

Romans 4

By: Charles Stanley

From: On the Epistle to the Romans

We must bear in mind that we are not on the subject here of righteousness before men. On that subject we must turn to James. There we should find the question of justification from an entirely different point of view. A man is not justified before his fellow-men by faith, but by works, proving the genuineness of his faith. (See James 2:18-26.)

It may now be fairly asked, if the whole human race has been found guilty before God — Jews and Gentiles — on what principle could any have been justified? Clearly, on the principle of law, that which condemns the guilty, none could have been justified, and two of the most remarkable cases are cited in proof. No less persons than Abraham, the very father of the Jews; and David, the sweet singer of Israel. The one was justified four hundred and thirty years before the law was given; the other, about five hundred years after, and that when he had merited its curse by fearful transgression.

As to Abraham, if anyone could be justified by works, surely he could; and if he were before men, as in James, he had to glory, “but not before God.” It is still the solemn question of man before God. Well, what saith the scripture about this man, before the law was given to anyone, even to him? “*Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness.*” This is the scripture answer and principle how a man can be justified without the deeds of the law.

Abraham believed God, and it (his faith) was reckoned as, not for, righteousness. Very much depends on the true meaning of the word, translated “imputed,” “reckoned,” and “counted,” in this chapter, the same word in the original. It means *reckoned as such*, or *esteemed so*; it is not the word which is used to mean simply imputed, or set to the account of a person; that word is only found twice in the New Testament, in Romans 5:13: “But sin is not imputed when there is no law.” It is not

placed to the account of a person as transgression of law, when no law has been given which could thus be transgressed.

It is more fully and correctly translated in Philemon 1:18, “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee aught, *put that to my account*,” impute it to me. Let us illustrate the two words. We say, such a person has paid into a bank £500 to the account of another; it is set to his account. In the other case, a nobleman marries a poor woman. Is she reckoned poor after that? She has not a penny of her own right, but she is reckoned as rich as her husband, judicially accounted so, or reckoned so.

Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned as righteousness. This may also be seen confirmed in Abel. “By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts.” In both cases the principle of faith is the same. Abel believed God, and brought the sacrifice. Abraham believed God, Both were reckoned as righteous.

And this is not on the principle of works, not on the ground of what Abraham or Abel was to God, but God reckoned faith to them as righteousness. “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness.”

I met an aged man the other day, with hair as white as snow, and said to him, “You have made a profession of Christ, more or less, for many years, and yet you do not know that you have eternal life, you are not sure you are justified, and if you should die, you have not the certainty that you would depart, and be with Christ.” The poor aged countenance fell; he said, “It is all true.” “Let me, then, tell you the reason of this. You have never yet seen God’s starting-point. You have been striving all these years, more or less, to be godly, believing that God justifies the godly. You have never yet believed that God justified the ungodly; there is the starting point. Godliness will come after. ‘But to him that worketh not, but believeth on

him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.”

“I never saw that before,” said the aged man. We ask you, reader, solemnly, have you ever really seen this, and believed God that justifieth the *ungodly*? You may have striven long to take the place of a godly man before God by ordinances of men, and so-called good works, trying hard to falsify this scripture. Yes, it often takes a long life of failure to bring a soul to this true starting-place of *grace*. Certainly it must be on a different principle from law that God can justify the ungodly. To him that worketh not, but believeth.

Now let us have David’s inspired explanation of this matter. “Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man unto whom God reckoneth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not reckon sin”; or, “to whom the Lord shall not at all reckon sin.” It is not that they are reckoned righteous because they have never sinned, for all have sinned; but whose sins have been covered, whose iniquities have been forgiven. It is not, however, that their past sins only have been covered by the atoning death of Christ, but there is this further statement of infinite grace, and that in perfect righteousness, “The Lord shall not at all reckon sin.” This is indeed marvelous, but in perfect harmony with all scripture.

Such is the efficacy of that one sacrifice, the value of the blood of Jesus, that it cleanseth from all sin. There needs no more sacrifice for sins; there is none; and God remembereth their sins, who are once purged, no more (Heb. 10; 1 John 1:7).

