

ADDRESSES ON ROMANS

by

Louis T. Talbot D.D., LL.D.

Author of *Christ in the Tabernacle, Lectures on Ephesians*

Copyright @ 1936

CHAPTER THREE

RIGHTEOUSNESS REVEALED

Romans 3:21-4:25

IT IS with a feeling of relief that we turn from the study of the sin of man to the great theme of the righteousness of God. We saw in our last lesson that Paul cuts the ground beneath the feet of the man who seeks to reform himself. The Spirit of God shows how futile it is for the sinner to try to make himself righteous by joining the church, by observing ordinances, by being moral and kind and benevolent. We often sing:

Could my zeal no languor know,
Could my tears forever flow,
These for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Do you really believe that, my friend? Blessed is the man who comes to the end of himself, and sees what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for him.

Verse 20 of chapter three concludes the first division of this epistle. The word “**therefore**” indicates the conclusion of what has gone before. “**Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now . . .**”

Note these two words which so strikingly introduce the second great division of the epistle, which extends from 3:21 to 4:25. In the first division of the book we saw the sinfulness of man unveiled, but now we are to see the righteousness of God as it is revealed in Christ.

“**Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified . . . But now . . .**”

All the world is guilty before God, “**but now**” God offers the sinner the free gift of His righteousness. Man has no merit of his own; “**but now**” since our Lord Jesus has come “**to seek and to save that which was lost,**” sinful man may be made fit to stand in the presence of a holy God, unafraid and unashamed.

We marvel at this redemption provided by God for us.

It is in Christ, without the law, by grace, through faith, without works, as these verses go on to explain. Then, two Old Testament illustrations follow, showing that God has always had only one way of justifying man, even from the beginning. Abraham was justified without the law, by grace, through faith, without works. The same was true of David; and this is the righteousness which is being offered now to you and to me. It is the only way God has ever had of justifying the guilty sinner.

“By the law is the knowledge of sin.”

Good works are all right in their place, but they will not settle the sin question. The great facts that Paul has set before us in Romans 1:18-3:20 prepare the way for the marvelous revelation of the righteousness of God.

We enjoy singing:

His grace is like a river;
His grace is full and free.

You will never be able to sing about His grace, my friend, unless you understand the truth about sin.

The law is something like a mirror. It reveals sin. I remember that when I was a child, after I had played in the mud until I was covered with it, my mother had great difficulty in convincing me that I needed to wash. Finally, in order to prove that I needed a bath, she would hold the mirror up before me so that I could see for myself. The mirror could not wash me, however; it could only reveal the mud. That is what the law does. It reveals sin, but cannot wash it away. Law imparts to man the knowledge of sin.

Man's sin has been revealed in Romans 1:18-3:20 — **“but now . . .”**

At the end of the court scene the Judge does not execute the sentence. Instead, He steps down and takes the place of the guilty sinner. The Minister of the court, the Holy Ghost, says that all who receive this Substitute have everlasting life.

It is your business and mine, my Christian friend, to pass that good news on to everyone in that courtroom. The whole world is arraigned before the judgment bar of God. And **“the wages of sin is death”** (Romans 6:23); but the Judge has come down, and taken the sinner's place. The penalty has been paid by Him. And instead of death, He offers life to everyone who will receive it, without works, by grace, through faith, without the law.

Some years ago, I heard Dr. Harris Gregg tell how he led a little black boy to Christ; and since then I have often used this illustration to explain the way of life, not only to black boys, but also to others convicted of sin and wanting to know the way of salvation.

This is the substance of Dr. Gregg's story:

“On one occasion I arrived in a certain city to conduct a Bible conference. As I got off the train, I noticed that my shoes needed shining; and seeing a young black boy standing near his empty chair, I asked him to give me ‘a shine.’ I wanted to approach the subject of salvation in some way, but somehow I could not make an opening. However, I prayed that God would help me.

“When the boy had finished, I got to my feet and asked, ‘How much do I owe you, my boy?’ When he told me, ‘Ten cents,’ I took a dime out of my pocket. Holding it in my hand, I began by asking: ‘This dime belongs to you, doesn’t it? You have earned it, haven’t you? I will not be fair if I don’t pay you, will I?’

“When he agreed with me on these points, I said further, ‘My boy, I give you this dime because you have earned it; it belongs to you. Now put out your hand.’

“He put out his hand; and when he had taken it, I took a quarter out of my pocket, adding, ‘Now I am going to make You a gift. I do not owe you this, do I? I am already square with you, am I not? You have not earned this extra money* But will you take it?’ He gladly took it.

“Then I said, ‘My boy, there are other wages which you have earned, the wages of sin. And the wages of sin is death. If you pay that penalty, you will be separated from God forever. The Lord Jesus Christ took your death and mine. He paid the penalty. And no God offers you the gift of Christ as your Saviour.’

