

Romans 4:1–12 — Background Notes

Big picture

Paul illustrates the doctrine he has just stated in 3:21–31: justification is by faith apart from works of the law. Abraham and David—Israel’s patriarch and king—are summoned as witnesses. Abraham shows that righteousness is credited through faith before any ritual or law; David shows the blessedness of forgiveness apart from works (Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 1998, pp. 215–217).

Flow of the argument (vv. 1–12)

1. vv. 1–3: Abraham’s standing with God did not come “according to the flesh.” Scripture says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6). The key is imputation—God reckoning righteousness to the believer’s account (John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans 4:3*, in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Baker, 2009 reprint, p. 157).
2. vv. 4–5: If salvation were by working, God would “owe” a wage. Instead, God justifies “the ungodly”—so the only fitting instrument is faith, not works (John MacArthur, *Romans 1–8*, Moody, 1991, p. 233).
3. vv. 6–8: David confirms this from Psalm 32: the blessed person is the one to whom God credits righteousness and does not credit sin (Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 6, Romans 4:6–8).
4. vv. 9–12: Abraham was credited righteous while uncircumcised; circumcision came later as a sign and seal of the righteousness he already had by faith. Therefore Abraham is father of all who believe—uncircumcised Gentiles and circumcised Jews who walk in the same footsteps of faith (Jamieson-Fausset-Brown, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Romans 4:9–12).

Key terms

- **logizomai (to credit/reckon/impute)**: Paul’s accounting metaphor. Righteousness is not infused by our performance; it is reckoned to us by God on the basis of faith (Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Romans*, 1834, Romans 4:3).
- **“According to the flesh” (v. 1)**: Not mere physical descent or external advantages; Paul denies that anything “from the flesh” explains Abraham’s acceptance with God (R.C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*, Baker, 1995, pp. 83–85).
- **“Wage... debt” vs. “grace” (vv. 4–5)**: A wage is earned; grace is given. Justification cannot be simultaneously grace and earned payment (MacArthur, *Romans 1–8*, p. 234).

- **“Ungodly” (v. 5):** God declares righteous those who have no prior moral claim—undercutting any view that justification is a reward for improved behavior (Sproul, *Faith Alone*, pp. 92–94).
- **“Sign and seal” (v. 11):** Circumcision functioned as a covenant sign and divine seal authenticating what God had already granted by faith (Calvin, *Commentary on Romans 4:11*, Baker, p. 161).
- **“Footsteps” (v. 12):** The pathway of Abraham-like faith; true children of Abraham imitate his believing, not merely his ritual (Jamieson-Fausset-Brown, *Romans 4:12*).

Notes by section

vv. 1–3 — Abraham justified by faith

Paul anticipates a Jewish objection by going to Abraham. If justification were by works, Abraham could boast; but Scripture itself says faith was credited as righteousness (Gen 15:6). Imputation here is forensic—a legal declaration, not a process of moral transformation (Calvin, *Commentary on Romans 4:3*, p. 157).

vv. 4–5 — Wage vs. gift; God justifies the ungodly

Paul contrasts two economies: wages (earned) and grace (given). God justifies “the ungodly,” meaning those with no claim on His favor. Faith is not a meritorious work but the empty hand receiving God’s gift (MacArthur, *Romans 1–8*, pp. 233–234).

vv. 6–8 — David’s testimony (Psalm 32)

David describes the blessedness of the forgiven: sins covered and not imputed. This negative imputation complements the positive crediting of righteousness. Even Israel’s king relied on mercy, not merit (Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, *Romans 4:6–8*).

vv. 9–12 — Why circumcision cannot be the basis

Abraham believed in Genesis 15; circumcision was given years later in Genesis 17. Thus, justification preceded the sign. Circumcision confirmed righteousness already received by faith, making Abraham the father of both believing Gentiles and believing Jews (Jamieson-Fausset-Brown, *Romans 4:9–12*; Calvin, *Commentary on Romans 4:11*, p. 161).

Conservative commentator insights (synthesized)

- Abraham’s case proves that justification by faith is not a novelty; it is God’s covenantal way from the beginning (Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 217).
- The verb *logizomai* dominates this passage, insisting that justification is God’s act of reckoning righteousness (Barnes, *Romans 4:3*).

- God declaring righteous “the ungodly” is central to sola fide, excluding boasting and magnifying grace (Sproul, *Faith Alone*, p. 92).
- Circumcision as sign and seal shows that ordinances confirm but do not convey justifying grace (Calvin, *Commentary on Romans 4:11*, p. 161).

Cross-references to keep in view

- Genesis 15:6; 17:10–27 (Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*).
- Psalm 32:1–2 (Henry, *Romans 4:6–8*).
- Galatians 3:6–9, 15–18 (MacArthur, *Galatians*, Moody, 1987).
- Romans 2:28–29; 3:21–31; 5:1; 11:6 (Schreiner, *Romans*, pp. 215–220).
- James 2:21–24 (Sproul, *Faith Alone*, pp. 101–103).

Practical/theological takeaways

- Justification by faith is rooted in Abraham and David, not a NT innovation (Calvin, *Romans 4*, p. 159).
- God saves the ungodly, not the deserving (MacArthur, *Romans 1–8*, p. 234).
- Abraham’s fatherhood is spiritual and worldwide, encompassing all who share his faith (Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 218).

References

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