

An Exposition of Romans 4:1-3
By Steven L. Svendsen

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter^a? ²If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about^b—but not before God^c. ³What does the Scripture say?^d “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness^e.”^f

^a 4:1 **What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter?** Abraham did make a discovery. What he found is recorded in Genesis 15:6. Abraham was credited with a righteousness not his own when he put his faith in the word of God. That may not seem like a profound discovery until you see the alternative to justification by faith: religious performance. The perfection demanded is something that even Abraham the friend of God did not have.

^b 4:2 **If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about.** Paul had asked, “Where then is boasting?” (3:27). If Abraham’s outward behavior could change his guilty standing before God, he deserves great recognition from the rest of us sinners.

^c 4:2 **but not before God.** Abraham looks good to us. He left all to follow the Lord from Ur to Haran to Canaan. He received direct revelation from God and built more than one altar for worshiping the LORD. God preserved him in Egypt and later enriched him in the Negev. He was a praying man who mustered a small army to defeat Kedorlaomer’s forces and rescue Lot. All these works, yet Scripture says he was not acquitted of his sins until after these events. Why? Because God’s standard of righteousness is impossible for even the best among us to attain. Abraham’s works may have looked good to men, “but not before God.” Holy God was entirely distinct from his creation before Adam sinned. After the Fall the distinction became dramatically more pronounced. What sinner can boast before a holy God?

^d 4:3 **What does the Scripture say?** This appeal ought to be our constant resort when we are pondering questions about life in a sin-cursed world. Wondering what to believe about how a holy God can justify sinners? What does the Scripture say? Marriage trouble? What does the Scripture say? Emotions out of control? What does the Scripture say? Got a habit you cannot beat? What does the Scripture say? God spoke and Abraham believed it. Today God speaks through his word. Can you believe it?

^e 4:3 **Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.** The coming dissertation on faith and righteousness will properly define both. Biblical faith (same root as the word “believe”) is not a quality that makes man independent, the goal of those who urge you to “believe in yourself.” Faith is what makes a person entirely dependent on the words and the deeds of another. It must have an object. Abraham was not simply a man with faith. He had faith *in God*. Righteousness (same root as “justice” or “justification”) is a legal standing before God that is only credited to the accounts of those who believe (take God at his word).

^f 4:1-3 Paul says that Abraham made a discovery, but he wasn’t out in search of what he found. He was merely listening to the voice of God and discovered the way to be declared righteous—but not like you might imagine. God did not give Abraham a moral aptitude test or a list of deeds to perform. God simply spoke hard-to-believe words and Abraham believed. His discovery was made when he understood that God keeps his word. Here is what every sinner must discover:

1. Justification presupposes guilt. You do not need justification unless you have committed a crime. The discovery is that you are in legal trouble with the only perfect judge.
2. Sinners have no goodness that impresses God. Favorable comparisons work because you can always find someone worse than yourself. The discovery is that the highest human standard of righteousness falls short of the requirements for release.
3. Righteousness must be imputed by God. Do not let the word “imputed” cause you to stumble. It is the word “credited” in verse three. The word is important because it puts in accounting terms the fact that man is bankrupt in righteousness and has no means of earning any. Only a benefactor with righteousness to credit can balance the books. The discovery is that you must cast your entire unrighteous bulk for mercy at the feet of the only one who is rich in mercy and righteousness.