
It's Always Been Grace Through Faith

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Notes

4:1-25 'By faith alone': the faith of Abraham. Paul now elaborates the points he has briefly made in 3:27-31 by referring to the history of Abraham. It was important for Paul to cite Abraham at this juncture for two reasons. First, Judaism made much of Abraham but tended to view him as a great pioneer of 'torah piety', a man who pleased God above all by his obedience to the law. Secondly Abraham, the recipient of God's promise and ancestor of the Jewish people, occupies a crucial place in OT salvation-history. Particularly was this so in Paul's understanding, for he saw that one of the central errors of his Jewish contemporaries was to emphasize the Mosaic covenant at the expense of God's prior arrangement with Abraham (see Gal. 3:15-18). Paul thus needs to cite Abraham to show that his emphasis on justification by faith is no new, revolutionary, doctrine, but the teaching of Scripture from the beginning. And, further, Paul uses Abraham to make absolutely clear just what faith is. He does so in a series of contrasts that anticipate the great Reformation principle of *sola fide* ('by faith alone').

1-8 In this section Paul discusses faith versus works. The question that opens this chapter parallels the question that begins 3:27-31: *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter*—that is, in the matter of boasting and justification? For if Abraham was justified by works—as some Jews believed—then he had, indeed, good basis for boasting, and Paul's conclusion that boasting is excluded (3:27) is jeopardized. *But not before God* (2b) is Paul's response to this supposition. This may mean that Abraham had a basis for boasting before other people, 'but not before God'; or, more likely, that the condition Paul has stated—*if ... Abraham was justified by works*—must be rejected when we place the matter 'before' God's own verdict. This verdict is given in Scripture itself: *Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness* (Gn. 15:6). This text becomes the basis for the rest of Paul's exposition. He shows that this 'crediting as righteousness', precisely because it is based on faith, excludes 'works' (4-8), circumcision (9-12) and the law (13-17). He details the strength and nature of this faith of Abraham's

that led to his righteousness (18–21) before citing his text once again (22) and then making clear its applicability to his readers (23–25).

Paul's purpose in vs 4–5 is to contrast faith and works. Works, on the one hand, imply a situation of obligation. A person who 'works' receives wages that an employer is obliged to pay. Faith, on the other hand, implies a situation of free giving. As an act of humble acceptance, faith makes no demands on the giver; nor is the giver 'obliged' to respond. These contrasts show clearly that justification must rest on faith. This is because God is, by definition, a God of grace, a God who *justifies the wicked* (5). People are not accepted into relationship with God because, by their righteousness, they have earned it. It is the 'wicked person', the person who has no righteousness of his own to plead his case, whom God accepts. Here Paul reminds us of one of the great truths of Scripture: that people can make no claim on God's attention. Establishing a relationship with him is a matter of his free gift, to be accepted in humble faith.

To underline the point that Paul has been making from the Pentateuch (Gn. 15:6), he adds, in good Jewish fashion, a confirmatory text from the 'Writings'. In Ps. 32:1–2, David also makes clear that God justifies people *apart from works*. Blessing, David makes clear, is a matter not of a person's achievements but of a person's being forgiven by God. Paul makes clear that the phrase 'credited as righteousness' in Gn. 15:6 means that God considers a person to have a status of 'righteousness', in which that person's sins are not 'counted' against him.

9–12 This *blessedness* of a righteous status is not based on circumcision. For God's pronouncing of Abraham as righteous (Gn. 15) took place well before he was circumcised (Gn. 18; according to the rabbis, twenty-nine years separated the two incidents). Circumcision, then, was not the basis for Abraham's righteousness, but a *sign or seal* of the righteousness that Abraham already possessed by virtue of his faith. In this way Abraham is qualified to be *the father of all who believe*. For, like Gentile Christians, Abraham was justified without being circumcised (11b) and, like Jewish Christians, he was both circumcised and justified by faith. Paul's reading of Genesis, in the light of the fulfilment of God's plan in Christ, allows him to see Abraham as more than just the father of the Jewish nation (1, 'our forefather according to the flesh'), but as the father of all Christians.

