

# **Romans: The Good News of God**

## **Abraham Justified by Grace – Part 1**

*Romans 4:9-17*

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# Abraham Justified by Grace – Part 1

## Scripture

What does the word *Yankee* mean to you? Robert W. Mayer, in a *Wall Street Journal* article, writes, “To people in other parts of the world it simply means someone from the United States; to people in the United States it means someone from north of the Mason-Dixon Line; to us Northerners it means someone from New England; to New Englanders it means someone from Vermont; and to Vermonters it means someone from the Green Mountains.”<sup>1</sup>

The term *Christian* has taken on a wide range of meaning too. Some have equated being a Christian with being an American. That’s far too wide! Others say a Christian is someone who has been baptized and become a member of a Christian church.

A true Christian, however, is someone who has come into a right relationship with God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

This is what the apostle Paul teaches in our text today as he shows us that Abraham was justified by grace. Let’s read Romans 4:9-17:

**<sup>9</sup> Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, <sup>12</sup> 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.**

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<sup>1</sup> Terri Gibbs, ed., *Our Daily Bread* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 2005), 23.

<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. <sup>15</sup> For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

<sup>16</sup> 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 but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, <sup>17</sup> 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. (Romans 4:9-17)

## Introduction

When I think about how some people try to come into a right relationship with God I find it rather sad.

For example, let me tell you what John MacArthur says in his commentary on Romans about how Hindus try to come into a right relationship with God.

One of the great Hindu festivals is called Maha Kumbh Mela, which is celebrated every twelve years at the confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers, called the fabled waters of the Sangam. It is claimed to be the world’s largest single religious event.

Disregarding the difficult journey, the great expense, and the cold waters, multitudes of the faithful are drawn to the celebration. Caste and economic class are temporarily set aside. The festival is led by a group of stark naked holy men who lead a procession of millions of pilgrims down to the filthy water. Fakirs sit on beds of nails and walk over broken glass and lie down on hot coals. A common sight is to see worshippers taking long knives and piercing their tongues in order to sentence themselves to eternal silence as a way to appease their myriad gods. Some worshippers will stare at the sun until they are blinded. Others intentionally cause

their limbs to atrophy in gestures of worship. One man held his arm upright for eight years. Although his arm muscles had long since atrophied, his uncut fingernails had continued to grow and descended some two and a half feet below his hands.

One Hindu holy book declares, “Those who bathe at the conflux of the Ganges and the Yamuna go to heaven.”

Another sacred writing says that “the pilgrim who bathes at this place wins absolution for his whole family, and even if he has perpetrated a hundred crimes, he is redeemed the moment he touches the Ganges, whose waters wash away his sins.”

At this festival the waterfront is lined with countless shaving booths, in which the devoted strip themselves bare and have every hair on their bodies shaved off, including their eyebrows and eyelashes. Every shaved hair is collected and all the hair is then thrown into the water. Hindu writings assure pilgrims that “for every hair thus thrown in, you are promised a million years residence in heaven.” We are told that millions who come with spiritual hunger depart with peace in their hearts and renewed faith.<sup>2</sup>

What a dreadful, damning deception by Satan! But it perfectly illustrates the works-centered systems of religion people crave under Satan’s inspiration, all of which seek to convince people that they can be made right with God and guaranteed a place in heaven by performing certain rites and ceremonies. Some religions are much more sophisticated and humanly attractive than others, but all share the common false belief in works righteousness in some form or the other. The natural man instinctively believes that somehow he can make himself right with God by his own efforts.

The apostle Paul continues his teaching that Christians come into a right relationship with God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Paul uses Abraham as an example of this truth. His argument was that if Abraham, the greatest man in the Old Testament, was saved by grace alone through faith alone, then every other person must be justified on the same basis. And, con-

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<sup>2</sup> Johan MacArthur, *Romans* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966, c1991, c1994), 246.

trarily, if Abraham could not be justified by being circumcised or by keeping the law, then neither could anyone else.

## Lesson

In Romans 4:9-17 Paul demonstrates three closely related truths: Abraham's justifying faith did not come by his circumcision (4:9-12); it did not come by his keeping the law (4:13-15); but rather it came solely by God's grace (4:16-17).

### I. Abraham Was Not Justified by Circumcision (4:9-12)

First, Abraham was not justified by circumcision.

