

Lesson 40 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 4:1, Continued

Romans 4:1 — What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?

When we ended last week, we were looking at the phrase “our forefather” in verse 1. And that word “forefather” leads us immediately to a corresponding question: who are the children of Abraham? As it turns out, there are several possible answers to that question.

At one level, the children of Abraham are Isaac with Sarah and Ishmael with Hagar. And Abraham also had six sons with Keturah (Genesis 25:1-2) and possibly other children (Genesis 25:6). So, at an immediate physical level, Abraham had at least eight children.

At a second level, we could include all of the physical descendants of those eight sons. That would include the Jews and the Edomites through Isaac, the Ishmaelites through Ishmael, and whatever nations came through Abraham’s sons mentioned in Genesis 25, which at least include the Midianites. And who else was included among those physical descendants? We don’t know all of them, but we do know they included “a multitude of nations” and “kings” (Genesis 17:4-6).

And so who are the children of Abraham? Physically we have run out of answers, but not spiritually. Abraham has both physical offspring and spiritual offspring. Paul tells us that elsewhere.

Galatians 3:29 — And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

And so, at a third level, Abraham's offspring could refer to those who belong to Christ, who, as we have seen, are the faithful people of God under either the old covenant or the new covenant. No one has ever been or will ever be cleansed of their sin apart from the blood of Christ.

Which of those three levels is meant here in Romans 4? Abraham's immediate physical descendants? Abraham's remote physical descendants? Abraham's spiritual descendants? Or is there another level we haven't even considered yet?

Perhaps it would help us to answer that question if we quickly skimmed ahead through chapter 4 to see what else Paul will have to say here about the children of Abraham.

- **Verse 1:** “our **forefather** according to the flesh”
- **Verse 11:** “the **father** of all who believe without being circumcised”
- **Verse 12:** “the **father** of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our **father** Abraham had before he was circumcised”
- **Verse 13:** “the promise to Abraham and his **offspring** that he would be heir of the world”
- **Verse 16:** “that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his **offspring** — not only to the adherent of the law

but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the **father** of us all”

- **Verse 17:** “I have made you the **father** of many nations”
- **Verse 18:** “that he should become the **father** of many nations, as he had been told, ‘So shall your **offspring** be.’”

Later we will look at each of those verses in detail, but I think all we need to take away from that list now is that it lets us know that Paul is using the terms “father” and “offspring” in different ways in this chapter.

For example, here in verse 1, we find a father according to the flesh, but later in verses 11-12, we find a father of all who believe. And in verse 16 we find “offspring” who share the faith of Abraham. So it seems that we see both physical and spiritual descendants of Abraham in this one chapter.

But what about verse 1? What is the scope of the word “forefather” in this first verse?

Although Paul does seem to view the term spiritually later in this chapter, I think we can rule out the spiritual level here. Why? Because of that little phrase at the end of verse 1 I mentioned just a moment ago — “according to the flesh.”

I think that the offspring of Abraham here in verse 1 are physical descendants of Abraham. Whatever point Paul is planning to make about the spiritual descendants of Abraham, I don’t think Paul is making that point yet.

But while the Jews might have thought that Paul had only his fellow Jews in mind when it came to the phrase “our forefather,” we know that Abraham had many physical descendants who were not Jews, such as the Ishmaelites, the Edomites, and the Midianites.

But that was not how most of the Jews saw things. When they bragged that Abraham was “our” father, they meant that Abraham was uniquely their father. Yes, Abraham had children other than Isaac and grandchildren other than Jacob, but, to the Jewish mind, those other children didn’t count. The Jews believed that they had exclusive rights to Abraham.

And, yes, there was a line of promise through Jacob that Paul will tell us about later, but no, the Jews did not have exclusive rights to Abraham.

That claim of exclusivity was false no matter how you define “offspring.” Physically the claim was false because of Isaac’s half-brothers, but spiritually the claim was false because not all of the Jews were faithful to God. And so, **physically** the Jewish claim of exclusivity was too **restrictive**, and **spiritually** the Jewish claim of exclusivity was too **expansive** as to them. They were wrong either way.

And so, with all of that background, what can we say about this word “forefather” in verse 1? What we can say is that it is most certainly a loaded term!

