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MAKING SENSE OF PAUL

Pick any whole number. I recommend picking a number less than 13. Now, if you picked 4, add up the first 4 odd numbers: $1+3+5+7$. If your number was 7, add up the first 7 odd numbers: $1+3+5+7+9+11+13$. You will find this sum is just the square of your original number. For example $1+3+5+7 = 16$, which is 4 squared ($4 \times 4 = 16$).

Now, the above description is worthwhile at some level because it works. You could add up the first 55 odd numbers ($1+3+\dots+107+109$) and find that their sum is $55 \times 55 = 3025$. On the other hand, it is not completely satisfying if it isn't clear to you *why* it works.

You might find my position regarding Paul's use of *saved* similar. In the last section of chapter four, I gave evidence that Paul did not have eternal Judgment in mind when he spoke of being **saved** or **justified**. There I cited passages indicating four reasons:

- Paul, like Christ, warns that sinners are in danger of hell, including those who already believe.
- Paul, like Christ, indicates that all are judged in the same way, with no partiality shown toward believers.
- Paul uses the phrase **received the Spirit** in the same way that he uses the term **saved**.
- Several verses would contradict each other if Paul viewed present salvation as intimately linked to deliverance from hell.

While you may well be happy accepting my position (it does, after all, adhere to the understanding of salvation shared by the Jewish writers of the New Testament and has Orthodoxy beaten hands down in the biblical-consistency department), you might feel a bit like a typical male in a wallpaper store. When someone asks you what color you want, you know the correct answer (i.e., what-

ever your wife told you)...but you don't know *why* it's the best match for your ~~shartroose chartruse~~ ...greenish-yellow couch.

Paul is hard to understand. It doesn't help that Romans, which everyone quotes, has some of the Bible's most inscrutable language. Nor does it help that Paul, in the educated style of his day, uses as few words as possible to get across his point, expecting the reader to fill in the gaps as necessary. The real problem, though, is that not everyone appreciates the setting of Paul's evangelism. I will discuss four keys to understanding how his writing's context should influence our interpretation. Since huge tomes have been written on Paul, you'll forgive me if I stick mainly to those items pertaining most directly to salvation.

Key 1: Understanding *Works of the Law*

Paul uses the phrase **Works of the Law** *a lot*. What does he mean?

What He Does Not Mean

The clause **no one is justified by the works of the Law** (*Galatians 2:16* and *Romans 3:20,28*) has for centuries been used to attack "works-righteousness." The church has taken **no one is justified by the works of the Law** and turned it into, "You cannot pass the Judgment through good deeds because God requires perfection, which none of us attains."

We look at three reasons why this extrapolation makes no sense:

1. Paul is not talking about perfection.
2. Paul is not talking about the Judgment.
3. Paul is not talking about good deeds!

Perfection

Paul cannot refer to the impossibility of perfection. To the 1st-century Jewish mind, it was, in fact, possible to be blameless. Their understanding of "blameless" and ours are very different. Paul calls himself blameless (with respect to the Jewish law) in *Philippians 3:6* and Luke writes the same thing about Elizabeth and Zechariah in *Luke 1:6*. There's no talk anywhere of perfection or how a single sin makes an individual unrighteous.

Final Judgment

Paul is not speaking of the Final Judgment in these passages. Even the Pharisees did not universally claim that only Jews “made it” through God’s Judgment. This was a point of great debate, and some sects believed non-Jews had a stake in the World to Come. A couple centuries after Christ, this would become the official belief of Rabbinical Judaism. The Talmud, the collection of rabbinic discussions that became central to Judaism after the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, decrees that all monotheists who keep the seven Noahide Laws have a place in the *O’lam Ha-Ba*.

You won’t find Paul speaking of the Judgment anywhere around these verses. When Paul alludes to items in the past, they all relate to God’s eternal plan to bless the world by exalting Christ. When discussing the present, he refers to the spiritual transformation of those in Christ.

Paul is concerned about the spiritual enslavement of people caused by rebellion against God and about the spiritual freedom to righteousness given to those who believe in Christ. In Paul’s theology, the Law causes spiritual death because someone who knows God’s commands and breaks them is actively rebelling against God, which enslaves him or her to sin. Christ breaks believers free of this enslavement and protects them from re-enslavement.

When Paul writes of the Judgment, his take is very different. *Romans 2:5–16* presents a version of the Judgment so different from how people interpret *Romans 3:10–26* that some commentators have claimed the text in *Romans 2* presents Paul’s hypothetical picture of the Judgment had Christ never come!

What Deeds are These?