Thus, as to the reckoning of guilt, or sins, to the justified, they are reckoned righteous, as righteous as though they never had, and never did, sin. As to his standing before God, sin is not at all reckoned to the justified man; he is thus truly and continuously blessed. Will such love and righteousness as this, such eternal salvation, make the enjoyer of the blessing careless, and say, Let us, then, continue in sin

that grace may abound? We shall see, as to that, further on. But is not this the very truth revealed here? It was utterly impossible for God to have justified the ungodly in this way, on the principle of law; but the propitiation, through the blood of God’s eternal Son, explains the righteousness of God in thus not reckoning sins unto him that believeth.

It may, however, fairly be asked, Does that propitiation apply to the future as well as to past sins? That is exactly what scripture does teach, and, strange as it may seem, the knowledge of this very fact is made known to us that we may not sin. “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not: and if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 2:1-2).

And in another places, speaking of believers: “Who His own self bore our sins in His own body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). And again: “When He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:8). Oh, wondrous grace — free grace! “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.” He will not, He cannot in righteousness reckon them to us. We shall see this still more fully explained as we go on.

Reader, do you really believe God? Yes, the question is this, as we read these pages of the riches of His grace, Do we believe God? Remember we are yet only on the entrance ground, the very beginning of the gospel of God. Does then this blessedness come upon those under law only, that is the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised? Well, it was an undeniable fact, which the Jews at Rome could not deny, that faith was reckoned as righteousness to Abraham when he was uncircumcised long before the law was given.

What an overwhelming argument then, that it must be all of grace and not of the law at all! And Mark, he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had, being uncircumcised. That is, circumcision was a mark of his separation to God: he was the first person, the father of it;

but Mark, it had nothing to do with justifying him — he was reckoned righteous first, entirely apart from all works or circumcision. Is it not so with every believer? His separation to God and a holy life, are a sign that he *has been reckoned righteous first*, apart from law or works. But God calls him and justifies him while ungodly. That is, it is there where God begins with man. Has He so begun with you, or are you seeking to be justified by works when you become godly?

Now another principle of great importance is clearly brought out. PROMISE clearly depended on God, and this was given to Abraham long before the law; therefore it could not be through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

The covenant at Sinai was in direct contrast with promise: therefore the blessing depended on man's obedience, and he utterly failed to keep the covenant. Man could fail under covenant, and thus forfeit all claims on the ground of works; and he did fail. But God could not fail, therefore the promise still stands sure to all who believe. "Therefore [again] it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the PROMISE might be sure to all the seed." Thus Abraham believed the promise of God, because God could not fail. "He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God. And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able to perform. And therefore it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

He considered not his own body. Now, such confidence as this in a covenant of works would have been confidence in himself, which would not have been faith, but presumption. His faith has unbounded confidence in God alone: in the promise of God. Therefore faith was reckoned as righteousness. He, even Abraham, was justified by faith, reckoned righteous before God. This was written after Abraham (was long dead), even for us. For blessed as this was to Abraham to believe the promise of God, there is something still more blessed, "for us also, to whom it shall be reckoned, if we believe [or, believing] on him

that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification." Abraham believed the promise of God. We believe these two facts of God: the promise is fulfilled. We are thus reckoned righteous before God.

But it may be asked, do not many still rest their soul's salvation on the promises? What would you say if a wife rested on the former promise of her husband for evidence, that she was his wife? Would not this show that she was doubtful as to whether the marriage had really been accomplished or was valid; or, to say the least, that she did not understand it? Is it not something like this, when we try to rest on the promises? There must be some doubt or misunderstanding about these two accomplished facts before us.

Doubtless there are many precious promises on which we do well to rest. But this is not now a promise. Righteousness is reckoned to us, believing on Him, that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead. It is reckoned to us: that is not a promise. No, if we are believers the righteousness of God is upon us. We are reckoned righteous. Then the resurrection of our Lord is not now a matter of promise. God *has* raised Him from the dead. If not, there is no gospel, and we are yet in our sins. (See 1 Cor. 15:14-17.)

