

Romans 4:1-25

The Revelation of God's Righteousness in the Old Dispensation

A. Notes on the Text

Verse 1

Paul is now going to show that in the time of the old dispensation (the time before Christ's incarnation) it was also the rule that a person became righteous before God by faith alone and not through works of the law.

The Jews were fond of appealing to their "father Abraham" (e.g. John 8:33ff.). Paul, too, will appeal to him in order to ridicule the Jewish teaching of works of the law. "Our" forefather: as a Jew, Paul wishes to speak about that, especially with the Jewish Christians.

Verses 1, 2

We could describe these verses as follows: what shall we now say? Perhaps this, that Abraham "according to the flesh," [RSV] in his own natural strength, namely by keeping the law, has attained righteousness? If that were true (but it is not!) he would have had something to boast about and did not need to give God the glory.

Verse 3

We find the answer in Genesis 15:6. The Jews said that Abraham did indeed become righteous before God because of his works. They regarded the faith of Abraham as very meritorious. (To refute this, see Heidelberg Catechism, A. 61. Note that Genesis 15:6 is also quoted in Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23). There is quite a difference of opinion among interpreters of this text, including Reformed ones. (More about this in Main Thoughts.) The word "credit" appears eleven times in this chapter, so we should also take a closer look at that concept (see Glossary #15, #16, and #8).

Verses 4, 5

Paul explains v. 3 further: when you work you have a right to your wages, but if you do not work and receive something anyway, that is pure grace.

Verses 6-8

What David says in Psalms 32 goes just a little further: he calls him happy (and he means himself!) to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity. We do not have a credit with God, nor even a clean slate, but rather a debit, a debt. The grace of forgiveness is this, that which has been achieved is not credited (sin), but what has not been achieved is (reconciliation).

Verses 9, 10

In vv. 9-12 Paul is going to show that circumcision (Old Testament baptism!) does not make one righteous either. Circumcision is not even essential to justification: Abraham was made righteous by God (Genesis 15) before he was circumcised (Genesis 17). Paul notes very carefully the redemptive-historical order of justification and circumcision for Abraham! He does the same in other places (e.g. Galatians 3: 17).

Verses 11, 12

We learn two things from this: first, that God already showed then that Abraham would be the father of all believers, even though uncircumcised. That would be true also for the Gentiles: righteousness before God is not earned, but imputed (reckoned), just as it was with Abraham, for he, too, was initially an "uncircumcised Christian."

Second, God thereby showed that Abraham would be the father of the circumcised, that is, of Jews, who are not only circumcised, but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith which our father Abraham displayed when he was still, I repeat, when he was still uncircumcised.(C. Vonk)¹

This walking in the footsteps of Abraham is so nicely shown in the Greek, but it is overlooked by many an interpreter. The image is of a grown man's footprints in soft sand, and of a younger and smaller person, who is trying to keep up by walking in those footprints. (A. Van Veldhuizen)²

Thus, Abraham had faith for a while before he was circumcised, just as there are heathens in the mission field today who believe before they can be baptized. The sacraments (of circumcision and baptism) do not save, as the Roman Catholic Church wrongly teaches. On the other hand, circumcision (and baptism) without faith, in an adult, is an abomination!

In v. 11, circumcision (the Old Testament baptism), is called a "sign" and "seal." The Reformed doctrine about the sacraments has a strong proof text for the sacrament as a sign and seal (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 66). In Genesis 17, circumcision as a "sign" has the meaning of a hall-mark: the mark by which something is certified or confirmed, a certification of authenticity. Later in the Scriptures, the circumcision of the foreskin becomes a symbol of something spiritual: circumcision of the heart, the cutting away of sin which hinders (stands in the way of) faith (see Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:3ff; Romans 2:29ff).

Verses 13-15

Abraham received the promises unconditionally (see Genesis 12:2,3; 13:14-16; 15:5,6,8; 17:2-9; 18:18; 22:17,18). According to v. 13 he received the promise of

¹ Ed. Note: Quote is from *Paraphrase*.