The most interesting point, though, is that Paul is not referring to doing good deeds. He is referring to the Mosaic law. In particular, he means *those aspects of the Mosaic law that are not part of the Spiritual law of the new covenant*. Paul’s point, generally speaking, is that Gentile believers are bound to a law written on their hearts and have nothing to gain (but everything to lose!) by following any additional ordinance. This means that the object of Paul’s attack is as far away from “good deeds” as one could imagine, for the spiritual Law (which believers are bound to: *Romans 7:6*; *1st Corinthians 9:21*; and *Galatians 6:2*) is all about doing good.

Just look at the examples Paul uses. When describing the **works of the Law** he is attacking, he never refers to anything that we would consider a “good deed.” He refers mostly to circumcision, and in other verses to Jewish dietary restrictions, observance of special festival days, Sabbaths, and other items of the

Mosaic law whose purpose was to separate Jew and Gentiles.¹ In other words, he is attacking the very things that built the **wall of partition** (*Ephesians 2:14*) between Jews and Gentiles: the **decrees opposed to us** from *Colossians 2:14*.

Romans 3:28–29 puts to rest any thought that Paul has good works in mind when saying people should not put their confidence in **works of the Law**:

For we consider a person is declared righteous by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles?

If Paul had “good deeds” in mind, this statement makes no sense — Jews and Gentiles alike can do good deeds. But if Paul refers to those items of the Mosaic law that separated the Jews as God’s special people, then this passage makes complete sense. Another verse that crystalizes this is *1st Corinthians 7:19* — **Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Instead, keeping God’s commandments is what counts.** How is it possible to read that as attacking legalism?

Paul’s point is that God’s grace does not depend on race or previous covenants. To understand why this is so important, you need to know some church history.

The Jerusalem Council

Originally the Christian church is entirely Jewish. After Peter and Paul have their visions, Gentiles are evangelized, but the Jewish church leadership does not know what to do with them. (We see Judaism today as a separate religion. To the original believers, Christianity was simply *authentic Judaism* — Christ was the *Jewish Messiah*, after all. Paul calls believers members of the **true circumcision** in *Philippians 3:3*.) Friction arises between the “old Jews” and the “new Jews” (Gentile believers). Gentiles are seen as grafted-on branches, and many Jewish Christians try to force the “new Jews” to keep the Mosaic law.

Paul disagrees with those who think Gentiles must follow the cultural provisions of the Law. He spends great energy fighting them, even publicly opposing Peter in *Galatians 2:11*. The apostles hold a council to consider the situation and ultimately choose to enforce only three Jewish laws upon the Gentiles:

- They should not eat meat sacrificed to idols.
- They should not drink blood or eat anything strangled.
- They should adhere to the sexual code of the Mosaic law.

¹*Romans 2:25; 3:1; 14:5; 1st Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 2:11–13; 4:10; 5:2–6,11; 6:15; 1st Corinthians 8:8; and Colossians 2:16–23*

Acts 15 describes the proceedings in detail: the events leading up to convocation, the purpose of the council, and the outcome. *Acts 15* is foundational to understanding the context Paul wrote within, and I urge you to read it carefully.

The apostles only discuss the Mosaic law (*Acts 15:1*), not the general idea of “doing God’s will.” Certainly other requirements would join these were the council dictating a complete code of conduct. The apostles see these three rules as extending to all believers, even if they are not readily apparent parts of God’s *natural* law. Peter’s wording in verse 15 has a double meaning, for the term **yoke** refers to the restrictions a rabbi would set as his interpretation of the Mosaic law. The Mosaic law says **honor the Sabbath**, but the rabbis told people the specific requirements. Some might say you could walk up to 2000 cubits on the Sabbath, others might say 1000 cubits, etc.

Not Under the Law?

I often hear people claim they are “not under the law, but under grace,” as though Paul is saying we no longer have to worry about our eternal security. I hope the above sections make it clear that Paul is not saying we are exempt from God’s commandments. Paul quite clearly refers to the *Mosaic* law the Judaizers were pressing on Gentiles, and only those parts that are not in the Spiritual law, which Paul sums up as **love your neighbor** in *Galatians 5:14*.

Any notion that disobedience no longer carries danger should be vanquished by Paul’s concern for sinning believers in *1st Corinthians 6:8–11* and *Ephesians 5:4–5*. They mirror warnings conveyed in *Hebrews 2:2–3* and *10:26–27*. In each case the author writes to genuine believers. The readers in Corinth have already been **washed, sanctified** and **justified**. In *Ephesians* he writes to people God has forgiven through Christ (4:32). The writer of *Hebrews* engages those who have **received the knowledge of the truth** and have **hearts sprinkled clean**. Paul’s caution that believers who go against their conscience do so toward their own **destruction** in *1st Corinthians 8:11* and *Romans 14:15* should give anyone pause, as should Jesus’ words to His followers in *Mark 9:43–50*.

