19-22).

Before examining this material a comment must be made about God's giving "*life to the dead*." This statement may easily be lifted out of context and applied to many things including the resurrection. Divorcing this statement from its context is mishandling the text. The meaning of the words is carefully explained in verse 19. If we wish to properly apply the thought, we may say that only God is capable of certain actions. When Sarah and Abraham could not bring a child into the world on their own, God set aside natural law and allowed Sarah to become pregnant. Sarah had never given birth, and when this promise was made, her body was too old for the natural process to work. Abraham's body was as good as dead. Several obstacles had to be overcome for Sarah to become pregnant. A similar point is found in the spiritual realm. Man has never been able to justify himself. Man cannot save himself. If he is to be saved, there must be divine intervention.

In commenting on Sarah and Abraham Paul also said God knows the future. He "*calls the things that are not as though they were*." That is, God is so confident in His knowledge of the future He *calls* (says) what will happen before the events occur (compare Isa. 46:10 and Acts 2:23). Today, announcers can watch and describe events as they happen. God can give this same type of "blow by blow" description of any event, person, or circumstance, but He does so before it happens. In this context, Paul reminded readers that God predicted the birth of Sarah and Abraham's son.

A single term (*zoopoieo*) in the original text is the basis for "gives life." Normally, this term is translated "*quicken*" in the KJV. For a list of other places in the New Testament that use this term, see Jn. 5:21; 6:63; Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:22, 36, 45; 2 Cor. 3:6; Gal. 3:21; 1 Tim. 6:13; 1 Pet. 3:18. Many of these verses use this term in a spiritual sense (salvation). A study of this term shows that the power to make alive belongs exclusively to God.

4:18: *Who in hope believed against hope, to the end that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, So shall thy seed be.*

Though it may seem contradictory, this verse should be studied in conjunction with Gen. 17:17. The Genesis writer stated that Abraham *laughed* when he was told about his son. Yet, Rom. 4:18 says that Abraham had "*hope against hope*" (i.e. he believed in the impossible). If Abraham really believed that

God would do the impossible, why did he laugh? The answer must be that Abraham laughed for joy. He was thrilled with the promise that a child would finally come to him through Sarah. Concerning the *hope against hope*, the Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (1:439) noted how “Abraham provides an example of true hope. Hope is based on the divine promises and leaves behind it any uncertainty, venturing against all hope.”

The Genesis writer also provided some information about Sarah. When she was told about the promise, she too laughed, but her laughing was for a different purpose (Gen. 18:10-15).

4:19: *And without being weakened in faith he considered his own body now as good as dead (he being about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb;*

Verses 19-21 provide the specifics concerning what was mentioned in verse 18. Abraham’s body was as good as “*dead*” (this described his ability to father a child). In the New Testament *dead* (*nekroo*) is found only here, Col. 3:5, and Heb. 11:12 (the latter passage also refers to Abraham and, like here, essentially means he suffered the deadening affects of aging). Abraham was impotent. Abraham also knew that Sarah’s womb was *dead* (she was incapable of conception). Abraham’s deadness is described with a verb and Sarah’s is worded with a noun (*nekrosis*). According to the Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (2:461), this second term is a medical word which describes “the process of dying or the state of death of the body or some part of the body” (the latter definition is the proper one for here). This *deadness* had been true for their entire marriage. Even when Sarah was at the age of 90, she was still unable to conceive (Gen. 17:17). This couple had no earthly hopes of having children of their own.

Another key word in this verse is “*weakened*” (*astheneo*). Other verses use this word to describe physical sickness (Mt. 25:36; Mk. 6:56). It can also describe a spiritually weakened condition or a weakened conscience in places (compare Rom. 14:1-15:13). Here, it means “to be weak in faith” (Thayer, p. 80).

4:20-21: *yet, looking unto the promise of God, he wavered not through unbelief, but waxed strong through faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully assured that what he had promised, he was able also to perform.*

God made a promise to Abraham regarding a child and this great man did not waver. He refused to entertain any thoughts of unbelief. The Bible says he “*waxed strong through faith and he gave glory to God.*” Even though Abraham was faced with something that seemed impossible, he knew how God had acted in the past so his trust was unshakeable. The middle of verse 20 (“*waxed strong*” in the ASV and “*strong*” in the KJV) has a word meaning Abraham was actually *strengthened* in his faith. His existing faith was great, but it grew to new heights. His unwavering belief in God not reneging or being unable to carry out His promise is further expressed by “*fully assured*” (*epicheireo*). In the KJV this is rendered “*fully persuaded,*” and it means “full and complete conviction.” Spicq (3:121) adds that Abraham was convinced God had “the power to make good on his promise.” He is, thus, an example of someone who had true faith. This word is also found in Rom. 14:5. Abraham was so confident he “gave glory” to God. He praised and honored God though the promises were not immediately given.