The apostle Paul was anticipating the question that Jews would ask at this point in his argument: "If Abraham was justified by his faith alone, why did God demand circumcision of Abraham and all his descendants?"

Most Jews in New Testament times were thoroughly convinced that circumcision was not only the unique mark that set them apart from all others as God's chosen people but was also the means by which they became acceptable to God.

The Jewish apocryphal *Book of Jubilees* declares:

[Circumcision] is an eternal ordinance, ordained and written on the heavenly tablets. And every one that is born, the flesh of whose foreskin is not circumcised on the eighth day, belongs not to the children of the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham, for he belongs to the children of destruction; nor is there moreover any sign on him that he is the Lord's but [he is destined] to be destroyed and slain from the earth. (15:25ff.)

Many Jews believed that salvation was based on their obedience to God in being circumcised, and that, therefore, their eternal security rested in that rite.

In his commentary on the *Book of Moses*, Rabbi Menachim wrote, "Our [Rabbis] have said that no circumcised man will ever

see hell” (fol. 43, col. 3).

The *Julkut Rubem* taught that “Circumcision saves from hell” (num. 1), and the Midrash Millim that “God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised should be sent to hell” (fol. 7, col. 2).

The book *Akedath Jizehak* taught that “Abraham sits before the gate of hell, and does not allow any circumcised Israelite to enter there” (fol. 54, col. 2).

Such beliefs were so strong in Judaism that many of them were carried over into Christianity by Jewish converts in the first century church. Circumcision and following the Law of Moses became such issues that a special council of the apostles and elders was called in Jerusalem to settle the matter. The unanimous decision, expressed in a letter sent to all the churches, was that obedience to Mosaic ritual, including circumcision, was *not* necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1-29).

The apostle Paul had come out of a strongly legalistic Jewish background, being “circumcised on the eighth day . . . a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee” (Philippians 3:5). Yet the Holy Spirit had revealed to him, and the Jerusalem council had acknowledged, that neither circumcision nor any other ceremony or human act, no matter how divinely ordained, could bring a person into a right relationship with God.

Circumcision had never saved a Jew and it could not save a Gentile (Romans 2:25-29). Paul therefore warned his fellow Christians in Galatians 5:1-4:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

A person who trusts in circumcision, or in any other cere-

mony or work, such as baptism or church membership or whatever, nullifies the work of Christ on his behalf.

He places himself under the law, and a person under the law must obey it with absolute perfection, which is humanly impossible.

Genesis 17:10-14 makes it clear that the act of circumcision was a God-given mark of his covenant with Abraham and his descendants, the Jews. It was on the basis of that passage that the rabbis taught, and most Jews believed, that obedience to that rite was the means of pleasing God and becoming right with him.

But Paul uses that very passage of Scripture to demonstrate that, to the contrary, Abraham was *not* made righteous before God by his circumcision but that when he was given the command of circumcision he had *already* been declared righteous.

And so Paul begins by asking in Romans 4:9-10a: **“Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him?”**

The relevance of this basic truth for our own day is great. Although few people, even Jews, now believe that circumcision brings salvation, countless millions firmly trust in some form of religious ceremony to make them right with God.

The Roman Catholic Church, for example, teaches that people come into a right relationship with God through baptism. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, edited by the present Pope when he was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, states that “Justification is conferred in Baptism.”<sup>3</sup> That means that a person is justified by baptism and not by faith in Jesus.

Some Protestant churches, such as Episcopalians and Lutherans, hold similar views. They believe that a person is saved by the act of baptism apart from any faith on the part of the individual being baptized.

But all such doctrines are forms of magic, in which salvation

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, ed., *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York, NY: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1994), 482.

is supposedly conferred apart from faith by the individual.

That is exactly the kind of power the Jews of Paul's day attached to circumcision. And because they believed that what was true for Abraham in regard to justification was true of every person, especially every Jew, Paul continues to use that patriarch as his model. Answering his own question about the time of Abraham's being declared righteous, the apostle declares that it was **it was not after, but before he was circumcised** (4:10) that he was saved.

The obvious chronology of Genesis proves it. God called Abraham to himself when he was seventy-five years old (Genesis 12:1-4). When Abraham was eighty-six years old God declared Abraham to be justified by faith (Genesis 15:6). It wasn't until Abraham was ninety-nine years old that he was circumcised (Genesis 17:23-25). So, Abraham was clearly justified long before he was circumcised.

