

- e. In his gospel argumentation regarding righteousness by faith alone Paul introduced Abraham and, through him, established four distinct arenas of contrast: that between faith and personal works; between faith and circumcision; between faith and the Law; and between faith and sight. While each of these contrasts provides insight into the faith that characterized Abraham, Paul's intention was not to display him as a "faithful" example to be followed by Christians. Rather, he presented Abraham as the ordained progenitor of a spiritual progeny linked to him by their faith in the Seed who stands as the focal point of the promise God made to him. *In this way Abraham serves to inform the Christian's understanding of the nature and significance of his own covenant identity, and thereby inform, establish, and strengthen his personal confidence in the gospel promise of righteousness reckoned by faith.*

Again, the reason for this faith and confident hope of reckoned righteousness is that they have their terminus in the Lord Jesus Christ. Though facing the obstacle of pervasive *deadness*, Abraham resolutely believed God's promise of a son because he knew Him to be a God who gives life to the dead; regardless of the obstacle, He is fully able to perform what he has promised (4:16-21).

- The *conception* of Isaac thus provides a germinal fulfillment of God's promise that He would overcome death with life.
- Later, God would again display His power in honoring that promise by, as it were, bringing back Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19). Though God commanded that Abraham slay his beloved only-begotten son, he was confident that he and Isaac would descend *together* from Mount Moriah to rejoin his waiting servants (Genesis 22:1-5, cf. 22:10-12).
- Both of these incidents - and others that would follow through the centuries - contributed to the foundational reality that the Abrahamic faith that was reckoned as righteousness is a faith in God's promise of life out of death. This truth would weave its way through salvation history, gaining strength until it would come to its ultimate expression in fulfillment in Jesus Christ: *the living One who died and lives forevermore; the One who is Himself the resurrection and the life* (John 11:1-26; Revelation 1:9-18). In every respect, the promise of God is *amen* in Him, so that all who believe God's word of promise by believing in His Son see death swallowed up in life (John 3:1-36, 5:1-27, 6:22-58, 7:37-39, etc.).

It is this pinnacle fulfillment that concerned Paul as he interacted with Abraham's faith and hope in the promise. This is evident by the movement of his thought in the succeeding contexts (cf. Romans 5:12-21, 6:1-23, 7:1-25, 8:1-8). But it is immediately obvious by the way he closed out the fourth chapter. Having devoted an entire chapter to the historical figure of Abraham, he insisted to his readers that Abraham's faith and its being reckoned as righteousness looked beyond him to all his offspring who share his faith in the promise (ref. 4:9-18).

- 1) It was seen in the preceding context that Abraham's faith was not directed generically toward God, but toward the *God of promise*. Specifically, his faith had its object in the God who had promised to bring a living heir out of the union of a "dead" couple. In Abraham's case that promise had initial reference to the conception of Isaac, but it looked beyond that child to a vast, multinational progeny.

Accordingly, Paul's declaration introducing this context makes explicit the redemptive-historical significance of Abraham's faith and reckoned righteousness which previously had been expressed only in a more general way: "*Now not for his sake only was it written, that it was reckoned to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will be reckoned...*" (4:23-24a)

It is easy to pass by this statement, but it is of great importance. For it asserts plainly and emphatically that Abraham's spiritual circumstance and relationship with God had a *determined trajectory and end point*. God's interaction with Abraham was not ultimately about Abraham or even Isaac; it anticipated the "seed" that would come from him - the multitude of descendants drawn from all the families of the earth. The promise would move through Abraham's covenant sons Isaac and Jacob to the twelve tribes of Israel, eventually finding, in the fullness of the times, its ultimate referent in the singular covenant son of Abraham, the Lion of Judah. He is the Seed to whom the promises were made and in whom the inheritance of righteousness by faith is realized, so that all who belong to Him are true sons of Abraham and heirs of the promise (Galatians 3).

- a) Thus, from the beginning God's intention was that Abraham's righteousness, which was reckoned to him by faith, was to stand as the defining point of connection between him and all his descendants. Regardless of whether they shared his ethnicity or circumcision, they would all share his faith in the covenant-keeping God.
- b) Furthermore, their existence as Abraham's children, - as was the case with the first child of promise - would depend solely upon the power of God to *make alive that which is dead* and to *call into being that which does not exist*.
- c) And as with Abraham, God's life-giving power would be exercised in conjunction with their faith in the promise; like their spiritual father, these descendants, too, were to share a faith in the God who promises to bring life out of death. But living in the context of the fulfillment that Abraham could only see and anticipate with the eyes of faith, their faith is in the God "*who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead*" (4:24b). Nevertheless, just like their father their faith is reckoned as righteousness.

*“It is the God of the promise, the promise given to Abraham but ultimately fulfilled in Christ and Christians, in whom both Abraham and we believe. While, therefore, the locus of faith has shifted as the course of salvation history has filled out and made ever more clear the specific content of the promise, the ultimate object of faith has always been the same.”*  
(Douglas Moo)

- 2) These three verses (4:23-25) mark in another way an important point of development in Paul’s instruction concerning the gospel. Though he had previously spoken of redemption and propitiation in relation to Christ and His death (3:21-26), he here began to draw together more tightly the gospel principles of justification, faith, and righteousness. The way in which he did so was by the introduction of the principles of *substitution* and *imputation* in relation to Christ’s self-sacrifice. This is a crucial link in his gospel chain, and it will be seen to dominate his argument throughout the fifth chapter.

