



Romans - Chapter Four

III. Romans 3:21-4:25 - The saving righteousness of God (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Four

In his discourse so far, Paul has made the provocative claim that God's righteousness reaches out to faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, without regard to works of the law. However, he has not yet demonstrated this claim from the OT scriptures. But this is where Paul's Gospel becomes most objectionable to his fellow Jews, both followers of the older ways and fellow believers in Jesus as the Christ. So if Paul is to have any hope of winning the argument, he must make good his claim at this point. Unless he can demonstrate from scripture that a person is justified by faith and not by works of the law, he will be unable to maintain the continuity between the Gospel and his central faith. In Chapter Four Paul essentially turns to that task.

Paul uses the example of Abraham, the forefather of the Jewish nation, to press home his argument. Abraham was revered by all Jews and was held to be the archetypal Jew, a role model for all to follow and aspire to be like. Abraham was faithful, was the one to whom the original covenant was promised, and a man clearly blessed by God.

Paul looks at three key aspects of Abraham: his righteousness; his faithfulness; and his trust in God. At each stage, Paul looks at this in its historical context and draws, each time, on the point made in Genesis 15:6 that the covenant promises made by God were all given graciously and freely to Abraham, independently of anything Abraham had achieved, i.e. his works, and prior to either his own circumcision, a symbol of his accepting God's promises, and outside of the law, which was not given for several hundred years, when it was given through Moses, to the Jews after they had left captivity in Egypt.

Paul also shows that God's promises were that Abraham should be the father of many nations, with no precondition that people should be nationalistically tied to Abraham, but should be linked by having the same trust and belief in God, through faith, that Abraham had shown, and on which the covenant was based.

Paul goes on to show that the Jews can be part of Abraham's family too, and call him their father, but not by their birthright. For Jew and Gentile can only be accepted into the family of God through the acceptance of Jesus Christ as the Lord of their lives, and the fact that he was crucified for the propitiation of their sins, before being raised to life again by the power of God.

III.b Romans 4:1-25 - Abraham justified by faith

Justification by faith was so contrary to the Jews' understanding that Paul has laboured on the point so far. He now turns to giving examples as proof, citing Abraham, whom the Jews revered as the Father of their nation and, being of the seed of Abraham, sealed them in the promises of God.

Paul's argument is: 'All that are saved are justified in the same way as Abraham was'; Abraham was justified by faith, and not by works of the law, as the law was not yet given. Thus all who are saved are saved by that same faith and not by works'.

This, for the Jews, was a powerful argument, for if Abraham, a man famed for works, so eminent in holiness and obedience, was nevertheless justified by faith only, and not by those works, how much less can any other, especially any of those that spring from him, and come so far short of him in their own works, become justified by their own works? Abraham is considered here as a test case for the view that justification is by faith alone. Abraham was the progenitor of the Jewish people, and hence his example is crucial for Paul's argument.

III.b.i Romans 4:1-8 - God's Covenant with Abraham

It is quite natural for Paul to use Abraham in his thinking at this stage. After all, it was Abraham whom God called and to whom the first covenant was given. And it is through his seed that the promises of God were to be fulfilled. For those who were Jews it was natural to see themselves as belonging to the family of Abraham, they could do so biologically as well as through their religious heritage. But through the Gospel, this new covenant of faith, all believers were being invited to join the family and it only seemed right that Paul would explain why and what kind of family it was meant to be.

The thrust of this section is not Abraham's faith, but for Paul to establish what type of family Abraham is supposed to have and how we relate to it. He concludes the chapter by clearly asserting it is not a single ethnic family but a family of many nations.

Paul's main theme is built on Genesis Chapter 15; especially the ceremony that establishes the covenant. This should alert us to something that many readers today never even imagine: that for Paul, as for Judaism, 'being in the right' with God is much the same thing as 'being a member of the covenant'. NT Wright asserts that Genesis 15:6 is tantamount to 'Abraham believed God, and it was the basis of the covenant which was then established'.

All of this occurred apart from the law, which was not yet given, thus Abraham was not righteous by works of the law, neither can Christianity be said to be a subset of ethnic Judaism.

At the time of his calling Abraham was an ungodly pagan. He had faith in a God he didn't yet know or comprehend, and yet he detected something that made him know it was right to put his trust in him. Therefore, Abraham started where all non-Jews start, but God does not simply declare us righteous for obeying the call and leaving us there. As the story of Abraham shows, God takes us a lot further than that.

Paul then calls David as his witness, who wrote in Psalm 32:7-8 that we are blessed to have our sins not just forgiven but dealt with. This was God's intention for entering into covenant with Abraham; to have a way of demonstrating his determination to deal with the sin of mankind, through forgiveness and not righteous judgement.

David recognised this a thousand years before the events of Calvary, which placed it for all time on a secure foundation.

¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter?

Romans 4:1

Abraham was considered by all the Jewish people to be the forefather of their nation and was revered. He would become justified by faith, spiritually rather than of the flesh, as Paul indicates elsewhere: <<For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh>> (Philippians 3:3). Jesus spoke to the Jews of him: <<Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad>> (John 8:56), showing that Abraham had the gift of prophecy through his faith in God. Abraham had long been lauded as the prototype of the devout Jew; that is, as one who demonstrated his faithfulness to the Lord under testing, as one who 'in testing was found faithful'.

Discovered in this matter is frequently translated as 'according to the flesh'. The Jews would immediately agree with Paul in this statement as to be considered to be of 'the seed of Abraham' was a key badge to their being part of his 'covenant faithfulness'. But Paul will use this to show that paternity extends well beyond the realm of the physical and the visible, embracing Gentile as well as Jew. This somewhat beguiling opening, so reassuring to Jewish sensibilities, is actually the opening thrust in Paul's attempt to challenge these axioms of Jewish self-understanding as a people by his assertion that God's covenant righteousness extends to believing Gentiles as well as Jew without regard to national identity, as determined by the law.

² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about — but not before God.

Romans 4:2

If Abraham stood in the right before God on the basis of his good works, then he could truly boast, since his obedience would function as the basis of his relationship with God. But Paul insists that Abraham could not boast before God.

Had he been justified by works then room is left for boasting: <<The Lord said to Gideon, You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her>> (Judges 7:2). And thus does not give God the full glory that he deserves and desires. The Jews may have claimed that Abraham was justified by works when he offered his son Isaac as a sacrifice to God in obedience: <<Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?>> (James 2:21), but it was clearly by faith, as we see in the original account: <<On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you">> (Genesis 22:4-5), because of the fact that he states 'we will return' showed he had faith that somehow God would either allow Isaac to live, or would resurrect him if he did die! Abraham could have boasted of his faithful obedience but not before God. Once again Paul is alluding to the fact that Jewish pride in their nationalistic status of automatic covenant membership was actually preventing them from understanding and recognising that the only way anyone can stand before God is by humble faith.