“As I reasoned thus with the lad, he accepted Christ. Then a few days later, when I saw him again, he came running to me, saying, ‘I have a friend with me who will shine your shoes, and will you tell him about this free gift of God?’ That little boy had learned the secret of real joy — to know Christ and to make Him known.”

I. “THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD” (1:17; 3:21, 22).

The first thing I want you to note concerning this provision of God is that it is the righteousness of God; it comes from God; and it is freely offered to man.

In the days of Paul, as in our own day, man has ever sought to work for salvation by trying to be just in his dealings, kind, moral, upright; but this is a godless, a Christless salvation. I spent two hours recently with a young couple, telling them this truth. But they were seeking salvation by character. Thousands of people teach this false doctrine. They say that Christ is the “Way-Shower,” not the “Sin-Bearer.” Others teach salvation by church membership and the observance of ordinances. And yet others teach salvation by conscience. These are all man’s theories, and Paul proves them to be utterly false. Man must be saved in righteousness if he is to be saved at all. He has no righteousness of his own and must accept that which God Himself has provided for poor lost, guilty sinners.

Robert Murray McCheyne, who died about one hundred years ago, at the age of twenty-seven, realized this great truth. Once, while studying the third chapter of Romans, he picked up his pen and wrote:

When I stand before the throne,
Dressed in beauty not my own;
When I see Thee as Thou art,
Love Thee with unsinning heart;
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,
Not till then, how much I owe.

My friends, the beauty which Robert Murray McCheyne referred to, that beauty not his own, is the righteousness of God, provided in the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

This redemption was foreshadowed in Eden.

You remember how Adam and Eve clothed themselves in fig-leaf aprons, attempting to make themselves fit to appear before God. But God gave them coats of skins, provided through the death of animals. Here we have the foreshadowing of the death of Christ, as our Substitute, that we might be clothed in His righteousness forever.

(1) *“Without the Law” (3:21)*

This righteousness is not only of God; it is also without the law — apart from the law.

Our salvation is of God, and cannot be obtained by obeying the requirements of the law, lest we should boast. We cannot work it out. We must accept it by faith. Thank God for such a righteousness as that! There will be no boasting in heaven. There is no ground for boasting; for salvation is all of grace, something to be received by faith through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. In heaven Christ is all the glory.

This world is full of boasting. I have heard so much of the twentieth century civilization that I shall be glad when the twentieth century is over. In the salvation of God there is no cause for boasting, even as Paul tells us also in Ephesians 2:8, 9: **“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.”**

(2) *“Witnessed by the Law and the Prophets” (3:21)*

God had this redemption in mind from the beginning.

Moses represented the law, and he depicted this righteousness, in direct prophecy and in shadow and type. He wrote of the coats of skins which God provided for Adam and Eve. He recorded God’s first promise of the Redeemer, **“the seed of woman”** (Genesis 3:15).

It was Moses who first wrote, saying that Christ should come through the nation of Israel and through the tribe of Judah (See Genesis 12:3; 49:10). It was Moses who told us all the symbolism of the Jewish tabernacle which was so wonderfully typical of the Person and work of Christ.

We cannot begin to name all the ways in which the righteousness of God was “**witnessed by the law;**” but we do want to remember, in this connection, that our Lord Himself bore testimony to this truth when He said to the Jews: “**Had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me**” (John 5:46).

The righteousness of God in Christ was also “**witnessed by . . . the prophets,**” all of whom had one testimony concerning the coming Messiah, just as Peter said in the house of Cornelius:

“To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43).

Stephen also said, before he was stoned, that “**the prophets . . . shewed before of the coming of the Just One**” (Acts 7:52).

David, conscious of the blackness of his sin, wrote, saying, “**Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow**” (Psalm 51:7).

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the minor prophets taught this fundamental truth, that sinful man needs a Saviour. All of the prophets pointed on to the coming Messiah.

Peter, James, and John, on the Mount of Transfiguration had this truth presented to them as they saw the Lord Jesus in His uncreated glory.

“And behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: who appeared in glory and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:30, 31).

Moses represented the law; Elijah, the prophets. They realized the significance of the approaching death of Christ, and discussed it with Him before He went to the cross. Possibly they were reminded by the Lord, as were the two disciples, who later walked with Him to Emmaus after He arose from the grave, of all the Old Testament Scriptures which told of His sufferings, and the glory which should follow. What a conversation that must have been between the transfigured Lord Jesus, Moses, and Elijah!

(3) Received “Through Faith,” (3:22)

In verse 22 we see how this righteousness is to be received by poor lost sinners: “**By [Through] faith in Jesus Christ.**” The simplicity of it is clearly set forth in the words which follow; for this gift of God’s righteousness is “**unto all and upon all them that believe.**” “**Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely**” (Revelation 22:17); but only “**whosoever believeth in him,**” God’s only begotten Son, shall not perish, but shall have “**everlasting life**” (John 3:16).

