

Homiletics Analysis: Romans 4:1–25

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Romans 4 is Paul's extended biblical argument that justification has always been by faith alone, apart from works. Paul marshals Abraham as his primary witness — the father of the Jewish people, the recipient of circumcision, and the inheritor of covenant promise — and demonstrates that Abraham was counted righteous by God before circumcision, before the Law, and solely on the basis of faith. Paul moves through three interlocking arguments: (1) Abraham was justified by faith, not works, citing Genesis 15:6 — “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (vv. 1–8); (2) this justification preceded circumcision by years, meaning Abraham was justified as an uncircumcised Gentile, making him the father of all who believe regardless of ethnic or ritual status (vv. 9–12); and (3) the promise to Abraham came through faith, not the Law, because the Law produces wrath, not inheritance (vv. 13–17). The chapter closes with a portrait of Abraham's faith itself — its nature, its object, its anatomy — showing a man who trusted God's power to give life to the dead and call into existence the things that do not exist, holding firm to God's promise against all apparent evidence to the contrary (vv. 18–25). The final verses make the canonical hinge explicit: Abraham's faith-righteousness is written for our sake, because we too believe in “him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

Broader Unit — Component of a Larger Argument

Romans 4 is a component of Romans 1–5, Paul's extended prosecution and defense establishing the doctrine of justification by faith. Romans 1:18–3:20 establishes universal guilt — Jew and Gentile alike stand under the wrath of God. Romans 3:21–31 announces the solution: the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, apart from the Law, for all who believe — but raises the immediate objection that this appears to overthrow the Old Testament and Abraham's covenant. Romans 4 is Paul's answer to that objection, his Exhibit A from the Old Testament itself. Romans 5 then moves from justification's basis (chapters 3–4) to its results — peace, access, hope, and the certainty of final salvation. Romans 4 thus functions as the biblical-historical pivot of the doctrinal argument: not a detour into Abraham's biography but the scriptural proof that “righteousness through faith” is not a Pauline novelty but the covenant pattern from the very beginning.

This Text — Intent

Paul is not simply proving a doctrinal point about Abraham for historical interest. God's intent through this chapter is to demolish every ground of boasting before Him — the boasting of religious performance, ethnic privilege, ritual participation, and legal

observance — and to replace it with a posture of pure trust in a God who justifies the ungodly. The chapter is addressed to a specific pride structure: the assumption that right standing with God is something achieved, merited, earned, or inherited through participation in a covenant community. God is seeking to produce in the reader a settled, grounded, humbled confidence that rests entirely in what God has declared and what God has done in Christ — not in what the reader has done, is doing, or belongs to. The closing portrait of Abraham’s faith (vv. 18–25) functions as a pastoral invitation: this is what faith looks like, this is the One faith is directed toward, and this is the declaration you receive when you trust Him.

Subject Sentence

Subject Sentence: Abraham’s justification by faith alone validates and grounds the gospel’s universal offer.

Primary Claim

Primary Claim: God is calling every reader to abandon every ground of confidence before Him except faith alone — because Abraham, the father of the faithful, was counted righteous by God through faith alone, long before circumcision and the Law, which means the gospel’s promise of justification is equally available to all who trust the God who raises the dead and who raised Jesus our Lord.

Interpretive Evaluation

The central interpretive question: What does “counted to him as righteousness” mean?

The phrase *logizomai* (counted, reckoned, imputed) in verse 3 (quoting Genesis 15:6) is the exegetical center of the chapter and the site of the most significant hermeneutical divergence. The Reformed reading holds that this language is the vocabulary of imputation — God reckoning to Abraham’s account a righteousness that is not inherently Abraham’s own but is graciously credited to him. The parallel in verses 4–5 is decisive: Paul draws an explicit contrast between wages (what is owed as a result of work) and gift (what is reckoned to one who does not work but believes). This is not merely semantic — Paul is arguing that the *mechanism* of justification is non-meritorious from the ground up. God’s counting is a sovereign, gracious declaration, not a recognition of existing moral achievement. The Reformed verdict: imputation is not an inference drawn from the text but the explicit logic of the text.

