

b. The second point of contrast involving Abraham pertains to the relationship between his reckoned righteousness and his *circumcision* (4:9-12). Paul's transition into this passage proceeds upon the central matter of blessedness addressed in the previous context.

1) Specifically, he raised the question to his readers as to whether the blessedness that marks those whose sin is not reckoned to them pertains only to the *circumcised Jew* or includes those who are *uncircumcised* as well (4:9a). The reason for raising this question is the very natural connection between Abraham and David and the rite of circumcision.

- Abraham - the man whose faith was reckoned to him as righteousness - was himself circumcised according to God's prescription that circumcision be the sign of His covenant.
- Likewise David bore the mark of circumcision as a faithful Israelite under the Old Covenant (Leviticus 12:1-3).

This being so, could it not be maintained that the reckoned righteousness of which both men spoke, and in which both participated, is a peculiarly Israelite privilege related to their circumcision?

2) In response to this reasonable question Paul returned to his original proposition respecting Abraham, namely that his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness (4:9b). But Paul's reason for doing so was not to reiterate what he just insisted upon six verses earlier, but to cause his readers to consider the circumstance and especially the *chronology* of God's reckoning of righteousness to Abraham.

It was seen that this reckoning occurred at the time of God's ratification of His covenant with Abraham in association with His promise to him of an heir to come from his own body (Genesis 15:1-21). Abraham's faith in God and His promise was reckoned for righteousness, and this reckoning was fundamental to God's covenant relationship with him. But Paul's concern here was not with the reckoning as such, but the fact that, at the time of this event, *Abraham had not yet received the sign of circumcision* (4:10). That ordinance would not be introduced until several years later at the time when God acted to confirm His covenant promise of a seed by announcing that Sarah would bear a son (Genesis 17:1-27).

Subsequent to God's promise of an heir, Abraham did conceive a son through Hagar, and it likely appeared to him that this first son Ishmael fulfilled that oath (17:17-18). But now God further revealed to him that the promised heir was to be Sarah's offspring as well as his own. His child by the Egyptian woman would also be given a great legacy, but the covenant heritage was to belong to Sarah's son Isaac (17:19-21).

- 3) Because Abraham was yet uncircumcised when he was granted his righteous standing before God, his righteousness could have had nothing to do with his circumcised status. Quite the contrary, God gave to Abraham the sign of circumcision specifically as a **seal** of the righteousness “*of the faith which he had while uncircumcised*” (4:11a). In other words, the rite of circumcision was given to Abraham to both attest to his righteous standing and also seal him in it. This being so, Paul’s point was that Abraham’s circumcision *presupposed, bore witness to, and confirmed* his righteousness; it did not in any way contribute to it.
- 4) The fact that God instituted the rite of circumcision as the sign of His previously ratified covenant with Abraham and the seal of the righteousness which was already his had more than a personal significance. For God’s design was that the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant would extend beyond national Israel as his physical line of descent to embrace an innumerable multitude of every tribe, tongue, nation, and people. The very name God gave to him - *Abraham* - testified of this multi-national paternity (Genesis 17:1-8), which promise God perpetuated in his son and grandson (cf. Genesis 26:1-4, 35:9-12).
- 5) Abraham was to be the father of many nations and peoples, which meant that his paternity could not be limited to physical descent. In accordance with God’s eternal purpose, being a son of Abraham was not to consist in sharing his genetics, but sharing in his covenant relationship with God founded upon the principle of faith. Thus Paul’s point: *in the context of gospel fulfillment, one’s “descent” from Abraham is determined solely by participation in Abraham’s faith and the righteousness reckoned to it* (4:11b-12). And because the children of Abraham are defined in this way, circumcision becomes entirely irrelevant; both circumcised Jew and uncircumcised Gentile are reckoned as righteous on the basis of possessing the same faith as their father Abraham (4:13-25; cf. also Galatians 3:1-29).

This is an absolutely crucial distinction, and one that is commonly overlooked in contemporary American Christianity. For those reared under Dispensationalism, it is regarded as an axiom that the *Jews* are the children of Abraham and therefore the true referents of the covenant promises made to him. This being the case, they maintain that the Church is simply reaping anticipatory benefits associated with those promises, which are believed to be reserved ultimately for Jewish Israel in a future millennial kingdom. In support of this position they point to the biblical text and its explicit declaration that God’s covenant promises were given to Abraham and *his seed*. Furthermore, the fact that those promises were fulfilled in the Israelite theocracy proves beyond any doubt that the Abrahamic Covenant and its blessings belong to Abraham’s physical offspring as manifested in the twelve tribes of Israel.

But, at the same time, they fail to recognize the *typological* role of Jewish Israel as the people of God. The Israelite kingdom that God raised up in order to fulfill His promises to Abraham was simply a “first-level” fulfillment. That is, it did constitute a true fulfillment of those promises, but only in a preparatory way. The Israelite theocracy was designed by God to itself serve a prophetic role as it portrayed and anticipated a later, ultimate and everlasting kingdom. Its perpetual failure, decline, and final destruction made its transience evident to all, and through its imperfection and impermanence the theocracy set the hopes of the covenant people upon a future kingdom to be ruled by the true David and peopled by true covenant sons of Abraham.