Let me illustrate this truth in a very practical way.

As I sit here at my desk, I am wearing a new suit of clothes. The other day as I was walking down the street, I saw this suit in the window. It was unto all. Anyone who wanted it could have it, provided he fulfilled the condition. But I went in and paid for it, and now it is upon me.

Likewise, God's righteousness, which clothes us for His holy presence, is **"unto all. . . for there is no difference."** But it is **"upon all them that believe,"** and upon them only.

These words take us to the different people in the court scene, Jews, Gentiles, pagan moralizers — all classes are sinners. "There is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." There is only one method of making man righteous. It makes no difference what class he represents. God has just one way to save man.

Do you remember the story of the brazen serpent in the wilderness, which God told Moses to **"put . . . upon a pole"**? Only those who looked at the serpent were healed (See Numbers 21:5-9). Our Lord used this experience as an illustration of how the sinner is saved.

In talking to Nicodemus, He said: **"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life"** (John 3:14-16).

This free gift of God's righteousness in **"unto all and upon all them that believe."**

II. **"JUSTIFIED FREELY BY HIS GRACE," (3:24-26)**

"Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" — in these words the apostle enlarges upon what this salvation does. He tells us that when man is clothed in this beauty not his own, the beauty of the Lord is placed upon him. Then the message of verse 24 is realized. That man is justified!

Here we have some of the most profound statements the Spirit of God has ever seen fit to have penned, profound statements in regard to Calvary. They tell us how it is that through the work of Christ Jesus on Calvary God can show grace to sinners. Paul says that those who believe are **"justified."** The word **"justified"** means **"to be declared righteous."** The sentence of the judge is in favor of the prisoner.

Justification before God is far more than forgiveness. If you should steal a thousand dollars from me, by an act of grace I might forgive you, although I could never justify you. But God does both. He pronounces you positively righteous. That is justification.

When a poor, lost sinner, tired and weary with his futile life, casts himself upon God, God says to him, "You are justified." When a sinner comes to Jesus, the Lord Jesus not only forgives him; He justifies him also, and the sinner becomes righteous.

- Justification touches character, while forgiveness touches the act.
- Justification removes the guilt, while forgiveness removes only the penalty.

In Scotland an old woman known as "Betty," a saint of God, was nearing death. Her pastor, wishing to test her, said:

“Suppose your faith is in vain. It may be that after all, your soul is going to be lost. What if you should be eternally lost?”

To the minister’s questions the dear old saint replied: “Is that all you know? Why, if my soul were lost, God would lose more than poor Betty. God would lose His character, for He has promised in His Word to save me. He could not go back on His Word.”

The old Scotch woman understood the truth of justification.

Again, we are justified “*freely*.” The Greek word translated “*freely*” means “*without a cause*,” and is so used elsewhere. The world hated Christ “**without a cause**.” Our blessed Lord did nothing to cause men to hate Him, whereas we have done nothing to deserve God’s grace. Since there was no cause in us for grace to come to us, the cause must have been in someone else, upon whom God could base His action. That Person is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. We are “*justified without a cause by his grace*,” because God delights in giving. He delights in showing mercy.

The grace of God has been revealed to the guilty sinner “**through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus**.” Redemption is God’s payment of man’s ransom from bondage to Satan and sin.

We read today a great deal about kidnapers who hold people for ransom. That is the idea here. Your life and mine have been forfeited because of sin, but the ransom has been paid by Christ Jesus, our Lord, who bought us “**with a price**” — His own blood. This is what Peter meant when he wrote to Christians, saying: “**Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot**” (I Peter 1:18, 19).

The value of this ransom in Christ is estimated according to the excellency of His Person. And He is “**holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners**” (Hebrews 7:26). We must look to Him for the ransom of our souls. We must deal with Him directly to find eternal redemption.

(1) Christ —Our “Mercy Seat” (3:25, 26)

The basis on which God can justify a man is set forth in verse 25: “**Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood**.”

“**Propitiation**” means “*mercy seat*” (Hebrews 9:5). But what does this mean as applied to Christ? The mercy seat was the golden lid over the Ark of the Covenant, in which the two tables of stone were kept. Between the two cherubim on either side of the ark was the Shekinah Glory, the manifested glory of God; for He dwelt above the mercy seat. This was in the Holy of Holies, where the high priest went once a year, on the Day of Atonement, to sprinkle the blood of the sin-offering on the mercy seat. It was on the ground of this sprinkled blood that God met the sinner and showed mercy. In other words, the mercy seat was the meeting place between God and the high priest, who represented the people (See Exodus 25:22).

When the Son of God died on Calvary, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from top to bottom. No human hand could do this. It was rent in the midst, and immediately the mercy seat was disclosed. The rent veil opened the way to the mercy seat (See Hebrews 10:19-22).