² Ed. Note: Quote is from *Paulus en zijn brief aan de Romeinen* (1918).

the inheritance of "the world" (literally *a* world, not *the* world): the world of Canaan, which was the temporal representation of the new earth, and which will belong wholly to those who are saved (Matthew 5:5).

"Where there is no law there is no transgression" means where there is law, there is transgression. Read in context, Paul means: the law did not yet exist in its concrete Sinaitic form, the law which plays such a major role in the Jewish scheme of redemption. Paul does not say that Abraham did not know God's will for his life (Genesis 17:1, for instance, makes it clear that the opposite is the case).

Verses 16ff.

Abraham needed the faith of the resurrection to continue in the promise: he believed that the God, who out of nothing called all of creation into being (Genesis 1), was also powerful enough to fulfil his promise regarding a son (Isaac), by making Abraham and Sarah alive again as a father and mother (cf. Hebrews 11:11,12). Faith is trusting in God, who calls what is dead into life, and calls into being that which does not exist.

Did Abraham have more children after Isaac (Genesis 25:1-6)? Some (Calvin and Greijdanus among them) argue that Abraham's returned virility was not temporary, but continued after the birth of Isaac. Others believe that the events described in Genesis 25 may have preceded the birth of Isaac.

Verses 22-25

"Us, to whom God will credit righteousness" (cf. Romans 15:4) means that when we put our trust in the same God it will also be imputed to us as righteousness. And we may focus our faith on the finished work of Christ, whom God delivered over to death for (causal: because of) our sins, and raised to life for (purpose: to) our justification (see Isaiah 53). The second "for" may mean: for the sake of our justification still to come. In that case, the word "for" has the same meaning both times: because of, for the sake of.

B. Main Thoughts

1. In the fourth part of his letter, Paul discusses this topic: God justifies the sinner for Christ's sake alone. Taking Abraham as an example, he shows that it was no different in the old dispensation. He quotes Genesis 15:6 to support his argument. This text, (also quoted in Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23) poses these questions: a) what is "righteousness" and b) what is reckoned (imputed)? Is it faith itself or that which is being accepted in faith, namely God's righteousness?

There are many differences of opinion about the interpretation of this text, also among Reformed exegetes. Some say: "The clause: 'faith was "credited ... as righteousness"' is a syncopation of the idea that God reckons

righteousness granted in faith in Christ to a person, and acquits him on that ground".³ So, according to them, that which is accepted in faith, i.e. Christ's righteousness, is credited. However, others say, "Faith itself has no merit, but, being worked by God it is subjective righteousness, being right before the Lord"⁴ (Regarding this see Deuteronomy 6:25). According to a third opinion (H.N. Ridderbos) "righteousness" is not what Christ did to save us, but it is living according to the demand of God's covenant, and the Lord values that as being in accordance with his covenant justice. Faith, itself a gift, is juxtaposed with merit through keeping the law, for faith accepts Christ. Therefore, this opinion ultimately comes to the same conclusion as the first.

2. God credits to us what we do not have (Christ's work for us), and does not credit to us what we do have (sin). That is why circumcision cannot make one righteous. Rather, imputed and freely given grace, which must be accepted in faith, does.
3. Paul carefully notes dates in order to view the matter in a redemptive-historic way (see Notes to vv. 9,10). Dates are important in redemptive-historic events. That is what the debate about redemptive-historic and exemplary preaching was all about before and during the time of the liberation. Exemplary preaching does not consider the date of the text, redemptive-historic preaching does. It is of great significance that someone lived before or after the giving of the law on Sinai.

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³ *Ed. Note:* Commentators who hold this view are H. Bavinck, S. Greijdanus, G.C. Berkouwer.

⁴ *Ed. Note:* Commentators who hold this view are J. Ridderbos, H.J. Jager, J.G. Wolderink.