Note 12 The word order in this verse makes it possible to think that Paul has two distinct groups in mind: Jews—'the circumcised'—and Jewish Christians—'who are not only circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had ...' But the interpretation presumed in the niv translation is preferable. There, only one group—Jewish Christians—is mentioned.

13–17 In Gal. 3, Paul argues that the Mosaic law could have had nothing to do with Abraham's status before God because the law only came into the picture centuries after Abraham. Here in ch. 4 Paul prefers to argue less 'from history' and more 'from principle'.

To show that obedience to the law had nothing to do with Abraham's being 'credited as righteous' (13), Paul cites the weakness of the law itself (14–15), the grace (16) and creative power of God (17b) and the universal 'fatherhood' of Abraham (16b–17a).

Faith *has no value* and the promise *is worthless* if inheriting Abraham's blessing depends on doing the law. This is because, as Paul has pointed out earlier (3:9–20), no-one can obey the law well enough to merit righteousness before God. The law, then, brings not blessing, but *wrath* (15). By spelling out the demand of God in great detail, the law increases the responsibility of the sinner before God. When, inevitably, the law is then broken, the guilt of the sinner is even greater than it would have been without the law to condemn him. This is the point Paul implies in v 15b when he claims that *where there is no law there is no transgression*. He does not mean that there is no 'sin' apart from the law, but that the definite form of sin called 'transgression' (Gk. *parabasis*) can exist only in the face of definite, clear, commandments of God for which one is responsible. (This is the sense the word *parabasis* always has in Paul; Rom. 2:23; 5:14; Gal. 3:19; 1 Tim 2:14.)

Paul touches briefly on a second reason why righteousness cannot come by the law: to base righteousness on the law would mean that it would be based on 'works' and thus nullify God's grace (*cf.* 4:4–5). This point is related to the one Paul makes at the end of v 17, that the God in whom Abraham believed is no less than the one who *gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were*. This looks ahead to the description of Abraham's own faith in vs 18–21, but it also reinforces the idea of God's freedom and creative power. It is parallel, in that sense, to Paul's earlier designation of God as the one who *'justifies the wicked'* (5). A third reason why righteousness cannot be based on the law reminds us of the argument Paul has used in 3:29–30. God's intention was to open up the inheritance he had promised to Abraham to all people, as the OT itself indicates: *'I have made you a father of many nations'* (Gn. 17:5). This could only be done when the inheritance was no longer based on an institution—the Mosaic law—peculiar to Israel.

18–21 In this brief paragraph, Paul pauses to characterize briefly the nature of Abraham's faith before bringing his exposition to a close. Abraham, Paul shows, had a faith that was strong and consistent in the face of much evidence that what God had promised could not come to pass. He squarely *faced the fact* that his age and the barrenness of Sarah made it humanly impossible for the promise that he would have many children to be fulfilled. Yet *Against all hope*—the kind based on ordinary human potentialities—Abraham believed *in hope*—the kind that sees beyond the circumstances to rest on the promises and ability of God. Note Calvin's encouraging application of this paragraph: 'Let us also remember, that the condition of us all is the same with that of Abraham. All things around us are in opposition to the promises of God: He promises immortality; we are surrounded with mortality and corruption: He declares that he counts us just; we are covered with sins: He testifies that he is propitious and kind to us; outward judgments threaten his wrath.'

What then is to be done? We must with closed eyes pass by ourselves and all things connected with us, that nothing may hinder or prevent us from believing that God is true.'

Note. 20 Paul's insistence that Abraham *did not waver through unbelief* may seem inconsistent with Abraham's disbelieving and scornful laughter at God's promise in Gn. 17:17. Paul's point, however, is not that Abraham was a perfect person, or never had any doubts at all, but that his heart attitude was consistently one of faith and hope in the promise of God.

22–25 Paul rounds off his exposition of Abraham's faith by citing again his key text—Gn. 15:6—and making clear what has been implicit throughout, that the verse and its meaning have direct application to Christians. Like Abraham, we too believe in the God who gives life to the dead; specifically, in the God *who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead*.

