**Romans 4**

By all means seek to master this chapter! It explains how God justifies (declares righteous) ungodly people through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "Salvation" is a broad term and includes all that God does for the believer in Christ; "justification" is a legal term describing our perfect standing before God in the righteousness of Christ. In this chapter, Paul uses the example of Abraham to illustrate three great facts about justification by faith.

**I. Justification Is by Faith, Not Works (4:1-8)**

Every Jew revered "Father Abraham," and from [Gen. 15:6](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ge+15%3A6) knew that Abraham had been justified before God. Abraham's acceptance by God was so certain that they referred to heaven as "Abraham's bosom." Knowing this, Paul points to Abraham and asks, "How was Abraham, our father in the flesh, justified?" Was it by works? No, for then he could have gloried in his accomplishment, and we have no record of such action in the OT. What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God!" (See [Gen. 15:1-6](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ge+15%3A1-6).) The gift of righteousness came, not by works, but by faith in God's revealed Word.

Note that in his argument, Paul used the words "reckon," "impute," and "count" ([vv. 3-6](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A3-6), [8-11](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A8-11), [22-24](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A22-24)). These words all mean the same thing: to put to a person's account. Justification means righteousness imputed (put to our account) and gives us a right standing before God. Sanctification means righteousness imparted (made a part of our life) and gives us a right standing before men, so they believe we are Christians. Both are a part of salvation, as [James 2:14-26](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Jas+2%3A14-26) argues. What good is it to say that I have faith in God if my life does not reveal faithfulness to God?

Salvation is either a reward for works or a gift through grace; it cannot be both. [Verse 5](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Jas+2%3A5) states that God justifies the ungodly (not the righteous) through faith and not works. The Jews thought that God justified religious people on the basis of their works; yet Paul has proved that "Father Abraham" was saved simply on the basis of faith. Then Paul refers to David and quotes [Ps. 32:1-2](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ps+32%3A1-2), proving that Israel's great king taught justification by faith, apart from works. God does not impute sin to our account, because that was charged to Christ's account ([2 Cor. 5:21](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=2Co+5%3A21), and see [Phile. 18](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Phm+1%3A18)). Rather, He imputes Christ's righteousness to our account purely on the basis of grace! What a wonderful salvation we have!

**II. Justification Is by Grace, Not Law (4:9-17)**

Now the important question arises: "If salvation is by faith, then what about the Law? What about the covenant God made with Abraham?" Paul answers this question by pointing out that Abraham's faith and salvation took place fourteen years before he was circumcised! Circumcision was the seal of the covenant, the rite that made a Jewish child a part of the system of law. Yet Abraham, the "Father" of the Jews, was in effect a Gentile (that is, uncircumcised) when he was saved! Circumcision was merely an outward sign of a spiritual relationship, as baptism is today. No physical ceremony can produce spiritual changes; yet the Jews of Paul's day (like many "religious" people today) trusted in the ceremonies—the outward signs—and ignored the saving faith that was required of them. Abraham is actually the "father" of all believers, all who belong to the "household of faith" (see [Gal. 3:7](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Gal+3%3A7), [29](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Gal+3%3A29)). As Paul pointed out in [Rom. 2:27-29](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+2%3A27-29), not all "Jews" are truly the "Israel of God."

In [vv. 13-17](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+2%3A13-17), Paul contrasts law and grace, just as in [vv. 1-8](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+2%3A1-8) he contrasted faith and works. The key word here is "promise" ([vv. 13, 14](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A13-14), [16](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A16)). God's promise to Abraham that he would be "the heir of the world" ([v. 13](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A13)—indicating the glorious kingdom ruled over by the Promised Seed, Christ) was not given in connection with the Law or circumcision, but by God's grace alone. Read [Gen. 15](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ge+15) again and note Abraham was "at the end of himself when God stepped in and gave him His gracious promise. All Abraham had to do was believe God! The Law was never given to save anyone; the Law only brings wrath and reveals sin. The Law completely cancels grace, just as works will cancel faith; the two cannot exist side by side ([vv. 14-15](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A14-15)). How could Abraham be saved by the Law when the Law had not yet been given? Paul concludes in [v. 16](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ge+15%3A16) that justification comes by grace, through faith; and thus all people— Jews and Gentiles—can be saved! Abraham is not only the father of the Jews, but he is "the father of us all," all who follow in his steps of faith. (Read [Gal. 3](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Gal+3).)

**III. Justification Is by Resurrection Power, Not Human Effort (4:18-25)**

The first section ([vv. 1-8](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A1-8)) contrasted faith and works; the second ([vv. 9-17](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A9-17)) contrasted law and grace; and now the third ([vv. 18-25](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A18-25)) contrasts life and death. Note that Paul in [v. 17](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A17) identifies God as "He who quickens the dead." Abraham and Sarah were "dead," their bodies being well past the age of childbearing (see [Heb. 11:11-12](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Heb+11%3A11-12)). How could two people, one ninety years old and the other one hundred, ever hope to have a son? But when the flesh is dead, then the resurrection power of the Spirit can go to work!

We ought to marvel at the faith of Abraham. All he had was the promise of God that he would be the father of many nations; yet he believed this promise, gave the glory to God, and received the blessing. What a perfect illustration of the miracle of salvation. As long as people depend on the flesh and feel they still have enough strength to please God, they will never be justified. But when we come to the end of ourselves, admit we are dead, and cease to strive in our own efforts, then God is able to "raise us from the dead" and give us new life and a perfect standing before Him. It was Abraham's simple faith in God's Word that justified him, and that is how sinners are justified today.

But perhaps Abraham was somebody of importance. No, says [v. 24](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A24); God wrote that statement in His Word for our sakes, not Abraham's. We are saved the same way he was saved: by faith. Note how important this word "believe" is in Romans: it appears in [1:16](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+1%3A16); [3:22](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+3%3A22), [26](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+3%3A26); [4:3](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A3), [24](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A24); [5:1](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+5%3A1); [10:4](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+10%3A4), [9-10](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+10%3A9-10); etc. When a sinner believes the promise of God in the Word, then the same resurrection power enters his life, and he becomes a Christian, a child of God, as was Abraham. We must confess that we are dead and believe that Christ is alive and will save us.

[Verse 25](http://www.crossbooks.com/verse.asp?ref=Ro+4%3A25) explains the basis for justification: the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul will go into detail on this subject in chapter 5. The verse reads, "[Jesus our Lord] was delivered because of our offenses, and was raised again on account of our justification." The fact that He died proves we were sinners; the fact that God raised Him from the dead proves we have been justified by His blood.

This is evidence again that justification is a matter of resurrection power and not feeble human effort.

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