Our works may bring us glory before men but not before God: <<Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved praise from men more than praise from God>> (John 12:42-43). The important thing is: <<My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me>> (1 Corinthians 4:4), and: <<What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and 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 3:8-9), so too Abraham.

³ What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Romans 4:3

The point of the previous verse is not that Abraham could boast before men. Instead, there was no basis for boasting at all, for Abraham stood in the right before God by believing, not by doing. But Paul does not cite this himself or reference any other man’s opinion, instead he refers to God’s word, what does Scripture say, i.e. Genesis 15:6 (LXX). Paul apparently quotes from the Greek Septuagint, rather than the Aramaic translation, as it would be more familiar to the Diaspora Jews, and he turns to this verse almost certainly because he was aware of the already typical understanding of it as attesting to Abraham’s covenant faithfulness. It had, no doubt, been his own understanding of it prior to his encounter with the Risen Lord on the Damascus Road. But now, in the light of the revelation of Christ, he reads it differently, and because of this different reading, he now seeks to persuade the Roman congregations, Jews as well as Gentile. Paul is not trying to rob the Jews of one of their key heritage verses but just wishes to show their misinterpretation of it. Thus he can now appeal to this verse because he is confident that he himself stands within the mainstream of God’s covenant purpose, and that he can demonstrate what he sees now to be the proper interpretation of Genesis 15:6.

Abraham had accepted the seed of promise by faith, seeking no sign or reward for doing so; God was his reward: <<After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward>> (Genesis 15:1).

Paul introduces two key words in this verse on which the understanding of Abraham’s righteousness stand: believed and credited, or reckoned in several translations. Paul will now expound each in turn.

⁴ Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.

Romans 4:4

Paul uses an example from everyday life. If salvation were based on works, then God, in granting a person salvation, would merely be repaying what he owed that person, just as an employer gives a worker wages for his work. Here, Paul makes the link between works and the idea of credited. When working and crediting are put together then self-evidently we are talking in the accounting terms of everyday transaction, hence the imagery of a worker and his due wages. But in Genesis 15:6, the link is between belief and credit, and if someone does not work and only believes in God, who justifies the impious, then it must be his belief which is credited to him as righteousness (see v.3).

⁵ However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Romans 4:5

Under the Gospel, however, works comes under a completely different equation. Righteousness does not come to those who work for God, since all, like Abraham, are by God’s absolute standards wicked or ungodly: <<Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods>> (Joshua 24:2), showing the pagan ancestry of Abraham. But what Paul is proclaiming is that right-standing righteousness comes, as it did for Abraham, by believing in place of working.

Paul's line of exposition is already foreshadowed in the most provocative phrase of all: trust God who justifies the wicked. This description of God would certainly have come as a shock to his Jewish readers, and the devout God-worshippers as well, for it runs so directly counter to the basic principle of Jewish justice, one that was rooted in the Lord's own self-declaration: <<Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty>> (Exodus 23:7). Why does Paul risk losing Jewish and God-worshippers' sympathy with what appears at first as an unnecessary slighting of divine righteousness? The answer presumably lies once again in the degree to which Paul is angling his exposition to the typical Judaism of his own day. He would have been aware that, for the devout Jew, 'godliness' was more or less synonymous with covenant loyalty, and faithfulness to the obligations laid upon Israel by the covenant God of Israel; and ungodliness accordingly denoted disregard for the Mosaic Law and its prescriptions: <<Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night>> (Psalm 1:1-2), David continues: <<Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous>> (Psalm 1:5), and King Solomon states: <<The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him>> (Proverbs 15:8). But this is precisely why Abraham is such a crucial test case for Paul to demonstrate and prove, for God called Abraham and then justified him when, in terms of conventional Judaism, he was still ungodly and therefore wicked.

It is his faith and not his adherence to the covenant that was credited to Abraham as righteousness for: <<You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend>> (James 2:22-23).

⁶ David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

⁷ "Blessed are they
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

⁸ Blessed is the man
whose sin the Lord will never count against him."

Romans 4:6-8

Paul introduces David as a second example of righteousness by faith, citing Psalm 32:1-2 to demonstrate that David's righteousness, whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered, was not based on his works. In the parallelism of word and thought in these opening lines of the psalm, the non-reckoning or crediting of sin is the same as the forgiveness of acts of lawlessness and the covering of sins. This blessedness of forgiveness, of sins not reckoned by God, irrespective of the number or severity of them, Paul affirms with full confidence, that this is also the blessing of righteousness reckoned or credited by God without regard to works. Although the Jews, through the psalmists and the prophets, fully accepted God's gracious nature with regard to forgiveness, they would still have problems with Paul's dogged determination to state it was 'without works of the law'. But Paul does not use Psalm 32 self-evidently in a way to imply that God's grace is all sufficient. Paul's call on David as a witness does not advance his argument on its own, as David was circumcised and in possession of the law when he received God's grace in such abundance, but it does help to cement the idea of reckoning or crediting righteousness despite the level of sin in a person's life. But the claim 'apart from works' has still yet to be established; at least to the satisfaction of Paul's readers.

Had Abraham been perfect in his obedience then he could still not make God his debtor, as Paul will later assert: <<“Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?” >> (Romans 11:35), for it is given by grace: <<From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another>> (John 1:16).

Before Abraham came to faith he was a Chaldean idolater, see Joshua 24:2 (v.5), no room is left for despair, although God will not forgive the impenitent guilty, yet through Christ he justifies the ungodly. As an example of this, Paul quoted Psalm 32:1-2 as noted earlier, which illustrates the nature of forgiveness, and the blessedness of it. For you cannot be blessed without God’s forgiveness, which is his gracious mercy: <<For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more>> (Hebrews 8:12).

III.b.ii Romans 4:9-17 - Abraham the father of both uncircumcised and circumcised

God’s reckoning or giving credit in favour of man is always a matter of his generous grace and favour; man is never able to put God in his debt, as recently noted. Therefore, Paul now shifts to the other key word in his example of Abraham and that is that he believed God (v.3). Paul is now swinging the argument back to Abraham’s faith and the key text of Genesis 15:6.

