The Righteousness of Faith  
Romans 3:21 – 4:25

In the first section of Romans (1:18-3:20) we learned that Israel failed to bless the world with God’s salvation. They were unfaithful to the evangelistic great commission that God placed upon them. And of course, it was impossible for them to do so, because King Sin ruled (5:12-21) over God’s creation and people before the coming of Christ. Nevertheless, God would still be faithful to His plan of blessing the world through Israel, which is foundational to this second section: 3:21 – 4:25. In the following outline we can see that Abraham’s righteousness of faith is the central point of 3:21 – 4:25.

**God’s Faithfulness of His Promises to Abraham**  3:21 – 4:25

a God’s Righteousness Manifested in Christ  3:21-26
b God’s Justified Jew/Gentile Family in Christ  3:27-31
c  The Righteousness of Faith by which Abraham is Our Father  4:1-8
b’ God’s Justified Family Includes the Uncircumcised  4:9-12
a’ God’s Promises Fulfilled in Christ  4:13-25

Let’s begin our study in the middle section, which will help explain the outer sections. I agree with those who say that Paul’s specific point in 4:1 is that Abraham is not our forefather according to the flesh. Abraham is our forefather according to the righteousness of faith. To understand the full meaning of this, we should realize that Paul packs a lot of meaning within a few words.

I. Abraham and The Righteousness of Faith

A. Justification Apart From “Flesh” & “Works”

Notice in v.1,2 Paul equates “flesh” and “works”. The terms “flesh” and “works” relate both to the old Law identified in circumcision and to the fruitful works of Abraham’s obedience. Paul’s point is that Abraham’s justification was not secured by the works of circumcision, nor by his personal good works that evidenced his faith. Thus, Abraham is not our forefather according to the “flesh” or “works” in any sense of those words. The chronology of Abraham’s life is very significant in capturing Paul’s full exegetical point in Genesis.

Paul quotes Gen.15:6 to say Abraham was justified by faith. This occurred several years after Abraham initially followed God in Gen.12. Paul is pointing out from the Genesis narrative that Abraham was justified by faith in spite of all his obedient deeds of good works. Ever since Genesis 12, Abraham was obedient to God and evidenced his faith through good works. Nevertheless, Genesis 15:6 declares it was still by faith that Abraham was justified.1 Good works was the fruit of Abraham’s faith that justified him in the sight of God.

So then, since the fruits of Abraham’s faith did not contribute to his justification, what about the rite of circumcision? Did it secure Abraham’s justified position? No indeed. Abraham was justified by faith in Genesis 15 – the faith he had since Genesis 12 – which was several years before he was circumcised in Genesis 17. Therefore in both

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1 Calvin makes this same exegetical point in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk.III, sec.14, xi.
respects – after his “works” of faith and before his circumcision in the “flesh” – Abraham was always and only justified by that living faith itself.

This justifying and living faith explained by Paul is the same point addressed in James 2:24, yet from a different angle. When James says that Abraham was “justified by works” he is identifying the type of faith that does justify. This type of faith is a living faith that works, and produces good works, in some form or fashion. Otherwise it is a dead faith that will not save (James 2:17). While James is dissecting the anatomy and content of true saving faith, Paul is affirming that saving faith is what justified Abraham.

B. God’s Promise To Abraham

Paul uses the Greek root-word “logizomai” to explain God’s viewpoint of Abraham having saving faith. The following words are used as a translation: concluded, regarded, reckoned, considered, accounted, or imputed. (same word used in 3:28, 4:3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,22, 23,24) This word is very significant to Paul considering he uses it repeatedly. As a simple definition of this word, we can say it means that God looked upon Abraham and made a declaration about him. Since Abraham had faith in the true God; God then regarded, reckoned, imputed, or considered Abraham as a justified person.

In addition to God’s justifying viewpoint of Abraham, Paul also says God promised that Abraham and his descendants would inherit the world. In summary fashion he says God’s promise was given through the “righteousness of faith” (v.14). As this study will demonstrate, this is a very pregnant term full of meaning. Notice, for now, that this is Paul’s central point in the entire passage of 3:21 - 4:25. In the central section (4:1-8) Paul has explained the details of Abraham’s righteousness of faith, which was not of the “flesh”, nor of “works”. Then in verse 13 Paul labels those details, summarizing that promissory narrative, with his phrase “the righteousness of faith”.

