

- c. The third point of contrast involving Abraham's faith is found in verses 4:13-15. In this brief passage Paul contrasted faith with the Law of Moses. At face value it may appear to some that this context effectively replicates 4:1-8 in which faith was set over against works. But Paul's concern in the present context was not with the works of the Law as the basis of righteousness, but the Law as the basis for securing God's blessing. This is evident from his terminology: whereas the former context addressed *faith* versus *works*, the present one sets in contrast *faith* and *law* specifically as they implicate *promise*.

Paul's transition into this third section is accomplished by the use of the inferential conjunction *for*. This term can serve various purposes, but Paul uses it here in an explanatory way to further clarify his statements in 4:11-12. It was seen that his argument in these verses is redemptive-historical. That is, Paul used the historical reality of Abraham's righteous reckoning preceding his circumcision to substantiate his important role in salvation history. God had promised him that he would be the father of a multitude of nations, and the circumstances surrounding that oath and the giving of the sign of circumcision provide insight into the nature of Abraham's fatherhood:

- The determinative principle in Abraham's relationship with God was his *reckoned righteousness* on the basis of his faith. Moreover, the fact that this reckoning was attended by God's promise of a *multinational* progeny indicates that filial relation to Abraham was to be based on sharing in his faith and reckoned righteousness rather than simply biological descent.
- That such faith and the righteousness granted to it would determine the children of Abraham became more evident with the *sign of circumcision* instituted years later. For, as Paul noted, Abraham's circumcision was the sign and seal of the righteousness he already possessed (4:11). This being so, God's requirement that every male attached to Abraham's household be circumcised spoke of the truth that participation in God's promise to Abraham demanded not simply the physical mark of circumcision, but also the reality of reckoned righteousness signified by circumcision. Thus Ishmael and Esau bore the mark in the flesh, but they were excluded from the covenant and its blessings.

The issue in Abraham's fatherhood is *faith*, even as it was the issue in Abraham's righteousness. His circumcision added nothing; it merely attested and sealed what was already true. For this reason he is father to those who, like him, are reckoned righteous by faith without being circumcised; at the same time, he is father to those who, while sharing in his faith, also bear the mark of physical circumcision. In this way God's promise is fulfilled that Abraham would be the father of not merely *circumcised* Israel, but a multitude of nations. This is possible because circumcision means nothing to his fatherhood; *all* who share in his righteousness reckoned by faith are his children, whether Jew or uncircumcised Gentile. This is Paul's point in 4:11-12, and he continues that argument in 4:13-15.

- 1) Specifically, his intention in this transition was to show to the Romans how the determinative principle of righteousness by faith in contrast to law implicates God's covenantal promise to Abraham:

*“For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith” (4:13).*

Paul began his discourse on Abraham by establishing that his righteousness was reckoned to him on the basis of his faith (4:1-8). From there he showed how the multinational “seed” God promised to Abraham were to be identified not by physical descent, but participation in his faith and reckoned righteousness (4:9-12). In the present context Paul advanced his argument by turning to the promise itself and the relation of the principle of promise to the Law of Moses, with these three verses in turn providing the foundation for the point he was ultimately seeking to make:

*God's promissory commitment to Abraham was not on the basis of law, but faith; and just as Abraham's faith in God and His veracity was reckoned to him for righteousness, so also it secured in actual fulfillment what God had promised.*

God promised Abraham an inheritance, and that inheritance was to belong to an heir who would come from his own body. Further, the heir would proceed out of Sarah's aged, barren womb, and through him Abraham's descendants were to be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abraham believed God concerning this promise, his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness, and through that faith he ultimately obtained what was promised (ref. 4:16-22; also Genesis 15:1-6, 17:1-21, 18:1-15, 21:1-7).

It is noteworthy that the idea of *promise* is here introduced in the epistle for the first time, and it stands as the central theme through the end of the chapter (cf. 4:13-14, 16-17, 19-21). And because Paul's intention was to methodically build his argument throughout the epistle, it follows that the theme of promise and God's faithfulness respecting it are foundationally important to the balance of the letter, both doctrinally and practically.

- a) The first thing to observe about this transitional context is Paul's identification of the nature and content of God's promise to Abraham. Although the Genesis account records several aspects of promise, Paul lumped them all together under the concept of an *inheritance*. Abraham was promised a direct heir, a multitudinous seed through him, a perpetual habitation, and a blessedness that would extend to the world. And, realizing their significance in fulfillment, Paul combined them all and spoke of them in terms of the divine promise that Abraham would be the *“heir of the world.”*

He notes further that this promise pertained to Abraham's descendants as well (4:13a), which is commonly interpreted as referring to ethnic Israel. It is undeniable that Abraham had a physical, genealogical line of descent who received the inheritance in a physical way, but the previous context indicates that Paul's concern was not with Jewish Israel per se, but the *true* children of Abraham - Jew and Gentile - who partake in his faith and, therefore, his reckoned righteousness. This becomes even more obvious as he advances into the succeeding context (ref. 4:16-24). These descendants of Abraham are co-heirs with him; as he was promised the world as his inheritance, so also are his descendants. But what exactly did Paul mean by insisting that Abraham was heir of the *world*, when Genesis nowhere speaks in these terms?

Some have sought to resolve the difficulty by removing it. They do so by saying that Paul's Greek noun rendered *world* is to be understood in terms of the Hebrew noun, *land*, used in God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-5). The immediate problem with this view is that the noun used by Paul never refers to a particular geographic region. In fact, the Septuagint always employs a different Greek noun to translate this Hebrew term when it is used in reference to the land promised to Abraham.