V 25 describes the work of Jesus the Lord in two parallel statements (it may be that Paul is quoting an early Christian confession). The first statement alludes to the lxx of Is. 53:12, where the servant of the Lord is said to have been 'handed over because of their sins'. The *for* (Gk. *dia*) in this first line probably means 'because of': Jesus was handed over to death *because* it was necessary to provide for our sin problem. In the second line, however, the *for* probably has the meaning 'for the sake of, *with the purpose of*': Jesus was raised from the dead for the purpose of providing for our justification. While Paul usually connects our justification with Christ's death, this verse shows that Christ's resurrection also plays a role in our being made right with God.¹

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Sola Fide

Romans 4:1–16

A preacher, long-departed from the truth of the gospel, told the following story to summarize the faith he taught. It seems that a frog one day fell into a pail of milk, and though he tried every conceivable way to jump out, he always failed. The sides were too high, and because he was floating in the milk he could not get enough leverage for the needed leap. So he did the only thing he could do. He paddled and paddled and paddled some more. And *oila!*—his paddling had churned a pad of butter from which he was able to

¹ Moo, D. J. (1994). [Romans](#). In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., pp. 1130–1132). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

launch himself to freedom. The preacher's message was: "Just keep paddling, keep on working, keep on doing your best, and you will make it."

We smile at this exaggerated simplification, but this actually describes our American "man on the street" folk religion quite well. Despite the fact that "Amazing Grace" is our favorite hymn, most people think that if you just do your best you will somehow make it to Heaven. Modern man is, as a matter of fact, deeply hostile to the concept of justification by faith alone through God's grace. He is much more comfortable with the motto: "We get our salvation the old-fashioned way. We earn it!" Justification through the "good life"—that computes.

Such thinking is, of course, nothing new. It is endemic to human nature and has characterized religious thinking from time immemorial. It was the received wisdom, the conventional thinking, of the Jews in the time of Jesus and Paul. For those people then, Abraham was the prime example of a man who was justified by his works, as rabbinic literature eloquently testifies. The Mishnah's third division *Kiddushin* (4.14) makes a specious interpretation of Genesis 26:5, wrongly concluding: "and we find that Abraham our father had performed the whole law before it was given, for it is written, '*Because that Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.*'" The earlier Book of Jubilees (*circa* b.c. 100) similarly says, "For Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life." So perfect was Abraham thought to be that another book, *The Prayer of Manasses*, concluded that Abraham never had need of repentance: "Thou, therefore, O Lord, that art the God of the righteous, hast not appointed repentance unto the righteous, unto Abraham...." What claims! 1) Abraham performed the whole Law before it was written, 2) he was perfect in all his deeds, and 3) he had no need of repentance. Conclusion: Abraham was justified by his works and therefore is an example to follow. Case closed!

Perhaps closed for some, but not for the Apostle Paul, the lawyer of grace. Paul acknowledges that Abraham was righteous, but he denies that the Jews had any right to present him as an example of righteousness by the works of the Law. Here in Romans 4 Paul takes Abraham away from the proponents of works-righteousness and brilliantly sets him forth as an example of those who are saved, not by works, but by faith alone—*sola fide*.

SOLA FIDE FOR ABRAHAM (vv. 1-5)

The apostle begins, "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say?" And here he quotes Genesis 15:6 in answer: "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (vv. 1-3).

Paul's point here is that Abraham was justified by faith *before* he did any of the great works for which he is so famous.

In order to catch the full impact of Abraham's amazing faith we need to frame Genesis 15:6 in its context. Abraham had just come off a great military victory in which he and 318 of his men had rescued Lot, defeating four kings in battle (Genesis 14), and like Elijah after his great victory over the prophets of Baal, Abraham was suffering a post-victory letdown. Perhaps as he drifted off to sleep, he was reflecting with weary negativism on his having been in the land for ten years but still having no heir to carry on the line. But then God spoke to him in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward" (Genesis 15:1). Rousing words! Nevertheless, Abraham, still discouraged, recited his plight: "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? ... You have given me no children" (Genesis 15:2, 3). It was at this point that the promise of the Lord came to him: "'This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.' He took him outside and said, 'Look at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be'" (Genesis 15:4, 5).

