

The saying goes something like this, * **“Any time you see a turtle on a fence post, you know it didn’t get their on its own.”** No matter how much effort that turtle exerts, not matter how clever and skilled that turtle may be, it didn’t get there on its own. And I think the Apostle Paul might say, * **“Any time you see a person in heaven, you know they didn’t get their on their own.”** And he’s been saying as much in his letter to the believers in Rome.

[Turn to Romans 4]

* In Romans 3, Paul stressed that our salvation – our being justified before God – is based *not* on *our* works, *but* on *God’s* work accomplished through Jesus. That means being justified before Holy God is granted to us as a gift that we receive through faith. And that’s the only way we can gain it, since we are incapable becoming *unsinful* on our own – we are incapable of becoming perfectly righteous on our own. Our justification is based on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus that satisfied God’s wrath and paid our spiritual debt, setting us free from sin’s condemnation. And no one is so bad that they *can’t* be saved by grace through faith – nor is anyone so good that they don’t *need* to be saved that way – by grace through faith.

And Paul drove home that point in chapter 3, as reflected in statements like these:

Read 3:23,24

* ²³ **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;**

Read 3:27,28

* ²⁷ **Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. * ²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.**

But Paul knew human pride gets in the way of many good things – including salvation – including being justified before God. At this point, Paul wants to make sure his Jewish readers who were prone to boast in their heritage, their spiritual privileges, their circumcision, their possession of the Law, and their efforts to keep that Law...Paul wants to make sure they are not misled into thinking that their righteous standing

before God is dependent upon any of those things. He wants to drive home the point made in 3:28:

Read 3:28

* ²⁸ **For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.**

In chapter 4, Paul begins to drive home that point by stressing the role of faith in salvation – faith as the means by which we appropriate the benefits of what Jesus accomplished on our behalf. He wants to show us that justification **by faith** is *not* something new. And the example that will carry the most weight with his Jewish readers (and bring the most joy to his Gentile readers) is none other than Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel. Even Abraham was justified **by faith apart from works of the Law**

Romans 4 begins with this question:

Read vs.1,2

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

What then shall we say that Abraham... has found? You know, **Abraham**, *the* Abraham, the **forefather** of Jews **according to the flesh** – the genetic fount from which the Jewish people flowed. What **has** Abraham **found** regarding justification – regarding being made righteous before God?

Read v.2a

* ² **For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about,**

Many Rabbis taught that Abraham had built up many good works in his life to be accepted by God. Many taught that Abraham obeyed the Law of God even before it was given. Abraham’s right standing before God was linked to what he did.

As Paul starts out in v.2, he seems, for the sake of argument, to assume that Abraham *did* do many good things. And if he *could be* justified by works, he would indeed have **something to boast about**. But Paul is quick to add:

Read v.2b

* ² **...but not before God.**

Abraham’s works *may have* earned him favor in the eyes of other people, but those good works were not the basis of his justification *before God*. He couldn’t **boast...before God** regarding his justification because God did not justify him based on those works.

Remember what Paul said a few verses earlier?

Read 3:27,28

* ²⁷ **Where then is boasting? It is excluded.** [Even for father Abraham!] **By what kind of law?** [What kind of *principle* is at work that excludes boasting?] **Of works? No, but by a law of faith.** [The principle that governs our reception of justification before God is not one of works, but of faith.] ²⁸ **For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.**

Then Paul points to Scripture to support what he's been saying about salvation – about justification – about being granted righteous standing before God. It is graciously given to us based on faith, not on works, thus leaving no room for boasting. And that was even evident in the experience of Abraham. And the key verse Paul points to the support his point is Genesis 15:6, which he quotes from the LXX:

Read v.3

* ³ **For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."**

This is the first time the word “**believe/ believed**” [πιστεύω] is used in Scripture – *and* it's associated with **righteousness**. Abraham fully believed God – and on the basis of his faith, **righteousness...was credited to him**.

The verb translated **was credited** [ἐλογίσθη, aor pass indic, λογίζομαι, *account, reckon, credit, impute*] appears in 11 of the 25 verses in this chapters (verses 3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,22,23,24). It must be an important word – an important concept. Depending upon your translation and the particular verse in which it appears, it might be translated **credited, reckoned, counted, or imputed**.

This word appears often as an accounting term, to refer to *crediting* to someone's account what they do not already possess. Paul uses it here to refer to our being **credited** with righteousness *even though* in actual practice, we are sinful – we are lacking personal righteousness. Even though Abraham was no different than any other person in that he was a sinner, **righteousness...was credited to him by God**.

