

Romans 4:9-16—Abraham: The Father Of All Who Believe

Memory Verse

Romans 12:1-2 NKJV

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Introduction

First Paul focuses on *when* Abraham first believed and was accounted as being as righteous as God Himself—did circumcision have anything to do with Abraham being counted as righteous? Is God's righteousness only available to the Jews, or is it also available to the gentiles?

Secondly, Paul also describes the genuine faith of Abraham, and how that makes Abraham the father or model or example for all believers who come to faith in Christ, both old and new testament, Jew and gentile.

Outline

1. (vs 9-12) Abraham was counted as righteous before he was circumcised; therefore Abraham being circumcised had nothing to do with his salvation
2. (vs 13-15) God's promise to Abraham was based on faith, not the works of the law
3. (v 16) Justification is according to grace through faith

Romans 4:9-16 NKJV

Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. ¹⁰ How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. ¹¹ And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, ¹² and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.

¹³ For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, ¹⁵ because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all

1. Abraham was counted as righteous before he was circumcised; therefore Abraham being circumcised had nothing to do with his salvation

Romans 4:9-12 NKJV

Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. ¹⁰ How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. ¹¹ And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, ¹² and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.

Romans 4:9-12 NLT

Now, is this blessing only for the Jews, or is it also for uncircumcised Gentiles? Well, we have been saying that Abraham was counted as righteous by God because of his faith. ¹⁰ But how did this happen? Was he counted as righteous only after he was circumcised, or was it before he was circumcised? Clearly, God accepted Abraham before he was circumcised!

¹¹ Circumcision was a sign that Abraham already had faith and that God had already accepted him and declared him to be righteous—even before he was circumcised. So Abraham is the spiritual father of those who have faith but have not been circumcised. They are counted as righteous because of their faith. ¹² And Abraham is also the spiritual father of those who have been circumcised, but only if they have the same kind of faith Abraham had before he was circumcised.

v 9 Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? The **circumcised** refers to the Jews. Paul asks the question, “Is salvation only available to the Jews, or is it available to all other people as well (the gentiles)?” Can the gentiles (non Jewish people) say along with David when he said “*Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸ Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.*”

v 9 For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness: More simply put, “*Abraham received the righteousness of God because of His faith*”. Paul is reminding us of his main premise: Abraham was justified or made righteous because of his faith, and not because of anything he had done (works).

v 10 How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? When was Abraham counted as having the Righteousness of God credited to His account, as recorded in Genesis 15:6? The answer is that Abraham wasn't given covenant of circumcision until at least 14 years later, as recorded in Genesis 17. The clear answer to Paul's question, “**How then was it accounted?**” is that God's righteousness was transferred to Abraham *because of his faith, and not because his circumcision*, which happened 14 years later. Abraham was saved long before he was circumcised.

v 11 **And [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised:** Simply put, circumcision was given as an outward sign of an inward change that had already happened in Abraham—that change being that Abraham had gone from being positionally unrighteous (condemned or guilty) in God’s eyes, to receiving the positional standing of being declared righteous (innocent or not guilty) in God’s eyes. Circumcision didn’t cause the change, but was given to validate or give an outer evidence of the previous internal change.

The NLT paraphrases this nicely, “Circumcision was a sign that Abraham already had faith and that God had already accepted him and declared him to be righteous—even before he was circumcised.”

The Amplified Bible reads, “He received the mark of circumcision as a token or an evidence [and] seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised”.

Application: Circumcision and baptism

Colossians 2:11-12 links circumcision and baptism, and explains the spiritual significance of circumcision. *“When you came to Christ, you were “circumcised,” but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature. ¹² For you were buried with Christ when you were baptised. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead”* (NKJV).

So the cutting away of the foreskin of the male represented the cutting away of the old nature. It’s a perfect symbol—a part of the man that nobody else can see has been cut away. This is what happens when a person is saved under the New Covenant. The old stoney (rebellious) heart is removed, and a new (loving and obedient) heart is given in its place.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 NKJV

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

Baptism is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament ritual of circumcision—simply put, both circumcision and baptism are outward signs of an inward change which has already taken place.