Let us then proceed very carefully here. Only let us note there is a change in the language. It is not now the propitiatory view of the death of Christ, as in Romans 3:22-26. There, that death has first glorified God. The blood before Him, His righteousness is maintained, established on His throne, the mercy-seat; and thus mercy toward all without infringing on the righteousness of God.

But here (Rom. 4:24-25) Christ is the Substitute of His people, answering to the second goat of atonement (Lev. 16). The sins of Israel were transferred to that goat — laid on it and borne away. Just so here. "Who was delivered for our offenses." Was He delivered for the sins of the whole world as their Substitute, to bear them away? Then clearly

they would have been borne away; for God has accepted the Substitute. This is certain, for He has raised Him from the dead. This would teach the fatal error of universal redemption. Hence the need of carefully noting that these words are distinctly limited to believers. “If we believe” or “believing.” Abraham believed God, and that was reckoned *to him* as righteousness. We believe God that “He hath raised up Jesus OUR Lord from the dead; who was delivered for OUR offenses, and was raised again for OUR justification.”

The next chapter will also show that this must be limited to believers. “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” To apply these words then to all, is to destroy their effect to all, or to teach, what is false on the face of it, that all will be saved.

Let us, then, take the facts in their order. God is speaking to us here. Do we believe Him, that He hath raised up Jesus from among the dead? That alone would not be enough, the devils know that that is so, and many an unconverted man does not doubt that. But mark the next fact: “who was delivered for our offenses.” Had it said, “our transgressions,” it would not have taken in Gentiles, who were not under law; but this is a word that takes in all our sins—under law as transgressions, or sinners without law.

Now, do you really believe that Jesus was delivered up to the cruel hands of men, yes, nailed to the cross, and there to bear, and did bear, the wrath of God due to *your very sins*? Before you read another line, we entreat you to answer that question in the presence of God. Can you look and see the Holy One of God bearing your sin truly as if there was not another whose sins He bore on the cross? Oh, what a sight, and your Substitute!

And, if we may use the word, not only did His death make the infinite payment infinite justice demanded, but He “was raised again for *our* justification.” Thus God has shown His acceptance of the ransom — the death of *our* Substitute; but He could in no way more distinctly have shown our everlasting

discharge, than by raising up the Substitute for our justification. Oh, how wondrous! He was raised up from among the dead, that, believing God, we might justly be reckoned, accounted, righteous before God; our sins as truly borne away, never to be reckoned to us, as though we had never sinned — justified, reckoned righteous before and by God our Father.

Thus we have more than promise — all is accomplished fact. All *our* sins — for they all alike future then — have been borne by Jesus. “Who was delivered for our offenses.” God has raised Him again for our justification. Believing God, we are justified, reckoned righteous. Mark, “raised again *for* our justification” cannot possibly mean because we were justified; this thought entirely sets aside faith. It is evidently “for,” in the sense of, for the purpose of our justification; that is, when, through grace, we believe “Therefore, being justified *by faith*”—being reckoned righteous on the principle of faith — “we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).

Many souls are perplexed as to whether they have the right faith — “justified by faith.” If we separate this verse from the end of the previous chapter, we get occupied with faith as an abstract matter; and indeed we make faith that which, somehow, merits justification, and very soon it becomes a question of examining our own feelings.

It may be said, but did not “many believed in His name when they saw the miracles which He did; but Jesus did not commit Himself unto them, because He knew all men?” (John 2:23). Just so; but what did they believe? No doubt they believed in Him as the Messiah, when they saw the miracles that He did. But that was quite a different matter from what we have before us here. “Well,” you say, “I am sure I long to have peace with God, but I am not sure I have got it. How is this? *You* say, Partly because I ask myself, Have I the right faith? but the fact is, my horrid sins and iniquities rise up before me, and press me, until I am almost ready to conclude I have no part in Christ. Conscience also says it is all true.”