The concept of *reckoning*, or imputation, was previously observed to be a central thesis in the larger context addressing Abraham (ref. 4:3-5, 9-12, 16-22). Moreover, this same imputation language is found in Paul’s citation from Psalm 32 in which David extolled the blessedness of the man whose sin the Lord will not “*take into account*” (4:8).

So also the language of imputation emerges in this final context of chapter four. It proceeds very naturally out of Paul’s treatment of Abraham’s reckoned righteousness, but also advances his argument by showing that the inheritance of righteousness with its attendant covenant blessing stand upon a reckoning bound to the sacrificial work of Christ; it comes through faith in the One “*who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification*” (4:25).

This expression immediately calls to mind Isaiah 53 - the Old Testament passage that presents in a singular way the Servant of Yahweh who suffers and dies as the appointed sin-bearer (vv. 4-6), and whose death brings justification to those whose guilt He bore (vv. 10-11). As in Isaiah’s revelation, so also here Paul was bringing crucial insight into how faith - which itself does not fulfill the obligation of righteousness - can be reckoned as righteousness. Stated differently, *how is it that God can maintain His own justice while yet justifying ungodly men by faith?*

God’s justice must be fully upheld, and yet the sublime glory of the gospel is its insistence that He counts the ungodly as righteous through their faith. The “missing link” that brings these two truths together is the *substitutionary death* of Abraham’s promised Son. Thus it is appropriate that the fifth chapter of Romans - which focuses on Christ as the representative of men - be introduced with His substitutionary atonement.

a) The first thing to observe about Paul's concluding declaration is that it consists of two parallel statements that correspond to one another both linguistically and grammatically:

1) "*He was delivered up because of our transgressions*";

2) "*He was raised because of our justification.*"

The first clause refers to Christ's *crucifixion*, and the second to His *resurrection*. And, as already intimated, together they reveal the reason for Paul's emphasis upon the principles of *deadness* and *life* in relation to the matter of faith. At the heart of God's promise to Abraham was His commitment to bring life out of death, and Abraham's faith grew strong in unassailable hope for the simple reason that he knew the ability of the God who gives life to the dead (ref. again 4:16-21). As a result he received Isaac, the child of his and Sarah's deadness. But this obtainment only anticipated the ultimate fulfillment to come when God would bring forth Abraham's singular Son from the dead, and that with the promise that as He lives, so all of Abraham's offspring will live in Him (cf. John 6:47-58, 11:21-26, 14:18-20; 2 Corinthians 13:4; etc.).

b) Second, the principle of substitution is paralleled in both statements by the structure: "**He** was ...*because of our*..." In the former Paul assigned the transgressions of others as the reason for Christ's crucifixion; He bore the punishment due them for their disobedience to God. In the same way he assigned men's justification as the issue in Jesus' resurrection.

This latter clause has caused some interpretational difficulty for the reason that it employs the same language and grammar as its predecessor. For, all interpreters are in agreement that the first clause establishes a *causal* relationship between Christ's death and human transgression: He was delivered up because of (on account of) those transgressions. This is the normative sense of the grammar Paul employed, and a causal relation between Jesus' crucifixion and men's transgression is readily evident throughout the breadth of the New Testament (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-3; Hebrews 9:27-28, 10:1-14; 1 Peter 2:24, 3:18; etc.).

But this causal sense is more difficult to uphold in the second clause, and for that reason many have sought another interpretation. In other words, can it really be said that men's justification is in some sense the *cause* of Christ's resurrection? Biblically, the relation between them seems better understood in terms of the resurrection being the *foundation* of justification.

For this reason many scholars have viewed Paul's prepositional construction as having a *retrospective* sense ("because of") in the first statement and a *prospective* sense in the second one ("for the sake of"). The immediate problem is that this latter meaning is relatively uncommon for this grammar. Perhaps more significant is Paul's close parallelism, which itself seems to argue against such a shift in meaning within the parallel structure. Accordingly, some have argued that *both* clauses are prospective in orientation: Christ died with a view toward atoning for men's transgressions as He also was raised with a view toward their justification.

Despite these considerations, it appears best to understand both clauses as speaking retrospectively. In this case the latter clause does in some sense find the resurrection as having its basis in the justification of men. This relation that seems so awkward at first becomes evident when it is recalled that it was Christ's *death* that effected atonement for sin, and that atoning work is what secured men's justification. Thus, *justification was secured by Christ's substitutionary, atoning death, and His resurrection acted to bear witness to that fact by demonstrating openly God's acceptance of His offering of Himself in their stead* (ref. 1 Corinthians 15:12-19). And so it is entirely appropriate to speak of Christ as having been raised "because of" our justification; His resurrection stands upon and testifies to the justification He accomplished by His death.

Paul introduced his gospel in 1:16-17 with the pronouncement that the gospel is the power of God for salvation because in it God's righteousness is revealed from faith to faith. And now, three chapters later, he has shown just exactly what he meant. The gospel is the power of God because it proclaims God's promise to bring life out of that which is dead, which promise has found its ultimate fulfillment in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus the gospel is a message of *promise kept through power exercised*. It speaks of an *historical fulfillment* that simultaneously yields up a *new promise* of life from the dead. This new promise establishes anew the obligation of faith in the living God. The One who fulfilled His promise to Abraham by raising up the promised Seed is the same One who gives life to all of Abraham's descendants. This life is life eternal; a life that is their present endowment, but which also exists in hope of the promise of complete renewal in the resurrection of the last day when faith will at last become sight.

*"If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you...We ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it."*