Therefore, baptism should never be considered necessary for salvation, but, as with circumcision, a ritual that is done after salvation to demonstrate to everybody the unseen inward transformation that has already taken place.

v 11 **The faith which he had while still uncircumcised:** “In fact, Abraham, **the father of all those who believe**, was declared righteous while he was still *uncircumcised*! Therefore, how could anyone then say (as some did in Paul’s day) that Gentiles must be circumcised before God would declare them righteous?

For the Jewish people of Paul’s day, the significance of circumcision was more than social. It was the entry point for a life lived under the Law of Moses: *And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law* (Galatians 5:3).” (David Guzik)

v 11-12 **That he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised ... who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised:** What a radical concept! The Jews thought of Abraham as being their father because they were circumcised just like he was. However, Paul points out that to have Abraham as your father you must **walk in the steps of the faith** that Abraham walked in. The Jew's sign of circumcision won't do them any good if they don't have real faith like Abraham did. It's like wearing an eagles football jersey but not being a member of the club—it means nothing.

v 12 **Our father Abraham:** This was an important concept for the Jews. David Guzik explains:

“Our father Abraham” is an important phrase, one that the ancient Jews jealously guarded. They did not allow a circumcised Gentile convert to Judaism refer to Abraham as “our father” in the synagogue. A Gentile convert had to call Abraham “your father” and only natural born Jews could call Abraham “our father.” Paul throws out that distinction, and says that through faith, all can say, “our father Abraham.”

It must have been a shock for the Jewish readers of this letter to see that Paul called Abraham the father of **uncircumcised** people! Faith, not circumcision, is the vital link to Abraham. It is far more important to have Abraham's faith (and the righteousness imputed to him because of it) than it is to have Abraham's circumcision.

William Barclay explains that the Jewish teachers of Paul's day had a saying: “What is written of Abraham is also written of his children,” meaning that promises given to Abraham extend to his descendants. Paul heartily agreed with this principle, and extended the principle of being justified by faith to all Abraham's *spiritual* descendants, those who believe, **who also walk in the steps of the faith** of Abraham.

v 12 **Our father Abraham:** Consider the importance of this radical statement that Abraham is not only the physical father of the circumcised Jews, but also the spiritual father of all those who put their faith in Jesus as their Messiah. Remember that in the Jewish culture that this was written in, *the promises given to the father are also applied to his children. Thus, God is promising that we can be the recipients of the same grace and forgiveness of sins that Abraham was—we too can be declared righteous if we simply choose to believe.* Since Abraham is the father of those who have faith, then we can share in the promise given to Abraham by God—God's righteousness will be imputed or transferred to anyone who puts their faith in the Messiah.

Abraham... the father of all who believe—summary and application by Jon Courson

“Paul here is saying Abraham is the father not only of the circumcised Jew, but of the uncircumcised Gentile because Abraham was pronounced righteous before he was circumcised. *Circumcision did not confer righteousness. It confirmed righteousness.* So, too, you can be baptised a dozen times next summer, but it won't save you if you don't believe in your heart that the work is done, that the price is already paid for your sin. The basis of everything we enjoy is that which God has done for us and on that fact that He views us through the lens of His Son.

So I get baptised because I want to go on record externally, declaring what I know is already true internally. I come to Communion because I want to do outwardly what I'm excited about inwardly. I have devotions not to earn His favour, but because He has already shown me such favour. It's not responsibility, folks. It's *response*. Why is it so hard for us to understand this? Could it be because our culture says, “There's no free lunch,” and “God helps those who help themselves”? Could it be because our flesh says, “Set the alarm earlier. Stay up later. Memorise more. Study harder. And maybe, just maybe, you'll be blessed”?

If I could communicate one thing to you precious people it would be this: Quit trying to give God a reason to bless you. It'll never work because God will be a debtor to no man. Just marvel at His goodness. Enjoy an intimate relationship with Him. And watch what He can pour out on you because you won't be taking the credit."

2. God's promise to Abraham was based on faith, not the works of the law

Romans 4:13-15 NKJV

For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, ¹⁵ because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.