Now all the pieces of furniture in the Jewish tabernacle were pictures of Christ, and foreshadowed His atoning work on Calvary. The ark was a picture of Christ. Just as the tables of stone were hidden in the ark, so Christ could say, “**Thy law is within my heart.**” And in His death He became our mercy seat, “**a propitiation through faith in his blood.**” He is Himself “**the Way**” to the Father, to heaven, and to eternal life.

The keeping of the law does not save you, my friend. Christ Jesus is the only One who has ever kept the whole law. You and I have broken God’s holy law, and we deserve the penalty — *death*.

The Lord Jesus kept the law for us, but His *keeping* it was not enough, for as the Lamb of God He had to die.

And when He died, God showed Him forth “*to be a mercy seat*” where a holy God could meet death-deserving sinners. He became our mercy seat, on the basis of His own sprinkled blood. Therefore, through grace God could justify us, and yet remain holy.

Why did Christ die? The last words of Romans 2:25 give us the answer. It was in order “**to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.**”

What are we to understand by the “**sins that are past**”? These sins are not sins of Christians in their unconverted days, but sins of Old Testament saints, before Christ came into the world. Christ did not ignore the sins of Noah, Abraham, David, and all the others. He did not remit their sins: He covered them. “**Blessed is he . . . whose sin is covered,**” David wrote in Psalm 32:1.

When you cover a thing, it is still there. How could God remain righteous and yet cover sins? God declared Abel and Abraham righteous, because He imputed righteousness to them. You know, David’s sins were nearly as black as yours and mine, yet God covered his sins. How could God do that and remain righteous? because of his faith in the promised sacrifice of Christ.

Through His atoning work on the cross the law of God was going to be vindicated. A holy God was just “passing over” the sins of the Old Testament saints, because He Himself was going to die in the sinner’s place. The Old Testament saints put their faith in the Christ of *prophecy*; the New Testament saints have put their faith in the Christ of *history*.

If Christ had not died, God could not have remained righteous, and at the same time merciful.

God is love; He is kind. But He is never merciful at the expense of justice and holiness. When an earthly judge begins to be merciful, he ceases to be just; when he begins to be just, he ceases to be merciful.

The only way the judge can be merciful is to set aside the law. But God never brushes aside His law. God could never have been both merciful and just if it had not been for Calvary. That is the meaning of verses 25 and 26.

When God passed over the sins of the Old Testament saints, He was not brushing aside the law, but was covering and was looking forward to the time when the penalty would be paid. He did not set aside His eternal Word: “**The wages of sin is death,**” but He “passed over” sins for four thousand years, from Adam to Christ. This was “**through the forbearance of God.**”

In other words, to quote Dr. Ironside, “The Old Testament saints were saved on *credit*.” The ransom had not been paid as yet. Then when Christ Jesus died on Calvary, He was the propitiation for our sins and theirs, that He might be just and the Justifier of them that believe in Jesus.

For God to devise a way for Him to be the Justifier of sinners, shows a greater display of wisdom than that shown in the creation of the universe. The bringing of worlds into space and the placing of burning stars in the heaven were as nothing compared with devising a way of saving sinners, yet vindicating His holy law.

There was only one way known to the wisdom of God — the Lord Jesus had to pay the price. He could not have been both just and merciful if Christ had not died. But at the cross “**mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other**” (Psalm 85:10).

God always vindicates His law, and at the same time shows mercy to sinners. Christ became a mercy seat. The tables of stone demanded your death. But on the mercy seat there was His sprinkled blood.

I might illustrate by telling the story of an Oriental monarch, who was known for his justice. He made a law that a certain offense was to be punished by the offender’s losing both eyes. The law was scarcely made before the first offender was arraigned before the tribunal, and brought before the king — and the guilty one was the king’s own son.

The royal father commanded that the law be executed. The men brought forth the hot needle and passed it across one eye. Then the king stepped down from his throne and said, “Release the boy.” But how could the boy be released and the command of the law be kept? The king took the place of his son, and had one of his own eyes burned out. Thus the law was vindicated.

Two eyes were given; yet the offender’s sight was spared.

Nothing could have impressed the people of the majesty and sacredness of the law more than one look at the king’s sightless eye. It pronounced his justice, his love, and his mercy. Likewise, and in a far more wonderful way at the cross, love and justice kissed each other. Christ bled and suffered and died, that we might live. And one glimpse of Calvary’s Lamb is enough to break the sinner’s heart.

Some people say that it is not *just* that Christ, a sinless Person, should die for us.

A man said to me, “Do you mean to tell me that God, the first person, took the sins of you, the second person, and placed them on an innocent third person?”

I answered, “No, my friend; I do not say that; the Bible does not teach that. The Bible teaches that God, the first person, took the sins of man, the second person, and laid them on Himself, in the Person of His own Son.”

