

Romans: Comment and Commentary

“Therefore, accept one another,
just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God (15:7).”

Parenthesis: This verse seems to summarize the book.

“Accept one another:” the purpose of the book (12-15)

“Just as Christ accepted us:” the foundation of the exhortation (1-11)

- I. Prologue, 1:1-17
- II. The Universality of Human Sinfulness, 1:18-3:20
- III. The Universality of Divine Righteousness for the Jew and Gentile: Justification, 3:21-4:25
 - A. The Basis of God’s Righteousness: The Divine Purchase, 3:21-26
 - B. The Means of Divine Righteousness Possessed: Faith, 3:27-31
 - C. The Confirmation: Righteousness and the Old Covenant, 4:1-25

In thought, this chapter is connected to 1:2 and 3:21. In the former passage, the gospel was promised long ago; in the latter the righteousness of God offered in the gospel was promised beforehand in the Scriptures. Flowing from Paul’s comments in 3:27-31 on justification apart from works, what we have here is a demonstration of the assertion showing that it was taught throughout the Holy Scriptures (OT). The proper way for the Jew and the Gentile to understand salvation is the way Abraham found it, by divine reckoning through the agency of faith without works.

Point of the Chapter: That, though there is a variance of clarity between the Old and New Covenants, the promises of God are accessed through faith in the integrity of the one who has made them. The way of true righteousness is available to the Gentile and the Jew through the provision of Jesus Christ procured in His substitutionary death.

Abraham is the greatest example of clinging to God’s promises in the Bible and the most important in the unfolding of the biblical, redemptive story. After Paul, Peter, and John the Baptist, he is referenced more in the New Testament than any other person. From the worship of a moon god in Ur, this devil-worshiper found grace and mercy in the true God. The point of this chapter is to show that salvation in the Old Covenant era is the same as in the New Covenant era. If one knows God, it can only be attributed to God. The message of the chapter is fourfold:

Verses 1-8, The Old Testament teaches justification through faith on the principle of grace.

Verses 9-12, The Old Testament teaches justification apart from the ordinances, even divinely sanctioned ones.

Verses 13-17, The Old Testament teaches justification apart from legal works of any kind.

Verses 18-25, The Old Testament teaches that the faith that justifies is like Abraham's.

1. A salvation through faith alone, vv. 1-8

a. The case of Abraham, vv. 1-2

1) The question, v. 1

Two questions are posed: first, what did Abraham discover about redemption? Second, was not Abraham, and were not all people in the Old Testament, justified by keeping the Law of Moses? If so, then Abraham could rightly boast; however, Abraham had no basis for boasting and, thus, was not saved by works. If Abraham is the "Father of the Faithful," every believing Jew is a "son" of Abraham. If every Gentile is saved after the manner of Abraham, every Gentile believer is a "spiritual son" of Abraham as well (see 4:11, 16).

2) The partial answer, v. 2

If, and it is a fact, Abraham had no basis for boasting, the implication is that works did not justify him. Here Paul applies the statement about boasting in 3:27. Abraham possessed a righteousness born of faith, a faith-righteousness, not a works-righteousness, having no cause in himself.

Abraham evidenced blight of soul. For example, he was a perpetual liar (Gen. 20:13) and continued to be so from the time he left his father, some twenty-four years ("she is my sister," [12:12, 20:2]). He seems to have passed the same trait to Sarah ("I did not laugh," [18:15]). If you break the law at one point, any point, you have broken it entirely and are unrighteous). The ninth commandment: "You shall bear false witness..." (Exod. 20, Deut. 5).

b. The citation of Scripture, v. 3.

The apostle sustains his assertion by appealing to Genesis 15:6 and the promise of a son (cf. v. 9). Abraham believed unto salvation; he did not achieve it. In Gen. 15:6, the word "believe" occurs in the Scriptures for the first time. Further, it relates to attaining righteousness! "To reckon" means to account or credit to one's benefit; it is a legal term.

There is some discussion among the scholars as to what Abraham believed, the content of his faith. It seems that he embraced two promises from God: that he would have a son and that he would have many "sons." There was evidence that Abraham should not have believed such promises after some twenty-five years of waiting, but he trusted God, and this became the model for God's way of receiving salvation.