Roman Catholic reading — faith formed by love (*fides caritate formata*)

The Tridentine tradition reads “counted as righteousness” as the beginning of a process by which the believer is made internally righteous through infused grace. Faith is the starting point, but righteousness must be progressively formed in the believer through charity and cooperation. On this reading, justification is transformative rather than declarative, and “righteousness” refers to the believer’s actual moral condition before God as it develops. This reading **must be refuted** on textual grounds: Paul’s argument in verses 4–8 depends entirely on the *distinction* between what is earned through work and what is received through grace. If justification is a process of internal moral transformation that the believer cooperates with, Paul’s contrast collapses — “wages” and “gift” would blend into each other. The quotation from Psalm 32:1–2 (vv. 7–8) reinforces the declarative character: the blessing is the *non-imputation* of sin — a forensic act of not-counting, not an act of moral infusion. The Catholic reading cannot account for this without significant reinterpretation.

New Perspective on Paul (NPP) — “works of the Law” as ethnic boundary markers

Scholars associated with the New Perspective (Dunn, Wright, Sanders) argue that “works of the Law” in Paul primarily refers not to moralistic self-achievement but to the Jewish identity markers that distinguished Jews from Gentiles — circumcision, food laws, Sabbath observance. On this reading, Paul’s polemic against “works” is primarily sociological: he is dismantling ethnic exclusivism, not condemning moral striving before God. The NPP correctly identifies that Romans 4 has an explicit social and ethnic dimension — Paul argues that Abraham is father of uncircumcised Gentiles as well as circumcised Jews (vv. 9–12), and the passage clearly addresses Jewish privilege and ethnic boasting. This sociological dimension should be **acknowledged**: it is genuinely present and often underweighted in purely individualistic readings. However, the NPP reading must be **qualified** significantly: Paul’s argument in verses 4–5 is not primarily ethnic but universally soteriological. The contrast between working and believing, between wages and gift, operates at the level of *any* human before God — not merely the Jew/Gentile distinction. The “ungodly” in verse 5 is not an ethnic category. Furthermore, verses 18–25 close the chapter with a universal portrait of faith directed at God’s life-giving power — not a resolution of an ethnic boundary problem but a statement about what it means for any human to stand rightly before the Creator. The Reformed reading holds both dimensions: the ethnic and the universal, with the universal primary.

Lutheran reading — Law/Gospel contrast

Lutheran exposition has historically read Romans 4 as a key text in the Law/Gospel dialectic: the Law exposes and condemns; the Gospel alone justifies. This emphasis aligns closely with the Reformed reading on the core point — justification is by grace through faith apart from works. The difference lies in how the Law functions in the *ordo salutis* and in Luther’s more extreme rejection of the Law’s ongoing role in the believer’s life (third use of the Law). For the purposes of Romans 4, the Lutheran reading is substantially convergent with the Reformed reading and represents a **genuine insight**: the Law/Gospel contrast in verses 13–15 is genuinely central to Paul’s argument — the Law produces wrath, not

inheritance, and this is why promise must come through faith. This emphasis deserves full weight in exposition.

Arminian/Wesleyan reading — foreknown faith as the basis of justification

Some Arminian readings of “counted to him as righteousness” understand God’s reckoning as a response to foreknown faith — God justifies those whom He foresees will believe. This reading preserves the “faith alone” formula but relocates its logic: faith is the condition God foresees and responds to, rather than the gift God sovereignly grants. The text itself does not support the foreknowledge apparatus: Paul’s argument draws no distinction between the origin of faith and its exercise. More critically, the portrait of Abraham’s faith in verses 18–25 presents a man whose faith is directed entirely at God’s sovereign power to do what is humanly impossible — “he considered his own body, which was as good as dead.” The faith Paul commends is trust in God’s sovereign life-giving power, not a capacity Abraham exercises that God then recognizes. The **Reformed verdict**: faith is itself God’s gift, and justification flows from God’s declaration, not from God’s recognition of a prior human capacity.

