

Study 5: Romans Chapter 4

Introduction

Paul now shows that Abraham was blessed not because he was a Jew (that is, by way of Law), but because of his faith. And all those who have the same kind of faith that Abraham had will also be blessed like he was.

Body of the Study

How is Abraham presented as a test case?

How does Paul introduce the idea of grace?

How does David support this proposition?

To whom was Abraham an example of faith?

What effect does the Law have?

How did Abraham demonstrate his faith?

What is the outcome of Abraham's faith?

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *How are we saved by the Life of Christ? (5:10)*
- *Is Justification a one-time-for-all-time act by God, or something else?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 5 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 5: Chapter 4

Introduction

Abraham is given special attention. He was after all, the father of the Jews, and they would claim that they were right with God because they were descendants of him. But the relationship with God does not come from the *national promise* (*your descendants will be greater than the stars in the sky or the sand on the sea shore*), but rather from the *seed promise* (*in your seed, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed*).

So, Paul now goes on to show that Abraham was blessed not because he was a Jew (that is, by way of Law), but because of his faith. And all those who have the same kind of faith that Abraham had will also be blessed like he was.

Body of the Study

How is Abraham presented as a test case?

The Jews would recognise the arguments that Paul had made about faith, and our relationship with God through that faith. But they had yet to cut the ties back to Abraham through the national promise.

As Paul outlines the life of Abraham, he clearly shows that the relationship that Abraham had with God was outside of Law, and outside of the national promise. In fact rather than being blessed because of the covenant relationship, the contrary is true, that the promises of God came *because of* Abraham's faith *outside of the covenant*. Abraham was not blessed *because* he applied his faith *within* the covenant relationship.

Paul begins by asking the question "what has Abraham *obtained*?" He brings the idea that Abraham has achieved something – and as the father of the Jewish nation, every Jew would agree. If Abraham had been justified by works, then he would certainly have something to be proud about and boast about to his family and those around him. But he could not boast about anything before God! If justification came this way, then it would be because God owed us a debt, and because we had earned our righteous position.

Paul quotes the scripture that "...Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him as righteousness..." In this case, Paul is quoting from Gen 15:6, on the occasion of God reiterating the promise that he would have physical descendants, when Abraham was around 90 years old at the time of establishing the sign of the covenant through circumcision. However exactly the same phrase occurs on other occasions in Abraham's life. The Hebrew writer describes the time when Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees and went to the land that his descendants would inherit "...not knowing where he was going..." (Heb 11:8). Paul says that when God made the promises to Abraham, that "...Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness..." (Gal 3:6). He was around 75 years old at this time. James uses the same phrase to describe Abraham's obedience when he was told to make a sacrifice of Isaac – his only son – and the one of promise, "...believing that God would raise him up again even from the dead..." (Js 2:23). At this time, Isaac would have been around 12 years old, which makes Abraham around 110.

So, what we see with Abraham is not just one event where he was counted righteous because of his faith, but a lifelong faith that stretched over 30 or 40 years, and put into *practice* the things that he knew and believed.

The occasion that Paul has in mind at this time is the one where God reiterates His promises of Gen 12. As an assurance of the promises, God instigates a covenant with Abraham, and seals it with the sign of circumcision. In the case under consideration, that covenant and seal has not yet

happened. God gave the assurance, Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him as righteousness, and then (some years later? Gen 17) because of Abraham's faith the covenant and seal are given.

First and foremost, the point that Paul wants to make is that the promises to Abraham did not come *because* he was a Jew, or *because* he was the father of the Jewish nation. In fact, they came at the time *before* Abraham became a Jew. Abraham's faith was counted as making him righteous throughout his life – when he left Ur of the Chaldees, when he received the promises of God, when the sign of the covenant was given, and when he obeyed God in the sacrifice of his son of promise. It really had nothing to do with the covenant, because righteousness was reckoned to him *before* the covenant. It had everything to do with his faith.

How does Paul introduce the idea of grace?