On what basis? On the basis of faith. Because **Abraham believed God**, God granted Abraham righteous standing.

We see evidence of Abraham's faith before this declaration made in Genesis 15. In Genesis 12 we read:

Read Genesis 12:1-3

* ¹ **Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To the land which I will show you; ² And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; ³ And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."**

And what did Abraham do?

Read Genesis 4a

* ⁴ **So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him;**

Abraham gives evidence of trusting God. That's why the author of Hebrews writes:

Read Hebrews 11:8

* ⁸ **By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.**

In chapter 15, God reaffirms His promise to the as yet childless (and imperfect) Abraham. And in the process we read:

Read Genesis 15:5,6

* ⁵ **And He [God] took him [Abraham] outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶ Then [may be left untranslated, as in NIV, since may be a summary statement as opposed to the result of the previous action. Abraham has already given evidence of faith.] he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness [what Paul quoted in Rom. 4:3].**

Abraham **believed** God – he considered God to be reliable and dependable. He did so when he left his homeland to follow God. He does so here, believing that God would fulfill His promise *even though* at that moment he was yet to have a child – and *even though* at that time Sarah was past the age of giving birth. And the Genesis account affirms that Abraham's **righteousness** was not earned on the basis of his good works, but it was **credited to him** by God on the basis of his faith.

Paul wants to make sure we understand there's a difference between righteousness based on works and righteousness based on faith. So he says:

Read v.4

* ⁴ **Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.**

If you work for a wage, then the pay you receive is not credited to your account as a favor, but as the payment for what you earned. It's what you are due – it's that to which you are entitled.

Read v.5

* ⁵ **But to the one who does not work, but believes [πιστεύοντι, pres act ptci, πιστεύω, picturing belief as ongoing] in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,**

Paul wants us to know that justification comes to us on the basis of faith, not works. Faith is foundational to our reception of justification. He's not suggesting that good works won't naturally be built upon that foundation, but that works alone aren't enough, since not only are the good things we do tainted by our sinfulness, but many bad works are obviously a violation of the character and will of God.

That's why Paul said earlier:

Read 3:23,24

* ²³ **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;**

Abraham's righteousness was not given to him because it was what he earned; it was graciously credited to him because of his faith – because he believed in who God was and what God promised – because he believed that God was reliable and trustworthy.

Did you notice how Paul describes God in v.5?

Read v.5

* ⁵ **...Him who justifies the ungodly [τὸν ἄσεβῆ]**

How can that be? Shouldn't he justify the godly? As Warren W. Wiersbe (p.524) points out: **"But God justifies the ungodly – because there are no godly for Him to justify."** If **righteousness** is not **credited** to us by grace through **faith**, we can't get it any other way!

Paul picks up on the word "**credited**" in v.5, and links it to the experience of another esteemed Jewish ancestor – King David:

Read v.6

* ⁶ **just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:**

Paul's now ready to quote David, and **the blessing** about which David writes is a result of God having **credited righteousness** to him **apart from works** (just as God did to Abraham). Paul quotes from Psalm 32:1,2a from the LXX, picking up on the concept of "crediting" which Paul's been talking about:

Read vs.7,8

* ⁷ **"BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. ⁸ "BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT** [same Hebrew word translated "reckoned"/"credited" in Gen.15:6]."

This Psalm was probably written out of David's experience of having committed adultery with Bathsheba and having plotted the death of her husband Uriah. But in spite of his sin, he was able to be **blessed**. And that blessing is related to the concept of *crediting/ reckoning* that Paul's been talking about. But in doing so here, he focuses on the *other side* of the coin of *crediting/reckoning*. He does so by calling attention to what David highlights in v.8:

Read v.8

* ⁸ **"BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT** [same Hebrew word translated "reckoned"/"credited" in Gen.15:6, and same Greek word translated "**credits**" in Rom 4:5].

Here in v.8 Paul calls our attention to what God *did not* credit to David's his account: God *did not credit* David's sin to his account. That's because of what God *did* credit to David's account, as pointed out by Paul in v.6:

Read v.6

* ⁶ **...David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:**

God obviously **credited** David with **righteousness** as well, and clearly **apart from works** – because this Psalm was a testimony to

his works of adultery and murder. And yet God did not credit his sin to His account.

