

## Father Abraham Had Many Sons

Romans 4:9–17

*Studies in Romans #16*

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**A**mazing grace, how sweet the sound,  
that saved a wretch like me,  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
was blind but now I see.

We know the song, but do we know the story of the author behind it? John Newton (1725–1807) was by his own admission an unbelieving, sin-loving, slave trader. And after many years in sin, the Lord powerfully converted him from spiritual death to spiritual life. He then went on to be a pastor and an advocate for the abolishing of slavery. And when we know this, his words take on new meaning. What is it about examples of notorious sinners becoming glorious saints that thrills our hearts? It's because we identify with their sins and struggles and with the power of God's grace that has changed our lives as well. God's grace truly is amazing.

We see an example of this with our spiritual father Abraham. He came from an idol-worshipping household (Josh. 24). He was a liar, who told his wife to call herself his sister so that he wouldn't be killed (Gen. 12). He didn't believe God could give him and his aged wife a son, so he took a concubine (Gen. 16). And because he was a sinner but also called a saint, he resonates with us as a powerful example of God's power to save sinners like you and me. Here in Romans 4 Paul continues to prove that God justifies sinners by faith alone apart from any and all works of the law by showing us the example of the father of all believers, Abraham.

## **Abraham is the Father of All Who Believe Because...**

The big point Paul is making in these verses is to prove to Jewish objections that their spiritual and familial father *Abraham is the father of all who believe*: **Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?** (v. 9) And in these verses Paul says he is the spiritual father of all who merely believe for two reasons.

*He was justified before being circumcised (vv. 9–12)*

First, Abraham is the father of all who believe because *he was justified before being circumcised*. **For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised** (v. 10). When was he circumcised? We read that in Genesis 17. How old was he then? Ninety-nine. When did he believe the Lord and it was counted to him as righteousness? We read of that before in Genesis 15, when he was eighty-five or younger. The chronology of Abraham's life proves this.

And so does the theology of what circumcision was all about. Notice verse 11: **He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised**. What was the purpose of circumcision? It was a sign. What does a sign do? It points to something. It was also a seal. Children, what does a seal do—and I don't mean the animal? If you want to sign up for school or for a sport and there is a certain age you must be, what do you parents do to prove your age? They get your birth certificate, which has a stamp on it from the government. That stamp is a seal. It makes the birth certificate authentic. In the Bible seals are used to authenticate a

promise. So what was Abraham's circumcision pointing to and authenticating? God's promise of **the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.**

What is Paul trying to show here? He's trying to say to Jews, "If you trust in the Lord like father Abraham, you are his sons and daughters. And therefore you obey the Lord's commands. But you're trying to reverse the order on Gentiles, making them obey the law and be circumcised first as a condition of belonging to the Lord." It's like a pregnant mom. She loves her baby and it is already a part of the family before it has done anything. It did nothing to earn that love. Then later the mom gets in the mail a birth certificate with a seal on it, authenticating that her baby was born at a certain time, at a certain place, with a certain doctor. Now imagine later that she decides to love a child that does not have a mom and dad. She loves the child and then adopts the child into the family. Her first, natural child, cannot object that the new adopted child did nothing to deserve being a part of the family. Why? Because he or she, too, was loved first by the mom before ever doing anything.

And you see that in verses 11–12, where Paul says **the purpose** of the Lord in the story of Genesis **was to make** [Abraham] **the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.** It's not just because you are circumcised that you are Abraham's son and daughters; you have to trust the Lord like father Abraham, who trusted before he was circumcised.

*He was justified before the law was given (vv. 13–17)*

Second, Abraham is the father of all who believe because *he was justified before the law was given*. **For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith** (v. 13). And notice that he says, **For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void** (v. 14). Why would he said that? Turn to Galatians 3:15–18. Paul gives here “a human example” that “even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified” (v. 15). Then he turns to God: “the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ” (v. 16). What is his point? “This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void” (v. 17). Did God make his promise to Abraham first or give his law to Moses first? He gave his promise. And the law afterward does not change the promise of salvation in Christ to come. Then Paul concludes, “For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise” (v. 18).

Let me give you an illustration. In the traditional English marriage vows—which, I might add, we need to stick to now more than ever before!—a husband and wife mutually promise “to have and to hold; from this day forward; for better for worse; for richer for poorer; in sickness and in health.” This means, husbands, that you cannot change your mind because your wife has changed what she looks like! There is no such thing as “no fault divorce” in the kingdom of God! But this also means that you cannot go to your wife

and say, “Oh, and by the way,” and then add in a bunch of conditions you had in your back pocket. The promise supersedes everything else. We’ll come back to verse 15 when we get into chapter 5, but notice in verses 16–17: **That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law (meaning, Jews) but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham (meaning, Gentiles), who is the father of us all, as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.**

So what’s Paul’s big theological point here? Abraham is the spiritual father of all who believe in Jesus the Messiah. How do we know this? From the Old Testament itself, which says he was justified by faith before he was circumcised and before the law of circumcision or the law of Moses was given.

## **Because Abraham is the Father of All Who Believe**

What a gospel! Amen? But our theology must become our biography. So what does this Old Testament example that Paul applied to the first century mean to us? *Because Abraham is the father of all who believe* let me offer several avenues of application.

First, *there is hope for you and all sinners*. Don’t ever forget as you read about Abraham that he came from an idolatrous household. God love sinners and he shows that in Abraham. He has shown that to many of you, who like him, grew up in homes that did not worship the true God. It does not matter what you have done; God promises you that

if you as a sinner trust in Jesus Christ as a righteous Savior to stand in your place before a holy God, you will be accepted by God as a Father. And there's further hope here, because it was as a justified sinner that Abraham struggled with God's promises and that led him to lie and to lack faith. What is your sin today, brothers and sisters? Confess it; receive forgiveness for it; go forth struggling against it in the power of Holy Spirit; and when you are wounded by it again, come back to the Lord and confess it again.

Second, Abraham being the father of all believers means that *God's people have unity in their diversity*. The Jews were justified by faith and so too were the Gentiles. According to worldly diversity, we have all different colors of skin in this church, all different socio-economic classes, all different political opinions and parties; but in Christ, all these take a backseat to our common identity in the Lord. As a church, we have to be more aware of each other's differences so that we have more reason to accept one another. And when people ask you if they would fit in at your church, you tell them yes! When someone different shows up, don't look, feel, or act surprised; accept them, welcome them!

Third, let me offer a theological application of what we read here. Like Abraham, who believed and then was circumcised, *we too are therefore to give the sign and seal of God's covenant with us to our children*. We don't believe in baby baptism or infant baptism; we believe in covenant baptism. All those in the covenant with God are to receive the sign of that covenant.