Now then, since the promise of a global inheritance was given to Abraham and his descendents through this righteousness of faith, what would this mean for Abraham and his children? What would be their continual hope and anticipation? What would they expect God to do, to bring His promise to fulfillment? Paul answers these questions when he introduces this entire passage in Romans 3:21.

II. The Righteousness of God and The Righteousness of Faith

A. The Breakthrough of God’s Righteousness

“But now the righteousness of God apart from the Law is revealed” (3:21). The righteousness of God is His attribute that is manifested when He acts on behalf of His people. It is certainly an attribute of God's being that He has had from eternity past. Yet, when 3:21 says God's righteousness is "being witnessed by the Law and Prophets" we see that it is an act that Scripture has always anticipated. But why has Scripture so greatly anticipated the climatic event that will reveal God’s righteousness.

The root issue, or problem, is God’s forbearance that is mentioned in verse 25: "because in His forbearance God passed over the sins previously committed." The fundamental problem, up to this point, is that God had never reckoned with sin. God’s tolerance with sin opened the way for injustice, tyranny, and mockery to be hurled not only upon creation, but against God Himself.

Concerning injustice, God had not dealt with sin as it deserved, by rightly and
severely punishing it. Concerning tyranny, God allowed sin to have dominion and
lordship over His creation. Concerning mockery, God allowed sin to trample upon all
His promises, bringing into question the veracity and faithfulness of God.

So by revealing His righteousness, God was reckoning with all these questions,
and even problems raised by His forbearance and tolerance. The issues of God's justice,
lordship, and faithfulness were all addressed, rectified, and vindicated in the death of
Christ. God acted as the Judge who punished sin, the Warrior who overthrew the tyranny
of sin, and the Husband who was faithful – even though sin had trampled upon all His
promises and plagued His people.

With all this said, it is clear that in Romans 3:21-26 God's righteousness is not
what is propitiated and appeased. But rather God's righteousness is what brings about the
propitiation of His wrath. God's righteousness causes His wrath to be carried out, and
exhausted, upon the unlawful presence of sin. God's righteousness causes Him to
overthrow the parody of sin’s sovereignty, re-establishing His own reign as creation's one
and only sovereign Lord. As we will see in our next study, King Sin and King Death are
no longer the evil lords exercising their dominion over God’s creation. Finally, God's
righteousness caused Him to act to fulfill all His promises, and in accordance with His
promise to work through the Seed of Abraham. Therefore, God's righteousness was the
effectual cause and reason for Jesus' death. And the revelation of that attribute, in His
Son’s death, was the very fountain from which all His mercy and grace flowed.

Therefore, in this passage Paul is not wrestling with the question of how God can
be righteous and merciful at the same time, as if those attributes were opposed to one
another. Instead, Paul is explaining how God’s righteousness brought about His mercy
and justification that we have in Christ Jesus. And with this line of reasoning, it will help
us capture a more Biblical image of God manifesting His righteousness.

In passages such as Isaiah 11:4-5, 49:1-2, 59:16-20; God promises to exhibit His
righteousness like a mighty warrior who rescues His people. From these passages, and
from the entire backdrop of the Old Testament, we see that God puts on His helmet of
salvation, breastplate of righteousness, and cloak of zeal. God draws His sword, and
comes to Mt. Zion to make war on His enemies. God’s righteousness is revealed when
He accomplishes this heroic work, against His enemies, on behalf of His people. In
summary, when God promises to reveal His righteousness He promises to accomplish a
huge rescue mission.

To unpack some of those promissory details, God promised to destroy the reign of
His enemies (Sin, Death, Satan) and to make a new creation. All the promises contained
in Gen.3:15, and all the promises anticipated in Day One of creation, came to fruition
in the death of Jesus. For even when God made the heavens and earth, He anticipated the
day when He would unite them (Rev.21). All of God’s promises were accomplished
through the Seed of Abraham to Whom God made those promises (Gal.3:19). Notice that
everything that God has accomplished in Christ is rooted and grounded in His promises.
From making a new creation to forgiving individuals, from the macro to the micro
aspects of redemption, and with everything in between, God necessarily made good on all
His promises through the death of Christ. Therefore, when God revealed His
righteousness it was nothing less than the fulfilling of His promised rescue mission.