Further, there’s no indication in *2nd Corinthians 5:10*; *Romans 2:6–16*; or *Colossians 3:25* that God judges believers any differently than non-believers, which brings Paul’s version of the Judgment in line with how Jesus repeatedly portrayed it. Strikingly, Paul shows some concern for his own fate in these matters (*1st Corinthians 9:27* and *Acts 24:15–16*).

Separate from these, there is the danger that those who do not obey the law of the Spirit will lose it, as indicated in *Romans 6:12–16*; *Romans 8:12–13*; *2nd Peter 2:20–21*; and Jesus’ exhortation to the disciples in *John 15:10*.

Key 2: Salvation — Being in Christ

Paul depicts salvation history both as a drawn-out plan to bless humanity (*Romans 9:1-11:36*) and a long-foreknown plan to bless Christ (*Galatians 3:16*).

1st Timothy 2:5 describes Christ as the *only* mediator of the new covenant, so all people must come to God the same way. But to Paul, Jesus was not merely reconciling sinners to God, but rather all things in the world to each other. Humans, angels, animals, heaven, and earth were all being reconciled because they were all being brought under a single Master. Christ, that Master, would later subordinate Himself and all things to God so that God can be **all in all**.²

Spiritual Salvation

All things have been given unto Christ due to His obedience, and through Him those who die to the world to live in Him are blessed by His calling us out of desolate unbelief — just as Moses brought the Israelites out of slavery and idolatry. The Holy Spirit is the celebrated proof and preserver of this calling.³ To a faithful Jew like Paul, who knew the history of his people, the transformation wrought by the Spirit was the perfect gift from God. Israel's history was a study in the weakness of human flesh, the tendency for selfish desires to dominate us.

Paul's agony as a faithful Jew before coming to faith is nearly palpable in *Romans 7:13-25*. He describes how this condition, this spiritual death, arose through Adam's rebellion against God. This weakness passed down to all, even to those who had no specific law to rebel against (*Romans 5:13-14*). The Mosaic law, which might have curbed sin had our flesh been stronger, made the situation all the worse. Israel, in failing to keep the Law, multiplied the rebellion that had caused their weakness in the first place.

Paul uses a special word, *katákrima*, to refer to humanity's abject condition after Adam's sin, dominated by self. Most Bibles translate it the same way they do the more common term *krima* — **condemnation**. The difference is that *katákrima* has in mind not only the verdict but the consequences. **Condemnation** in this sense suggests one is *already* "serving time." It is thus a good word to refer to the spiritually imprisoned state of humanity after Adam's rebellion, the same way the term is used twice in *Romans 5:16-18*.

This last example (8:1) is often misunderstood. Paul says **there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus** and unpacks it like a *matryoshka* doll through the next several verses, ending at 8:7-8.

²*Romans 5:8; Galatians 3:8; Ephesians 1:10; 2:12-20; Colossians 1:15-20; 3:11; 1st Corinthians 8:6; 1st Corinthians 15:24-28*

³*Galatians 3:22; 4:6; and Romans 8:14-16*

Those who are not in Christ are still in bondage, unable to subject themselves to God's rule. It is the same message as in *Romans 6:6–8*, which shows why baptism is crucial to Paul, for it joins us to Christ in His death. Jesus wore the same weak flesh we do, and in His resurrection this flesh was transformed. We, by sharing in Christ's death, attain a likeness of His resurrected state as our flesh, while still weak, no longer dominates us. This model where Jesus' *resurrection* causes our genuine righteousness allows *Romans 4:25*⁴ to make sense as written. Modern dogma, where Jesus' *sacrifice* is the key to everything, trips over this verse, causing commentators to say Paul is just being poetic there.

Paul's perspective makes perfect sense given his own Jewish heritage. Ancient Jewish rabbis claimed that we have two masters while alive — God and our evil inclinations. Ancient Jews thought that when we die we are no longer enslaved to evil inclinations, so we are free to serve only God. Jesus' teaching that we can not **serve two masters** in *Luke 16:13* would have extra meaning to His Jewish audience. Through Christ's death (and the work of the Holy Spirit) we are free to serve as one who has already died.⁵ Indeed, this is how Paul repeatedly calls us to see ourselves; for example, see *Romans 6:13*. In other words, *the life we live in Christ is an opportunity to live the life of the next era today.*

Imperial Salvation

But Christ's reign does not begin in the next era. Christ is already King, and saying **Jesus is Lord** for a 1st-century citizen of the Roman Empire was a good deal different than saying it today. While we can grasp at the political persecution saying "Jesus is Lord (and Caesar is not)" might invite, we have a harder time understanding its full meaning.