Anyone who works for a living does what he agrees to do, and then expects to get paid at the end of the day (or the week, or fortnight or whatever). The worker has done the work, and the boss owes him a debt until such time as the boss pays him the debt that is owed. He cannot say that the boss has given him this money because of his good looks, or because the boss had a good day. It is a debt that is owed because of the work that has been done.

But this is not the case with God. There is no work that we can do that warrants the gift (of being made righteous) that comes from God.

It is like God looking at the hearts of the people who are lined up looking for work outside the employment agency. There is no work there this week, and they have a need to eat and to support their families. It is as if God looks at them and says "*here is a free gift – you don't have to earn it, and you cannot do any kind of work that would deserve it – it is for you because I can see into your heart what kind of person you are.*" The true picture is that we are charity cases! We need God's grace. The work *grace* comes from the greek word *charis*, and it is where we get the word *charity* from. God has made us righteous when we are charity cases, because he can see our hearts, if we have shown the same kind of faith that Abraham showed.

This does not mean that we have no obligation at all. Our faith should necessitate action. It should be a *doing* faith. Abraham did not just believe God and then sit in Ur of the Chaldees, but he went to the country that God would show him. When he was told to sacrifice Isaac, he rose up early in the morning and went out. It is this kind of obedient faith that God requires of us if we are to be made righteous.

Does this mean that we are saved by works? Certainly not! James says "...*show me your faith without your works, and I by my works will show you my faith...*" (Js 2:18). He then goes on to say that Abraham was saved by works (Js 2:21). James is not talking about works to earn our salvation, but rather works of obedience.

God applies conditions. We don't get the free gift unless we meet the conditions. Imagine that you have won the lottery (I'm not advocating gambling, but it illustrates the point). We have not *earned* the prize it is a *free gift* (well, perhaps not exactly free if we had to buy the ticket). But the conditions to claim the prize include being able to substantiate our identity, establish that we have the valid ticket, and that we lawfully obtained the valid ticket. Even if we have the valid ticket, we will never receive the prize unless we *do something* to go and claim the prize. It is exactly this kind of works of obedience that James, Paul, and the Hebrew writer talk about. None of us should think that we will be saved by God (=made right = justified) unless we obey and do what God says. We are saved by faith, but only (and not until) we obey God. This is exactly the message that is described with Abraham's faith.

How does David support this proposition?

The proposition from David does not show a positive – but rather a negative proposition. Rather than a blessing, God withholds punishment “...*blessed is the man to whom God will not impute sin...*” Notice that David (and Paul) said that *not imputing sin* (4:8) is the equivalent of having our *transgressions covered* and our *sins forgiven* (4:7).

The application to Abraham was that by being made right with God (righteousness was accounted to him), he had his sins forgiven. This happened not by the keeping of the Law (it was 430 years before the Law (Gal 3:17)) but by Abraham’s demonstrated faith.

More than this, not only did it happen outside of the Law, it also happened outside of the covenant with God that was sealed by circumcision!

Circumcision was not given to Abraham to justify him (make him right) but as a seal of the fact that he had been made right with God by his faith. [In a parallel way, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (Eph 4:30) because of our relationship with God through our faith. Paul will have a lot more to say on that in Chapter 8. There are some who would argue that baptism is a sign and seal of our faithful relationship with God. The scriptures do not support this. When we are baptised into Christ (Gal 3:27) it is because we are obeying what God has commanded us to do (Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15-16). It is us demonstrating our faith in the works of obedience, just as Abraham did. Notice that Paul says that we are *baptised into Christ*. This is *how* we get into Christ – it is not to underplay the place of our faith, or of repentance – but we are not *in Christ* if we have not been baptised (immersed in water) *into* Him. More on this in chapter 6.

To whom was Abraham an example of faith?

The Jews were thinking that they (solely) received the blessings from Abraham as his descendants. But Paul points out that the Gentiles were (or at least *are* now that Christ has come) also recipients of the blessings.