Was not Jesus, the Holy, Holy One, delivered for those very iniquities? Do you believe God has raised Him from the dead—He “who was delivered for our offenses”? This is a very different affair from miracles, important as they are in their place. Mark, this is real substitution—Christ, the delivered Substitute of His people, of the believer. We must not confound this with the propitiation, which was not only for us, but for the whole world. God is glorified about sin, so that freepardon is preached to every creature—to all men.

Let us take a picture, or type, of this; indeed this scripture seems to refer to it. After the blood of one goat had been sprinkled on the golden mercy-seat before God, showing the righteousness of God met by the blood of Jesus, before the eye of God — then “he shall bring the live goat; and Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away, by the hand of a fit man, into the wilderness. And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited” (Lev. 16:21).

Now compare this with another scripture: “But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord path laid on Him the iniquity of us all.... And He bore the sin of many” (Isa. 53:5-12).

The scriptures do not teach that He bore the sins of all; but, as the Substitute, the sins of many; and this in contrast with the doom of those who reject Him, and must therefore be judged. Yes, mark the contrast. “And AS it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment; so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of *many*; and unto them that look for Him shall He appear the second time, without sin, unto salvation” (Heb. 9:27-28).

Now faith is not believing that I feel, or that I do believe. But do you believe this amazing fact, that God hath raised Him from the dead who has been thus, as your Substitute, delivered for your offenses? This is the first question as to all your iniquities.

Were they transferred to Christ, laid on Him? Not the sins of one year, like Israel on the day of atonement, but all your sins and iniquities before you were born. Did He take the whole responsibility of them, according to the righteous claims of God? Did He come, and was He delivered for this very purpose? Was it bearing the wrath of God against your sins, that made Him cry out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken Me?” Oh, love beyond all words or thought! Did He fail? No; hear His words “It is finished.” Yes, that work He came to do is finished. God is glorified. Our iniquities have been laid on Him, transferred to Him, borne by Him; not some of our sins, but all our iniquities, were laid on Him. The Lord Jehovah laid them on Him. And it is finished. Oh, my soul, ponder this well—“It is finished!”

He has made your peace with God by His own blood. And now what does He say to you? “Peace unto you.” Do you say, But, oh, my horrid sins! He replies, They were all laid on Me; “peace to thee.” He shows His hands and His side. But I have denied Thee, Lord, when I ought to have confessed Thee. “Peace unto you.”

Now God, having judged our sins, all our iniquities, on His Son, can He again in righteousness judge them on us? Do you say, “I do not for a moment doubt Jesus died on the cross as my Substitute, and bore my sins in His own body on the tree; still, I have not the blessed certainty that I am justified, and have peace with God; I do not experience that happiness I ought.” Does this scripture, or any other, say we are either justified, or have peace, by experience? Does it say that we are to look at our feelings for evidence that we are justified?

God has done a certain thing, to give to faith the certainty of our justification, and that one

thing, which He has done for this very purpose, has been greatly overlooked. Jesus not only was delivered for our offenses, but we read, “and was raised again for our justification.” Yes, God raised Him from among the dead, not *because* we were justified, but for the express purpose that, believing Him, we might be justified. Thus, if Christ be not raised, we are deceived, and yet in our sins (1 Cor. 15:17). But He is raised; the whole question is settled to faith.

Do you say, “But must not I accept the atonement of my Substitute?” No, in this case it is God that has shown to us that He has accepted the one sacrifice for our sins, by raising Jesus from the dead, and giving Him a place above all heavens. And now, as to your sins, fellow-believer — where are they? They have been transferred to your Substitute. Well, they could not be on you, and on Him. No. Where are they then? Are they on Christ? No. But they must be on Him, if on any one, as He

has taken the whole responsibility of them before His God. They are not on Him. Then they cannot be on you. Oh, wondrous grace!

God says He will remember them no more. If He did, He must remember them as against Christ, and this is impossible. Christ is in the unclouded presence of God in light. Then so are you justified from all things — not hoping to be so. Could anything be more certain than this resting on the very words of God? Did not God give His beloved Son for this very purpose, that we might have unclouded peace with Him? Why should we doubt Him?

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