The emperor of Rome was not only the political leader; he was also a type of god (with his own religion) and a source of providence in an era when self-empowerment and independence did not flourish. People put their confidence in Caesar to meet their needs and defend them. Paul's depiction of Jesus as King is not merely a reference to authority or the requirement that we do His will. It is also an indication of *where we put our confidence*. To rely on Jesus, when others relied on the empire or the temple, required a courage we have a hard time understanding today. Perhaps Paul would tell modern Christians not to put their confidence in their jobs, politics, mortgaged homes, or retirement accounts.

⁴ He was given over because of our transgressions and was raised for the sake of our justification.

⁵Dr. R. Moseley claims a similar lesson in Paul's marriage metaphor (*Romans 7:1–7*). I am indebted to his citing of ancient Hebrew expert David Flusser on this topic.

Seeking theological rigor by asking *Confidence of what?* misses the point. This is not *confidence my sins are forgiven* or *confidence that He can save me from hell*. Such philosophies treat Christ as an expedient rather than a King. The confidence is *if I serve Him, things will be okay*. It is the confidence children have in their parents. We follow Christ because He is the risen Lord; we find our security in knowing His love for mankind and His power to bless.

This is one reason Paul reacts so violently against those who press the Law upon Gentiles. He sees this as putting confidence in the Mosaic covenant rather than in Jesus. Instead of trying to **perfect** ourselves via the Mosaic law, Paul writes in *Galatians 3:3*, we should put our confidence in Christ's transforming work. We **work out our salvation**, as Paul writes in *Philippians 2:2*, by following Christ's commands. Christ is conditioning us progressively into His image — and sometimes there are bumps in that program. In *Philippians 1:10; 2:12–15; 1st Corinthians 1:8*; and *Colossians 1:22–24* we are presented as **blameless** when our **love abounds**, when we **decide what is best, obey...doing everything without grumbling, remain firm** and have God **strengthen [our] hearts**.

We are not presented as **blameless** due to the faith that initially brings us into Christ, as though on the day of Judgment faith in Jesus is some magic soap that works retroactively. Christ is *working* creation into a blameless whole to present to God. There is no metaphysical transaction that removes our sins *on Judgment day*, for that was not the purpose of the atonement.⁶ Nor was there any need for this because Paul, like other early Christians, had no interest in decreeing to God how the Judgment *must* work.

Freedom and Slavery in Christ

I've already discussed how in Christ we are *free from sin* in that we are no longer dominated by our flesh, unable to naturally walk with God. We are free in another key way as well. Prior to Christ, God's people had 613 laws. These laws and their interpretations restricted and codified Jewish life in a way Americans, awash in religious liberty, can hardly understand. Rather than the priests and rabbis dictating our behavior, Christians are free to follow God based on Christ's counsel via the Spirit. As Matthew states in *Matthew 23:8*, **Do not be called Rabbi, for One is your teacher, and you are all brothers**.

In this way we are *freed from the Law*. We now have one master, one teacher, and one judge. This is the **freedom** Paul references in *Galatians 5:13*, **Do not use your freedom as an opportunity to indulge your flesh**. He certainly does not mean "you are free from having to worry about your sin, but

⁶*1st Corinthians 6:9–10; Ephesians 5:5; and Colossians 3:5–6*

you should still not sin.” He refers to the idea that each believer is responsible for her own conscience, decisions, and actions. This idea runs through much of Paul’s writings: see *1st Corinthians* 8:9–11; 10:29; *Romans* 7:6; 14:5; and *1st Timothy* 1:9.

The slaveries of the new covenant come from the freedoms. We have been freed from slavery to self to be enslaved to Christ. We live as a new creation in Christ. We crucified our old self to gain the new creation we walk in today. This not only means that Christ is our new master, but that our service is not a choice. This service is not optional — we do not *choose* to do God’s work. Rather it is the natural outworking of a new creation. As Paul describes in *1st Corinthians* 9:16, we are **compelled** to serve. Our service is not “above and beyond” our calling. We cannot boast in our service because it is nothing more than what is expected and reasonable as slaves to Christ. We have nothing to boast in for God has given us everything — even the freedom we have to serve.

But this slavery should not be taken as a suggestion that we have nothing to lose by failing to serve. Nor does it imply that God ignores our actions when evaluating us. Any reading of the longer passage from which *1st Corinthians* 9:16 is taken should dismiss these notions, especially verses 23–27.

Key 3: God’s Wrath

Most Christians do not think about the end times, and those who do generally focus on them a bit too much. 2000 years of waiting has thrust the end-time wrath, God’s wrath *before* the Judgment, to the back burner.

Early Christians certainly see things differently. They, as the Jews before, eagerly look forward to the coming **Day of the Lord**, when those who are persecuting them will suffer God’s justice. Second Thessalonians is written mostly to assure readers that *the day* has not yet come — they have not missed out. Paul also cautions them that *the day* may not be immediate, for some have simply stopped working and are waiting around idly.