In Antioch: <<Some men came down from Judæa to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question>> (Acts 15:1-2), and in the Galatian churches: <<Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love>> (Galatians 5:2-6), some Jewish Christians had insisted that Gentiles could not be saved unless they also committed to the Jewish rite of circumcision, i.e. they had to become Jews before they could become Christians. Paul fiercely opposed this and won his argument at the Jerusalem Council that led to the Jerusalem church writing to Antioch and other Gentile churches that this was not the case: <<Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorisation and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul — men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell>> Acts 15:22-29.

Paul uses the same argument here, which is the last time he mentions circumcision in Romans, and actually demonstrates that Abraham entered the covenant a long time before he was circumcised, along with Ishmael and his own household. Circumcision was a sign of covenant sealing, not an initial term for membership of the covenant, although it would later become so. Thus Paul successfully argues that the covenant promises agreed between God and Abraham were on the basis of faith and not circumcision. It therefore follows that membership of Abraham’s family is equally by faith, and for Gentiles to not have to be part of ethnic Israel to be accepted either.

What is equally clear is that Abraham remains the father of the circumcised as well, but with the caveat it is only to those Jews who have faith in Christ Jesus.

The church must be clear that it does not exclude anybody from the family of Abraham on any grounds providing they accept the Gospel that Jesus is Lord, that he died for our redemption and was raised to life again by the power of God's Holy Spirit. He now lives on, with God in heaven, as the mediator for all those who wish to come into relationship with God the Father.

God's promise of the Land of Canaan as an inheritance for those who believe in him is expanded in v.13 to encompass all nations, i.e. the whole world, and not just a small strip of land, albeit a very fruitful one at the time it was given. Thus Israel's claim to just the region called the Promised Land is superseded, something quite outlandish to Jewish thinking at the time, and even so today, where the Jewish mindset, and even that of some Christians, are so focused on restoring the land of Israel to God that they fail to see their mission field is literally the whole world, as it has all been given to the family of Abraham, i.e. all believers.

Paul doesn't so much press the idea that all that was promised to Abraham was done apart from the law as he does in Galatians Chapter Three, but tends more toward saying that if you introduce the law into the equation of vv.13-15 then no one will inherit anything! Paul will increasingly unpack the issues surrounding the law as the letter unfolds.

There needs to be room for all the Gentiles to come into the family without the law, for the law discovers sin but faith in Jesus covers those genuinely repented sins, so that we can only really exist in God's presence through the blood of Christ and with no law in sight. Law makes us into the children of wrath: <<All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath>> (Ephesians 2:3), and compare this with Paul's statement about the Jews in Romans 11:15 <<For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?>>, and the way the Gentiles were right outside the covenant anyway: <<remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world>> (Ephesians 2:12), brings into focus what Paul is bringing together, that Jew and Gentile are and always have been in the same boat, if perhaps on different decks, but that there is sufficient room in the lifeboat for them all.

Jewish conversion means life from the dead; Gentile conversion means new life, fresh creation.

Gentile Christians don't make much of being children of Abraham, whereas Jews and Muslims do. NT Wright says it is time to get this issue out of the cupboard, dust it off and put it to good use once again. It was such a key theme in the early church.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!

Romans 4:9-10

Abraham was righteous before God, as we read in Genesis 15:6, before he was circumcised, and therefore circumcision is unnecessary in order to belong to God. Here, Paul clearly states that Abraham had faith and received God's promises, both before the law was given several generations later, and also before he was circumcised. Therefore, his faith was counted to him as righteousness before he was circumcised. The promises were imputed in Genesis 15:7 <<He also said to him, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it">>, and his circumcision was reported in Genesis Chapter Seventeen, some 14 or so years later.

For the devout Jew, proud of his national and religious distinctiveness, circumcision was the work of covenant loyalty: <<Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God>> (Romans 2:25-29). It was precisely for this reason that its discontinuation in the Gentile mission was a cause of such controversy within first-generation Christianity. And it was the command to Abraham above all which showed circumcision to be a divinely sanctioned mark of the covenant people for all time, an everlasting covenant: <<Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant">> (Genesis 17:9-14).

But Abraham's faithfulness did not begin at Genesis Chapter 17; it began much earlier, arguably in his response to God's call from Haran: <<The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there>> (Genesis 12:1-5).

By narrowing the issue to circumcision as such, Paul takes up a strong position and one difficult to contest. For the evidence of scripture is that Abraham was reckoned righteous, accepted in covenant relationship by God, prior to his being circumcised and without reference to circumcision. That one fact is sufficient to establish the point that God's righteousness was not dependent upon works of the law, and on any cultic observance, in the case of Abraham. And if Abraham is the paradigm for God's dealings with humankind, including his covenant dealings with the seed of Abraham, that also means that God's acceptance in general is or at least can be 'apart from works'.

¹¹ 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.

Romans 4:11

Circumcision was the sign and seal of Abraham's righteousness that belonged to him by faith. In other words, circumcision documented and ratified the righteousness by faith that Abraham enjoyed before his circumcision.

The Jews would call circumcision a 'sign of the covenant' (Genesis 17:11), and 'seal' would almost inevitably evoke the correlative idea of a formal agreement: <<"In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it">> (Nehemiah 9:38), <<Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring – for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked">> (Esther 8:8), <<Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame>> (Song 8:6), and: <<But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge>> (Daniel 12:4).

Paul was still a Jew and had no intention of trying to undermine the importance of circumcision as ratification of the covenant that was between Israel and God. It was still as important to Paul, in his Jewishness but not his Christianity, as it was for any other Jew. However, what Paul was trying to establish was that Abraham's righteousness was not dependent on his circumcision. Paul can readily acknowledge that positive link between circumcision and covenant, since circumcision manifestly at this point only has a secondary role and is not integral to Abraham's already established righteousness, and since he also believes that in the eschatological fulfilment of the covenant, the palpable impact of the Spirit is just as clear a mark of divine ownership as ever circumcision was: <<A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God>> (Romans 2:28-29), <<set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come>> (2 Corinthians 1:22), and: <<For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh>> (Philippians 3:3).

This also means that Abraham's faith was the crucial element in the covenant with Abraham as a whole, with circumcision functioning as a post hoc ratification. But this also means that the terms of the covenant promise are determined by faith, not by circumcision, and that the heritage of the covenant is likewise dependent on the same faith and not restricted solely to the circumcised.

¹² 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.

