

Romans: The Good News of God

Abraham Justified by Grace – Part 2

Romans 4:9-17

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January 27, 2008

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Scripture

Let's read Romans 4:9-17:

⁹ Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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, ¹² 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.

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

¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ 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

The November/December 2000 issue of *Modern Reformation* has a fascinating interview with William Willimon, Professor and

Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. At one point he addresses the issue with students of how modern people think about eternity. He says:

This past Easter, I told the people: “There was a day when I thought my problem was how to get critical, modern, twentieth century people to believe that a Jew who was dead three days then returned and came back. I just thought that was hard for you all to swallow. But then I realized last year, by my count, there were seven movies where people came back from the dead – *Meet Joe Black*, *The Titanic*, something about a snowman. Then I realized that it isn’t that you people are skeptical and critical. It’s that all of you *easily* believe in immortality. I mean, you all believe you’re just so wonderful that you’re going to just go on forever, that there will always be some spark of you.”

Many people think that they are going to continue in eternal bliss, just because they are immortal.

Others, perhaps because of some religious strain, believe that immortal bliss is not automatically conferred; it has to be somehow earned. And so they perform religious ceremonies and strive for religious obedience.

Unfortunately, none of these ways prepare a person for eternal bliss. Satan effectively deceives people into thinking that a person’s righteous works will earn him or her a place in heaven.

But that is contrary to the teaching of God’s Word.

The apostle Paul teaches against such works righteousness in Romans 4. He points to Abraham as the supreme Old Testament example of a man was saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Review

In Romans 4:9-17—our text for today—the apostle 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). Last week we looked at the first point.

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

First, Abraham was not justified by circumcision.

Abraham was declared justified by God 14 years before he was circumcised. In other words, God saved him, and it was only 14 years later that he required him to be circumcised as a sign and seal of his covenant promises to Abraham. So, Abraham was not justified by circumcision.

Similarly, not one of you can be saved by circumcision. Nor can you be saved by baptism, communion, church membership, or any other religious ceremony.

Lesson

II. Abraham Was Not Justified by the Law (4:13-15)

Second, Abraham was not justified by the law.

Again the chronology of the Scriptures proves his point. As every Jew well knew, the law was not revealed to Moses until more than 500 years after Abraham lived, and that patriarch obviously had no way of knowing what the law required.

People have never been able to come to God by means of an outward ceremony or standard of conduct. When Abraham was declared right with God, he was neither circumcised nor in possession of the Mosaic Law. Circumcision had not yet been required by God and the law had not yet been revealed by God. Therefore, **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** (4:13).

The promise to Abraham was embodied in God's covenant with Abraham, in which the patriarch was told that **his offspring would be heir of the world** (Genesis 12:3; 15:6; 18:18; 22:18). In

analyzing God's promise to Abraham, four significant factors emerge.

First, the **promise** involved *a land*. Genesis 15:18-21 says, "On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.'" Abraham lived in the land but his descendants only came to *possess* the land about 500 years later, when Joshua led the Israelites in their conquest of the Promised Land.

Second, the **promise** also involved *a people*, who would be so numerous that they could not be numbered, like the dust of the earth and the stars in the sky. God said to Abraham in Genesis 13:16: "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted," and in Genesis 15:5: "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. . . . So shall your offspring be."

Third, the **promise** involved *a blessing* of the entire world through Abraham's descendants. God said to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, *and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (italics mine).

And fourth, the **promise** would be fulfilled in the giving of *a Redeemer*, who would be a descendant of Abraham through whom the whole world would be blessed by the provision of salvation. That promise was, in essence, a preaching to him of the gospel. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:8 that "the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'"

Abraham believed that gospel, and even when Isaac, the sole

divinely-promised heir, was about to be offered as a sacrifice, Abraham trusted that “God [would] provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering” (Genesis 22:8).