Jesus the Son and God the Father are One. When Jesus Christ was on the cross, He was “**God . . . manifest in the flesh.**” God came down to earth in human form for the purpose of vindicating sinners. Yes, God is holy and just; but He is also merciful. “**God is love.**”

III. BOASTING EXCLUDED, (3:27, 28)

How wonderful is all this! I trust that we shall all come into a deeper realization of what Calvary means, a realization such as we have never seen before. Then we shall understand why Paul asked, “**Where is boasting?**” There will be no boasting in heaven. We shall all say in worship and adoration, “**Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!**”

“**Where is boasting?**” or “Where is glorying?” And the answer is, “**It is excluded.**”

There is no room here for spiritual pride. In our courts when a man has been vindicated or justified, he may glory in the testimony of his innocence of the accusation brought against him. The attorney who has won the case receives praise. The papers make a great deal of the lawyer’s marvelous skill. But in God’s courtroom, when He declares us justified and righteous in His sight, we glory in the cross of Christ, not in our sinful selves.

If we were justified by works, there would be boasters. But we are saved through faith. No one can boast. In heaven, throughout eternity, the Lamb will receive all the glory.

In verses 29 and 30 Paul comes back to the fact that God is no respecter of persons. He justifies all by faith, the Jew and the Gentile, the circumcised and the uncircumcised. But in verse 31 we read again that this method of justification does not ignore His holy law. The law condemns the one who breaks it. But Christ has borne the vengeance of the broken law, thus magnifying it and justifying the sinner who could never, never keep it himself.

What treasures are found in these few verses, 21 to 31!

A guilty world hears the just condemnation of a holy God. “**But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets.**” This gift of God is received through faith alone, for the sinner is “*justified without a cause by his grace*” — the grace of Him who is our “**mercy seat.**” At the foot of the cross every Jew and Gentile may meet a holy God and sing the song of the redeemed. My unsaved friend, will you not join that bloody washed company? Then you, too, can sing:

Boasting excluded, pride I abase;
I'm only a sinner saved by grace.

IV. TWO OLD TESTAMENT ILLUSTRATIONS OF REDEMPTION, (4:1-25)

Let us remember that Romans 3:21-4:25 forms one logical division of the epistle; therefore, in chapter four, with a break in the thought, Paul follows up the theme of the righteousness of God as revealed in Christ Jesus with two Old Testament illustrations. He presents Abraham and David as examples of the truth that justification apart from works of any kind has been God's method of saving sinners from the beginning. Both of these men were declared righteous, and Paul shows that the way they were made righteous is the same way we are justified.

Let us remember that many of the Roman Christians were Jews, and that many of them did not fully understand the Old Testament Scriptures. They neglected to study, just as many Christians do today. Because of their ignorance of the Scriptures, some of the things Paul wrote sounded very strange to them. For example, since boasting was excluded, what about Abraham? He was the great Progenitor of Israel.

What about David, the man after God's own heart? Surely these had whereof to boast! But no, Paul continues; Abraham and David believed what they foresaw, and they saw what God was going to do for them. They believed, and God counted it unto them for righteousness.

Abraham and David and all the Old Testament saints were justified before God because they put their faith in the promised Messiah of Israel and Saviour of the world. The Lord Himself said to the unbelieving Jews, "**Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad**" (John 8:56).

Abraham and David were sinners like you and me, but by faith they foresaw Christ's day; they were justified on that ground alone — without works, through faith, by grace, apart from the law.

We should remember that Paul's greatest conflict was continually with legalists; they were his chief opponents. The Jews represent legalism. And many Gentile Christians today take up the defense of the law, seeking to lead Christians back under the Law of Moses. They say it is necessary to keep the Ten Commandments in order to be saved. This is just a denial of the sufficiency of the finished work of Christ.

In the East, I once attended an afternoon service where there was a great audience.

The preacher was teaching that salvation is in Christ, but that the finished work of Christ can never save a person, that the sinner has to keep the seventh day and certain commandments.

To my surprise, at the close of the service many went down the aisles to embrace the claims of the law. Nothing could be more convincing than the way Paul refutes such teaching by these illustrations from the lives of Abraham and David.

(1) Abraham, (4:1-5; 9-25)

In the opening words of chapter four, Paul raises the question: **“What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?”**

The Jews boasted of Abraham; and he was, indeed, a great man. Many orthodox Jews today think they will be saved because Abraham was their father. They forget that he was justified by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Note the question Paul raises: Was Abraham justified by keeping the law? This was not possible, because the law was not given until four hundred and thirty years after Abraham’s death. He was not justified by works, because he was a poor sinner. He lied down in Egypt when he said that his wife, Sarah, was his sister. Like every other sinner, he had no works to justify him before God.

