

EXEGETICAL BRIEF: Διά + The Accusative in Romans 4:24,25— More Than “For”

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Lutheran pastors understand justification by faith to be the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. No other biblical doctrine is more central to our teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, whether that teaching take place in the confirmation classroom, the prospect’s living room, or the cancer patient’s hospital room. We also understand that nowhere in the Bible is justification by faith presented more thoroughly than by Paul in his letter to the Romans. Pentecost 3 (July 3, 2011) will afford the Lutheran preacher a wonderful opportunity to teach justification by faith from the pulpit by means of the Second Lesson, Romans 4:18-25. With these verses Paul concludes a stunning discussion of God’s grace that began at 3:21. His point throughout this discussion is how our gracious God has provided the righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) all sinners lack but nevertheless need in order to stand before the holy God. Three times in Romans 4 (v. 3, 9, 22) Paul quotes from Genesis 15:6 to prove that justification by faith is not his own invention, but rather it was invented by God in eternity and was clearly expressed already in the first book of the Bible in connection with Abram. Three times Paul utilizes Moses’ wording in Genesis 15:6 to demonstrate that it was the divine gift of faith, not Abram’s works, that ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην (NIV: “was credited to him as righteousness”).

Allow us to focus on Paul’s final point in this glorious discussion of justification, verses 24 and 25. Not content to leave Abram’s case in the Old Testament, Paul takes what we learn from Abram’s story and applies it to New Testament Christians. After telling us that the exact wording of Genesis 15:6—“it was credited to him”—was not recorded only for Abram’s sake, Paul goes on to state why those words are so important for our sakes today. Note the triple use of διά + the accusative in the last two verses of Romans 4:

²⁴ἀλλὰ καὶ δι’ ἡμᾶς, οἷς μέλλει λογίζεσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν ἐπὶ τὸν ἐγειραντα Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν ἐκ νεκρῶν, ²⁵ὅς παρεδόθη διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν καὶ ἠγέρθη διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν.

In many English versions all three of those διά’s are translated “for.” However, students of the Greek New Testament know that διά +

the accusative says more than “for.” And as Paul concludes this great justification by faith section, we do well in our preaching and teaching to let those *διὰ*’s have their full force. Normally *διὰ* + the accusative means “because of” or “for the sake of.” It is a construction by which the inspired author communicates the cause or reason for something he wrote earlier. When we understand the *διὰ*’s of Romans 4:24, 25 in this normal sense we get to stand side by side with our hearers and gaze into the wonders of God’s grace.

The Wonder of *δι’ ἡμᾶς*

With this short expression in verse 24 the apostle tells us the reason why God spoke the exact words he spoke through Genesis 15:6. The reason is because of us. The Old Testament Scripture “it was credited to him” was recorded that way for the benefit of New Testament believers. Moses was inspired to pen what he penned “because of us.” Paul’s *δι’ ἡμᾶς* in Romans 4:24 encourages us New Testament Christians to make the Old Testament stories of faith our own, to realize and rejoice in the fact that the Old Testament Scriptures belong to us. Just as Father Abram put his trust in a God who could do the impossible by bringing a son from his lifeless (un-reproductive) body, so our Spirit-worked faith in Jesus is a death-to-life story today. Trust in God to keep his promises was the channel through which justification came for Abram, and it remains the channel for our justification thousands of years later.

The Wonder of *διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν*

Paul uses the relative pronoun *ὃς* to refer to Jesus in verse 25 and with this particular *διὰ* phrase he communicates the reason why the perfect Lord Jesus was delivered over to death on a cross. The reason was our sins, literally our “fallings to the side” of a proper relationship with a holy God. Paul’s use of *διὰ* + the accusative in this instance mirrors the Septuagint translation of Isaiah 53:5,12. By using this construction the apostle takes us by the hand to the foot of the cross and invites us to come to the right conclusions about what we see. Why is the sinless Son of God hanging on that cross? It is “because of our sins.” Good Friday’s alien work is to impress upon worshipers that their moral failures in thought, word, and deed forced the innocent Lamb of God onto the altar of the cross. But look again. Why is the sinless Son of God hanging on that cross? The phrase “because of our sins” invites us to experience Good Friday’s primary work, that is, to see every last one of our sins placed upon the Perfect Sacrifice and removed from us as far as the east is from the west. The full depth of the sinner’s sin and the Sinless One’s sacrifice is plumbed by Paul’s careful little phrase *διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν*.

The Wonder of διὰ τῆν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν

With this διὰ phrase Paul takes us down Golgotha's hill to Joseph of Arimathea's garden. Now he invites us to stare into the empty tomb and ponder the full meaning of Christ's resurrection from the dead. It seems that limiting διὰ to “for” would perhaps limit our hearers' understanding of what exactly God was doing on that first Easter Sunday. Why was Jesus raised from the dead (note the aorist passive ἠγέρθη in verse 25) by God the Father? It was “because of our justification.” By using the word δικαίωσις rather than δικαιοσύνη for the Lord's not guilty decree, Paul especially emphasizes the *activity* involved in God's declaration of innocence. Yes, the holy God actively declared sinners to be innocent for Jesus' sake,¹ and that act of declaring not guilty *caused* Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday. Stand in wonder at the vacated tomb! Do you want to know if Good Friday really worked? Do you want to be certain that your sins truly have been taken away and that you are right with God? Look at Jesus' resurrection from the dead. It would never have happened had God's justice not been satisfied and God's acquittal-verdict not been sure. This is why Easter Sunday is *the* high festival for the Christian. Easter Sunday is the proof that Good Friday really worked. And Paul's use of διὰ + the accusative makes the case that Good Friday and Easter, rather than being conditioned upon our faith, are actually the bedrock events of our faith.

“Because of” is not only an accurate translation of διὰ + the accusative in Romans 4:24,25. It is also a comforting one. God bless you as you proclaim the wonders of justification by faith.

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¹Commonly called “objective justification.”