Romans 4:12

Paul's argument might negate some of the pride that the Jews take in their circumcision as if they had a monopoly on happiness in God, and it would help ease the fears of the uncircumcised Gentiles who want to share in the promises of God. Paul gives two reasons why Abraham was justified by faith in uncircumcision:

1. The circumcision was a seal of the righteousness of faith. Sealing supposes a previous agreement or contract, which is then ratified by a ceremony. Circumcision was an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace. It was a bloody ordinance that was abolished with the shedding of Jesus' blood, although the practice continues.
2. That he might be the father of all those that believe. It is not that there were not others before Abraham that were righteous in God's eyes, e.g. Enoch and Noah, but that he was a father-figure and precedent of justification by faith so that liberties, privileges, honours and estates can be passed on from father to son.

Zacchæus was reckoned a son of Abraham by his faith in Jesus not his circumcision: <<Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham">> (Luke 19:9).

Since Abraham was uncircumcised when he came to faith, it can never be a bar to others: <<Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all>> (Colossians 3:11), and: <<For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love>> (Galatians 5:6).

Paul asserts that Abraham's fatherhood is not restricted to the circumcised but, on the contrary, because faith is the crucial factor, all those who believe as he did are his children whether circumcised or not. He is also the father of the circumcised, but they enter into their full sonship only when they exercise faith as Abraham did, in a way which shows it to be independent of circumcision and not any cultic works. And uncircumcised Gentiles who believe can properly call Abraham 'our father' too. This is the way God had always intended it to be; otherwise he would not have reckoned Abraham righteous apart from circumcision.

¹³ It was not through 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.

Romans 4:13

The promise given to Abraham embraces not only the land of Canaan but also the whole world. The final reward, the inheritance, which is another term for final salvation that will be given to Abraham and all believers is the new world to come: <<For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them>> (Hebrews 11:10-16). See also Revelation Chapters 21-22.

Paul now reformulates his exposition of Abraham's faith and moves it on to a second state by focusing on the word 'promise'. For it was the promise of numerable descendants: <<He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be">> (Genesis 15:5). It was Abraham's trust in this promise of God that credited Abraham with righteousness, for the promise was not given through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

The degree to which Paul's argument is determined by the current self-understanding of his own people is clearly indicated by his careful wording which picks up four key elements in that self-understanding:

1. The covenant promise to Abraham and his seed.
2. The inheritance of the land as its central element.
3. The conviction that the beneficiaries of this promise are coterminous with the people of the law.
4. The importance of covenant righteousness.

Paul picks up these emphases in order to redefine them.

Jewish teaching often spoke of Abraham's seed inheriting the earth. It is not by accident therefore that Paul picks up on the more grandiose form of the promise; the promise to Abraham or his seed that he should inherit the world. For the promise thus interpreted was fundamental to Israel's self-consciousness as God's covenant people: it was for this reason why God had chosen them in the first place from among all the other nations of the earth, the justification for holding themselves distinct from the other nations, and the comforting hope that made their current national humiliation endurable. What astounded his Jewish readers was that Paul asserted the same point he made earlier: this promise was established before the law was given and therefore the promise is outside of the law: <<What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise>> (Galatians 3:17).

¹⁴ For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless,

Romans 4:14

Paul now rephrases the point with added emphasis: if those who live by law are heirs, then Abraham's faith has been made an empty cipher and the promise given to Abraham rendered ineffective, a concept that would not sit well with the Jews. It was the assumption of total integration between covenant and promise, Jewish nation and the law, which Paul has been forced to question by his own experience of God's grace; this closely woven pattern of Jewish faith, which he now unpicks with the sharp point of Genesis 15:6. The traditional Jewish understanding of the covenant promise cannot be correct, because it perverts the clear sense of Genesis 15:6; making Abraham's faith empty and ineffective, which God had credited to him as righteousness; and surely God is not wrong in doing so! It would therefore render the promise to Abraham null and void because it denies that it was given to Abraham and accepted by Abraham there and then as a binding commitment, which God had taken upon himself: <<For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise>> (Galatians 3:18).

If the inheritance is gained by observing the law, then righteousness is no longer by faith but by works. Faith and works are fundamentally opposed, for faith means trusting in or relying on a promise of God's work, and not depending in any way on human performance.

¹⁵ because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

Romans 4:15

Paul explains why one cannot be an heir through the law: human beings cannot keep the law, and they therefore face God's wrath. Paul uses the word transgression technically, so that it is distinguished from sin. Transgression is defined as the violation of a revealed command, which means that the Jews, who had the written law, had even greater responsibility for their sin and as great a need to be saved from God's wrath and justified by faith. Paul elsewhere argues that sin also exists where no written law specifies the malfeasance: <<All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law>> (Romans 2:12); see also comments made on Romans 5:13. The primary function of the law is to condemn, not to serve as a medium of the promise. That role, Paul argues, is filled by faith.

¹⁶ 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.

Romans 4:16

Therefore points to the special relationship between faith and grace. Faith means trusting in another, not in one's own efforts. Faith therefore corresponds exactly to grace, which involves trusting God's gift of unmerited favour.

Those who are of the law refers to the Jewish believer in Christ.

That the promise was given before the law is also significant and supports the annulment of the ceremonial law due to the Cross. The promise was given to Abraham many generations before the law was given to Moses: <<What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise>> (Galatians 3:17-18).

That is why God gave the promise to Abraham in the way he did. The way in which God gave the promise to Abraham determines how the promise itself is to be understood and who its heirs are. The promise to Abraham, without any reference to any act of covenant loyalty, when he was not yet a father, biologically or spiritually, was an act of complete grace and generosity, so that the promise and its beneficiaries might be expressions of the same grace. Consequently, the issue of who belongs to Abraham's descendants, heirs of the promise, is not dependent on whether they perform acts, which demonstrate covenant loyalty, and is not dependent on their being members of the people of the law. To restrict the promise to the Jews would be to deny the terms of its original acceptance and to diminish the promise itself. God's intention, as attested by Genesis 15:6, was that the promise of grace through faith might embrace all who are willing to accept that same grace, whether Jews or not; just as Abraham did. Only so can the promise that Abraham would be 'the father of many nations' actually be fulfilled.

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.

Romans 4:17

Many nations. Abraham's universal fatherhood is confirmed by: <<No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations>> (Genesis 17:5).

Abraham was promised to be the father of many nations and so he was, both physically and now, through Christ, spiritually. He had no possession of his own and yet through the seed of promise, the whole world is now owned by his spiritual family, or stewarded at least on behalf of God: <<The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ>> (Galatians 3:16). Thus the promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 is fulfilled: <<I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you>>.

God in whom he believed. Paul now moves into the third key point of his exposition, that Abraham believed God. The definition of Abraham's faith, which is now to be developed has already been presupposed in the sharpness of the distinction between law and faith which motivated vv.13-16.