We do not know whether Abraham's response was immediate or after some thought, or even whether it was verbal or mental, but we do have this immortal record: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). Though Abraham had been childless all his eighty-plus years, though Sarah had been infertile all those years and was well beyond childbearing years, Abraham *truly believed* he would have an heir from his own body. Because of this, before his great works, it was "credited to him as righteousness." God was so pleased with Abraham's faith that he not only credited him with righteousness, but that night appeared as "a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch ... and passed between the pieces" of a sacrifice (Genesis 15:17), thus signifying that the promise he had made to Abraham (children and blessing) was unconditional.

The word "credited," *logizomai*, appears eleven times in Romans 4 and has the idea of crediting to one's account. This is evident despite the various ways different translations render it: *counted, reckoned, considered, imputed, computed*. These all mean that righteousness was credited to Abraham's account because of faith, not because of works!

Paul destroyed the wrongful use of Abraham as an example of the conventional works-salvation view—and he did it using the sacred text of the Genesis Torah. Salvation for Abraham, their model of models, was *sola fide!*

Having established the faith alone principle from Genesis 15:6, the apostle next states the principle in what were startling terms to the traditional Jewish ear: "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (vv. 4, 5). This was shocking indeed, first because Paul discourages working

for salvation! To be sure, in other places he encourages good works (cf. Philippians 2:12, 13) but not here where the doctrine of salvation is at stake.

Second, this was shocking because the paradoxical description of God as a “God who justifies the wicked” (literally *the ungodly*) assaulted traditional sensibilities. In the Old Testament the acquittal of the wicked and the condemnation of the innocent is repeatedly denounced. In fact, to discourage such injustice God presented himself as an example saying, “I will not acquit the guilty” (Exodus 23:7). Thus, to say that God justifies the wicked seemed outrageous to the law-abiding Jews. How could this be? The answer lies in the difference between law and grace. God forbids in the Law what in fact he does in the gospel.

Sola fide, the doctrine of faith alone, offends our natural sensibilities. We naturally think justification ought to go to the good, those who are trying to do their best—the paddlers. But not to the ungodly! We can understand how Abraham was justified by faith, because he was a God-fearer. But the wicked? But the truth is, *we are all ungodly/wicked*. None of us are good enough. Salvation will be *sola fide*, or it simply will not be. “You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly” (5:6). Again, grace has power which the Law never had.

SOLA FIDE FOR DAVID (vv. 6–8)

Having established that Abraham was reckoned as righteous by faith *before* his good works, and having memorably stated the *sola fide* principle, Paul presents the experience of another great Old Testament saint—King David. Here he refers to David’s blessedness and joyous relief at having his sins against Bathsheba and Uriah forgiven, an *undeserved* righteousness bestowed upon him, as described in Psalm 32:1, 2. Paul explains in verses 6–8:

David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.”

Ostensibly, Paul turned to this psalm because of the rabbinical principle of interpretation that when the same word is used in two Biblical passages, each can be used to interpret the other. (Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:2 both contain the same word—*logizesthai*, LXX and *hasab*, MT—which the NIV renders “credited” in Genesis 15:6 and “count” in Psalm 32:2.)

But a deeper reason David had unmerited righteousness credited to him is, it was because of faith! David had broken three of the ten Commandments outright as he coveted Bathsheba, committed adultery, and murdered Uriah—and the Old Testament sacrificial

system made no provision for such premeditated sin. This is why David cried in Psalm 51:16,17:

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

David's case was hopeless. There was nothing he could do but cast himself on God's mercy. Regarding this, F. F. Bruce says of Psalm 32:

And if we examine the remainder of the psalm to discover the ground on which he was acquitted, it appears that he simply acknowledged his guilt and cast himself in faith upon the mercy of God.

Paul calls David "blessed," and David twice calls himself "blessed" because when there was no work that could possibly atone for his sins he was forgiven on *sola fide*! So the principle of faith alone was mightily established and illustrated in the life of Israel's greatest king—a "man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). Nothing you and I can ever do can atone for our sins. Our only hope is "a righteousness from God, apart from law ... to which the Law and the prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (3:21, 22).

