

SOUND DOCTRINE FOR SPIRITUAL SUCCESS – Studies in Romans

Abraham and David (Romans 4:1-8)

“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.’ Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ‘BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT.’”

Our initial understanding of Romans 4:1-25 was aided greatly by Paul’s three-fold repetition of Genesis 15:6. But the reiteration doesn’t end there, as he also makes use of the verb “logizomai,” an accounting term, on five occasions in vv3-8, and continues to mention it three times in vv9-11. The constant occurrence of this verb indicates that Paul is seeking to make a point which cannot be ignored. His ongoing concern with proving the continuity of God’s plan to his Jewish readership is in the forefront of his reasoning. What better way to accomplish this than to provide two examples from the Old Testament in Abraham and David? First, Paul makes it clear that Abraham did not earn his righteous standing before God by working for it and then receiving it as a reward which was due him (4:2-5). He received it by faith (4:3), not as a wage but as a favor (4:4); not because he was godly, but ungodly (4:5) and not as a circumcised Jew but as an uncircumcised Semite (4:10).

This continuity of God’s plan is also exemplified in David, even though the contrast between the two examples is stunning. Paul quotes from Psalm 32:1-2, written by David in the aftermath of his sin with Bathsheba. After refusing to acknowledge his sin for nearly a year, he finally confesses it in his confrontation with Nathan the prophet (2 Samuel 12:1-15). David writes both Psalm 32 and 51 in reflecting upon this difficult experience. Even though God did forgive his sin, it occurred in the context of a profound chastening by God that brought him to repentance. In addition, David’s forgiveness from God did not exempt him from enduring a series of negative consequences which plagued him for the rest of his life.

So, the ironic significance of Paul using the example of these two heroes of the faith is this. The doctrine of justification by faith, originating in the Old Testament, is affirmed by Paul with the positive example of Abraham and in the negative example of David. Both give us a complete picture of the two-fold benefit of being justified by faith. First, because justification provides a total and permanent forgiveness of sin, we can say along with David: Since God has justified us by faith, He will never impute to us our sins, because they have all been forgiven, forever. Our justification also provides us with an eternally righteous standing with God in Christ, which neither Abraham nor any of us have earned. Yet, there is an insidiously antinomian conclusion which some have drawn from this two-fold benefit of justification by faith: The Christian can sin with impunity and it won’t matter! If you think that it doesn’t matter, just ask David if it didn’t matter, as you read about what his earthly life turned into under the disciplinary and consequential hand of God. Paul will deal with this distortion of God’s grace in Romans 6:1-19.