God who gives life. This is a key phrase for Paul and for all Jews. Their creator God, who can bring life forth from nothing, who sustains all life and who will determine how things are to be from an eschatological perspective, is at the centre of life for any Jew. It was the God they placed all hope in and allowed them to endure the hard times they were now suffering as a

nation: <<Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up>> (Psalm 71:20), and: <<Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead>> (2 Corinthians 1:9).

Calls things that are not as though they were underscores the doctrine of creation ex nihilo or out of nothing. Before God created the universe: <<In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth>> (Genesis 1:1), only the Godhead existed, nothing else. Paul uses this general truth to affirm the great power of the God whom Abraham trusted: Abraham believed in a God who could raise the dead and summon into existence what did not exist, e.g. new life in Sarah's womb. Going further into God's creative power we read also: <<And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light>> (Genesis 1:3), and: <<For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ>> (2 Corinthians 4:6). The justification and salvation of sinners, and the calling of Gentiles, were a gracious calling of things that are not as though they were. It is by faith in God that we become accepted of him and conformable to him. Just as all things were created out of nothing and had no say in their creation, for how could they? So too, the dead cannot negotiate the terms of their resurrection. God will apply the same principles to his acts of salvation and resurrection of the dead, as he did to his original creation: it will be an act of free grace with the recipient adding nothing to the process, other than perhaps total obedience to God through Jesus during their lifetime here on earth.

Where there is no law there is no transgression imputes that where there is law there is transgression and so the law brings the wrath of God on those who fail to keep the whole law, which everyone but Christ failed to do.

The reasons why the promise was given by faith are:

1. That it might be given by grace and not by law or debt: <<For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God>> (Ephesians 2:8).
2. That the promise might be certain. It is not by works which would depend on the efforts of men, and they would fail, making the promise uncertain. But by making the promise through continual faith in Jesus makes it a certain and well-ordered covenant: <<Is not my house right with God? Has he not made with me an everlasting covenant, arranged and secured in every part? Will he not bring to fruition my salvation and grant me my every desire?>> (2 Samuel 23:5).
3. That it might be given to all the seed. If it had been by the law then it would have been limited to the Jews only as they were the recipients of the law and the keepers of God's word: <<the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises>> (Romans 9:4). But by making the promise by faith opens it up to the spiritual as well as the biological seed of Abraham. In this way God has made it as extensive as it can be, i.e. it is available to all true believers in the world. Therefore God made Abraham the father of all nations: <<No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations>> (Genesis 17:5). Abram means the high father; Abraham means the high father of the multitude. The Jews claim this makes him the father of the proselytes, which is again too limiting. The 12th Century Jewish rabbi and philosopher Maimonides states: 'Behold, he is the father of all the world, which are gathered under the wings of the Divine Majesty'.

What is at issue here is not whether Gentiles can be included among Abraham's descendants, along with the Jews who are there as of right, but how anyone, Jew as well as Gentile, may come to be counted as a true spiritual descendant of Abraham. Paul's answer

rings with increasing strength as his argument proceeds; by faith, apart from works of the law.

III.b.iii Romans 4:18-25 - Abraham's faith and ours

From the outside Abraham's hope of having a child with Sarah in their old age about 4,000 years ago borders on stupidity. There was a case in Italy recently when a woman in her mid-60's had IVF to produce a child, but that was not even a remote possibility in Abraham's day. But we only need to factor in the Creator God, whose knowledge and abilities are infinite, so that to even suggest the most intelligent human would compare as a pre-school child of moderate intelligence when compared to God would be so far off the mark, clearly overstating the claim; for God's intelligence, knowledge and capabilities far out ranks that or any other analogy. And we now know that Sarah did bear Abraham the child Isaac a year or so later after the promise was given. In fact, after Sarah's death twenty seven or so years later: <<Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her>> (Genesis 23:1-2). Abraham then took another wife some years later and had a further six children by her: <<Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah>> (Genesis 25:1-2), in his mid-100's no less! That is the power of God, but more importantly here is that God kept his promise and Abraham retained his faith always knowing that God would. It should be noted that, although they were Abraham's biological heirs along with Ishmael and Isaac, only the latter bore the seed of promise.

¹⁸ 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." ¹⁹ 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.

Romans 4:18-19

Against all hope is when all human reasoning tells us it cannot be yet our faith in God knows that it will be as he has promised. Hope in God is not the weak meaning of the word hope because it is based on God's promise.

The strength of Paul's case is that the key text relating to Abraham is such a good illustration of the relationship between the creature and his creator; and between the recipient of God's grace and covenant promise, and its giver. For Abraham knew that the fulfilment of the promise depended on no life or power that was his own; there was no ground of hope in himself or in his human condition. All he had to cling to was the promise: <<So shall your offspring be>> (Genesis 15:5b). Here Paul insists in effect Genesis 15:6 must be interpreted in relation to its immediate context. The promise God gave at that point was wholly without condition. It is that promise which Abraham believed. It was that belief which God acknowledged in declaring Abraham righteous. Indeed he makes a point of referring his readers back from the promise in its Genesis Chapter 17 form to the prior version of Genesis 15:5. The implication is that the requirements attached to the later version (Genesis Chapter 17), as indeed the testing of Genesis Chapter 22, the account of testing Abraham's faith by his offering of Isaac as a sacrifice to God, need not and should not be drawn in to interpret Genesis 15:5-6, when that passage is sufficiently clear and coherent in itself. Rather, it is Genesis 15:5-6, a giving and receiving complete in itself, which should determine the significance given to the later version of the promise and to these subsequent events. Paul thus makes it clear beyond dispute that the keystone of his whole argument is not Genesis 15:6 on its own, but the fact that Genesis 15:6 is the response to the promise of Genesis 15:5; without that connection the argument would collapse.

Abraham squarely faced the fact that he and Sarah were too old to have children. Even though his and Sarah's bodies were considered as dead from the perspective of natural reproduction, their faith kept alive the hope of the promise: <<By faith Abraham, even though he was past age — and Sarah herself was barren — was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore>> (Hebrews 11:11-12). Likewise, the death and resurrection of Jesus keeps the spiritually dead alive in Christ, as Paul confirms elsewhere: <<As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins>> (Ephesians 2:1), <<and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms>> (Ephesians 1:19-20).