Key Canonical Support

Key Canonical Support:

- **Genesis 15:1–6** — The source text for verse 3: God’s covenant with Abram, the darkness, the torch, and the promise of descendants as numerous as the stars. The context of Genesis 15 is crucial — Abram is terrified, nearly despairing, asking God “what will you give me?” God’s “counting” of Abram’s faith as righteousness occurs in the context of God making a unilateral oath. Paul’s use of this text carries the full weight of the covenant context.
- **Psalms 32:1–2** — Paul’s second witness (vv. 7–8): “Blessed is the one whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sin is covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” David’s blessing-language is forensic — it concerns the non-imputation of transgression, confirming that Paul’s “counting” language is declarative, not transformative.
- **Habakkuk 2:4** — “The righteous shall live by his faith” — the text Paul cites in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11, establishing the faith-righteousness principle as the backbone of Old Testament soteriology and not a Pauline innovation.
- **Galatians 3:6–29** — Paul’s parallel argument in Galatians: Abraham believed God, it was counted to him as righteousness, therefore those who are of faith are Abraham’s sons. Galatians develops the Abrahamic covenant as the instrument through which Gentile blessing comes, and ties it directly to the promise of the

Spirit through Christ — providing the christological completion of Romans 4’s argument.

- **Hebrews 11:8–19** — The portrait of Abraham’s faith in Hebrews 11 — obedience to the call, sojourning in a foreign land, trusting God’s promise of a son, willingness to sacrifice Isaac “considering that God was able even to raise him from the dead.” Hebrews 11 provides the canonical commentary on the faith-anatomy Paul describes in Romans 4:18–25, grounding the life-from-the-dead motif in the actual history of Abraham’s testing.

Aim

Aim: To demonstrate from Abraham’s own history that justification has always been God’s gracious declaration received through faith alone — and to call every reader to rest their entire standing before God in Christ’s accomplished righteousness rather than in any religious, ethnic, moral, or ritual ground of their own.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
4:1	Paul raises the rhetorical question: What has Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, found?	Introduces Abraham as the test case for justification by faith; “according to the flesh” signals the coming argument against ethnic/works ground
4:2	If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about — but not before God	The conditional is important: Paul does not concede that Abraham <i>was</i> justified by works; the “but not before God” is the pivot
4:3	Scripture says: “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6)	The controlling citation — <i>logizomai</i> (counted/reckoned/imputed) is the key word; Paul will return to it repeatedly
4:4–5	Workers receive wages as what is owed; but to one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, faith is counted	The explicit contrast between wage-earning and gift-receiving; “justifies the ungodly” is a stunning phrase — God’s justifying

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	as righteousness	activity is directed at the ungodly, not the deserving
4:6–8	David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works (Ps 32:1–2)	Second witness alongside Abraham; the blessing is defined negatively — non-imputation of sin — confirming the forensic/declarative character of justification
4:9	Is this blessing on the circumcised or also on the uncircumcised?	Paul shifts from the <i>nature</i> of justification (by faith, not works) to its <i>scope</i> (who has access?)
4:10	When was it counted? Not after but before circumcision	The chronological argument: Genesis 15 precedes Genesis 17 (circumcision) by approximately 14 years; Abraham was justified as an uncircumcised Gentile
4:11a	He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness he had by faith while still uncircumcised	Circumcision is the <i>seal</i> of an already-existing righteousness, not the ground of it; the sign follows the reality
4:11b–12	The purpose: that he would be father of all who believe without circumcision (Gentiles) and father of the circumcised who also walk in the steps of Abraham's faith	Abraham's dual fatherhood — ethnic Israel and believing Gentiles both trace their spiritual lineage to the pre-circumcision Abraham-by-faith
4:13	The promise to Abraham (heir of the world) was not through the Law but through the righteousness of faith	Third argument shift: from works/faith and circumcision/uncircumcision, now to Law/promise
4:14	If those of the Law are heirs, faith is null and the promise void	Reductio ad absurdum: Law-based inheritance destroys the promise structure entirely
4:15	The Law brings wrath; where there is no law there is no	The Law's function in redemptive history: it