That word “forefather” can be *said* in multiple ways and can be *heard* in multiple ways — and the way it is said is not always the way it is heard. In short, that word “forefather” is a perfect word to get people

thinking about the role of Abraham in the plan of God — which I suspect is why we find that word used here in the very first verse of this lengthy discussion about Abraham.

Now that we have looked at the second half of verse 1, let's back up and look at the question in the first half of the verse: "What then shall we say was gained by Abraham?" Why does Paul ask that question, and what does it mean?

As for why Paul asks that question, I think the answer is that Paul already knew the objection that was coming next from his Jewish readers. Paul had likely made these same arguments many times as he taught in the synagogues, and so Paul knew the objections and counter-arguments that he would hear next.

What had Paul just told the Jews in Romans 3? Paul had told them that justification was by faith in Christ and not by works of the law.

And what would most Jews immediately ask in response to that argument? I think Paul's pivot in Romans 4 answers that question — I think most Jews would immediately ask, "But what about Abraham?"

To most Jews, it was beyond dispute that Abraham was justified by works. Few Jews would have argued with the view that Abraham had earned his justification before God — that Abraham had merited his justification by all that he had done for God.

Just look, for example, at the Handout for Lesson 40, which shows most of Abraham's recorded travels. Just most of them? Yes, because that map does not show his starting point in Ur. That city of Ur is 600 miles away from Haran, which is the first location shown on this

map. But how did Abraham get to Haran? We find the answer to that question, not in Genesis, but in Acts.

Acts 7:2 — ...The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.

Had God not appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, there is no reason to believe that anything shown on this map would have ever happened. Most likely, Abraham would have lived his entire life in Ur. He would have stayed where he was and would have continued to serve other gods (Joshua 24:2).

But that is not what happened. God told Abraham to go, and Abraham went. And Abraham did that again and again — he heard God, and he obeyed God.

Almost any Jew looking at what Abraham did would have thought that God owed him something. If anyone ever in the history of the world was justified by works, they would have argued that it was Abraham. Just look at all that Abraham did for God! Didn't God owe him something in return? Most Jews would have answered yes.

And so I think Paul knew that if he could make his point with Abraham, then he could make his point with everyone. If Abraham was not justified by works, then no one else was justified by works.

And so I think that is why Paul uses Abraham as an example. In the gospel accounts, we see the Jews frequently using Abraham as their ultimate trump card in arguments against Jesus — and so Paul starts with their own trump card.

That answers the *why*, but what about the *what*? What does the question mean? “What then shall we say was gained by Abraham?”

To answer that question, we first need to look at the Greek word translated “gained.” That Greek word is *heurisko* (Strong’s #2147), and it means, not just to gain something, but to find something, usually as the result of a search. We find that same Greek word used many times in the New Testament:

Matthew 7:7 — Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will **find**; knock, and it will be opened to you.

Luke 2:46 — After three days they **found** him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

Luke 15:4 — What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he **finds** it?

“What did Abraham **gain**?” I think the KJV translation is better. “What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath **found**?”

This word is not describing something that just dropped into Abraham’s lap. This was something for which Abraham was searching. And Paul’s question is **what**. What did Abraham search for and find?

But Paul’s question is also **how**. How did Abraham find it? And while the question of how is unstated in verse 1, that question of how is really the key question in what follows. The Jews all agreed on what Abraham had found — he had found justification. But **how** did Abra-

ham find justification? That is where the disagreement began. And Paul turns to that question next.

Romans 4:2

Romans 4:2 — For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

What did Abraham find? Justification. And how did he find it? Some might answer that Abraham found it by works, and so Paul begins by considering that possibility.

But here we get to a subtle distinction between what we saw in Romans 2-3 and what we see here in Romans 4. Earlier Paul was considering the hypothetical possibility that someone could be perfectly obedient to the law of God. We see that, for example, in Romans 2:13 — “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.”

But Paul has now moved away from hypotheticals. Instead, Paul is now looking at a concrete example — the example of Abraham — an example that was well known to every Jew.

And so when Paul is asking whether Abraham was justified by his works, Paul cannot possibly be asking whether Abraham was perfectly obedient to God. Why not? Because no one could ever argue that Abraham was perfectly obedient to God. No Jew could ever claim that he was.

- Before God commanded him to go, Abraham had served other gods (Joshua 24:2).