SOLA FIDE FOR GENTILES (vv. 9–12)

The intense Jewishness of Paul's argument could lead some at this point to assume that *sola fide* was for Jews only. After all, Abraham is the Jew of Jews, the grand patriarch. So Paul now asks the question, "Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness" (v. 9). And he answers his own question in favor of the Gentiles:

Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (vv. 10–12).

Paul's answer indicates that Abraham was credited as righteous at least fourteen years *before* he was circumcised. Genesis 15:4–6 records the promise to Abraham that he would have an heir. Genesis 16:16 records that he was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael (as a result of his attempting to help God bring about the promise). And Genesis

17:24 indicates that Ishmael was thirteen when he, his ninety-nine-year-old father Abraham, and his whole household were circumcised. Thus, there is a space of some fourteen years, assuming that Hagar became pregnant soon after Abraham's faith in Genesis 15:6. But the time gap may be even greater because traditional Jewish chronology places circumcision twenty-nine years after Genesis 15:6.

The point is, Abraham was declared a righteous man while a Gentile—and remained so for some fourteen to twenty-nine years before he was a Jew! Therefore, *sola fide* was a Gentile principle long before it was Jewish reality. *Sola fide* is for everyone—Jew and Gentile! Abraham is the father of uncircumcised believers and the father of circumcised believers—not on the ground of circumcision but of faith. Through the solidarity of faith, Jews and Gentiles are brothers and sisters in Christ.

SOLA FIDE TRANSCENDS THE LAW (vv. 13–15)

If circumcision and its many blessings had nothing to do with Abraham's justification, the Law had even less to do with it. Paul explains in verse 13, "It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith." The historical fact is, as Paul has written in Galatians 3:17, the Law came 430 years after Abraham was made heir to the promise by faith—and there is thus no way the Law could invalidate or restrict its scope. To make the promise conditional on obedience to the Law, which was not even hinted at when the promise was given, would nullify the whole promise. Righteousness, and its promised benefits, has always come by faith to those who live by faith!

Pursuing righteousness both by the Law and by faith is impossible, "For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression" (vv. 14, 15). The Law makes the promise worthless, because if we have to keep the Law to receive the promise, the promise will never be fulfilled. Moreover, the Law promotes transgression and wrath (cf. 5:20; 6:7, 8). No one can keep the Law, so the Law enhances one's sense of transgression and failure and the sense of being under God's wrath. The Law promotes defeat and pessimism, but faith brings joy, assurance of the promise, and thus a life of optimism.

"Don't be fooled," says Paul in effect, "the principle of faith transcends the Law." Abraham was credited as righteous because of his faith. So was David. *Sola fide* preceded the Jews; it preceded the Law; it is for everyone!

SOLA FIDE (v. 16)

Paul draws this magnificent conclusion: “Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all” (v. 16). The universal principle of grace teaches us that salvation comes by faith alone. Oh, how badly our frog-paddling world needs to know this!

Today it is fashionable to derive our preaching agendas from the “felt needs” of men and women on the street—the homiletics of consensus. But I am convinced that the average person on the street does not know what he needs. What today’s person really needs is a clear understanding of the opening chapters of Romans. I am convinced that is what the church needs too, far more than advice on how to raise children or how to handle money (subjects which I do preach on!).

We need to understand just how radically sinful we are—how sin so effects every part of us that we are totally unable to live up to God’s standards and effect our own salvation—that we are lost in ourselves.

We need to understand that we are in need of a radical righteousness which comes “from God” alone (1:17) and that “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (3:22). We need to understand that we must “be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (Philippians 3:9), so that we can say, “he saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy” (Titus 3:5a).

It was *sola fide* for Abraham—*sola fide* for David—*sola fide* for the Gentiles—*sola fide* before, during, and after the Law—it is always for all *sola fide*.

Not what these hands have done

Can save this guilty soul;

Not what this toiling flesh has borne

Can make my spirit whole.

Not what I feel or do

Can give me peace with God,

Not all my prayers and sighs and tears

Can bear my awful load.