Early Christians think their generation is a type of transition period. Jesus is coming soon to finish the transformation the Spirit began. This is why we read **the time is short** in *1st Corinthians* 7:29 and **the culmination of all things is near** in *1st Peter* 4:7. Christ will return with God’s physical wrath on the earth. It is this global wrath 1st-century believers are looking toward, for it will vindicate them over their oppressors. The Judgment is a completely separate event occurring much later, with several events taking place in between.

Paul's passages on the end times, as well as *Revelation*, suggest a combination of God's wrath and human persecution occurs. Then Christ returns to rule with those who were persecuted in His name (as well as any believers alive at that time). Then there's *another* round of God's wrath. Then everyone is resurrected. Then, and only then, does the grand Judgment occur.

Yet Another Problem for the Modern Gospel

The apostles of the 1st century thought Jesus was going to return very soon. Had they believed Christ's purpose was to deliver Christians from hell, it would mean they thought the vast majority of all people who ever lived had no hope, for they died before Jesus came. If this were true, there would have been exclamations of joy about how those of their era and locale were so fortunate as to have been in the right place at the right time.

If, conversely, those who came before Christ (that is, most people who had ever lived) did have some way to escape, there would be at least some indication of how faith in Christ was not required of *them*. The people who had access to Christ were the rare exception, not the other way around.

But we don't find anything like that at all, which makes perfect sense as the apostles were not building up grandiose theologies about how the Judgment worked, articulating rules God had to follow. Other than claiming that Jesus was the Judge and those who followed His commands would be rewarded, they had very little to say on the matter.

Key 4: Justification

I have purposely placed this section at the end because it is the most challenging. I promise not to tell anyone if you skip forward to chapter eleven and come back here later, though chapter eleven is no vat of tapioca pudding either!

Paul, like many modern pastors, often uses the term **justified**, particularly in stating we are **justified by faith**. What does he mean? This is another of those vague terms we use to make theology go down more smoothly. Some Bibles use the translation "declare righteous" instead, and the same word is translated **freed** in *Acts 13:39* and *Romans 6:7*.

The Greek term is **dikaioō**. Linguistically it should mean "to be made as one ought to be." The first part of the word means "to be as one ought." The **-oō** part normally means "to make." This is what the Holy Spirit does — it *makes us as we ought to be* by strengthening our spirit and informing our conscience to

do the will of God. It's useful to point out here that the related word translated **righteous** does not have the nuance of *never-ever-having-sinned-ever-in-your-life* that it is often spun to mean.

The Greeks came to use the term secularly to mean “affirming someone,” or “determining someone is acceptable.” This is how Jesus uses it in *Matthew 12:36*, **For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.** When Paul says . . . **the doers of the law will be justified** in *Romans 2:13*, this is how he is using the term. James agrees in *James 2:21–25*.

The word also refers to a type of self-defense: “to show that one is as one ought to be.” This is the sense of the term in *Luke 10:29*. N.T. Wright has suggested the term refers to demonstrating that one is in the covenant.

Evangelicals see justification as meaning “to declare righteous,” but not in the sense that we actually are righteous. Justification, in their view, allows a type of “alien righteousness” where our sins are placed on Jesus, and we are considered righteous based not on our own actions but on Jesus’.

Why so Difficult?

It's useful to see why coming to an understanding of Paul's meaning is so difficult. One way to see the issue is by noting all the variables.

Initial, Ongoing, or Final?

Is Paul talking about something that occurs when we first believe, something that happens while we live in belief, or something that occurs at the Judgment?

Global or Individual?

Is Paul discussing the justification of individuals or groups? For example, he refers to scripture **foreseeing** the gospel that God would **justify the Gentiles** in *Galatians 3:8*, and the condemnation in *Romans 3:10–19* (which appears to be a parallel to *Galatians 3:22*) is an indictment of Israel as a nation. On the other hand, Paul is certainly concerned about the actions of individuals being compelled to follow the Mosaic law.

What Faith?

What faith is meant here? Is it our faith *in God*, as described in *Romans 4:24* (and, *very interestingly* referred to in *James 2:19*), our faith *in Christ* as described in *Galatians 2:16*, or does Paul refer to *Christ's faithfulness*? The Greek for “faith in Christ” is the same as the Greek for “faith of Christ,” so several passages could be read in two different ways.

What Justification Might Mean

I'll be honest with you. I'm not certain what Paul means. It's hard to find a particular answer that makes sense when comparing scripture with scripture. In the end, we probably have to allow Paul to use the word more freely than we might deem responsible. After all, Paul was a proto-rabbinical 1st-century Jew writing to the masses. He uses the term **law** in at least five different ways within the book of Romans alone. It's quite possible that he reasons with individual believers about one type of justification using arguments that appeal to a different meaning when applied to the past. We must remember that Paul's *goal* takes priority over everything else. In his epistles, Paul's purpose lay in dealing with infighting within the church due to friction between Jews and Gentiles.