In the righteous act of Jesus’ death, God rescued us from His own wrath by
forgiving our sins and justifying us in Christ. He rescued us from the tyrannical reign of
sin and death. Our heroic God – the Righteous Warrior – rescued us from this present evil age (Gal. 1:4). The resurrection of Christ declares that God has put on His helmet of salvation, breastplate of righteousness, and wielded the sword of His Son’s death upon creation’s soil. God’s righteousness was revealed through the weaponry of self-sacrifice; for His weapon of choice was the death of His only begotten Son.

Therefore, the manifestation of God's righteousness in Christ was the long-awaited climactic act of God. Without that act, God’s righteousness – and even God’s glory – would be at stake. So first and foremost, the death of Christ was a work of God, for God Himself. All that He is, all that He has promised, all that He will give His people, all of creation's hope - can all be summarized, contained, and explained through the act of God shedding His Son's blood on the cross. And as zealous as God was to demonstrate His righteousness, even so was the Son of God faithful to pursue and shed His own blood - effecting that righteous manifestation of the true and living God.

B. The Accomplishment of The Righteousness of Faith

After Jesus’ resurrection, it was evident that God used Jesus’ death as a mighty weapon to reveal His righteousness. Here in Romans 3:21-26 Paul identifies and names this holy weapon as the “Faith of Jesus Christ”. He also refers to it in verse 25 as the “Faith in His blood”. This “Faith” is a reference to the work of Jesus in His death for us. In another passage Paul refers to Jesus’ coming as the coming of Faith. Galatians 3:25 “But after Faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.” (the capitalization of “Faith” is my translation)

As I just mentioned, notice that I capitalized the word “Faith” in each of these specific phrases. In our English translations, on these particular verses, I think it is necessary to capitalize this word because it helps to explain that Paul is speaking about the work of Jesus in His death. Of course, secondarily, Paul is referring to our faith in Christ. Yet, primarily, the death of Christ was the Faith, the weapon, which God used to destroy sin and death.

Later in Romans 10:6-8, Paul will elaborate on this Faith. Paul will explain how the Law anticipated this Faith. Paul will even explain that he preaches this Faith. And in that passage Paul will identify this work of Christ as the “righteousness of Faith”. Notice how that passage is understood when we capitalize the word “Faith”. "But the righteousness of Faith......what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of Faith which we preach):" (Rom.10:6-8)

As will be explained in more detail when we get to that chapter, I understand Paul to primarily be speaking about the work of Jesus when he explains the “righteousness of Faith”. In that passage Paul simply interprets Deuteronomy 30:12-14 explaining that the Law even anticipated the “righteousness of Faith”; which is Christ – the Law’s Goal.

All of this is to say that in Romans 3:21-26 Paul is writing about the "righteousness of Faith" that revealed God’s righteousness. It ties a lot of exegetical points together when we realize that the “Faith of Jesus Christ” is the “Faith in His blood”, and all of this is “the righteousness of Faith”. This Faith identifies the church as the New Covenant people of God. It is this Faith that God used to reveal His righteousness to all of creation, rescuing it from sin and death. This Faith, the work of Christ, is the Person in whom we are calling people to place their faith.
C. God's Righteousness Conquers Through The Righteousness of Faith

So with great joy in Romans 3:21-26 Paul is telling us that all the former redemptions and acts of God in the Old Testament merely foreshadowed this time when God ultimately accomplished His redemption. God's redemption was victorious in the sufferings of His Son, and likewise His justified people are victorious in their sufferings (Rom.8:37). For this reason God’s righteousness conquered through the sufferings of Christ and continues to conquer even through the sufferings of His people.

In Christ Jesus we certainly have the righteousness that comes "from God" (Phil.3:9) which is imputed to us and received by faith alone. This is the “gift of righteousness” (Rom.5:17) that causes us to reign in life. Now in addition to God justifying us through His gift in Jesus Christ, God continues to manifest His personal righteousness to the world through His people.