Parenthesis: To reckon, to credit, to account

One of the key words in this passage is the word "to reckon" or "to credit." It is found eleven times in this chapter (vv. 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 22, 23, 24); eight times in vv. 1-12. In each occurrence the connotation comes from a legal,

commercial background meaning “to place on someone’s account, to credit to one’s account.

Note that God credited Abraham’s faith to him *as* righteousness (v. 3). Faith itself is not righteousness; faith is not meritorious. It is only the vehicle by which God’s righteousness is received by us. However, it is the only vehicle by which the gift of God reaches us.

c. The explanation of the Apostle, vv. 4-5

The apostle points out that, when a person works, his pay is not a gift. It is something earned. Abraham believed and God placed in his account divine righteousness. God did not make Abraham righteous, but he placed into his account such righteousness so that it cleared his debt. It is the ungodly, not the godly, that are justified, declared righteous in His sight. F. F. Bruce comments that “God, who alone does great wonders, created the universe from nothing (1:19-20), calls the dead to life (4:17), and justifies the ungodly, ‘the greatest of all his wonders.’”

In Philippians, Paul commented of his experience of obtaining the righteousness of Christ saying, “... and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own the comes from the Law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God that depends on faith (2:9).”

-a righteousness not his own

-because his righteous was merely imperfect conformity to rules through self-endeavor

-but divine righteousness is a gift

-which comes through trusting, believing, receiving the provision procured by Christ that God Himself accepted for us by raising Him from the dead!

(If commendable deeds are what people do; salvation would be a reward. Life is what God bestows; it is a gift! Works assume that God can be obligated to act on our behalf; grace assumes that God acts on His own behalf to give life! Grace causes acquiescence!)

d. The similar case of David, vv. 6-8

David is chosen as a lesser illustration (Paul afterwards returns immediately to Abraham). It is not uncommon in Jewish writings and in the synagogue to quote from the Pentateuch primarily and then secondarily from “the prophets or writings.” Abraham was the greatest of the patriarchs and David the kings. The connection between Genesis 15: 6 and Psalm 32:1-2 is the term “reckon” or “impute.” In 32:1, the reckoning deals with a negative matter, forgiveness, whereas in Genesis 15:6 it is positive, the imputation of righteousness. Nothing could be more illustrative of Paul’s thought than the pronouncement that the blessed person is the one whose iniquities are forgiven, and the one to whom the Lord does not impute sin. The epitome of blessing, as evidenced in Abraham and David, is grace through faith; it is not the reward of works.

Parenthesis: Psalm 32, a penitential Psalm

While Ps. 51 is a penitential Psalm, a poem of confession, connected to the Bathsheba incident, Paul quotes from this one because of the notion of forgiveness (in the Bathsheba incident forgiveness is not specifically stated). Says Moo, "One of the reasons why Paul quotes these verses is the presence in them of the key word 'reckon.' The practice of associating verses from the OT based on verbal parallels was a common Jewish exegetical technique." The Psalm is a wisdom/thanksgiving poem in which David urged those who sin against the Lord to seek His pardon with the encouragement that He is gracious with the penitent. Other such Psalms are 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143.

2. A salvation apart from circumcision, vv. 9-12

The context is Genesis 17. God appeared to Abraham twenty-four years after his migration from Ur, fourteen years after ratifying the promise through a sacrifice (Genesis 15), and thirteen years after Ishmael's birth. Abraham was ninety-nine years old. The promise was that kings would come from him, and a sign was given, circumcision.

Chapter four sustains Paul's argument in 3:21-31. Salvation is always the same before God; it must be a gift!

a. The questions, vv. 9-10a

The rhetorical question is this: "Paul, have you not forgotten something? Did not God give circumcision as the means of rightful standing before Him?"

b. The apostle's answer, v. 10b

Circumcision was a sign of faith ("a sign of the covenant" [Gen 17:11]) that Abraham experienced in Genesis 15:6. The gap of years between the promise (15:6) and the seal or sign was fourteen years. The Jews rejected faith and thought the seal was redemptive. This was the fatal mistake the Jews made in interpreting Moses. The Jew, like the Gentile, must come to the faith of uncircumcised Abraham!