To be viable, it seems any theory on what Paul has in mind should make sense of three key things:

- His claim that justification is by faith
- His claim that justification is not by works of the Mosaic law
- His repeated use of *Genesis 15:6* as an example

One option that satisfies the above is the simplest one: Paul's point is that God determines our worth based on our faith. This is very different from our faith being used as a type of permission slip for God to transfer our sins to Jesus and Jesus' righteousness to us. Rather, the idea is that faith in God (rather than specific deeds) is the meter stick used to determine the merit of a person. This is what the Greek word meant in its common secular use.

While this simple idea has value, it is unlikely to make sense of all the ways Paul uses the term. I claim the linguistic definition of "to make as one ought to be" is an option worth considering. This is precisely what the Spirit does — it transforms us, turning spiritual death to spiritual life. Paul tips his hand in *Galatians 2:21* and *3:21* that he might mean this, speaking of how the law did not **give life**, and that righteousness could not come through the Law:

Galatians 3:2 **Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the Law or by believing what you heard?**

Galatians 3:16 **No one is justified by the works of the Law but by faith in Jesus Christ.**

This is a pretty powerful indication that justification is the work of the Spirit, which works to make us righteous (not merely "declares" us righteous).

This understanding of Justification satisfies the three bullet points I made above. The dependence on faith is obvious, for we receive the Spirit through faith. Furthermore, it was only through *Christ's faithfulness* that the Spirit could

come. Paul's reference to **works of the Law** not achieving this refers on a small scale to circumcision's cutting the flesh without transforming the heart. It also makes sense on a large scale because God's sending the Spirit was not contingent on Israel keeping the Law (as Paul points out in *Galatians 3:17*) and the Law was unable to transform Israel into a righteous nation.

To see the relevance of the third bullet point (Paul's repeated use of *Genesis 15:6*), you have to wrap yourself in the cultural fabric of the 1st century, where stories had a more central position in society than they do today. Thus, Paul can refer to a single verse from Abram's story to bring the entire narrative to the mind of the reader. In this sense, the use of "justify" in the Abram example referred to God's calling Abram from idolatry in *Genesis 12:1*, hence bringing him to righteousness completely by grace. It is still *faith* that is causing the justification, for as *Hebrews 11:8* points out, **By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, and he went out without understanding where he was going.**

Speaking of grace, Paul says justification is by the **gift** (e.g., *Romans 3:24; 5:15–16; and 6:23*). But what *gift* would Paul have in mind? To the apostles of the 1st century, **the gift** was the Spirit.⁷ Seeing justification as transformation *by the gift* matches Paul's focus on freedom from slavery. The rest of *Romans 3–8* is about spiritual death and life; why shouldn't justification be as well?

Paul's gospel revolved about the destruction of the wall between Gentile and Jew. The Jewish Christians in *Acts 11:18* said **So then, God has granted the repentance that leads to life even to the Gentiles.** That is a statement about transformation! *Calling* someone to repentance *makes* them righteous; it does not *declare* them to be debt-free. To live in repentance, to turn from ungodliness and live a life faithful to God, is to live righteously (*Ezekiel 18:27*).

The Jews in *Acts 11:18* are responding to the outpouring of the Spirit (*10:45*), proof that the Gentiles are being shown "The Way," just as they have.⁸ The Gentiles, kept out of God's special favor for millennia, are welcome in the new covenant. They are allowed **the life**, the **Promise**, the **gift** reserved for those children of Abraham God would call to righteousness (*Acts 2:39; 3:25–26*).

How does Paul refer to this *transformational* opening of **a door of faith for the Gentiles**, his gospel that the **Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus**?⁹ He says God is *justifying* them! Removing some rhetoric from *Galatians 3:7–14* we see this:

⁷*Acts 2:38; 8:30; 11:17; 10:45; Hebrews 6:4; 1st Timothy 4:14; and 2nd Timothy 1:6*

⁸**The Way** was the name of the earliest Christians, see *Acts 9:2*

⁹*Acts 14:27 and Ephesians 3:6*

So then, understand that those who believe are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, proclaimed the gospel to Abraham ahead of time. . . so then those who are by faith are blessed along with Abraham the believer. . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles, so that we could receive the promise of the Spirit by faith.

I've compacted this passage to show what Paul sees as justification and the purpose of Christ's death — that all who believe can receive the Spirit, which God promised would come to all sons of Abraham. The parts I've removed contrast the physical descendants of Abraham, who relied on the Mosaic covenant **law** to secure their identification with Abraham (and hence their share in the blessing upon his progeny), with the spiritual descendants of Abraham who secure this blessing by having the same **faith** Abraham did.