The importance of Genesis 15:5-6 in controlling the interpretation of what followed becomes even clearer when we realise that the documentation of Abraham's faith is actually drawn from Genesis Chapter 17. In the light of Genesis 15:5-6 the significance of Genesis Chapter 17 lies not so much in vv.9-14, the requirement of circumcision, as in the specific promise that Sarah would have a son: <<God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her">> (Genesis 17:15-16). Paul deliberately picks up Abraham's recognition of the hopelessness of his human condition: <<Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?">> (Genesis 17:17), and sets his complete powerlessness in sharpest contrast to the divine omnipotence. Such strength as Abraham had lay not in his body or in Sarah's; it lay only in his faith. Abraham himself was fully aware of this. He took full account of the deadness of his own body, and of the deadness of Sarah's womb, the double evocation of the description of God's creative power in v.17, i.e. 'God who gives life', is quite deliberate. He knew that only the life-giver could fulfil his own promise, and then only by the exercise of his own power. The strength of his faith was precisely his recognition that there was nothing in him which could make the fulfilment of the promise possible, his recognition, that is to say, that he had to rely wholly and solely on God, who alone can give life to that which is dead, who alone can make something out of nothing.

²⁰ Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

Romans 4:20-21

Yet he did not waver. Although Abraham and Sarah did have a moment of doubt, seen perhaps as a weakness in faith, that was also seen in the apostles times, e.g. <<He said to his disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?">> (Mark 4:40), and thus Sarah gave Abraham her maid Hagar, by whom he fathered Ishmael: <<So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne>> (Genesis 16:15), yet their faith prevailed and it was more in admiration of God's power than a spirit of disbelief or distrust that: <<Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?">> (Genesis 17:17). Abraham did not doubt the promise of God in unbelief but became strong, or was strengthened by God, in his faith. All he had to cling on to was the promise given to him by God, but that was enough, for it was the promise of the Creator God. The strength of Abraham's faith was precisely that it was unsupported by anything else; it was not something which Abraham could do. It was trust, simple trust, nothing but trust; something for us all to cling to!

Abraham's faith actually increased as the time of waiting went on: but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God. He continued trusting that God could be relied on to do what he had promised, and as Abraham trusted God, he honoured and glorified him all the more. Paul had made the condemnation in Romans 1:21 <<For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened>>, but here Abraham does what is right, and the only thing he could do in the circumstances, he gave glory to the Creator. The echo here of Romans Chapter One is again deliberate. Thereby Paul confirms his transformation of Abraham from being the pattern of the devout Jew to being the pattern of man just as he was created to be; a universalising of Abraham, which further undermines Israel's otherwise exclusive claim to him as their father. Abraham is now clearly to be seen as the model of the proper creature, a man of faith who holds his whole life in total dependence on the Life-giver, a role model for all who thus would believe in Jesus as the Christ of God; Gentile as well as Jew.

²² This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness."

Romans 4:22

Despite the momentary lapse many years before the birth of Isaac, Abraham's faith remained strong and intact, which brings glory to God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. To lack faith and belief in God is to call him a liar: <<Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar>> (1 John 5:10b), but: <<The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful>> (John 3:33). Abraham's faith gave God the glory of his wisdom, power, holiness, goodness and, above all, his faithfulness.

As we saw in the quote of Jesus in Mark 4:40 (vv.20-21), Jesus would often rebuke his disciples for their lack of faith, but he would also commend those who showed their trusting faith in God: <<When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith">> (Matthew 8:10), and: <<He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering">> (Mark 5:34). Therefore, God gives honour to great faith, just as great faith gives honour to God.

Paul returns to the point at which he started: Abraham's righteousness was credited to him purely through his faith in a promise of God, given apart from law, without the requirement of or even reference to circumcision, and with no reference to ethnicity. It is shown to be a complete match between divine ability and human inability; as indeed the complete mismatch between a wholly generous and gracious promise, and a confidence based on law and race, which emerges so clearly for Paul from his text.

²³ The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, ²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness — for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.

Romans 4:23-24

Righteousness was not credited to Abraham for Abraham's prerogative, nor was it recorded for the purposes of an historical account, but Paul states it was written for our benefit: <<These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come>> (1 Corinthians 10:11), and: <<For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope>> (Romans 15:4). For God's word is true yesterday, today and forever.

The Greek used for will credit (righteousness) is mellie logizesthai, which means 'it shall be imputed', which is in the future and not the past tense of the verb, showing that God will make

us righteous in the fullness of time, providing we turn to him through Jesus and remain in obedience to his call.

Paul applies Genesis 15:6 to his readers: but also for us. Paul sees that, in God's providential plan, scriptures as far back as Genesis were written also for the benefit of Christians in the new covenant age.

Abraham's faith is the archetype of Christian belief in relation to Jesus; the parallel can be drawn and the application made since the same two key elements are present in both: belief in God, and in the Creator God, as the one who is able to raise Jesus and us from the dead. Paul deliberately makes the link between God's creation of life from the deadness of Abraham's body and Sarah's womb (v.19), and God's raising of Jesus from the dead. What Paul's Gospel calls for is faith in that same God, belief in the exercise of that same life-giving power; the same faith, the same belief.

The logic is clear: since the exercise of divine power is of the same order in both cases, so too the faith it evokes should have the same character in both cases; the unconditional act of God's life-giving power is met only by a faith which relies on nothing other than that life-giving power.

²⁵ He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Romans 4:25

The last verse of this chapter anticipates something Paul is going to do throughout Chapters 5-8. He rounds off every stage of the argument in this long section with a reference to Jesus. This isn't a mere pious gesture, smuggling in a mention of Jesus in case we thought he'd forgotten about him. It shows, rather, what the whole argument is all about. It brings us back home to the source and power of Paul's thought. In this case, it draws together what has been underneath the whole of the previous four chapters. Jesus was handed over because of our trespasses; in other words, the massive human evil which has disfigured the world came together and, in the Cross, was dealt with as it deserved, in judicial condemnation.

Paul has cleverly shaped the two clauses to match the context of his previous argument, and indeed to provide a bridge between the two sections of his argument: the unusual link between justification and Jesus' resurrection is obviously determined by the earlier description of Abraham's justifying faith in God, who makes the dead alive (v.17), just as the link between death and sins, transgressions in many translations, (which Paul usually uses to show breeches of the law, whereas sin can occur against God even where there is no law), evidently foreshadows the train of thought in Romans 5:15-20 <<But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more>>.