If salvation were on the ground of merit, *he might have cause for self-glory, but not before God.*

In other words, Abraham in heaven sees Christ on the throne, and sings, **“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing”** (Revelation 5:12).

He makes his boasting in having a great Saviour. He gives honor to his great, loving God. Abraham would be in a class by himself if he could boast in heaven.

The word **“before”** here means *“toward.”* If Abraham were justified by works, he could say, *“You have been singing about what God and Christ have done, but now boast toward me.”*

My dear friends, that is exactly what Abraham would be able to say if he were justified by works. And so could we, but then neither we nor Abraham could boast toward God. No; throughout all eternity he will sing with you and me, **“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!”**

With our faces, turned to the Lord, we shall make our boast in Him. And Abraham, the father of Israel, makes his boast toward God. His story is one of redeeming grace.

How was Abraham justified? **“What saith the scripture?”** (Romans 4:3).

The Scriptures will tell us, for they are the final Court of Appeals. **“Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.”**

From Genesis 15:6 these words are quoted. Turn to that chapter, and read the wonderful story of how Abraham was saved by faith, on the same ground upon which you and I are made righteous. And this event took place long before Abraham was circumcised.

Let us note four questions from Genesis 15:

1. **“Fear Not, Abram.”** With these words God spoke to Abraham, adding also, **“I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward”** (Genesis 15:1). What put fear in Abraham’s heart? The same thing that put fear in Adam and Eve when they hid from God, the same thing that puts fear in our hearts—*sin*. But the redeemed sinner has nothing to fear in the presence of a holy God.

2. **“What wilt Thou give me?”** (Genesis 15:2). By asking this question Abraham acknowledged that he had nothing to offer God, and that whatever he received from Him would have to be a free gift — all of grace. He took his true place before God as a poor, needy soul. The man who thinks he is justified by works is not conscious of his need.

3. **“Look now toward heaven and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be”** (Genesis 15:5). In these words God promised to make Abraham the father of Israel; and through this nation He promised also to send the Redeemer into the world.

4. **“Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?”** (Genesis 15:8). Thus Abraham claimed the promises of God. And God said, **“Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”** Abraham obeyed God, and offered these animals as a sacrifice. This is all highly typical of the shed blood of Christ; and upon this basis God made the covenant with Abraham.

It was in this connection that **“Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness”** (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3). When he offered these animal sacrifices, he saw Christ’s day and was glad. And every sacrifice of Old Testament times, offered in faith, was a type of the coming of the Lord into the world, **“the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world”** (John 1:29).

Look now at verses 4 and 5, where Paul is making comment on verse 3.

“Work” and “wages” are contrasted with “faith” and “grace.”

In other words, if a man works for his master, he merits his wages, and is given his pay check because of debt. But suppose that laborer becomes ill and cannot work, yet the master sends his pay check just the same. That would be according to grace, a gift of generosity. Thus it is to him that **“worketh not.”** There is no use in our trying to work for wages from God, because we are sin-sick, unable to work and merit justification before Him. To trust God, who hath made Himself known as the Justifier of the ungodly, is our only hope. If you are ever going to know Him as your Justifier, my unsaved friend, you will have to know Him as the One who deals with the ungodly.

Even if you *think* you are not ungodly, you are if you do not know the Lord. You must acknowledge that you belong to the class of the ungodly. Neither do you need to stand aloof because you are a great sinner. If you kneel before God, confessing your sin, and acknowledging Christ as the only Saviour, then He will do for you what He did for Abraham. He will write down in His book that you are righteous. There with Abraham and with all the heavenly host you will sing throughout the endless ages, **“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain!”**

On my way to Australia a few years ago, as I was walking on the promenade deck, I thought of what it would be like in heaven. The sun was sinking into the water. A light wind was blowing, and millions and millions of tiny waves were all rolling in the direction of the sun. As I looked at them, I thought of all eternity, when the redeemed shall be in Immanuel's land, where we shall see Christ. Every countenance will be turned toward Him, and every tongue shall sing His praise, for every redeemed soul will be in heaven only because he is a sinner saved by grace.

(2) *David, (4:6-8)*

Continuing the argument, without a break in the thought, Paul goes on to prove that David was saved exactly as Abraham and all the Old Testament saints were saved. The illustration of David is convincing, for he was a great man in the family of Israel. He was a powerful king, "**the sweet psalmist of Israel**" (II Samuel 23:1), and "**a man after**" God's; "**own heart**" (Acts 13:22).

Through the House of David the Messiah came. Surely his testimony, quoted from Psalm 32:1, 2, should be enough to convince even the strictest legalist: "**Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin**" (Romans 4:7, 8).

Now read carefully the Psalm from which Paul quotes these remarkable words. There David was describing the blessedness of the man whose iniquities are forgiven. Do you not see that David had in mind the same kind of forgiveness and justification that we have been considering? Paul is only emphasizing the fact that there has always been one way of salvation.