Parenthesis: Faith and Circumcision

Circumcision was an outward sign of an invisible reality; as a "sign" it pointed beyond itself to something it signified, a relationship with God according to promise and faith. Obviously, faith in the promises of God (chapter 15) came before the rite of the cutting of the flesh (Gen. 17) meaning that salvation was through faith, not circumcision. The Jews in Jesus' day, as well as Paul's, put faith in circumcision rather than the promises of God. If circumcision by itself was powerless to alter a person's relationship to God, the same would be true of its counterpart in the NT, baptism. Clearly, just as circumcision did not redeem the OT saint, baptism does not the NT saint.

c. The apostle's elaboration, vv. 11-12

Circumcision did not secure salvation; it secured nationhood, as in the case of Ishmael (Genesis 21:13). Circumcision signified the presence of faith. A "seal"

does not add to the thing sealed; it points to the existence of that which it seals. It confirms, authenticates, and guarantees the genuineness of that which is sealed.

Circumcision does not make a person a child of Abraham and it is no obstacle either. Believers follow Abraham in faith whether circumcised or not; it makes no difference.

3. A salvation apart from works of any kind, particularly the Law of Moses, vv. 13-17
 - a. The argument, vv. 13-15

Paul transitions to another consideration pertinent to the proof derived from the Old Testament data, that justification is through faith and that Abraham is the father of all who believe, circumcised or not. Like circumcision, God never meant the law to issue in salvation; it was given to condemn. Faith and law go together, but they are opposites. Law drives us away from Christ.

“Law (vv. 13)” refers not specifically to the Mosaic Law, but to what law demands, obedience. This seems in keeping with the flow of the apostle’s thought at this point. The Law was meant to reveal our need for redemption; “it shows us where we stand, but it does not save us,” wrote one commentator.

The “If (vv. 13, 14a)” clauses introduce statements that, for argument-sake, are assumed true, revealing the error of the assertion.

In vv. 14b-15 Paul seems to be saying that if there is not Laws or standards, sin cannot be discovered. The purpose of the Law as not to redeem but to show the need for it.

Parenthesis: The Mosaic legislation (Gal 3:17) was given to the people of God 430 years after the promise was given to Abraham. While scholars debate the time of the granted promise, the point is that it came centuries later. Abraham did not enter a relationship with God by law-keeping.

- b. The conclusion, vv. 16-17

Faith is the only instrument consistent with a by-grace salvation. Faith embraces a gift; it does not cause the gift to be given lest it not be a gift! Verse 17, a quotation from Genesis 17:5, confirms the fatherhood of Abraham through faith. The quotation substantiates, verse 16, that from Abram would spring many peoples (the meaning of the change of name from Abram to Abraham [“the father of many nations”], not merely a son).

“Who gives life to the dead” is a reference to God’s omnipotence, the miracle of the new birth.

“Calls things into being which are not” refers to that which is determined by God, as expressed in His promises though they have not yet been fully fulfilled. In Abraham’s case, it was about a son in his old age!

2. A salvation through faith like Abraham’s, vv. 18-25

The apostle in this section, the remainder of the chapter, answers a question: What exactly is saving faith? It is an unwavering trust in the God of the resurrection. That was the essence of Abraham’s faith.

a. The nature of Abraham’s faith, vv. 18-21

1) Its impediments, vv. 18-19

The word “hope” is found more times in Romans than any other NT book and linked often with “faith.” Abraham acted when there was no earthly justification to do so. (He expressed the same when came to Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac, his heir. To his servants he said, “We will worship and then we will come back to you (Gen. 22:5).”

At the age of seventy, God called Abram to an unknown land. Ironically, his name meant “exalted father.” At ninety-nine he was still childless, but God changed his name to Abraham, “father of a multitude” (Gen. 15:5). Sarah was beyond the age of childbearing (90) and had no previous history of the ability to conceive. “Beyond hope” means beyond human expectation. Here we have Paul’s commentary on Genesis 17.