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	transgression	multiplies transgression and produces wrath, not inheritance
4:16	Therefore the promise is by faith, so that it may be by grace and guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring — not just the Law but also those of the faith of Abraham, the father of us all	The logical conclusion: faith-basis = grace-basis = certainty for all; the three-way connection (faith / grace / guaranteed) is one of Paul's most compressed doctrinal statements
4:17a	"I have made you the father of many nations" — in the presence of God, in whom he believed	The promise of Genesis 17:5 invoked; Abraham is father of nations <i>before God</i> — this is a theological reality, not a biological one
4:17b	God gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist	The character of God as the object of Abraham's faith: the God of creation and resurrection — this frames the anatomy of faith that follows
4:18	Against hope, in hope he believed — that he would become father of many nations	"Against hope, in hope" — faith's paradoxical structure; not optimism but trust in God's word against all visible evidence
4:19	He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body (as good as dead) and Sarah's barrenness	The physical reality is not ignored — Abraham looked at the evidence squarely; faith is not denial
4:20	He did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God	Faith as active, growing confidence; "giving glory to God" — faith glorifies God precisely by trusting what only God can do
4:21	He was fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised	The anatomy of faith: full conviction of God's ability and faithfulness to His own word
4:22	Therefore it was counted to	The <i>logizomai</i> returns — completing the circle

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
4:23–24	him as righteousness The words “it was counted” were not written for Abraham’s sake alone but for ours — who believe in him who raised Jesus from the dead	opened in v. 3 The canonical bridge: Genesis 15:6 was <i>prospective</i> Scripture, written for the benefit of future believers; our faith-object is explicitly the resurrection of Christ
4:25	Jesus was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification	The christological ground of justification: the cross as the basis (propitiation) and the resurrection as the declaration (justification secured and announced)

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	4:1–8	Abraham Justified by Faith, Not Works: The Principle Established
2	4:9–12	Abraham Justified Before Circumcision: The Scope Determined
3	4:13–17	The Promise Through Faith, Not Law: The Ground Secured
4	4:18–22	The Anatomy of Abraham’s Faith: The Pattern Displayed
5	4:23–25	Written for Our Sake: The Pattern Applied to Christ

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Abraham’s justification by faith alone validates and grounds the gospel’s universal offer.

Primary Claim: God is calling every reader to abandon every ground of confidence before Him except faith alone — because Abraham, the father of the faithful, was counted righteous by God through faith alone, long before circumcision and the Law, which means

the gospel's promise of justification is equally available to all who trust the God who raises the dead and who raised Jesus our Lord.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine what you are actually trusting for your standing before God. (*Mind/belief*)

Paul's argument dismantles not just circumcision and the Mosaic Law as grounds of justification — it dismantles every equivalent structure: moral track record, church membership, baptism, consistent quiet times, family heritage, years of ministry, absence of gross sin. Any form of "I am accepted by God because I have done, am doing, or belong to X" is the precise structure Paul refutes. Abraham's faith was counted as righteousness precisely because he trusted God rather than anything he had done or participated in. The reader should stop and honestly ask: when I consider my standing before God, where does my confidence actually live? In my performance or in Christ's righteousness credited to me?

2. Rest in the assurance that justification is by declaration, not by process.

(*Affections/worship*)

The language of *logizomai* — reckoned, counted, credited — is the language of a completed, settled transaction. God does not begin a long process of making you progressively more acceptable to Him. He declares you righteous in Christ at the moment of faith. This should produce a profound, settled peace — not complacency, but the peace of a man who knows his trial has concluded with a verdict of acquittal. Many Christians live under a constant low-grade anxiety that they have not yet become good enough to be sure of God's acceptance. Romans 4 refuses this. If Abraham — who lied twice about his wife, fathered Ishmael in unbelief, and laughed at the promise — was counted righteous by God through faith, then your standing does not depend on the quality of your subsequent obedience. Rest in this.