We have already discussed the evidence for this. The blessings to Abraham did not come because he was a Jew, but came before he was a Jew. By implication, Paul is saying (in effect) that they came whilst Abraham was a Gentile. In a literal sense, he was uncircumcised when God gave him the blessings.

Whilst the sign of God’s covenant (circumcision) was given to Abraham, he therefore became the father to the Jews. However, because God’s blessings were given to him before the sign of circumcision, he is also able to call himself the father of the Gentiles! (4:9-12)

What effect does the Law have?

If righteousness (that is, our being made right = justified) comes by the Law (as the Jews supposed) then the implication to Abraham is – *what about the promise?* The blessings of God were given to Abraham without the condition of his keeping the Law because they came 430 years before the Law did! So, salvation by keeping the Law makes salvation by faith void – of no effect – and if that is the case, then Abraham could not have been justified / made right by God. This clearly is an untenable and illogical conclusion.

In fact, salvation by the Law takes us nowhere at all. All it does is to show that we are hopeless and incapable of keeping it. It condemns us because we did not keep it perfectly. But what about Abraham? He didn’t live under the Law. He was not subject to keeping all of the Law, and all of the things that it required. Because he didn’t live under it, he was not a transgressor – how could he have been, for “...*where there is no law there is no transgression...*” (4:15)

This has quite stark implications for the Gentiles. They did not live under the Law, and were not subject to it. The Law therefore did not condemn them. (But Paul has already shown that they are still condemned and not right before God, and hence in need of a Saviour – Chapters 1&2).

Notice that Paul brings together Faith, Grace, and Promise (vs 16) in stark contrast to the ideas that he has previously discussed of Works, Debt, and Law. We could *work* 24 hrs a day for the rest of our lives, under any system of *Law*, under the misapprehension that God owed us a *debt* for what we have done for Him, but we would totally miss the point (not to mention missing the reward). Rather, God has *promised* us that we will be made right (justified), and given us salvation totally by His *grace* towards us, and solely based on our *faith* (and of course, our obedience to that faith).

How did Abraham demonstrate his faith?

Abraham was not just the father of the Jews, for God had said that he would be made the father of many nations (4:17; Gen 17:5). This of course implies that it was not the Jews only who would call Abraham their father. In a physical sense, he is also the father of many other nations, but it is the spiritual sense that Paul brings out here – he is the father of all those who have faith.

His faith was demonstrated throughout his life (as we have already discussed). The promise that Abraham would be a father of *anyone* would almost seem unbelievable. Abraham was about one hundred years old, and Sarah was around 90 years old. Not only was Sarah incapable (naturally) of having children, but Abraham was also not capable of fathering children. If anyone knows my aunt and uncle Les and Laura Burgin, you will get the idea. At the time of writing (2004), Les is around 96 and Laura is 89 (if you don't know them then substitute someone you know or have known who are that age).

Yet Abraham had total faith in God that He would deliver on his promise. He was “...*fully convinced that God was able to perform what He had promised...*” (4:21)

What is the outcome of Abraham's faith?

The things that were said to Abraham were not just said for his sake alone, but were also said so that we might understand the things that God said and did, that we too might receive the blessings in like manner to Abraham.

We also shall receive the same blessings (justification) as Abraham if we have the same kind of faith. Paul adds that our faith “...*is in the God who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead...*” (4:24). The Jews had no trouble with faith in the God of Abraham, but to accept faith in the resurrection, and to accept Jesus as the Messiah would go beyond what they were (at least initially) ready to accept. But that is *exactly* the same kind of faith that Abraham had.

The outcome of Jesus as the Messiah is the end of the plan that God had put in place before the creation of the world. The idea of a Messiah who was put to death was totally foreign to the Jews.

Jesus was delivered up because of our offenses. Jesus is the remedy. Because we have sinned, Jesus became the propitiation (as we discussed in the last lesson). In exactly the same way that Jesus' death became the payment for our sins, His resurrection has become the way in which we have been justified before God. He was “...*declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead...*” (1:4). Through His resurrection He is seated at the right hand of God and makes intercession for us (Heb 8:1; 10:12; 12:2)