

Father Abraham's Family

Romans 4:9-12

We are coming to a very important paragraph in the book of Romans – speaking of how or to whom the blessing of the gospel, the blessing of justification by faith, comes to the world.

And very quickly does Paul bring us back to Abraham, after a brief jog over to David and Psalm 32.

We have much to consider here about Father Abraham being the model of the faith, both for the Jews and Gentiles who believe, and where circumcision, which is the sign and seal of the covenant, fits into this picture.

But I want us to start with something very clear at the outset, and be reminded of what is so central to the passage, and that is what Paul means at the start of verse 9 – “*This Blessing*”! What is the blessing in mind here?

We don't need to look very far for that answer. It is in verses 7-8 – a “Blessed, Blessed”. And further up in verse 6, the blessing on the man who has all sins pardoned, forgiven, not imputed AND the righteousness of God imputed to him.

The imputation of God's righteousness comes up again at the end of verse 11 – that righteousness might be credited to them.

Oh, this is the greatest news that sinners like me and you can hear!

Who is a pardoning God like Thee? Or who has grace so rich and free? Or who has grace so rich and free?

Be reminded that Paul is building on what he said back in Romans 3: His words in 27-28, of being justified by faith alone apart from works, is expanded in 4:1-8.

Now what he says in 29-30: “Is He the God of the Jews only, or also of the Gentiles?” That is taken up now in our passage.

See that by this Gospel God becomes Your God; this is how God becomes the Savior of the sinner, the unworthy, the needy, the perishing.

What the Lord spoke to Abraham is said to YOU, believer! “Do not be afraid, Abram. I *am* your shield, your exceedingly great reward.” (Gen 15:1)

This is the only way to have Him as your God – this God who is all-holy, perfectly righteous, who will by no means clear the guilty, the Judge of all the earth, the mighty, true, perfect God alone.

But He comes to you dressed all in grace, in mercy, in love, in peace! See Him giving Himself, sparing not His own Son, pouring out His Spirit lavishly upon you! You need only to receive Him, as you turn from yourself to Jesus, from your ways of unbelief and sin – which is your folly – in order to His embrace Him, His covenant, His grace, and His commitment to you.

And this gospel, giving us God, as Romans 4.13 tells us, this blessing includes having all things given to you. Abram and his children are the heirs of the world – not through the Law but the righteousness of faith.

Paul elsewhere wrote: “All things are yours!”

“So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.” (1Co 3:21-23)

On your worst day, believer, this is yours; at the bottom of your griefs, your trials, your weaknesses, on your most sinful day – this is yours.

“Oh, but pastor, I don’t see it! Are all things mine? Has he given me all? Where are they?”

Well just because you do not see them does not make it unreal!

Look at this building we are in; there’s several million dollars in this building. “Really? Where?” You can’t see it? But the Trustees can!

Our all is in Christ, right now, right here! Just as you cannot be more justified than you are right now, so God cannot be more fully yours than He already is, to all eternity!

Well, then, how do we come to have this blessing of blessings? How does one receive a full pardon, full acceptance for Christ’s righteousness, the whole God as our God, and heir of all things?

Well we have to become like Abraham was and get circumcised, right?! Wrong!

This is what the Jews stumbled on – that one has to become a Jew and be circumcised to be saved. That answer dogged the spread of the Gospel in the first century as it travelled from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the world.

But as shocking as that answer, I hope, was to your ears; we have to say it so because of teaching like we have right here in Romans 4, which corrected the church.

The carnal Jew, trusting in his flesh, his relationship to Abraham, was standing at the door of the gospel when the message of everlasting life came into the world through the Resurrected One.

And faithful Paul, the converted Jew and Apostle to the Gentiles, must address it.

He asks three questions here – notice this.

1. Verse 9 ‘Is this blessing on the circumcision only, or also on the uncircumcised?’
2. And in order to answer that question, he calls on Abraham in verse 10 to testify for us: ‘how was this blessing his?’
3. And then same verse: “Was it while he was circumcised or uncircumcised?”

Paul is addressing the wrong idea held by his Jewish countrymen – men whom he loved and would lay his life down for them – that they had a special standing unique from all the world.

Indeed they did – we have seen Jewish privilege already in chapter 3.