3. Trust God's word and character over visible, contrary evidence. (*Will/behavior*)

The portrait of Abraham's faith in verses 18–22 is not an abstract theological description — it is a pastoral model. Abraham "considered his own body, which was as good as dead." He looked at the evidence. He did not pretend it was not there. And then, against all visible hope, he trusted what God had said. There is a specific form this application takes in the reader's life: the promise you are tempted to abandon because nothing appears to be happening, the situation that looks biologically, financially, relationally, or spiritually impossible. Abraham's faith is not a mood or a feeling — it is full conviction of God's ability to do what He has promised. The reader should identify the specific promise they are walking away from because the evidence looks too discouraging, and return to the God who "calls into existence things that do not exist."

4. Receive Abraham as your father by faith, not by birth. (*Mind/belief*)

Paul's argument that Abraham is the father of "all who believe without being circumcised" means that every believer in Christ — regardless of ethnicity, background, or prior religious identity — has the same access to the same covenant promise through the same faith. This is not a secondary or consolation status for Gentile believers: Paul says the pre-circumcision Abraham was specifically declared father of *those who follow in the steps of his faith*. If you trust the God who raised Jesus, Abraham is your father. The covenant is your inheritance. The promise is yours. Do not live as a theological orphan when you have been given the entire household. This has direct implications for how the reader approaches Scripture: the Old Testament is not someone else's history — it is your family history.

5. Worship the God who raises the dead — and place your dead situations before Him.
(*Affections/worship*)

The God in whom Abraham believed is explicitly described in verse 17 as the One who "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." Paul is not describing a generic divine attribute — he is naming the precise character of the God who is the object of justifying faith. And he makes the connection explicit in verses 24–25: we believe in Him who raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection of Christ is the definitive act of the life-giving God. This means the reader does not merely believe *about* resurrection — they place their whole confidence in the God whose most characteristic act is giving life to what is dead. The congregation should be moved to specific worship of God as the God of resurrection, and to actively bringing their dead places — dead relationships, dead hope, dead vocational dreams, dead spiritual vitality — before the God who makes the dead live.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Romans 4 establishes that justification by faith is not a Pauline novelty but the covenant pattern God established with Abraham before circumcision, before the Law, and before the nation of Israel existed. This means the righteousness of God through faith in Christ (3:21–22) is the fulfillment of an original covenant design, not a revision of it. The passage also clarifies the mechanism of justification: *logizomai* — the reckoning or crediting of righteousness — is forensic and declarative, not transformative or processual. God counts the believer righteous; He does not begin a process by which the believer earns increasing acceptance. The character of God as the one who "justifies the ungodly" (v. 5) and who "gives life to the dead" (v. 17) is both the theological ground and the devotional object of the passage — justification is not merely a legal category but an expression of God's sovereign life-giving power exercised toward sinners who have no standing of their own.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Romans 4 is the Old Testament proof of the Reformation's central claim: *sola fide*. Calvin, Luther, and the Westminster Standards all ground imputed righteousness in this chapter's *logizomai* language — God reckons to the believer what is not inherently theirs, namely the righteousness of Christ, and this reckoning is the sole ground of justification. The passage also displays the covenantal structure central to Reformed theology: Abraham's faith does not merely precede circumcision chronologically — it demonstrates that the covenant of grace has always been one covenant, operating on one principle (grace through faith), across both Testaments. The Law does not introduce a different mechanism of salvation; it functions to expose sin and drive toward promise. Verses 23–25 provide the clearest statement in the chapter of the gospel as the engine of justification: Christ delivered up for trespasses and raised for justification means that the imputed righteousness the reader receives is grounded in Christ's atoning work and vindicated by His resurrection. The Reformation doctrine of justification is not a late medieval imposition on the text — it is the text's own argument.