It is this redemptive-historical significance of circumcision that accounts for and explains its timing, place, function, and crucial importance with respect to the Abrahamic Covenant. God had demanded that *every* male (because of the physical nature of the sign, it could not extend to every person) associated with Abraham’s household was to be circumcised. *Neither physical descent from him nor social standing determined the obligation of circumcision, and any person not so circumcised was to be cut off from the Abrahamic “community” - he had broken the covenant* (Genesis 17:9-15). By this strict commandment God was revealing that connection with Abraham and his covenant blessing was not indicated by physical descent or other social/cultural factors, but by the sign and seal of circumcision. Accordingly, circumcision constituted “covenant keeping,” and this is why Abraham’s blamelessness under the covenant was to be found in his personal insistence that every male associated with his household be circumcised. There could be no vital connection with Abraham and God’s covenant with him apart from bearing his circumcision.

But each of these historical parameters of the Abrahamic Covenant and its administration was specifically prophetic, pointing to a spiritual “substance” only portrayed by the physical “shadow.” This is the reason for the apparent discontinuity in the relationship between covenant status and the sign of circumcision. For, while every participant in the covenant was circumcised, not every circumcised son of Abraham was a party to God’s covenant with him. Ishmael was circumcised as Abraham’s firstborn son, yet he had no share in the covenant (Genesis 17:15-27). So also it would be the case in the next generation with Esau, Isaac’s firstborn (Genesis 27:1-40; cf. Malachi 1:1-4). From the point of its inception God was showing that *true* covenant status as a son of Abraham depended upon gaining the righteousness that is by faith, and that circumcision as the sign of the covenant was subservient to that ultimate reality.

At the *typological* level, circumcision was ordained to serve as the sign by which individuals were brought into and shown to be members of the “covenant community.” That community was initially defined by Abraham’s household, but later was extended under the Israelite kingdom to every physical descendant of Abraham together with Gentile proselytes.

At the level of *antitypical* fulfillment, circumcision still marks the members of the covenant community. But because it is a *spiritual* circumcision marking out a *spiritual* community, each of its members is also characterized by the *faith* of Abraham and the righteousness reckoned to it. Thus the discontinuity between the typological and antitypical realities: while some members of the typological community were true sons of Abraham who shared his reckoned righteousness (Isaac, Jacob), others only bore the external mark of circumcision without participating in the spiritual reality of which it spoke (Ishmael, Esau).

*“Circumcision was performed on the organ of procreation because the covenant pertained to descendants set apart to God. However, circumcision in the flesh was of no spiritual value unless accompanied by a circumcised heart - the reality that it symbolized. Throughout salvation history, God made it patently clear that only the circumcised heart satisfies the conditions of the covenant relationship (Deut. 10:16, 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Ezek. 44:7-9).”* (Bruce Waltke, Genesis)

These truths demonstrate that the essence of the New Covenant was present in the Abrahamic Covenant from the beginning, and there were those who, in accordance with its principle of reckoned righteousness, were made righteous before God by His grace through faith. Nevertheless, the true fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham awaited the coming of the Seed to whom the promise had been made. And with the fulfillment of the promise in Him, the result would be that *every* member of the “household of Abraham” would be his true covenant son - whether circumcised or uncircumcised - for he would belong to Abraham’s singular Son. This is precisely Paul’s point throughout the larger immediate context of Romans (4:9-25), as well as in the third chapter of his Galatian epistle.

By divine design, all of Abraham’s *true* offspring would, in the era of promise, share in his covenant blessing of righteousness reckoned on the basis of faith. That righteousness was to be attested by the ritual “cutting off” of their flesh, which covenantal sign also spoke of the dire consequence that would attend failure to undergo the rite as the focal demand of the covenant. *But because circumcision served a prophetic role, the physical rite would, in the fullness of the times, yield itself to the spiritual reality it predicted.* When the promise to Abraham reached its ultimate fulfillment, circumcision would again seal the righteousness that is by faith, but not a circumcision performed on the flesh by the hands of men. This circumcision would be inward and spiritual, performed by Abraham’s singular Seed, the One to whom the promise preeminently pertained, and the One in whom all of its blessings for all of mankind are “yea and amen” (cf. Romans 2:28-29, 9:1-8; Galatians 3:1-29, 4:19-31; Colossians 2:11).

*“By its identification with the gospel of Jesus Christ the Abrahamic Covenant is seen to be a promissory anticipation of the new covenant...God’s saving grace in and through Christ Jesus is thus the underlying explanation of the redemptive blessings provided through the covenant of promise to Abraham in both its old and new covenant stages of fulfillment.”* (Meredith Kline)