But they did not see this as grace but as merit. At the center of their connection with Abraham was circumcision. And circumcision was the first step of merit for salvation. They held to a gospel of works! And that, my friends, is not a gospel!

And Paul is not the first to address this matter.

The message of John the Baptist and Jesus already paved the way.

John warned his Jewish audience about their reliance on Abraham: “Don’t even begin to think that you have Abraham as your father – God can raise from these stones children to Abraham!”

Whoa! What a message! Not by a fleshly connection – what is born of the flesh is flesh! But a new, spiritual repentant faith – a supernatural raising of stony hearts – a miraculous inward regeneration, a new heart.

Jesus was even sharper who said: “Abraham is not your father! If you had him as your father, you would know Me! No, your father is the devil – you are his rebellious children, and his works you do!”

Again, whoa! How would you like Him to say this to you!?

"I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline *at the table* with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; ¹² but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Mat 8:11-12)

Do you recall when He said this in Matthew’s account? It was when He marveled at the faith of a Gentile, the Roman Centurion!

It is not circumcision, or a natural connection with famous Abraham, but it is his *faith* that God sets before us to be imitated.

And to demonstrate this, Paul shows us FROM THE SCRIPTURES that Abraham being blessed, Abraham being pronounced righteous by faith, took place before he was circumcised, in Gen. 15, and not after, in chapter 17 – at least 14 years later!

Importantly, he was blessed, he was saved, he was credited with righteousness by faith without circumcision. That demonstrates that circumcision did not add to his status as being pronounced righteous in the sight of God by faith.

The Jews read this as though it were reversed – that Abraham’s circumcision was the all-important first thing, and faith came in second.

But circumcision is a sign, not the reality. Circumcision sealed faith and was not itself faith. Paul has already said that a true Jew is one inwardly, in the heart, not outwardly merely, in the flesh.

Abraham became, in his faith, the father of us all; not just of the Jews who believe, but as well the Gentiles who believe.

The promise to Abraham by God at the very outset to his leaving his homeland, was not only that **A** great nation would proceed from him, but *many nations* (PLURAL) would have this blessing through him.

The great multitude marching behind Abraham, who call him father, who are of that promise, that are as the stars of the heavens or sand of the sea in number, are so by **faith**; or not so at **all**!

Notice Paul does not divide between Gentile believers and circumcised Jews, but Gentile *believers* and circumcised *believers*.

In both states – uncircumcised and circumcised – believing Abraham is placed by God before us as our father. So he is the father of faith to both and not to one or the other.

So there is a gross misunderstanding on the place of circumcision in those he is addressing; a terrible blinding of the nature of saving faith and grace through a Savior.

The Jews had come to place Abraham as the first hero on a national pedestal – he is like a George Washington, their peak, their high point.

But in fact, you see in Abraham – in the flow of God’s redemption – a step backwards, temporarily, for the purpose of bringing the gospel to the whole world.

Consider God’s dealings prior to Abraham. God dealt with the whole world in creation; with all men in Adam; with the fall of all mankind in Gen. 3; the judgment upon all the world in Noah’s flood; and the dividing of the tongues of all men in the tower of Babel.

As Vos brings out in his *Biblical Theology*, with Abraham – there is an ultimate eye toward blessing the whole world.

But we are immediately taken into a narrow field of one line, through Isaac, Jacob, Judah, eventually to David – from which line the Savior of the world would and did come.

If Abraham is the center and fulfillment, little wonder that he then takes on a life of his own, one that must be repeated, and salvation by ritual begins to creep in.

But that is not right – because Abraham pointed away from himself.

Abraham, and the entirety of the OT, are oriented toward our times, these last days, the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God come now with the King.

So where does that leave us? Since the idea that people do not have to be circumcised in order to be saved is now not a live issue, and something never taught in the OT – do we end the message here and call it a grand success?

Well, no – because the church continues to be tempted, and unbelievers who profess some Christian truth continue to mix works and sacraments and special standing with faith alone in Christ alone.

In his excellent evangelistic book, “Right with God,” John Blanchard presents 6 well written chapters – including chapter 3. The Failure.

In that chapter he gives us the 4 “R’s” – the failure of trusting in Race, Ritual, Religion, and Respectability.

Even though we do not have the exact same kind of denial of gospel completeness, the gospel is still compromised today by addition.