You will recall the terrible experience of David before he knew this blessedness. He had sinned grievously and openly. But he confessed his sin, saying, "**Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight**" (Psalm 51:4). It was then that he knew the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputes no sin.

I had a wonderful experience one morning.

Some time ago I preached a sermon on Psalm 32, as quoted in Romans 4:7. I told the story of a Scotch lad who was not quite normal mentally. He was very much afraid of God, and went about mumbling: "I am afraid of God. I don't want to go to heaven."

He had listened to eloquent sermons, but could not understand them. He was afraid of God, and no one knew how to help the poor boy. But one morning a new minister was in the church, because the scholarly pastor was away.

He was just a plain man from the mission nearby, and he hesitated about going into the pulpit of so learned a man. He was so humble that he stood down close to the people, and told the simple story of the love of God for sinners.

The little Scotch boy drank it in, and came to understand the meaning of Calvary. He went out of the church that morning, crooning, "I'm not afraid of God. I can go to heaven now."

A dignified elder heard him and asked, “What? Are you not a sinner? Have you not done wrong?” to which the lad replied, “I have sinned, but God does not see my sins now. Some day little John”—for that was the lad’s name—“will die, and go to heaven where God will have a big book. The names of many people will be there. When God is about to read my name, Jesus will put His bleeding hand over it, and God cannot see my sins.”

That little boy’s experience shows clearly the meaning of the righteousness of God. **“Blessed is the man whose sins are covered.”**

But back to my experience that morning.

When I came down to the church office, a young woman was sitting on the couch in the hall, waiting for me. We went into my study, where she told her story. She was so nervous that she almost pulled her handkerchief to shreds as she talked. “I am the daughter of a minister,” she said; “but I have sinned grievously, I once joined the church. Then I went away to college, where all my faith was taken away. When I left school, I got a job in a certain city. There I fell into sin. But I came to your church and heard you preach on the thirty-second Psalm—how God forgives sinners and does not impute sin to them. I fought against the conviction of sin, but I kept coming back. And now I want to know the blessedness David experienced.”

We knelt together, and she came to know the meaning of the words that David wrote from a penitent heart: **“Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered”** (Romans 4:7).

Let me say this: It is not in the Day of Judgment that God is going to cover sin and blot it out. It is right now that He does it for the man who acknowledges his sins. Then He blots them out, and remembers them no more forever.

We have already seen that God must impute sin to someone! if not to you or me. God is never merciful at the expense of justice. If God did not impute sin to David, it was because He was going to impute it to One, Christ Jesus, our Lord. **“He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him”** (II Corinthians 5:21). That is why David’s sins were not imputed to him.

There are so many restless, unhappy souls, because they look at themselves instead of at God. Do not give yourself to introspection, my friend. I know of nothing that will give one “the blues” more quickly. Martin Luther once said, “II took one look at myself, and decided to look at Jesus throughout all the future.”

Again, Luther went to see another great reformer who was nearing death, and asked him, saying, “My brother, what are you doing?” Promptly the reformer answered: “I am putting all my good works and all my bad works in one heap. They are as nothing. I have leashed my soul to Calvary. I trust in that, and am on my way to the New Jerusalem.” Luther’s reply was, “Go on your way; you will receive a warm welcome there.”

*(3) Abraham's Salvation was Apart
From Ordinances, (4:9-12)*

Now look at verses 9-12, where the question of circumcision is raised again. The Jews boasted of this token of God's covenant with them. They felt that this gave them a place of favor before God. But Paul asks, "**Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only; or upon the uncircumcision also?**" The Jew would argue that David was an Israelite, and Psalm 32 is a Hebrew Psalm.

Some people today also say, "Yes; salvation is of grace, but it is only for the Jews."

Paul answers this in verse 10; and his answer should be of interest to us Gentiles. Read again verses 9-12. Here Paul reminds us that Abraham was reckoned righteous before he was circumcised; and we know that this experience recorded in the fifteenth chapter of Genesis took place at least fourteen years before he was circumcised. His being made righteous had nothing to do with circumcision. Circumcision was a sign or token of God's covenant with him. It was a seal of the righteousness he had already received through faith while he was yet uncircumcised.

All of this was ordered of God, that Abraham might be "**the father of all them that believe,**" whether Jew or Gentile. And circumcision is in the class with all ordinances. While such ordinances as baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordained of God; and while I firmly believe that Christians should observe them in obedience to Christ's command; yet, like circumcision, they have no part in bestowing righteousness on the sinner. It is faith that saves. "**Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved**" (Acts 16:31).

I remember having been on a train where I came in contact with a man who believed that baptism was necessary to salvation. Surely this passage in Romans answers all such arguments completely.

Abraham's salvation was apart from works, apart from ordinances. It was all of grace, just as yours is, and just as mine is. It was received simply through believing God who sent His Son into the world, that He might die for our sins and rise again for our justification.

