

The Book of Romans Study Guide

Chapter 4

After establishing in chapter 3 that the Law can only provide the knowledge of sin and that people can only be justified by faith, not works, in this chapter Paul shows how that is true in the life of Abraham.

We know that, in Genesis 12, Adonai had declared His covenant with Abram, as he was known at the time. That took place in Haran in the land of the Chaldeans, also called Mesopotamia. Abram then obeyed God's instruction and traveled to the land of Canaan, which God appointed to him as an inheritance for his descendants. But, because Abram's wife Sarai, before she was renamed Sarah, was old and barren, the prospect for having actual descendants was zero from a human perspective.

In Genesis 15, Abram began processing his seemingly impossible situation, and he rationalized that the descendants would come through Eliezer, who was the head of Abram's household. Since Abram had no physical descendants at that time, according to protocol, Eliezer was, at that moment, entitled to be the heir of Abram's estate. So Abram thought that God's promise of the nation would come through Eliezer.

But that conclusion contradicted Adonai's declaration in Genesis 12:7 that it would be through Abram's *zarah* – translated as “descendants,” but literally means “seed.” And that did not apply to Eliezer. So, God clarified that directly in Genesis 15:4 by affirming that the heir would come forth from Abram's body, which implies normal impregnation. And then, in the next verse, God showed Abram the stars of the sky and declared that he would indeed have physical descendants that were too numerous to count. That clearly made a strong impression on Abram, so that in verse 6, we are told “he believed in Adonai.”

The Hebrew word for “believe” is *aman*, and it is the basis for the English word “amen,” which is used as a way of affirming agreement or belief in a previous statement. It is also related to the Hebrew word *emunah*, meaning “faith,” or more accurately, “faithfulness.” So, when the text reads in verse 6, “He (God) reckoned it to him as righteousness,” the “it” is Abram's belief or faith. He still didn't know the process how it would happen, which will contribute to his flawed attempt to create a descendant from his own seed that resulted in the birth of Ishmael.

But the point is that he really did believe that the covenant would become a reality, in spite of the currently apparent impossible circumstances. Also, in this verse, the word translated as “reckon” (NASB) or “count (KJV), or “credit” (NJV, CJB) is *chashav*. In its simplest usage, it refers to counting. But it can also convey the sense of accounting or reaching a conclusion about the information you have. That is why this being a reckoning also makes sense.

So, this verse is stating that because Abram exercised faith, God concluded that he was thinking in a righteous manner. And, as a result, God reckoned or accounted Abram's belief or faith in the category of righteousness. Notice especially that God is the one who does the reckoning by a sovereign ruling, not Abram by virtue of his own actions. It was only a matter of belief or faith for him.

4:1-8

- v 1 Paul begins using the life of Abraham to illustrate each of the points he made in the previous chapter. First, righteousness is not a matter of the flesh, which connects to his previous statements on circumcision.
- v 2 Because Abraham was not reckoned by works, he could not boast, just as Paul showed in the previous chapter.
- v 3 He quotes Genesis 15:6 in regard to Abraham being reckoned as righteous because he believed God. Here he uses the Greek word *logidzomai*. That's how the Septuagint renders the Hebrew *chashav* in Genesis 15:6, so Paul is reflecting the common understanding of this concept in the second temple period.

Because *logidzomai* is derived from *logos*, meaning “word,” it was used in the sense of the final word or conclusion. And, because, in the everyday world of ancient Greece, *logidzomai* was the standard verb for bookkeeping and auditing, it conveyed the meaning of an account being settled. But, in bookkeeping, if you have a debt, there are two ways to settle the account: You can pay it off yourself, or the one holding the debt can give you a credit that takes it off the books. In a similar fashion, a parent can put money in an account belonging to a child in order to pay off his or her debt.

That is what this text is getting at. When we sin, we owe a great debt to God. And since we can never earn enough to pay it off on our own, the debt will continue to remain on the books. But then, in an act of grace and love and mercy, Yeshua, the Son of God, paid the penalty for us. And, as a result, we are credited with the perfect righteousness of Yeshua. And that removes the debt from the accounting books.