While the significance of the point is clear in Romans 4, it becomes more profound by a detailed study of Genesis. By the time of Gen. 12:4, Abraham was seventy-five years old. Sarah was ten years younger (65, Gen. 17:17). This same verse (Gen. 17:17) puts Abraham at a “*hundred*” years old (this is a round figure because Gen. 17:24 says he was 99) when Isaac was finally born. Although this couple did struggle somewhat with the promise concerning Isaac (Gen. 18:10-14), they had faith. Since faith in having a son existed in Gen. 12:2 (a child was needed to make “*a great nation*”), Abraham and Sarah waited 24 years for their baby boy. Since Isaac’s coming was not like the Lord’s virgin birth, the natural process (sexual intercourse) was required. The first sexual act didn’t result in pregnancy. Neither did the first year of marital relations. Abraham and Sarah had to believe that their sexual union would one-day result in a child, and it took almost 25 years of married love for this to happen! Great faith on their part is

seen in another area too. God promised a land and Abraham went to this territory. When Abraham and his wife arrived, it was already occupied! Abraham was rich (Gen. 13:2), but he didn't try to use money to buy the property. Neither did he try to conquer the land through military might (he did have some warfare capabilities, Gen. 14:14). Abraham and his family quietly dwelled in their tents (Gen. 14:13) believing God would keep His word. If these examples are not enough, we can offer another illustration of Abraham's faith. Twenty-four years after the promises about a son and nations were made, Abram had his name changed to *Abraham*, a name meaning "father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5). Imagine what people said to or thought about him: "Father? A father of what nations? Where are your children? At the ages of 89 and 99 you are still sexually active and hope to have children? Faith was tested in almost bitter ways but this couple persevered.

Abraham did not operate on blind faith; he gave very careful consideration to his situation. In Rom. 4:19 "*considered*" (*katanoeo*) means Abraham took a very careful look at his body as well as Sarah's. He was carefully thinking about and mulling over God's promises, perhaps thinking about what seemed possible or even impossible. Brown's general definition for *katanoeo* (consider) is "direct one's mind and interest towards something, to notice and perceive it" (3:124). Other good definitions are "perceive" or "inspect" (Brown, 3:129). Some of the other places where *katanoeo* (*consider*) is used include Mt. 7:3 (careful "*looking for*" a speck in the eye of a brother). It is also found in Acts 7:31 (Moses came to "*behold*" the burning bush—look intently and pay very close attention). Peter's looking at the sheet lowered from heaven is described with this same term (Acts 11:6). Christians are told to "*consider*" Jesus as an apostle and high priest (same word, Heb. 3:1). James used it in the first chapter of his letter (verses 23 and 24). His use likens the term to examining our face in a mirror (the appearance is carefully studied).

Today, we must believe that God still fulfills all His promises. We must not doubt, waver, or have lingering concerns about God's faithfulness. Though this is a difficult mindset for some to have, this is the kind of faith that God desires and requires. The promises we have in the gospel should be sufficient to create unwavering belief and trust in God.

4:22: *Wherefore also it was reckoned unto him for righteousness.*

This verse takes us back to Paul's original point. God "*reckoned*" (*logizomai*, a term earlier defined as crediting to one's account, 4:2-3) righteousness to Abraham's account because Abraham *believed* and *he acted on his faith* (verse 3). We must follow this same pattern to please God. We must believe and obey.

4:23-24: *Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was reckoned unto him; 24 but for our sake also, unto whom it shall be reckoned, who believe on him that raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,*

The information about Abraham was recorded for our benefit as well as Abraham's. If this information had not been written down, we would not know how men were made righteous in the past. Neither would we know how we must act to please God. What has been recorded, if we will be obedient, will guarantee eternal life. The word translated "*shall*" (*mello*) is a verb meaning the "probability of something happening is so great that it can be spoken of as inevitable" (CBL, GED, 4:144). Thayer (p. 397) describes it as a "fixed necessity." God's grace and our being obedient to His will is the guarantee for eternal life (compare Mt. 25:34-46; Mt. 7:21). Paul described this obedient life as "*believing*"—a present tense verb. This apostle knew nothing of the "faith only" doctrine taught in many churches today. Neither did he believe that once a person was saved he or she was without further obligation. God requires His people to be faithful until their last breath, even if the price is physical death (Rev. 2:10). Paul's statements show that information from the Old Testament has value. The Old Covenant contains some lessons that are extremely important. This thought is restated in 15:4.

The remaining thought for comment is at the end of verse 24. From the first century onward, only those who believed in Jesus' resurrection have been justified. Belief in the resurrection of Christ is essential (Rom. 10:9-10), so when we teach people the gospel we must insure that they know about the

resurrection of Christ. This is made especially clear in verse 25.

4:25: *who was delivered up for our trespasses, and was raised for our justification.*

Jesus the Lord was “*delivered up*” (crucified). The reason Christ was delivered up was not to satisfy the mob, the religious leaders, or the politicians. Christ was *delivered up to pay for our trespasses*. This point will be stated again in the next chapter (5:6, 8). Paul wanted all his readers to know that Christ died in our place and He paid the price for our sins.

Jesus was crucified but He did not stay in the grave. He returned from the dead. There was a resurrection so all men can be justified (acquitted). Even though most will be lost and will not find salvation from sin (Mt. 7:14), Jesus still paid the full price for sin and all can be saved if they hear and obey the gospel. The following four points summarize the information in this chapter:

- Since justification is by faith, it cannot be earned (verses 1-8).
- Since Abraham was justified before he was circumcised, circumcision has no relationship to justification (verses 9-12).
- Since Abraham was justified centuries before the law, justification was not based upon the law (verses 13-17).
- Abraham was justified because of his faith in God, not because of his works (verses 18-25).⁵