*Thy work alone O Christ,
Can ease this weight of sin;
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God,
Can give me peace within.
Thy grace alone, O God,
To me can pardon speak,
Thy power alone, O Son of God,
Can this sore bondage break.
I bless the Christ of God;
I rest on love divine;
And, with unfalt'ring lip and heart,
I call this Savior mine.*

(Horatius Bonar, 1861)

10

The Faith of Abraham

Romans 4:17-25

One of the favorite books around our house is the *Guinness Book of World Records*. It has been on our shelf for years. Now and then I see one of my boys reading it to stock up on trivia. How much did the heaviest man weigh? (1,069 pounds.) How tall was the tallest man of modern times? (8'11". He wore a size 37AA shoe.) What is the world's record for bearing children? (Sixty-nine. The record was set by a Russian peasant woman who achieved great honor in her country. She had eight sets of twins, seven sets of triplets, and four sets of quads.) This is terribly important information for the trivia buff, hence our valued dog-eared copy! But, alas, I did find an error in the esteemed *Guinness Book* because it states that the oldest mother on record gave birth in October 1956 at the age of fifty-seven, thus setting the world record. However, this is entirely wrong!

The last part of Romans 4 focuses on the events surrounding the true world record for the oldest mother and the world-changing implications of that birth. Paul has stated a masterful argument for justification by faith in Romans 3, culminating in the summary statement in verse 28: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” Justification comes by faith alone, or *sola fide* as Luther translated it. As *The Living Bible* plainly translates verse 28, “we are saved by faith in Christ and not by the good things we do.”

Earlier in chapter 4 Paul has sustained the argument that justification comes by faith alone. He turned to the example of the patriarch Abraham and demonstrated that Genesis 15:6 means what it says: “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” Abraham’s righteousness by faith was established some fourteen years before he was circumcised. So Paul’s conclusion is that righteousness comes by faith apart from the works of the Law, and that it is equally available to all, whether they be people of the Law or not.

In 4:17–25 Paul explains the nature of true faith by describing what went on inside Abraham relative to the miraculous, world-record-setting birth of Isaac. It is as if Paul was able to unfasten the wing nuts holding down the top of Abraham’s head and give us an intimate look at the inner workings of this great man of faith. As we consider the example of Abraham, each of us will come to a better understanding of faith. First, we will see Abraham’s perception of the *object* of his faith. Second, we will see Abraham’s perception of the *obstacles* of his faith. Third, we will see Abraham’s perception of the *objectives* of his faith.

ABRAHAM’S PERCEPTION: THE OBJECT OF FAITH (v. 17)

The object of Abraham’s faith is very easy to discern. It was God alone, according to verse 17:

As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

The God “who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were” was clearly the object of the patriarch’s faith. It is fundamental that we understand that the object of one’s faith is most important. One’s faith, outstanding as it may be, will never benefit its owner if it has the wrong object.

Some have had strong faith in thin ice but did not live to tell about it. They actually died by faith. Or to use another example, I may leave church next Sunday with the utmost faith

that my car will get me home because it looks OK. However, if someone removes my hubcaps and lug bolts, then replaces the hubcaps, my faith will be to no avail—the wheels will fall off! On the other hand, if I have little faith in my car and drive it with trepidation, but no one has fooled with it, I'm perfectly safe despite my weak faith, because the object of my faith is strong.

When my son Carey was little, he used to hide on top of the refrigerator and jump on me when I passed. However, he had a misplaced faith in the object of his plunge (yours truly!)—and if he had tried it too many times, one of us would have been out of business!

By Scripture and by analogy we conclude that Abraham's faith was not exemplary due to its intrinsic strength, strong as it was, but because its object was God. We all have faith. The decisive issue is where we place the faith we have.

Abraham grasped two massive concepts about God. First, he understood that God "gives life to the dead." Although there had been no recorded resurrection at this point in history, and although God had not revealed any doctrine of resurrection, Abraham believed in God's resurrection power! This was borne out when he obediently raised the knife above Isaac. He knew that if Isaac died, God could resurrect him (cf. Genesis 22:5).