What Justification is Not

Having proffered two possible definitions for justification, I'd like to demonstrate problems with the standard model. Evangelicals claim believers attain an "alien righteousness" when God transfers their sins to Christ and transfers Christ's merit to them. The context is that perfection is required (even if it is contrived) to please God.

No Justification Through Works of the Law

The first problem with this idea, where we focus on God's appraisal rather than our transformation, is that the Bible states quite clearly that people can be righteous in God's sight by keeping whatever law they are given. Paul's own student, Luke, claims that Elizabeth and Zechariah **were both righteous in the sight of God, following all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly.** Paul describes himself as achieving the same type of righteousness in *Philippians 3:6*. Paul never claims this righteousness does not exist, but rather says it's a mere shadow of what he finds in Christ.

Before conversion, Paul was not concerned about his eternal security with God. He had, after all, kept the law available to him at the time. Rather, he yearned to be done with the anguish we see in *Romans 7:15–25*, and he found that balm in Christ. We could learn a thing or two from Paul.

Similarly, as described in chapter five, the Old Testament is replete with people who were righteous based on following the commands they were given,

without any mention of sacrifice. David's adultery and murder could not be covered with sacrifice, Noah lived before the sacrificial system was in place, and Rahab appears never to have converted to Judaism. The righteousness described over and over again in the Old Testament is not one accomplished by transfer of sin, which leads to the next problem.

No Transfer of Sin or Righteousness

Paul repeatedly refers to *Genesis 15:6* to illustrate that Abram was justified by faith and not works. But Paul's point is that Abram had not been circumcised or kept any other part of the Mosaic law, yet he was justified. The fundamental problem this passage poses for the modern definition of "justify" is that there is no transfer going on here. There's no transfer of sin discussed in the *Genesis* text, no transfer of sin discussed in Paul's description of the story in *Romans*, and no transfer mentioned in *Galatians*. Nor is the righteousness Abram is credited with transferred *from* anywhere. God seems perfectly content with judging Abram as righteous without having to withdraw that righteousness from somewhere else. It would be more reasonable to understand God *advancing* righteousness to Abram, who is *reckoned* a worthy investment. Faith here is like a credit rating describing whether someone will make good use of God's grace, likely to do God's work in the future (c.f. *Luke 14:28–34*).¹⁰

Not only is there no discussion of transfer in the original text or Paul's two commentaries on it, but there is obviously no place for sin to be transferred to. There is no sacrifice around to receive Abram's sin, and certainly no place to take righteousness from to deposit upon Abram. There is not even a mention of God forgiving Abram's past idolatry. ***God is not considering Abram righteous by ignoring, forgiving, or removing his past sins — not in the Genesis story, not in Romans, not in Galatians.***

The Problem of Unjustification

There is one more problem with the understanding of justification found in many branches of conservative Christianity: the possibility of losing it.

Several times Paul shows concern for those who have *already* been justified. Examples include *1st Corinthians 15:2*; *2nd Corinthians 6:1*; *Galatians 4:11*; and in particular *Galatians 5:1–4*. Outside of Paul's writing, there are several more clear examples of concern for someone gaining freedom in Christ and then losing it, like *2nd Peter 2:20–21*.

¹⁰I'm not claiming this as a general rule, but it complements the analogy in *Romans 4:4–5*. In any event, that illustrative analogy should not dominate our understanding of the term.

Many Christians believe that Christ's blood wipes away all the sins they will ever have (past, present, future) when they come to belief (or, in the case of Calvinists, even before). It's hard to see how someone can lose the benefit of justification if that justification involves transferring all the sins they will ever do to Christ. Peter says someone who believes and then falls away is in a worse state than before they believed. That is hard to understand unless God somehow reneges on the transfer and puts the sins back on the ex-believer. Similarly, if grace is found in having sins removed freely, then how does one **fall from grace** as Paul claims in *Galatians 5:4*? If freedom occurs as part of a process where all sins are placed on Christ, then how can Paul speak of becoming **subject again to the yoke of slavery**? How is it possible to **destroy** a brother, as Paul describes in *Romans 14:15*, if all of his sins have already been removed? Note that this is a brother **for whom Christ died**. And why on earth is Paul worried about being **disqualified** in *1st Corinthians 9:27* if our forgiveness is assured once we believe?

These kinds of problems arise when we inflict Western philosophy on Jewish thought. We want to have Jesus as an antidote for individual believers' individual sins so that we can each have our individual immortality at the Judgment.