- v 4-5 Paul continues this bookkeeping metaphor by showing the difference between a person who works and his wage is reckoned as being due, and a person who doesn't work but still is credited with a great benefit by God as the employer as a response to that person's faith. Paul identifies this as a distinction between works (Gr. *ergon*) and grace (*charis*).
- v 6-8 Paul backs this principle up with a quotation from Psalm 32:1-2, where David uses the same Hebrew word *chashav*. Your translation there might use the word “impute,” but for the sake of consistency, it is better to use “reckon, count or credit.” The point is that for us to be credited with the righteousness of Yeshua, our sins have to be covered and our debt wiped off the books by Him.

4:9-15

- v 9-10 Paul circles back to the issue he raised in chapter 2 about salvation not being a matter of physical circumcision. He does that by showing how Abraham was reckoned as righteous before he was circumcised. In other words, when the act of circumcision did occur 14 years later in Genesis 17, it did not contribute to his salvation.

Now, let us recognize that Judaism ignores this timing completely, and in fact, teaches that the act of circumcision secures a male child's place in the world to come. We see that, for example, at the time of a *brit milah* or circumcision ceremony, when this blessing is recited:

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who sanctified the beloved one from the womb, set His statute in his flesh, and sealed his descendants with the sign of the holy Covenant. Therefore, as a reward of this (circumcision), the living God, our Portion, our Rock, has ordained that the beloved of our flesh be saved from the abyss, for the sake of the Covenant which He has set in our flesh.”

Judaism goes through some theological gymnastics in regard to girls, saying that a woman is considered as if she were “already circumcised,” so a girl becomes a member of the covenant by the mere fact of her birth to a Jewish mother. Regardless, Judaism does not acknowledge the role of faith and the timing of Abraham’s circumcision in regard to eternal matters.

v 11 Paul uses two technical terms to describe Abraham’s circumcision:

- A sign that serves as a constant reminder of the covenant between God and Abraham.
- A seal that authenticated his righteousness. Like a king’s signet ring pressing into wax, circumcision was God’s “signature” confirming that Abraham already possessed righteousness by faith.

He also comes to the conclusion that since Abraham was reckoned as being righteous before he was circumcised, which would effectively make him a “Gentile” at the moment of his justification, he could be “the father of all who believe without being circumcised.” That is consistent with Genesis 17:5, where God changed his name from Abram (“Exalted Father”) to Abraham (“Father of a Multitude”), while declaring: “For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.”

v 12 He makes a special note that he is still the father of the circumcision or Jews who follow in the steps of faith like Abraham. That is in parallel to his words in 2:29 that “he is a Jew who is one inwardly.” In chapters 9 and 11, he will develop this understanding further with the concept of the remnant of faithful Jews.

v 13-15 Paul notes that God’s covenant promise to Abraham’s descendants and its association with his faith establishes another distinction with the Law because it can only bring about wrath, which arises from his earlier statement in 3:20 that through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

Read 4:16-25

v 16 Paul emphasizes the connection between faith and grace because neither concept is a matter of merit, and then he shows that both are what are necessary for Jews and Gentiles alike,

v 17-19 He compares God’s ability to give life to the dead and creating the universe out of nothing to Him bringing about many nations from Abraham even when his body and his wife’s body were dead to the capability of having children.

v 20 Paul begins commending Abraham as our great example of faith by pointing out how he never wavered in his faith, and that included when he was called to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering on Mt Moriah, because, according to Hebrews 11:19, he believed that God could raise him from the dead. And that is also what Paul is getting at in verse 17 by saying that Abraham believed God, who gives life to the dead.

- v 22 And that further strengthened Abraham’s faith and the righteousness that it reckoned.
- v 23-24 Paul then shows how all people can follow the example of Abraham by believing in the same resurrection power of God, namely in His ability to raise Yeshua from the dead. So, just, like Abraham believed that God could resurrect Isaac, it requires faith for us to believe in the resurrection of Yeshua. Paul will later reinforce the importance of this specific element of faith by saying in Romans 10:9 –
- “If you confess with your mouth Yeshua as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”
- v 25 Paul concludes this section of his letter by employing antithetical parallelism, a literary technique where two segments of a sentence are balanced against each other through contrasting ideas. In this case, Yeshua’s punishment for our transgressions is paralleled by our resurrection for our justification. In both cases, God is the one who makes it happen. And we just have to believe it by faith.