Second, he saw God as a God who "calls things that are not as though they were." God creates *ex nihilo*, from nothing. This is, of course, a towering concept. Perhaps, in retrospect, there is some suggestion here of God's restoration of Abraham and Sarah's procreation process. God for all purposes created Isaac *ex nihilo*.

Abraham's perception of God as the object of his faith was immense, and this gigantic concept dominated his entire experience of faith. It can makes all the difference in us too.

Robert Dick Wilson was one of the great professors at Princeton Theological Seminary. One of his students had been invited to preach in Miller Chapel twelve years after his graduation. Old Dr. Wilson came in and sat down near the front. At the close of the meeting, the old professor came up to his former student, cocked his head to one side in his characteristic way, extended his hand, and said, "If you come back again, I will not come to hear you preach. I only come once. I am glad that you are a big-godder. When my boys come back, I come to see if they are big-godders or little-godders, and then I know what their ministry will be." His former student asked him to explain, and he replied, "Well, some men have a little god, and they are always in trouble with him. He can't do any miracles. He can't take care of the inspiration and transmission of the Scripture to us. He doesn't intervene on behalf of his people. They have a little god and I call them little-godders. Then, there are those who have a great God. He speaks and it is done. He commands and it stands fast. He knows how to show himself strong on behalf of them that fear him. You have a

great God; and he will bless your ministry.” He paused a moment, smiled, said, “God bless you,” and turned and walked out.

If our view of God is as exalted as Abraham’s, if we see God as so vast that he creates *ex nihilo* and gives life to the dead, if you and I really believe this, if we are “big-godders,” it will make an equally immense difference in our faith and approach to life. Two questions are relevant here: 1) Is God the object of our faith? 2) How do we perceive the object of our faith?

We have seen Abraham’s perception of the object of his faith. Now we come to his perception of the obstacles to his faith.

ABRAHAM’S PERCEPTION: THE OBSTACLES TO FAITH (vv. 18–20)

See if you can pick out the obstacles in these verses:

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God.... (vv. 18–20a)

Abraham’s faith faced two obstacles. The obvious barrier to his believing God would give him a child was the biological impossibility due to Sarah’s and his age.

The less obvious obstacle was the staggering nature of the promise. That is, the promise was so wonderful, it was hard to believe—it was too good to be true! To think that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars above and the dust below, that all the earth would be blessed through him, that he would achieve a standing he did not deserve—this was difficult to believe. The first part of verse 20 touches on this when it says, “Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God.” Though it was all so incredible, he did not vacillate. Birthdays came and went—eighty-seven, ninety-two, ninety-five, ninety-nine, and year after year another candle was placed on his *baklava*—and then God told him the promised son would be born the very next year! Through all of this Abraham did not waver regarding the fantastic promise.

The greatest obstacle, of course, was not the staggering promise, but the clear biological impossibility of Abraham and Sarah having offspring. He was impotent, and Sarah was barren. After all, Sarah was ninety and he was almost 100 when God gave him the covenant of circumcision and reaffirmed the promise of a son (cf. Genesis 17:1).

Interestingly, the older English translations based on the *Textus Receptus* render verse 19 as, “He considered *not* his own body now dead” (italics added). Apparently some scribe thought the verse made better sense by adding the word “not.” However, the recent discovery of more ancient manuscripts confirm that Abraham took every relevant factor into consideration, including his great age. He contemplated the facts, which he fully understood, and believed God!

Some people are under the impression that when a person has “faith” he inwardly agrees to ignore the facts. They see faith and facts as mutually exclusive. Faith without reason is *fideism*; reason without faith is *rationalism*. In practice there must be no reduction of faith to reason. Likewise, there must be no reduction of reason to faith. Biblical faith is a composite of the two. Abraham did not take an unreasonable leap of faith.

How did Abraham come to such a massive exercise of faith? He weighed the human impossibility of becoming a father against the divine impossibility of God being able to break his word and decided that if God was God, nothing is impossible. As F. F. Bruce says, the patriarch believed “the bare word of God.” Genesis 17 reveals that God appeared before him and spoke directly to him, revealing himself as *El Shaddai*, the God of bounty and reproduction. And amidst involuntary laughter Abraham believed.