Romans 4:13-15 NLT

Clearly, God's promise to give the whole earth to Abraham and his descendants was based not on his obedience to God's law, but on a right relationship with God that comes by faith. ¹⁴ If God's promise is only for those who obey the law, then faith is not necessary and the promise is pointless. ¹⁵ For the law always brings punishment on those who try to obey it. (The only way to avoid breaking the law is to have no law to break!)

v 13 **For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith:** The promise of salvation given to Abraham couldn't have anything to do with the law, since the law was not given until 400 years later. The **promise** referred to here is the promise of justification by grace through faith, which has the added benefit that we will also be joint heirs with Christ as we rule and reign with Him on the Millennial earth (see Matthew 5:5, Revelation 21:7). If we simply believe, putting our faith in the Messiah, then God will credit us with His righteousness—and this made possible by the promise of the Messiah, Abraham's Seed through whom all the nations would be blessed.

v 13 **Not to Abraham or to his seed through the law:** Why can't the law save us? It's not because the law is bad, but simply because we are unable to keep it. The whole purpose of the law is to show that we are by nature sinful, and therefore need a Saviour to save us from our sin.

Romans 7:7-8a NLT

Well then, am I suggesting that the law of God is sinful? Of course not! In fact, it was the law that showed me my sin. I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, "You must not covet." ⁸ But sin used this command to arouse all kinds of covetous desires within me!

Jon Courson gives a good example of how the law brings out the worst in us by stimulating the sinful desires of our sinful nature. "Years ago, when the Susan B. Anthony dollar was issued, no one could get rid of them. One bank in Georgia, however, moved record numbers of the coins. When a Washington bureaucrat traveled to Georgia to determine the reason, he discovered their simple secret was a sign on the window that read: Susan B. Anthony Dollars Available. Limit Two Per Customer. "People kept sneaking back," said bank officials, "hoping to get more than their limit." That's what the law does. It not only undermines faith, but it underlines failure because, unable to keep its standard, we have no recourse but to break it."

v 14 **For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect:** It's one or the other—either a person is saved by working for or earning their salvation, or they are saved by simply receiving it. It's either “earn and deserve” (the principle of law), or “believe and receive” (the principle of grace).

v 15 **Because the law brings about wrath:** Since the law represents the perfect righteousness of the Holy God, and we are people born with a sinful nature, it follows that *if I try to keep the law I will only damn myself because I will constantly fall short*. Anyone who thinks that they can be good enough to earn salvation or God's favour by keeping the law, or just trying to be good enough, is actually condemning themselves every time they break the law and fall short of God's perfection—all they are doing is proving to God and everybody else that they deserve to go to hell.

v 15 **Where there is no law there is no transgression:** What does this mean? “*Transgression* is the right word for overstepping a line, and this for breaking a clearly defined commandment” (Morris). If there is no line, then there is no actual **transgression**.

Anytime we are told not to do something, the sinful nature response is to want to do it. It's the old, “wet paint, do not touch” scenario. If I have just painted a wall and don't want people to touch it, then the best thing for me to do is to say nothing about it. Why? Because if I put the “wet paint, do not touch” sign up, then people will instinctively want to touch the wet paint and ruin the wall. By putting the sign up, I am giving them a line to overstep, a specific transgression to commit, which people will be strongly tempted to do.

It's important to understand that this kind of sin, this crossing of a clearly defined line or breaking a specific command is not the only type of sin.

“There is sin that is not the “crossing the line” of the Law of Moses. The root of sin isn't in breaking the law, but in breaking *trust* with God; with denying His loving, caring purpose in every command He gives. Before Adam sinned he broke *trust* with God—therefore God's plan of redemption is centred on a relationship of trusting love—*faith*—instead of law-keeping. When we centre our relationship with God on law-keeping instead of trusting love, we go against His whole plan.” (David Guzik)

It's interesting to realise that Adam sinned in both ways. First he broke trust with God (he no longer trusted that God's way was the best for him), then He broke God's command. Remember, if I trust that what God says is best for me, that God loves me and has my best interests at heart, then I will obey Him. Conversely, if I don't, then I won't. It's a very simple test.

John 14:15-24 NKJV (selected verses)

15 “If you love Me, keep My commandments. ... 21 He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. ... “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word ... 24 He who does not love Me does not keep My words;

3. Justification is according to grace through faith

Romans 4:16 NKJV

Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all

Romans 4:16 NLT

So the promise is received by faith. It is given as a free gift. And we are all certain to receive it, whether or not we live according to the law of Moses, if we have faith like Abraham's. For Abraham is the father of all who believe.

v 16 **It is of faith that it might be according to grace:** Remember that salvation is only possible because of God's grace, His unmerited favour towards us. We are saved by grace through faith.