The natural question to be asked, therefore, would be, "Why circumcision? Why did God make that rite a binding law on all of Abraham's descendants?"

First of all, Paul says, circumcision was a sign. Abraham **received the sign of circumcision** (4:11a). Circumcision was a mark of God's covenant, setting Abraham's spiritual descendants apart as uniquely his chosen people.

Second, circumcision was **a seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith while he was still uncircumcised** (4:11b). In other words, every time circumcision was performed God's people were to be reminded of God's **righteousness** that was credited to Abraham, and that would be credited to all who trust in the righteousness of God.

Although they convey similar ideas, a sign points to something, whereas a seal guarantees it.

When an official seal was stamped on a letter or decree, for instance, its authenticity was guaranteed. In that sense, circumcision was the authentication that God's covenant promises would be fulfilled. It pointed to the fact that God wanted to circumcise, that



is, place his authenticating seal upon, his people's hearts, not simply their bodies.

That was always God's intent, and the Jews should have known it long before Paul pointed it out in his Roman letter. Moses had declared in Deuteronomy 30:6: "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live." God had always wanted first of all to cut away the sin that covered the heart.

Every male child of Israel was a testimony that people's hearts need spiritual circumcision, or cleansing.

In a similar way, baptism symbolizes Christ's death and resurrection. Communion symbolizes Christ's redemptive act on our behalf, which we are to commemorate until he returns. Neither rite has any saving merit in itself, and the elements of water, bread, and wine (or grape juice) certainly have no merit or power in themselves. Both sacraments are signs and seals of God's gracious covenant with his people.

As Paul has already made clear in this letter in Romans 2:28-29: "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."

Contrary to the teaching in some churches today, infant baptism no more provides salvation than did circumcision.

Abraham received circumcision *after* he was reckoned righteous so that he is **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** (4:11b-12).

Ethnically, Abraham is the father of all the Jews. And spiritually, he is the father of all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile.

And the reason that anyone is saved is because of faith, and not because of circumcision—or any other religious rite.

### Conclusion

And so we learn that Abraham was not justified by circumcision. He was justified by faith through the grace of God.

You cannot be justified by circumcision or baptism or any other religious rite. The only way to heaven is through faith in Jesus Christ.

During his years at Oxford George Whitfield became associated with the “Holy Club,” a group of serious churchmen committed to a methodically rigorous regimen of religious observance with the brothers John and Charles Wesley as the leaders. Their remarkable earnestness manifested itself in ascetic living, regular devotions, charitable works, and solemn discussion, but it was unenlightened by the Gospel.

“I began to fast twice a week for thirty-six hours together,” Whitefield wrote in later years, “prayed many times a day and received the sacrament every Lord’s Day. I fasted myself almost to death all the forty days of Lent, during which I made it a point of duty never to go less than three times a day to public worship, besides seven times a day to my private prayers. Yet I knew no more that I was to be born a new creature in Christ Jesus than if I had never been born at all.”

Deeply dissatisfied at heart, the reading of a book with the title *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* by Henry Scougal made plain to him the necessity of a personal relationship with God through Christ. Desperately seeking this relationship, he increased his self-affliction to such an extent that his weakness brought him near to death.

At last, however, the grace of God enabled him to trust solely in Christ instead of in his own religious exercises: “God was pleased to remove the heavy load,” he testified, “to enable me to lay hold of his dear Son by a living faith, and by giving me the

Spirit of adoption, to seal me even to the day of everlasting redemption.”<sup>4</sup>

The rest of George Whitfield’s life continued to be one of zeal and discipline. He became arguably one of the greatest evangelists who has ever lived. But, from that day on, he believed that he was justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and not by any of his good works.

I pray that God will help us to abandon all confidence in good works, whether it is baptism, circumcision, church membership, service, or whatever. I pray that you will trust only in Jesus Christ for the gift of eternal life. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Galaxie Software, *10,000 Sermon Illustrations* (Biblical Studies Press, 2002; 2002).



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
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**PRAAYER:**

Our Father, I am so thankful that we are not justified by our works, but rather we are justified by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone.

We are not saved by baptism. We are not saved by communion. We are not saved by church membership. We are not saved by our obedience to the Ten Commandments.

We are saved by the perfect and righteous work of Jesus Christ, which is credited to our account and is received by faith.

Thank you for the gospel. And thank you for Jesus Christ.

And all of this I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.