2) Its encouragements, vv. 20-21

Abraham’s faith was founded on the promise of God; faith is simply taking the words of God at face value. He did not waver though he did laugh and seemed to think it would be fulfilled in Ishmael (Gen. 17:17-18). Remember many years passed between Gen. 15 and the birth of Isaac (Gen. 21).

b. The divine response to Abraham’s faith, v. 22

Commenting on Genesis 15:6, Paul states that faith is the acceptance of divine righteousness, a right standing before God.

c. The apostle’s application, vv. 23-25

1) The twofold application, vv. 23-24a

Not only was Abraham accredited as righteous through belief in the promises of God, but he became the biblical exemplar for all who embrace the promises through simple trust.

2) The essence of saving faith, v. 24b

The NASV translation is correct (not, “if we believe,” but to us “who believe”). The essence of true faith is trust, delightfully embracing Him whom God raised from the dead. The resurrection of Christ is an essential, prominent part of the gospel message. It is because of Christ’s payment on our behalf that God the Father can justly credit us as righteous; the proof is the resurrection. If Jesus remained in the grave, the debt would not have been paid. The resurrection is the evidence!

3) The sure basis of faith, v. 25

Some of our scholars have identified this verse as part of an early Christian creed because of the parallelisms in the verse, its rhythmic quality. This verse summarized Paul's gospel. Without Jesus' death there can be no acquittal; without His resurrection there could be evidence!

His death took the place, paid the cost for human offenses; His resurrection took place to assure us that justification was completed. "Because" indicates cause in both cases. Christ's death justifies; the resurrection is proof. Look into His empty tomb and see acceptance!

Applications:

1. What can we say about the nature of faith? Faith is not the cause of salvation; Christ is the cause of it. Faith receives what Christ has accomplished on our behalf. Abraham was saved through trust in God's promises. Faith is simply counting what God has promised to be true. Faith looks beyond present circumstances and possibilities to God's promises.
2. Nothing is sure for sinners except that which finds its root in grace. Grace and human merit are as incongruous as grace and merit through sacramental obedience. Works is the enemy of finding grace; merit is found only in and through Jesus. Why will not people turn to Jesus? I think the answer is that they have never had anyone take the time to explain His claims and accomplishments. From the human perspective the causes are two: first, pride is a powerful deterrent to humility and, second, people find it hard to believe that something so great could be so free to them.
3. The way to have faith strengthened is not to consider the difficulties in the way of the thing promised, but rather the character and resources of God, who made the promise. If Abraham looked at the circumstance when God made promises (his age, the age of Sarah, the barrenness of Sarah), if they had been his focus, he would not have believed. He turned away from his circumstance to God who is greater than any circumstances. Does that not suggest something for us to consider? What lesson can you learn from Abraham?
4. The method of salvation has never changed though the content and object of faith is progressively clarified until you meet Jesus in the gospels. God only deals through grace, never human merit. What is abundantly clear is that Paul's gospel is not an innovation. The way to grace is to embrace the promises of God. God has sent His son to put an end to the sacrificial system, however wonderful it had been, in the giving of His life for us. Are you willing to believe that Christ came for you?
5. David wrote (Ps 32), "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him." Those who have put their faith in God are completely forgiven of their sin. Nothing can be brought up for which provision has not already been made. Believers are the most fortunate people imaginable because the question of their sin has been settled forever. In another penitential Psalm (103:12) the author wrote, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Guilt dogs the steps of the unbeliever, but forgiveness is the sweet gift of those who trust in God.
6. God has a purpose in all that He does even if it makes no sense to us, though it might retrospectively. Abraham did not waver, the Bible tells us, though he waited decades for the gift of Isaac. The man had no idea that God was using Him as a great illustration of what it

means to trust God. Some things God causes to occur in our lives we will never grasp. I am sure that Abraham did not.

7. We find ourselves in a culture that does not value the role and need of repentance for wrongdoing. People generally believe that self-esteem, self-confidence, feelings of success, possessing a positive self-image, is the way to security, success, and self-worth. How contrary is this to the teachings of the Bible? A good and wholesome self-image is found in repentance, in knowing how little we are. In awareness of weakness, the Christian finds strength because in our weakness we turn outside ourselves to God who is our strength and encouragement. The culture says magnify your inner capacities, think positively of yourself; God says, "Turn to me and you will find in me strength for today and all your tomorrows."