Jesus being delivered over is thoroughly rooted in the earliest Christians' memory and interpretation of Jesus' passion, as Paul himself is well aware: <<He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us

all things?>> (Romans 8:32), and: <<For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread>> (1 Corinthians 11:23); so it must have become quickly established and widely used throughout the churches. Here, in particular, it is clear that in both the Aramaic and the Septuagint rendering of Isaiah Chapter 53, Christians would link the prophecy with Jesus. How far we can generalise from this occurrence to the whole delivered over motif is much less clear, and tradition-historical analysis of: <<It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfilment>> (Luke 22:37), or: <<For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many>> (Mark 10:45), and: <<"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them>> (Mark 14:24), does not permit a confident conclusion that the explicit use of Isaiah Chapter 53 goes back to Jesus. However, here in v.25 there is evidence enough that Isaiah Chapter 53 did provide the first generation Christians with an important scriptural means of understanding the death of Jesus, and the fact that the reference is a formulaic allusion, rather than a carefully argued scriptural proof, such as Paul has just provided for Genesis 15:6, strongly suggests that the use of Isaiah Chapter 53 was widespread in earliest Christian apologetic and exercised a major influence on earliest Christian theology and thought. See the addendum to Chapter 4 for an overview of Isaiah Chapter 53.

Both the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are necessary for forgiveness of sins and justification.

Raised to life for our justification. When God the Father raised His Son, Jesus Christ, from the dead, it was a demonstration that he accepted Christ's suffering and death as full payment for sin, and that the Father's favour, no longer his wrath against sinful mankind, was then fully and completely directed toward Christ, and through Christ towards those who believe. Since Paul sees Christians as united with Christ in his death and resurrection: <<For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God>> (Romans 6:6-11), <<And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus>> (Ephesians 2:6), <<having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead>> (Colossians 2:12), and: <<Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God>> (Colossians 3:1), God's approval of Christ at the resurrection results in God's approval also of all who are united to Christ, and in this way results in their justification.

The condition for us of this privilege is our belief in God through His Son Jesus, i.e. having true and lasting faith. The proper object of this believing is divine revelation. The revelation to Abraham was that concerning a Christ to come; the revelation to us is a Christ already come, and who is to come again in final judgement according to God the Father's will. The difference in these revelations does not alter the case in question. Abraham was to believe that God had the power of raising up Isaac from the dead womb of Sarah; we are required to believe and accept that God has that same power, exerted to a higher instance, i.e. the resurrection of Jesus, who is the Christ of God, from the dead. This was witnessed by several hundred disciples and attested to through the NT scriptures, or in Paul's time, by men like him called to tell the Good News of Jesus.

The raising to life faith or calling of Abraham was a metaphor: <<By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise>> (Hebrews 11:9), the raising of Jesus was for real. We are to believe in that same life giving power and his grace in raising Jesus

from the dead; for his death and resurrection are the hinges on which the door to salvation turns.

Jesus was:

1. Delivered for our offences against God. He died as atonement for our sins, to expiate our guilt, and satisfy God's wrath.
2. Raised for our justification. Jesus died and became a prisoner of death in the tomb, in order to pay the debt of us all, heaped up by our continuous sin against God. On the third day, God sent an angel to roll away the stone, not to release Jesus from the tomb, for the power of the Holy Spirit had already released Jesus from the pain of death, but to allow us to see inside the tomb so we could have proof of the resurrection, and of the majestic power of God in achieving this.

The two parts of the formula are obviously two sides of the same theological assertion. Paul of course does not intend his readers to distinguish between Jesus' death and his resurrection as effecting quite separate results. The distinction here is purely rhetorical. At the same time, it was most natural to link human transgressions with Jesus' betrayal and death, especially since sacrificial categories were so much part and parcel of the Jewish understanding of God's way of dealing with sin. Having succeeded in separating Abraham's faith so clearly from cultic works, Paul is in no way embarrassed by the interpretation of Jesus' death with the framework of the major cultic work of sacrifice, as was evident in Romans Chapter 3; even the imagery here is mediated through the allusion to Isaiah Chapter 53. And the link between justification and Jesus' resurrection was not merely prompted by the preceding exposition, but also further underscores its point, that the justifying grace of God is all of one piece with his creative, life-giving power. Abraham's trust would have been wholly vain if, in the event, God had not given him and Sarah seed after all. Just so, Christian faith would be vain unless God actually raised Jesus from the bondage of death. Had Jesus' death not been followed by his resurrection, any understanding of his death as sacrifice would only have become part of Israel's martyr theology, without power of itself to provide the eschatological breakthrough which his resurrection demonstrated. Jesus resurrection is proof positive that the same life-giving power, which wrought for Abraham and Sarah, is still at work in this new stage of God's dealing with humankind, and is at work in eschatological strength. Faith knows it is accepted precisely because its acceptance is the same effective power which raised Jesus, and which will also give life to these mortal bodies of ours in final reckoning: <<And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you>> (Romans 8:11).

An interesting comparison from Romans

<u>Ch 1</u>	<u>Point</u>	<u>Ch 4</u>	<u>Point</u>
v.20, v.25	Humans ignored God.	v.17	Abraham believed God as Creator and life giver.
v.20	Humans knew of God's power but did not worship him.	v.21	Abraham recognised God's power and trusted him to use it.
v.21	Humans did not give God the glory he deserved and desired.	v.20	Abraham did give God all the glory.
v.24	Humans dishonoured their own bodies by worshipping beings that were not divine, i.e. carved idols.	vv. 18-20	Abraham, through worshipping the God who gives new life, found that his own body regained its power even though he was long past the natural age for fathering children.

<u>The result in each case is telling:</u>			
<u>Ch 1</u>	<u>Point</u>	<u>Ch 4</u>	<u>Point</u>
vv. 26-27	Humans dishonour their bodies by females and males turning away from one another into same-sex relationships.	v.19	Abraham and Sarah, through their trust in God's promises, are given the power to conceive a child.
God's command to humankind was to be fruitful and multiply. This can only be achieved through heterosexual relationships and that through the covenant of marriage if God's approval is fully desired.			

Abraham and the promise of God brought hope to Israel, but it was just a sign pointing toward Jesus, whose death and resurrection brings hope to a fallen world!

The first great section of Romans ends with Paul saying, in effect: the prophetic promises have come true; Abraham's faith is at last vindicated; the law has been fulfilled; human idolatry, sin and death have been decisively challenged; God has sent his own son as the Christ, Israel's faithful representative, to do for Israel and the world what they could not do for themselves; those who believe in the Gospel, in God's good news about His Son, are assured that they are the people of the new covenant, the single worldwide family promised to Abraham.

Isaiah Chapter 53

Addendum to Romans Chapter 4

This section is not intended to be a complete study of this beautiful scripture, which prophesies the suffering of the Jewish Messiah, later fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. It is believed this scripture was used extensively by the early church to help them to understand why Messiah had to suffer and die, but would be raised to life again.