- In Genesis 12:13 and 20:2, Abraham twice passed Sarah off as being merely his sister to protect himself, putting Sarah in a compromising position each time.
- In Genesis 16:2-4, Abraham listened to Sarah and took Hagar.
- In Genesis 15:3, Abraham doubted the promise of God.
- In Genesis 17:17, Abraham secretly laughed at the promise of God.
- In Genesis 16:6, Abraham again listened to Sarah and allowed Hagar to be treated very harshly.

And so, here in verse 2, when Paul says “if Abraham was justified by works,” he cannot be saying “if Abraham was justified by his perfect obedience” for the simple reason that everyone knew that was not the case. Yes, Abraham was great, but Abraham was not perfect.

So what then is Paul saying here? Paul is saying “if Abraham was justified by the works that he did” — not by perfect obedience, but just by what he did. And, as we see on the Handout, he did a lot. Again, to the Jewish mind, if anyone could ever be justified by the works that he did, it would be Abraham.

- The very first thing God ever said to Abraham was a command — “Go” in Genesis 12:1 — and Abraham “went” (Genesis 12:4).
- In Genesis 17:10, God commanded that every male be circumcised, and Abraham obeyed God “that very day” (Genesis 17:23).

- After finally having a son, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice that son (Genesis 22:2), and Abraham rose early the next morning so that he could obey that command (Genesis 22:3).

And so, what if those Jews are right? What if Abraham had, in fact, been justified by his works? That is the question Paul is considering here in verse 2.

And the answer? The answer is that Abraham would have something to boast about. The answer is that Abraham could have proudly said, “Look at what I did! I managed to work my way to Heaven! Good for me!”

“But not before God.” Paul adds that phrase at the end of verse 2, but what does it mean? I think there are two possibilities.

First, it could simply mean that Abraham’s boasting would be directed toward himself rather than toward God. That is, Abraham would be boasting about what *he* had done rather than about what *God* had done.

We earlier saw that sort of boasting could come from someone who managed to be justified by keeping the law perfectly (if that were possible), but it might also come from someone who managed to be justified by keeping *most* of the law perfectly (if that were possible). Either way, the justification would be based on what man has done rather than on what God has done.

But a second possible meaning for that final phrase in verse 2 is that Paul is giving us a preview of where he is headed in this chapter. Yes, if Abraham had been justified by his works, then he could boast be-

fore God — but that is not how Abraham was justified, and so Abraham cannot boast before God.

I lean toward the second possibility. Why? Because of what we see in the very next verse. Paul is about to prove what he just said from the Scriptures — and the verse he quotes shows us that Abraham was not justified by his works but instead was justified by his faith.

Romans 4:3

Romans 4:3 — For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

Before we look at what verse 3 is telling us about Abraham, let’s first focus on a particular word in verse 3 — the word “counted.” That word “counted” appears 11 times just in this one chapter!

- **Verse 3:** “**Counted** to him as righteousness”
- **Verse 4:** “Not **counted** as a gift but as his due”
- **Verse 5:** “His faith is **counted** as righteousness”
- **Verse 6:** “To whom God **counts** righteousness apart from works”
- **Verse 8:** “The Lord will not **count** his sin”
- **Verse 9:** “Faith was **counted** to Abraham as righteousness”
- **Verse 10:** “How then was it **counted** to him?”

- **Verse 11:** “Righteousness would be **counted** to them as well”
- **Verse 22:** “**Counted** to him as righteousness”
- **Verse 23:** “It was **counted** to him”
- **Verse 24:** “It will be **counted** to us who believe in him”

And so the word “counted” is certainly a key word in Paul’s argument here. But what does it mean?

The Greek word is *logizomai* (Strong’s #3049), and it means to count, to reckon, to consider, or to account. In secular usage, that Greek word was used in accounting to describe the reckoning of value and debit in commerce. And what is it that we see counted in this chapter?

- In verse 3, **belief** is counted.
- In verse 4, **wages** are counted.
- In verse 5, **faith** is counted.
- In verse 6, **righteousness** is counted.
- In verse 8, **sin** is not counted.

First, as to the difference between belief and faith, let’s recall that in the Greek text those two words are forms of the same Greek word as we discussed in Lesson 15.

As we recall, there is no verb form of the word “faith” in English. English has the verb “to believe” but English does not have the verb “to

faith.” “Faithing” and “faithed” are not words! That is why our English Bibles use “believe” for the verb form of faith.