*(4) God's Promises to Abraham were Apart
From the Law, (4:13-25)*

In verses 13-16 we see that Abraham received another Promise from God, besides the one concerning the imputation of righteousness. And Paul shows us that this promise also, was given, not on the ground of law, but on the ground of grace, "**The law worketh wrath**" (v. 15). That is all it can do.

The promise given to Abraham as "**heir of the world**" was given by the grace of God.

Now please note that these verses have to do with universal dominion, not with salvation. In Genesis 12:1-3 God gave this promise; and one of these days it is going to be literally fulfilled.

The Jews will no longer be scattered, persecuted, despised. They will be the leaders of all nations, and through them the Lord Jesus, their Messiah, will reign **“from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth”** (Psalm 72:8).

But Abraham had a *heavenly* seed, as well as an *earthly* seed. God told him to count the *stars* and see his spiritual seed. You and I belong to this vast company. But God also told Abraham that his earthly seed should be as the *sand of the sea*. This represents his natural descendants, Israel.

The earthly seed will one day be constituted as a nation, and will be heir of this world. The Son of David will return to earth, where he will establish his millennial reign and sit on the throne of David.

When He returns in glory, Israel will look upon Him **“whom they have pierced”** (Zechariah 12:10). They will then receive Him, and will become the heirs of the world.

This is true of the heavenly seed, too, except that Abraham’ spiritual seed will rule and reign *with* Christ. You and I shall be heirs of this world and of the universe. That promise is absolutely sure of fulfillment. It was made apart from conditions and not according to the law. It was given as an unconditional promise. The law cannot produce any promises. It **“worketh wrath.”**

This promise of heirship was given by God to Abraham hundreds of years before the law was spoken on Mount Sinai.

I want to say a word here to legalists.

Do you not see that God is endeavoring to show us that all His promises are on the ground of grace? You cannot get anything from God on any other ground. When the Jews receive Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, they will rebuild the temple.

- They will be the head of the nations, instead of the tail.
- They will have universal dominion. But they will have nothing in themselves, of which to boast.
- They will realize that God’s gifts are all of grace.
- They will not get anything from the covenant made at Sinai.
- They will get all according to the covenant made with Abraham before the law was given.

The Sinaitic Covenant **“worketh wrath.”** When we, too, become **“heirs of the world,”** we are going to reign with the Son of God. We are the Bride of Christ — on the ground of grace, and grace alone. **“We are not under the law, but under grace”** (Romans 6:15).

In verses 17-21 Paul goes a little deeper into these marvelous mysteries. **“As it is written** [in Genesis 17:5], **I have made thee a father of many nations”** (Romans 4:17). This is of deep interest, and must be carefully considered. What does the passage mean? Just this: *These promises are made secure by the resurrection of Christ, as well as by the death of Christ.*

Up to Romans 4:16 we have had the atonement set before us, but now we have our Lord's resurrection set forth. Abraham believed in the God of atonement, and he believed also in the God of resurrection. It is in Christ risen and exalted that all the promises of God are secure.

Those promises that God made to Abraham were confirmed in Isaac. Abraham's body was "**dead**," as far as reproduction was concerned, when God promised him that he should have a son. Abraham and Sarah were both "**dead**" in this respect. But Abraham believed God could touch the womb of Sarah. He believed in the God of the resurrection. He believed God when all seemed hopeless. In disappointment, he had given up all hope that he would ever have a child. Then in answer to his wavering faith, God gave him a son. Through that faith a nation came into existence — the nation that gave to the world Christ and the Bible! Through the child of resurrection God sent the Saviour!

Again on the altar of sacrifice God caused the bands that were put around Isaac to be loosed, after Abraham had offered his only son "**by faith . . . accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure**" (Hebrews 11:17-19).

"Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it [God's righteousness] was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences and was raised again for our justification" (Romans 4:23 -25)

This was written for you, my friend. It was written for me Abraham looked forward and believed what God was going to do through Christ's death and resurrection; we look back and see what the God of resurrection has already done! Everything we have and are is ours by the grace of God. We believe in the Christ who was "**delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.**" All the promises of our faith center around the empty tomb!

Justification apart from the law, by grace, through faith, without works — this has ever been God's method of saving sinners. He requires righteousness, but the guilty world has no righteousness to offer to a holy God. Only through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus can man be justified. It was by faith that Abraham and David and all the Old Testament saints were saved; and it is by faith that you and I and every redeemed sinner shall see God, and dwell in His presence forever.

Will you not accept this free gift of God's righteousness, my unsaved brother? On the mercy seat there is the sprinkled blood — for you. The God of justice is the God of love. Enter by faith into His presence by the way of His cross, and you shall know Him as your Saviour, your everlasting Father, and your loving Lord, now and forevermore.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>