How can that be? How can David's **LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN?** How can it be that David's **SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED?** How can it be that **THE LORD** did **NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT** David's **SIN?** Paul told us in v. 6: it's because God *did credit* righteousness to his account, based *not* on his works (after all, his works condemned him), but based on his faith. Instead of David getting what he earned, he was blessed by what he received by grace through faith.

Now Paul begins to turn our attention back to **Abraham** to drive home some of the implications of **Abraham** being justified by faith:

Read v.9

*⁹ **Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."**

David, just referred to, was circumcised when he was so blessed by God. But Paul wants us to focus on **Abraham**, that's why he once again quotes Genesis 15:6. Does the blessing of being **credited** with **righteousness** belong only to those who are **circumcised** (like David, and other descendants of Abraham who bore that sign of the covenant?) Or, can that blessing be bestowed on those who are **uncircumcised also?**

Paul, in the next verse, seems to be saying in essence, "think about it before you answer":

Read v.10a

*¹⁰ **How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised?**

Paul wants us to consider how righteousness was **credited** to Abraham. Was the blessing of righteousness credited to Abraham when he was **circumcised** (like David), or when he was uncircumcised. And the answer?

Read v.10b

*¹⁰ **...Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised;**

Not only was Abraham justified apart from works, but apart from circumcision! Chronology confirms that. * Paul already quoted Genesis 15:6 back in v.3, and he alluded to it again back in v.9. Abraham was already declared to be righteous 29 years (according to the Rabbis) *before* he was circumcised, which came about in

Genesis 17. You could say that Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, was saved as a Gentile! Circumcision, which would become a reason to boast in the minds of many Jews, played no role in Abraham's justification before God.

Circumcision was not foundational to his justification, but reflective of it:

Read v.11a

*¹¹ **and he received the sign [σημεῖον] of circumcision, a seal [σφραγίδα from σφραγίς, seal, signet, certification] of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised,**

The horse was his faith, and the cart was his circumcision – don't put the cart or circumcision before the horse of faith in the case of Abraham. In and of itself, it did nothing to contribute to his justification before God. If Abraham had no faith, circumcision would have nothing to signify.

Abraham was circumcised on the day the Lord told him that Sarah would have a child of her own – the child through whom the promises given to Abraham would be passed. And circumcision was given as a sign to his descendants that those promises were being passed on through them. But the circumcision of His descendants didn't guarantee their justification. Only genuine faith – the kind possessed and exemplified by Abraham – could do that.

Paul continues, pointing out an important implication of what he's just said:

Read v.11b

*¹¹ **... so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them,**

Contrary to what most Jews could imagine, Abraham (yes, *their* Abraham) is the spiritual father of **all who believe without being circumcised**, who like Abraham, may have **righteousness...credited to them** by their faith.

Paul goes on to show that Abraham is not only the spiritual (as opposed to the genetic) father of the uncircumcised, but also the spiritual (not just the genetic) father of the circumcised:

Read v.12

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

Paul wants his Jewish readers to realize that circumcision apart from faith contributes nothing

toward their justification before God. It's not enough for Jews to follow Abraham in circumcision – they must **also follow in the steps of Abraham's faith.**

Regardless of whether you are Father Abraham himself, one of His descendants through Isaac and Jacob, or an uncircumcised Gentile, it's not what's on the outside that counts, but what's on the inside – it's not about your flesh, but about your vibrant faith. Signs are meaningless unless they point to reality. The sign can say, "Free Parking", but if they still charge you \$20, the sign is meaningless. The sign can say, "Fresh Fruits and Vegetables", but if the produce below it is old and rotten, the sign means nothing. Circumcision apart from faith is of no more value than being baptized apart from faith.

Remember what Paul wrote in chapter 2?

Read 2:28,29

*** ²⁸ For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. ²⁹ But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.**

And as Paul will stress later in this letter, that's part of what happens when we place our faith in Jesus, the One through whom God's promises are fulfilled.

What are you counting on to be justified before God? Is it your works? Is it your circumcision? Is it your Baptism? Is it your church attendance? If it's anything other than your vibrant faith in God and the good news concerning His Son, Jesus, you may be in for a surprise – and not a good one at that.

As they say, * *"Any time you see a turtle on a fence post, you know it didn't get there on its own."* No matter how much effort that turtle exerts, not matter how clever and skilled that turtle may be, it didn't get there on its own. And as the Apostle Paul's been suggesting, * *"Any time you see a person in heaven, you know they didn't get there on their own."*

How they'd get there? And he's been saying as much in his letter to the believers in Rome.

Read 3:23,24,28

*** ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in**

Christ Jesus; ... ²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.