The discussions of Christ's blood in the Bible describe reconciliation and propitiation on a global scale, which makes perfect sense for Paul's gospel was largely one of the Gentiles being allowed into God's nation. Let's close this chapter by looking at such a passage.

A Key Passage

Romans 3:20–28 is crucial to evangelicals, having all the ingredients of the modern gospel. There is a talk of Jesus' blood, forgiveness, and a **free gift**; a word related to "atonement"¹¹; and marginalization of the Law.

The first problem is that **the gift** (*Romans 3:24*) refers to the Holy Spirit, the agent of our justification. More issues present themselves when we look at the context. What is Paul's goal? What comes immediately before and after?

The lead-up to this passage focuses on Jews and Gentiles being equal before God. Paul explains that the Law did not show the Jews were more righteous but rather confirmed they had fallen short of their duty. But that's okay because God's plan (to make everyone as they should be through the free gift, the Holy Spirit) had nothing to do with the Law. God did not send the Spirit as a response to the Jews' keeping the Law. God sent the Spirit in spite of the sins the Jews

¹¹Paul never uses the Greek word for "atonement," "expiation," or "propitiation" in any of his letters. A related word in *Romans 3:25* is the closest he ever comes.

had done (and the sins the Gentile nations did to them). God sent the Spirit as grace due to the **promise** made to Abraham, as described in *Galatians 3:18*.

This is why Paul specifies in *Romans 3:25* that God had passed over¹² the sins **previously committed**. These are the **violations committed under the first covenant** described in *Hebrews 9:15*. Even though the Jews and Gentiles had all screwed up, God sent Jesus anyway. God demonstrated righteousness (*Romans 3:21*) by keeping the Promise to Abraham. Thus, everyone (Jews under the Law and Gentiles not under the Law) has equal access to God through faith.

Look at another place in scripture where Paul refers to God's public demonstration of Christ crucified. Compare the verbiage of *Romans 3:25* with *Galatians 3:1*. Read *Galatians 2:11–3:22*, and compare it to the points Paul raises in the passage around *Romans 3:25*. Yet the discussion in Galatians is clearly about God accepting the Gentiles, who are given the Spirit when they believe, just as the Jews are.

¹²Indeed, Paul might be depicting Jesus as a Passover sacrifice. Jesus was crucified on the Passover. Paul oddly uses the Greek for "pass over" here. The word translated "propitiation" in this verse does not mean propitiation but refers to the places the blood of sacrificed animals were placed. It principally referred to the Mercy Seat in the original temple, but that object did not exist in Paul's day. It also refers to the lentils (*Amos 9:1*) on which the Passover blood was put or other places blood was placed (as in *Ezekiel 43:14,17,20* and *45:19*). In this sense, God was showing he had passed over the sins in the first covenant to free people spiritually, just as earlier the sins of Israel's idolatry were passed over to free the Israelites. I will show in chapter eleven why this notion of Jesus as Passover sacrifice for all creation makes a good deal of sense.

Summary and Final Notes

The message dominating almost all of Paul's work is the idea that Jew and Gentile are on equal footing with regard to being part of God's nation, the nation Jesus was returning soon to claim. The Mosaic law did not help the Jews receive the Spirit, and hence should not be forced upon Gentiles. Nor had the Mosaic law transformed Israel into a righteous nation, so why should any expect keeping the Law would help in the continuing transformation of those who follow Christ?

For Paul, salvation is all about transformation *from* the spiritual death in which creation languished before Christ *to* the life wrought through the Spirit. This salvation begins upon receipt of the Spirit, progresses as believers are transformed into Christ's likeness, and is complete upon receipt of the new body given at the resurrection.

Paul saw a believer's post-baptismal state as a marriage of a strengthened spirit and a fleshly body, a limited version of the salvation we will have later. Our transformation is a model of Christ's. He received the Spirit, so we shall as well. He rose again, and so shall we. He achieved a physical resurrection with a physical body, and so shall we.

Paul presents Christ as the true emperor, contrasting with the Roman world who taught that Caesar was the source of confidence. Not only should we follow Christ's commands, but we should also have confidence in Him, rather than putting our confidence elsewhere (such as in the temple, the Empire, or the Mosaic covenant).

Justify might be best defined as *to make righteous* in the sense of transforming or drawing someone to godliness. This occurred with Abram when God called him from idolatry. Christ's work justifies us in at least two ways. First, He works *genuine* righteousness through the general call to repentance His death brought. Second, transformation is one role of the Spirit He sent once God had given Him authority over creation. Justification is not the process by which God creates artificial righteousness by "removing sins from the book."

Paul and those to whom he wrote expected the second coming at any point, and so the word "saved" sometimes refers to deliverance from God's physical wrath upon the world. This occurs at a different time than the Judgment (and obviously only applies to those living in the end times, unlike the Judgment), so it should not be confused with it.