Isaiah 53:1-3 - The servant lived in rejection

¹ Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

Isaiah 53:1

Our refers to the believing remnant of Israel and is quoted: <<Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfil the word of Isaiah the prophet: "Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" >> (John 12:37-38), and: <<But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" >> (Romans 10:16).

The arm of the Lord is the power of God in action: <<See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him>> (Isaiah 40:10), <<Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in days gone by, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through?>> (Isaiah 51:9), and: <<The Lord has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: "Never again will I give your grain as food for your enemies, and never again will foreigners drink the new wine for which you have toiled">> (Isaiah 62:8).

² He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

Isaiah 53:2

Unbelief in the servant was natural because he was an obscure, outwardly unimpressive person in a failed culture. His generation was blind. And yet we read scriptures that tell us Jesus had something about him that people could clearly detect: <<As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphæus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him>> (Mark 2:14).

³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Isaiah 53:3

Rejection of the servant reveals how misguided the human mind is: <<This is what the Lord says – the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel – to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: "Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the Lord, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you">> (Isaiah 49:7), and: <<He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him>> (John 1:10-11).

A man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Jesus experienced sorrow and grief of various sorts throughout his whole life. Familiar with could be rendered knowing. Also see comments on v.11.

Isaiah 53:4-6 - The servant bore the sins of other people; he was himself innocent.

This section is the heart of the passage.

⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

Isaiah 53:4

Surely introduces the truth about the servant's sufferings.

Acting as his people's substitute, with no support or understanding from them, the servant took upon himself the bitter consequences of their sin: our infirmities, our sorrows: <<When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him. When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" >> (Matthew 8:14-17). The sufferings of the servant would show the consequences that sin brings to fallen humanity, though he himself would not sin (v.9).

Smitten by God, and afflicted. God would be the ultimate source of the sufferings of this faithful servant.

⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53:5

But contrasts with our incomprehension in v.4b. The servant's anguish was our fault, not his own.

Our transgressions; our iniquities. His sufferings went to the root of all human woe: <<This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" >> (Matthew 8:17), in comments made on v.4, and: <<He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed>> (1 Peter 2:24).

Pierced; crushed; punishment; wounds. Isaiah emphasises how severely God punished the rejected servant for the sins of mankind and to appease his wrath against them.

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:6

We all; each of us. The servant, who alone was sinless and perfectly obedient to God's will and purpose, was uniquely qualified to bear the sins of all others, and all people subsequently contributed to his pain.

Like sheep we are stupid and helpless; totally dependent on our shepherd: <<I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me — just as the Father knows me and I know the Father — and I lay down my life for the sheep>> (John 10:14-15).

The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Consider the scapegoat: <<He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert>> (Leviticus 16:21-22), <<God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God>> (2 Corinthians 5:21), and the lost sheep: <<For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls>> (1 Peter 2:25).

Isaiah 53:7-9 - The servant dies in innocence.

⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

Isaiah 53:7

Like a lamb he was totally innocent, submissive, not complaining: <<The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”>> (John 1:29), <<When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”>> (John 1:36), <<The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth”>> (Acts 8:32-33), and: <<“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly>> (1 Peter 2:22-23).

⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

Isaiah 53:8

By oppression and judgment, that is, oppressive judgment. The servant was wrongly condemned.

He was cut off from the land. Those who condemned Jesus did not understand what they were doing: <<Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”>> (Luke 23:34a), <<You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see. “Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer”>> (Acts 3:14-18), and: <<None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory>> (1 Corinthians 2:8).

⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Isaiah 53:9

He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich. The numerous parallels between the description of the servant in this verse and the death of Jesus have led Christians through the ages to see this as fulfilled by the events surrounding Jesus' death.

Although the servant was condemned as a criminal, and should have been buried with the wicked, he was in fact buried in an expensive garden tomb belonging to a rich man. Likewise, the servant is presented as someone who was completely innocent, both in deed, i.e. he had done no violence, and in word, i.e. nor was there deceit in his mouth. The servant is thus described as a person of total moral purity, the true substitute for sinners (see v.7). Matthew 27:57-60 provides the fulfilment of this prophecy: <<As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away>>.

Isaiah 53:10-12 - The servant was crushed but victorious.

¹⁰ Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

Isaiah 53:10

The Lord's will. There was a divine purpose for the oppression of the servant: <<Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?>> (Luke 24:26), <<This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross>> (Acts 2:23), and: <<Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen>> (Acts 4:27-28).

His life is frequently translated as soul, so he suffered not just in his body but in his deepest inner self.

A guilt offering. The servant's sacrificial death compensated for human sin by setting sinners free from their guilt and shame before God: <<When a person commits a violation and sins unintentionally in regard to any of the Lord's holy things, he is to bring to the Lord as a penalty a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value in silver, according to the sanctuary shekel. It is a guilt offering. He must make restitution for what he has failed to do in regard to the holy things, add a fifth of the value to that and give it all to the priest, who will make atonement for him with the ram as a guilt offering, and he will be forgiven>> (Leviticus 5:15-16). The Septuagint translates 'offering for guilt' as 'offering for sin', which explains why Paul could say that Christ's death 'for our sins' was 'according to the scriptures' in 1 Corinthians 15:3.

He will see his offspring. Those who strayed like sheep (v.6) return as children.

Prolong his days. Death is not the servant's end; he will receive everlasting life. Although resurrection is not explicit here, it is the natural inference, hence in 1 Corinthians 15:4 Paul can again speak of the resurrection as being 'according to the scriptures'.

The will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. The servant becomes the executor of God's will and plan.

¹¹ After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

Isaiah 53:11

He will see the light of life and be satisfied. The outcome of the servant's sufferings is not regret but the satisfaction of obvious accomplishment.

By his knowledge, that is, his experiential knowledge of grief (v.3).

Justify many. His triumph, which does not secure the salvation of every individual without exception, i.e. universalism, spreads out beyond the remnant of Israel to: <<a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language>> (Revelation 7:9b), and: <<But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!>> (Romans 5:15). They will receive a new seal of righteousness through justification: <<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>> (Romans 4:11-12).

¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Isaiah 53:12

Therefore. The sacrificial death of the servant explains his subsequent glory and the eternal blessings of those who believe in him.

A portion; the spoils. The imagery is that of a conqueror sharing his victory with his allies.

Numbered with the transgressors. The servant is identified with rebels, confirmed by Jesus: <<It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfilment>> (Luke 22:37).

Made intercession. This is the servant's priestly work on behalf of those he represents, securing their acceptance before God.