Our **race** – western, white, middle-class orientation; **ritual** – there is a creeping in of the sacraments to an unhealthy central place; **religion** – one must have a particular kind of experience to be a Christian; **respectability** – that we are saved in part by our keeping the covenant, our works.

But Abraham – for 14 years – was complete in Christ by faith apart from church membership, sacraments, sacrifices, and his own services rendered to the Lord.

Now this presents a proper consideration: While these things do not justify us, since faith alone does, apart from works; these means and services are not against the gospel – unless we substitute them for Jesus or for faith in Him.

Here is our next point – that we not throw out the baby with the bathwater when it comes to the use of means.

Circumcision is described for us in verse 11, not as a sign and seal of works, or of Jewishness, or of religiosity, but of the righteousness that is of faith – the faith, Paul adds, which Abraham had while uncircumcised.

Circumcision did not add or subtract from his justification; he was justified without it.

Yet it still was a God-given sign and seal of that righteousness that is of faith.

How? It spoke to the need of a radical changer regarding sin.

Moses thundered – “Circumcise your hearts!” To be uncircumcised in heart meant to be unregenerate, not believing, and yet in your sins.

With the change of standing by Christ before the throne, always comes a change of life by the Spirit in a renewed heart.

This is the same salvation from the beginning of time. It was in the OT and now, more manifestly in the NT. And there will be no other way until the end of time. No one is going to come forth and find another gospel than this one!

So circumcision served the church while under age, and was part of the blood-shedding rituals looking forward to Christ and His Cross.

But now, circumcision is no longer mandated like it was in the OT. The veil in the holy of holies has been rent in two. The wall between Jew and Gentile is taken down.

The blessing comes directly, immediately, upon believing Cornelius in Acts 10, without being circumcised!

So where are **our** signs and seals in the NT? Has God removed all means, which point to His grace, His salvation, and marks his people as His own?

A sign points away to what is signified. And a seal serves to authenticate the letter – it does not add anything to the letter itself; cannot do so.

Circumcision says: I must be saved from my sins, by regeneration and by the righteousness of another credited to me, even the righteousness of faith.

Notice that the sacrament was not attached chronologically to the time of the grace given; the grace had been given 14 years before; now comes the seal on that deal; the sign of its reality.

Now the NT Church is said to have been circumcised – all of us – by the circumcision made without hands; internally; and ties it with baptism.

And so we call upon men and women now – as the NT is enlarged and expansive – to believe and be baptized as a sign and seal of faith.

Abraham practiced believer's circumcision! So we practice believer's baptism! But wait! Don't I remember that they applied this circumcision – a sign and seal of faith – to the infant boys? Do I remember that rightly? Oh, yes they did! And if you could seal a covenant child with a sign of faith before they believe in the OT, why not now in the New?

My prof in college thought that he could prove infant baptism from just this one verse. I tend to think he was pretty much correct.

If infants were included in the Old Testament covenant of grace, when the Lord limited Himself to this one family out of all the earth in order to reach every family, will the inclusion of infants be changed? If so, where does Jesus do that? Or the Apostles?

The response is often given – well, little babies cannot believe yet. You're right – they cannot, although our God is able to regenerate from the womb, the usual manner is for their embracing Christ in their youth.

Why not wait until they have faith first? How can we apply a mark that signifies faith to a baby that doesn't have faith yet?

Yes – precisely – and how! God had no problem doing so in the OT, with circumcision; infants were given the badge of faith, not having faith.

So any argument along this line is actually arguing with the Bible!

Or as that same professor in college used to ask his Baptist Bible students – ‘if you were a Baptist in the OT, would you circumcise your son?!’

Children are members of the visible church, and should receive the mark of entrance to that body.

They are baptized, not so as to save them; nor are they set apart because we presume they believe already. But they are baptized because they are part of the visible church already – this belongs to

them. They are set apart as children of at least one believing parent, and are fit subjects of being disciplined.

In due time, they own the gracious terms signed and sealed to them, by what? Faith. Again, the sacraments of entrance – the one and done sacraments of circumcision and baptism – are not attached to the time of the grace being given and received.

And what did Jesus say about these little ones? Unless you become like them, and are converted, you will no wise see the kingdom of God – because it is a kingdom of grace!

The blessing is on all who believe, Jew and Gentile. Neither circumcision nor baptism can save you. And all who so believe are Abraham's children, and heirs of the world and eternity! Amen!