Paul says that in Christ we have "become the righteousness of God" (I Cor.5:21) This means we are God's redemptive agents who also reign over sin and death. By possessing the “righteousness of faith” in Christ, we become the “righteousness of God”. In this way we continue God’s fight against His defeated enemies: Sin, Death, and Satan. The righteousness of God that was accomplished and began in Jesus’ death continues its manifestation through Jesus church body.

A good commentary on what it means for us to become the righteousness of God in I Corinthians 5:21 is found in Ephesians 6:10-17. To become the righteousness of God means that God’s clothes us with the same armor with which He used to defeat the reign of sin and death. God made Christ who knew no sin, to be sin for us, so that in Christ we would continue the holy fight against sin, wearing the full armor of God.

The clothing of God's righteousness fits us; unlike the armor of King Saul which David was unable to wear before he fought Goliath. Because of our maturity in Christ we truly conquer more than David did with his sling and stone – for we are the righteousness of God wearing His gospel armor wielding His sword of Jesus’ righteousness of Faith.

III. Abraham’s Children and The Righteousness of Faith

A. The New Covenant Benefit

The fundamental and initial benefit that comes from Jesus’ death is justification. (v.26) Of course this is because He was raised from the dead (4:25), yet God’s justifying act began with the shedding of His blood. Those who have faith in Christ are justified in God’s sight, just as Abraham was considered and reckoned righteous by God.

This justification does not come through the Law-covenant. So the boastful position which the Jew rightly had under the old Law, for that time period, is no longer valid. (2:17,23) Paul says that the “Law of faith” excludes this former, boastful, covenant position of the Jews (3:27). As with many of Paul’s terms, the “Law of faith” refers to Jesus’ faithful work for us and the faith that we have in Him (3:22). This new Law, this Faith through a New Covenant, establishes what the old Law anticipated (3:31). To use more simple terminology, the Old Covenant through Moses anticipated the New Covenant in Christ.
B. God’s People Reflect God’s Nature

Therefore, just as God “reckons” believers as justified in Christ, even so Paul “reckons” that a man is justified by faith in Christ. This is all apart from the works of the Jewish Law-covenant. If this were not so, then it would mean that God was only the God of the Jews, and not also the God over all the nations (3:29). But the good news, hidden with the “Shema” of Israel, is that there is only one God over Jew and Gentile. Therefore, God will justify Jew and Gentile respectively “by faith” and “through faith.”

Here we see that the gospel is an expression and vindication of God’s oneness. Not only does the gospel fulfill the promises that God made in history, the gospel exhibits the very nature of God Himself. This even helps explain why heaven and earth will eventually become one. God’s oneness will be reflected in His people and His creation.

Moses’ Law-covenant only mediated for the Jews, identifying them as God’s covenant people for that time. That covenant was never sufficient to mediate and include the entire one people of God; who were Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. Since God is one, it is necessary for His people to be one. Therefore, Christ came to mediate for the entire one people of God, through His New Covenant (Gal.3:20). And Jesus’ people are the children of the promise awaiting the full inheritance.

C. The Children of Abraham

Paul has explained God’s righteousness that acted through Jesus’ righteousness of Faith, accomplishing our justification. He has explained the righteousness of faith that Abraham had, through which the promise was given to him. Now moving toward the end of chapter four Paul applies his teaching on “the righteousness of faith” to the true children of Abraham.

Paul says Abraham “in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, ‘So shall your descendants be’” (v.18). Then finally Paul quotes Gen. 15:6 again in verse 22 and says “it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us” (v.23).

This is extremely significant because it demonstrates Paul’s perspective of Holy Scripture. God’s written word still speaks to the church today. God’s word is still instructing us in its “righteousness of faith” doctrine, even in the Faith which secures God’s promises.

Therefore, the church is now the children of Abraham according to the “righteousness of faith”: the Faith accomplished in Jesus’ blood (3:21-26), the faith by which Abraham was justified and the promise was given (4:1-8,13), and finally the faith which the church has in Christ (4:22-25). No wonder Paul could introduce a summary of the gospel by saying it reveals God’s righteousness “from faith to faith” (1:17).

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2 When Paul says, “since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith...” (3:30) he is alluding to the “Shema” in Deut. 6:4, “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one!” Compare with I Cor. 8:4-6, Gal.3:20, Eph.4:4-6, I Tim.2:5, James 2:19.