Main Takeaway

Main Takeaway: Abraham was counted righteous before he was circumcised, before the Law existed, and in spite of a body that was as good as dead — because he trusted the word of the God who gives life to the dead. That is still the only way anyone stands before God. Not by what you have done, not by what community you belong to, not by the quality of your religious life — but by trusting the God who raised Jesus from the dead and who, on that basis alone, counts you righteous. Stop building your confidence on ground that cannot hold. The verdict is already in for everyone who believes.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Treating Romans 4 as a historical biography rather than a live doctrinal argument.** The danger is reducing the chapter to “learn from Abraham's great faith” — turning it into a character study or a motivational portrait of a faith hero. This is precisely the anti-moralism principle Clowney warns against: “be like Abraham” is not the point. Paul invokes Abraham as a *legal witness* in a judicial argument about justification. Abraham's faith is not commended so that readers can emulate it as a virtue — it is presented as the pattern that demonstrates how God has always operated. The preacher must resist every impulse to make Abraham the hero. God is the hero; Abraham is the evidence.

- **Missing the “justifies the ungodly” bombshell in verse 5.** This phrase is one of the most theologically explosive statements in the New Testament, and it routinely gets passed over. In the entire Old Testament, God commands Israel *not* to justify the wicked (Exodus 23:7; Proverbs 17:15). Yet here Paul declares that the God in whom Abraham believed is precisely “him who justifies the ungodly.” This is not a contradiction — it is the gospel: God can justify the ungodly because Christ has absorbed the condemnation of the ungodly. Failing to dwell on this phrase leaves the congregation without the starkest possible statement of grace in the chapter.
- **Soft-pedaling the forensic/declarative character of justification.** Under pressure to avoid controversy or to seem pastorally warm, preachers sometimes blur the line between justification (declaration) and sanctification (transformation), treating “counted righteous” as “beginning to become righteous.” This is not a minor technical distinction — Paul’s entire argument in verses 4–8 hangs on the *wage/gift* contrast, which only works if justification is a declaration, not a process. The congregation that does not understand that justification is a completed verdict, not an ongoing process, will be unable to rest in the assurance Romans 4 is designed to produce. Clarity here is a pastoral necessity, not a doctrinal luxury.
- **Presenting Abraham’s faith as an achievement rather than as trust in an achieving God.** Verses 18–22 describe the *anatomy* of faith — “he did not weaken,” “he did not waver,” “he grew strong.” These phrases can easily be moralized into a model of heroic willpower. But Paul’s point is precisely that Abraham’s faith was great *because its object was great*: a God who gives life to the dead. The faith described is not Abraham’s iron determination — it is Abraham’s full conviction of God’s ability. Preaching the anatomy of faith without insisting that the object of faith is the whole point will produce self-improvement religion rather than gospel confidence.
- **Failing to make the canonical bridge of verses 23–25 the landing point.** Paul explicitly states that Genesis 15:6 was “not written for his sake alone” but for ours. The chapter does not end with Abraham — it ends with the resurrection of Jesus as the object of the same faith Abraham exercised. Many expositions treat verses 23–25 as a closing tag rather than the homiletical destination. In fact, verses 23–25 are where Paul makes the whole argument land in the congregation’s own moment: you believe in the same God, the same promise, the same faith-pattern — and the resurrection of Christ is the definitive act that proves God can do exactly what He promised. The preacher should spend significant time here.
- **Underweighting the social/ethnic dimension while overweighting the purely individual dimension.** Romans 4 is addressed to a mixed Jewish-Gentile congregation in Rome in which status questions and ethnic pride were live issues (see Romans 14–15 for the pastoral context). Paul’s argument that Abraham is father of both the circumcised and uncircumcised was not a tidy doctrinal point — it was a demolition of a specific superiority structure operating in the congregation.

Preaching that ignores this dimension will miss the horizontal implications of justification by faith: if all stand before God on identical ground, the congregational pride structures, social hierarchies, and insider/outsider dynamics that mirror the Jew/Gentile problem in Rome cannot survive. Justification by faith alone is not only personally humbling — it is communally leveling.