Ephesians 2:8-9 NKJV

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9 NLT

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹ Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

Faith simply describes *how* we can receive the grace that God wants to give us. David Guzik describes this well. "**Faith** is related to **grace** in the same way *works* is related to *law*. Grace and law are principles, and faith and works are the means by which we pursue those principles for our relationship with God." (David Guzik)

v 16 **It is of faith that it might be according to grace:** Why is this so important to understand? Because if I don't live by the principle of grace, if I don't understand that the salvation I have received is a free gift and that I can do nothing to earn or deserve it, then I will live by the principle of works.

Living by the principle of law causes me to think that I have to do good works to earn my salvation, or that I must be good or do certain things otherwise God won't love me or bless me. But, if I'm living by the principle of law, then the question becomes, "*Just how much do I need to do in order for God to be pleased with me?*" This causes doubt. This is why many people doubt their salvation. Jon Courson describes this situation well.

"Salvation must be by faith. *If it were by works, we would always wonder if we were really saved.* We would feel like we had to come forward every service and get baptised every Sunday. We would walk around feeling beat up, cast down, and done in continually. But when we understand that our relationship with the Lord is not based upon anything we do or don't do other than simply believing, salvation becomes something we are not afraid of losing every week."

v 16 **According to grace:** Grace, by definition, is giving without *any* consideration of whether or not the person receiving deserves it. *The reason for the giving is all in the giver, not the receiver.* The gracious giver desires to give, so he gives—there is no other reason. This is why sinful man finds grace so hard to understand. It is foreign to our nature to receive something when we haven't earned it and we don't deserve it.

In contrast, law, by definition, is giving which depends entirely on whether or not the recipient is worthy of the gift. *The reason for the giving is all in the receiver, not the giver.* If the receiver is worthy or has earned something, then the giver is *obligated* to give, they have no choice but to. However, if the receiver is not worthy, then the giver has no obligation or reason to give them anything at all, and therefore nothing will be given.

Romans 4:4-6 summarises the two contrasting principles and effects of grace and works.

“When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned [principle of law].⁵ But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners.⁶ David also spoke of this when he described the happiness of those who are declared righteous without working for it [principle of grace] (NLT).

Summary of “according to grace”

Understanding the principle of grace leads to joy, as we celebrate receiving what we did not and cannot deserve. But living by the principle of law leads to either pride and arrogance if we think that we have been good enough, or doubting and depression if we think we have not been good enough.

v 16 **Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed:** The key word here is **sure**. If receiving the promise depends only upon God’s gracious nature, then it is **sure** or certain. Why? Because God doesn’t change. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8 NKJV).

In contrast, if the promise “were of the law, it would be **unsure** and uncertain, because of man’s weakness, who is not able to perform it.” (Poole) Nobody would know if they had done enough to earn their salvation—and this is exactly the problem with every other religion—they have no assurance of salvation. They all hope that they have done enough, but they can *never be sure*. This is a horrible way to live.

On the other hand, Christianity is the only religion that gives people the surety or certainty of going to heaven. Again, why? Because we put our faith in an unchanging and gracious God who freely gives salvation to all who are willing to receive it.

Hebrews 6:17-20 NLT

God also bound himself with an oath, so that those who received the promise [of salvation] could be **perfectly sure** that he would never change his mind.¹⁸ So God has given both his promise and his oath. These two things are unchangeable because it is impossible for God to lie. Therefore, we who have fled to him for refuge can have great confidence as we hold to the hope that lies before us.¹⁹ This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls. It leads us through the curtain into God’s inner sanctuary.²⁰ Jesus has already gone in there for us. He has become our eternal High Priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Summary and conclusion: Abraham is the father of all who believe

v 16 **But also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all [who believe]:** Once again Paul reminds us of the importance of Abraham being the father of all who have put their faith in God for salvation. Remember, the promises given to the father also apply to the sons. If we have the same faith as Abraham, then we will share in the same salvation as Abraham. Just like God did for Abraham, we too will be credited with the “righteousness of God”—God will see us and treat us as having lived a perfect life.

Jew or gentile, all people are invited to become spiritual descendants of Abraham by believing and receiving the same promise that Abraham was given, the promise being that God would send a Saviour who would be the payment for all the sins of all mankind.