It must have been something when Abraham gave Sarah the news. I can imagine Sarah saying, “Where have you been?” Perhaps he said, “I have been outside having my devotions.” And Sarah asked, “How was it?” Abraham may have replied, “It was great! I had a conversation with God. He told me something amazing.” She replied, “What was it?” And he blurted out, as only a man will, “Well, you’re going to have a baby!” I would like to have heard what Sarah said then.

Abraham believed God! And we know exactly what he believed. He believed that God is the one “who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were” (v. 17).

Again, Abraham’s majestic perception of his God was the ground on which he built his immense faith. To use Robert Dick Wilson’s term, he was a “big-godder.” Verse 18 says, “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed.” That is, against all human hope, Abraham in hope in God’s promise believed, and so became the father of many nations.”

In hope, against all human hope,

Self-desperate, I believe; . . .

Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees,

And looks to that alone;

Laughs at impossibilities,

And cries: It shall be done!

(Charles Wesley)

Applying this to ourselves, if God is who he says he is (and he is!), none of his promises will fail because he forgets us or our situation is beyond his power. The problem is, many of us keep in the back of our minds unexercised suspicions that what we say we believe about God's power is not really true. For all our lip service about trust in God, we rely chiefly upon what we can do ourselves. Some of us need to take deeper possession of the truths we have already believed about God. A good measure of how much spiritual truth we have appropriated is, how long is our worry list?

ABRAHAM'S PERCEPTION: THE OBJECTIVES OF FAITH (vv. 20b-22)

First, we saw Abraham's perception of the object of his faith, then his perception of faith's obstacles, and now we will consider Abraham's perception of the objectives of his faith. There were two.

The first objective of his faith was to glorify God, as the last line of verse 20 asserts: "... but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God." In this connection, we should emphasize that God is never glorified in a believer's life apart from faith—a full reliance on God. Abraham's life glorified God as few lives have because he demonstrated a faith that few mortals have shown. Some argue convincingly that verse 21 is one of the best definitions of faith in the Bible as it describes Abraham as "being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised." May we glorify God in the same way, taking him at his word.

The second objective of Abraham's faith was righteousness. Verse 22 concludes the description of Abraham's faith by saying, "it was credited to him as righteousness." Faith that makes one righteous before God perceives the immensity of God who creates from nothing and gives life to the dead (v. 17). Next, it is a faith that does not deny the existence of obstacles, but evaluates them in the light of God's Word and power (vv. 18–20). Ultimately, it brings the full assurance that what God has promised, he will perform (v. 21). That faith is reckoned for righteousness (v. 22). Faith is the only way any of us will ever be righteous before God.

Lest any of us try to relegate this to the moldy pages of ancient history, Paul says in verses 23, 24a: "The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us ..." We can have righteousness too. Promises as staggering as those made to Abraham are ours. We are not only God's friends, but his sons and daughters! "Dearest

Father”—“Abba, Father” is the language of our faith. And our present status will one day birth an entirely new state—“an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:17, NASB).

What are we to believe? What are we to put our faith in so as to be reckoned righteous? Paul is very explicit.

The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. (vv. 23–25)

This is what we are to believe! We are to put our faith in God who raised up Christ who died for our sins and was resurrected for our justification.

That which Abraham believed and that which we are to believe are very similar. Anders Nygren put it this way: “When we believe in Jesus as ‘put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification,’ we believe in the God ‘who gives life to the dead.’” In other words, to believe in Christ as described in verses 23–25 is to also believe in the stupendous God of Abraham.

How do we perceive the *object* of our faith—God? Hopefully as “the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were”—the God of the Resurrection.

How do we perceive the *obstacles* of our faith? Hopefully with realism and reason, weighing human possibilities against the divine impossibility of God breaking his word, and thus deciding that God is God and through him nothing is impossible.

How do we perceive the *objectives* of faith? Hopefully to glorify God through faith and find ourselves declared righteous. Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

What is your perception of your state—righteous or unrighteous? Rest all on God and his Word.²

² Hughes, R. K. (1991). [Romans: righteousness from heaven](#) (pp. 88–105). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.