Second, let’s notice from verse 4 that we seem to be on the right track when we think of the word “counted” in the context of financial accounting. That is definitely how Paul uses the word in verse 4 when he describes the counting of someone’s wages.

And third, let’s notice that these verses tell us, not only **what** is counted, but (in some cases) **how** it is counted.

- Faith is counted **as righteousness**.
- Wages are counted **as what is due**.
- Wages are not counted **as a gift**.
- Righteousness is counted **apart from works**.

But not sin. In verse 8, we see that sin is either counted or not counted — not counted as something else, but just counted as sin. Paul explains that fact elsewhere, using the same Greek word we find here.

2 Corinthians 5:19 — That is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not **counting** their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

Sins are either counted or not counted against us — and if they are not counted it is only because of the work of God in Christ. And, as Paul just told us, that is how we are reconciled to God.

And why do we need to be reconciled to God? We can answer that question with a single word: sin. Sin is what separates us from God,

and the only way to be reconciled to God is for those sins not to be counted against us.

And what happened to those sins that were once on our ledger? Were those sins just erased? No, they were not erased. Instead, they were moved to another ledger.

Isaiah 53:5 — But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

1 Peter 2:24 — He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

Luke 22:37 — For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: ‘And he was **numbered** with the transgressors.’ For what is written about me has its fulfillment.”

The Greek word translated as “numbered” in that verse is the same Greek word that is translated as “counted” here in Romans 4. “He was **numbered** with the transgressors.”

2 Corinthians 5:21 — For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin.” That is our sin being moved from our ledger onto Christ.

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin.” That is the free gift of God’s grace — not something we could ever possibly earn, ever

possibly deserve, ever possibly merit, or ever possibly demand — but instead an inexpressible gift freely given by God.

Next, let's look at what verse 3 tells us about Abraham and about what was counted to him.

In verse 2, Paul said that if Abraham had been justified by his works, then he could boast before God — but that is not how Abraham was justified, and so he cannot boast before God.

And now, in verse 3, as evidence for what he said in verse 2, Paul quotes Genesis 15:6. But, as we should always do, let's start by looking at the larger context of that quotation from Genesis 15 — and when we do that, I think we will see something remarkable.

Genesis 15:1-6 — After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

And what is so remarkable about that context? It is this: that famous verse about Abraham's **belief** being counted as righteousness originally appeared in the context of Abraham's **disbelief**!

In Genesis 12:2, God said to Abraham, “I will make of you a great nation.” And then in Genesis 12:7, God said to Abraham, “To your offspring I will give this land.” And in Genesis 13:16, God said to Abraham, “I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.”

But then, after all of that, what does Abraham say twice in the first four verses of Genesis 15? He says that Eliezer of Damascus will be his heir. In Genesis 15:3, he complains to God that “You have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.”

God corrects Abraham in the next two verses, reminding him of the promises that he had previously been made — and then, immediately after that reminder from God, we get verse 6:

Genesis 15:6 — And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

The crucial thing for us to see when we look back at the context of that verse is that Abraham was not at a spiritual high point in Genesis 15. Instead, Abraham was at a spiritual low point.

Abraham had just said — twice — that God’s promises had apparently come to nothing. Instead, Eliezer of Damascus was going to inherit everything. The great nation God had promised was looking to Abraham like just an empty promise. “You have given me no offspring,” he tells God.

And then what happened? God reaffirmed his promises. And Abraham believed him. Abraham trusted him. Abraham relied upon him and upon his promises. And it was that faith rising out of doubt that God counted as righteousness.

And that word “counted” is describing something that God added to Abraham’s account — not something that originated with Abraham, but something that originated with God. This righteousness was not Abraham’s own righteousness, as Paul elsewhere explains.

Philippians 3:9 — And be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own** that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.

This righteousness in verse 3 is “the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” And this great statement in verse 3 was made to Abraham when he was at a very low point — but when, even so, he believed and trusted in God anyway — when he believed in the promises of God, not based on what he was seeing, but despite what he was seeing. He was childless — could he still be the father of many nations? God said yes, and Abraham had faith in the promises of God.

And let’s think about our own lives for a moment. When do we, like Abraham, experience the greatest times of faith? Is it when everything is going our way? Is it when it is easy to believe that God is with us? Or is it when everything goes wrong, and we are tempted to think that God has abandoned us, but when, even from those depths, we reach out to God in faith, trust, and reliance?