The reason for Paul's apparent shifting of the scope of the promise is, again, redemptive-historical. God promised to Abraham a specific region as his inheritance, but in fulfillment that inheritance encompasses the entire earth. But having said that, Paul's point was not geographical extension; the entire context is concerned not with the land of Canaan but the heirs to come from Abraham. *By speaking of the "kosmos" as the inheritance Paul was showing how the breadth and depth of God's promise to Abraham have global, even cosmic, proportions.* Not only was his fatherhood to extend to all the nations of the earth, the whole world would be blessed through him. God's blessing upon Abraham had its ultimate goal in the blessing of the entire created order, which cosmic, comprehensive blessing was to come through Abraham's promised Seed (cf. Genesis 12:1-3, 22:15-18 with Galatians 3:8; also Isaiah 51:1-16; Micah 7:1-20; Luke 1:67-79, 19:1-10; Galatians 3:1-29; Hebrews 2:14-18, 6:9-20; Revelation 21:1-7).

- b) The second thing to observe is Paul's insistence that the promise came not through the Law but through "*the righteousness of faith*" (4:13b). This claim may be substantiated on purely chronological grounds - righteousness preceded the Law, but Paul's concern was not with chronology but the *relation* between differing principles.

In particular he was addressing the relationship between *promise* and *law*. Previously Paul insisted that faith and works are mutually exclusive principles (3:27-28), and in the present context he makes the parallel assertion that promise - specifically God's promise to Abraham - had no relation to the Law.

This is evident from the meaning of the terms themselves, for there is a fundamental incompatibility between the ideas of "promise" and "earned reward" gained through performance under law. But Paul makes the distinction explicit by the example of Abraham. But in so doing his point was not to show that the promise predated the Law, for the Jews (as also Reformed Theology) maintained that Abraham was subject to law even though the formal Mosaic structure was not yet in place (ref. Genesis 26:1-5). Rather than posing a chronological argument as in Galatians 3:15-18, Paul was here approaching the matter along different lines, namely *the basis upon which God makes and keeps His promises to men*.

In that regard, he declared that God's promise to Abraham was through *the righteousness of faith* and not the Law. This phrase has been subject to various interpretations, and does present certain difficulties, especially if it is viewed as indicating either that faith itself constitutes righteousness, or that God gave his promises to Abraham because of something intrinsic to him. In context it is apparent that Paul meant that Abraham's righteousness according to faith was not the cause, but the *mediating instrument* for God's promise to him. And because this righteousness was reckoned and not personal, it grants nothing to Abraham, but leaves the entire transaction as a matter of grace. All Abraham did was believe God and trust that His word would be fulfilled as promised (4:18-22).

- 2) In verse 4:14 Paul affirmed what was implicit in his previous statement, namely that promise and law are mutually exclusive principles. If law is the determinative principle for the reception of the *inheritance* (that which was promised), then the inheritance is rendered a matter of earned entitlement rather than promissory grant. This is essentially a restatement of his previous contention regarding the ideas of *reward* and *gift* (4:4). As seen, there are only two principles for living: work and faith, and each yields its own recompense: the former an earned wage and the latter a free gift. So also God's inheritance, like every other bestowal, is either earned or received as a gift, and that on the basis of either faith or works.

This being so, it is impossible to conclude that possession of and performance under the Law are the bases of being an heir; that is, unless one is ready also to eliminate the principles of faith and promise from the obtainment of the inheritance.

Paul's words are unequivocal: "*If those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified.*" His grammar indicates that he was speaking of Old Covenant Israel, and more specifically of Jews who believed and lived as if the Abrahamic promise and the inheritance of it depend upon possession of the Law of Moses. He was not, therefore, referring to all Jews; he previously affirmed that Abraham has true children from among "the circumcision" as well as the Gentiles (4:10-12). It is rather all those who trusted in their Mosaic and ethnic heritage that could not rightly regard themselves as heirs. For, if such men were indeed heirs as they supposed, then their gaining of the inheritance constitutes a due reward. And that being the case, both *promise* and *faith* are eliminated; in Paul's language, faith is forever emptied of its power and made futile, and the promise is left in a state of idleness and uselessness.

- 3) The reason for Paul's choice of terminology is the fruit that grows on the limbs of the Law: "*the Law brings about wrath*" (4:15a). Because the Law sets forth and demands the human perfection that is unobtainable by fallen men, it can do nothing but condemn them. Therefore, if law plays any role in gaining the promised inheritance, there is absolutely no hope of obtaining it - *the promise has been rendered permanently useless*; it will never be realized by anyone, and may just as well have never been uttered. So also faith - as firm confidence in God that He will keep His promise of blessing (4:18-21) - becomes only a futile exercise, for the wrathful "wages" that come to men through the operation of law keep them from obtaining what was promised; *they have believed and hoped in vain.*

Paul's contention that wrath is the only thing the Law produces for men flew in the face of the common Jewish conviction of his day, even as it still does today. All people naturally place their hope in personal righteousness to be gained and proven out under a moral, ethical, and/or religious standard, and the Jews under the Law are no different. There was no doubt but that they would associate the Law and their performance under it with their present status and future hope.

This firm confidence notwithstanding, Paul supported his insistence concerning the Law by observing that "*where there is no law, neither is there violation*" (4:15b). Although the context is particularly concerned with the Law of Moses, this statement represents a general maxim that addresses law *as law*. It stands upon the fact that the role of law is to establish explicit directives concerning right and wrong, with the result that disobedience to any one of those directives constitutes violation or *transgression*. Hence, where there is no law, there can be no transgression of law. But given that all men are *innately* sinful, the introduction of law - regardless of form or scope - accomplishes only one thing: it causes those under it to become transgressors. And such willful violation incurs the retribution of divine wrath, not the fulfillment of divine promise.