Through the writer of Hebrews, the Lord gives a beautiful revelation of the extent of Abraham’s understanding and faith in Hebrews 11:17-19: “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”

Jesus told the unbelieving Jewish religious leaders, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

In a way that is not explained, Abraham foresaw the coming of Jesus the Messiah, who would be born as one of his promised offspring. It was through that descended Messiah, Jesus Christ, that Abraham would bless the entire world and be **heir of the world**.

Referring to the Hebrew text of Genesis 22:17-18, Paul gives God’s exegesis of his own Word in Galatians 3:16, declaring that “the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It [i.e., the Scripture] does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.”

Later in that same chapter, in Galatians 3:29, the apostle says of *all* Christians, Gentile as well as Jew, “And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” In Christ Christians become part of that single spiritual seed, “who is Christ.”

All Christians are one in Jesus Christ, “one spirit with him” (1 Corinthians 6:17). Because we are identified with God’s only begotten Son, Christians become children of God. Paul later declares in Romans 8:16-17: “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs— heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”

It is not human descent from Abraham but spiritual descent from him, by having the *same faith* as Abraham, that makes a believer an heir both with Abraham and with Christ. As Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians, most of whom doubtless were Gentiles, human descent means nothing as far as a person's standing before God is concerned. "So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (1 Corinthians 3:21-23).

On the other hand, Jesus told the unbelieving Jewish leaders that, although they were physically descended from Abraham, spiritually they were sons of their "father the devil" (John 8:44).

Justification has never been **through the law**, just as it has never been through circumcision. Paul is speaking not only of the Mosaic Law but of God's law in its broadest sense, referring to all of God's commandments and standards. He was also speaking of the general principle of human law keeping, in which many Jews trusted for their salvation.

As Paul clarifies later in the letter, God's law "is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (Romans 7:12; cf. Galatians 3:21).

But the law was never given as a means of salvation, even for Jews. As Paul writes in Galatians 3:10 that "all who rely on works of the law," that is, seek to justify themselves on the basis of keeping the law, "are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'"

The person who trusts in his ability to save himself by law keeping is cursed because of the impossibility of perfectly keeping God's law. Paul counted his own previous efforts at law keeping as spiritual debts, as loss and rubbish (Philippians 3:7-8).

One purpose of the **law** was to reveal God's perfect standards of righteousness and to show people that they are unable in their own power to live up to those standards. Awareness of that inability should drive men to God in faith. "So the law was put in charge

[i.e. given] to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24, *NIV*).

God has never recognized any righteousness but **the righteousness of faith** in him, and that righteousness comes by means of his own gracious provision. Jesus Christ not only is the object of our faith but is also its “founder and perfecter” (Hebrews 12:2).

Abraham was justified because he believed God’s promise and, as Paul has already declared in this letter, that belief “was counted to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3; cf. Genesis 15:6).

In exactly the same way, when a person believes God’s promise of salvation through trust in his Son Jesus Christ, that act of faith is reckoned to him as Christ’s own righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

Abraham’s trust was not in what he possessed but in what he was promised. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says this about Abraham’s faith in Hebrews 11:8-10: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”

Abraham’s **faith** was exemplified in his willingness to go to a land he had never seen, which was a promised inheritance he would never possess. Abraham journeyed to that land and was satisfied to live there as an alien, because his ultimate hope was in the inheritance of “the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.”

Paul continues to explain in Romans 4:14: “**For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.**”

If people were able to keep God’s law perfectly they would indeed be heirs of God. That, of course, is impossible, but if it were true it would make faith of no value and would make God’s promise as worthless.

Faith is able to receive anything God promises. If, on the other hand, God's promise is only to be received through obedience to a law which neither Abraham nor his children could keep, then faith is cancelled. In other words, to predicate a promise on an impossible condition is to nullify the promise.

The law cannot save **for the law brings wrath** (Romans 4:15). The more a person seeks to justify himself by keeping God's **law**, the more he proves his inability to do so because of his sinfulness and the more judgment and **wrath** he brings upon himself. Just as surely as the law reveals God's righteousness so it also exposes man's sinfulness.

As Paul later comments in Romans 7:7-11:

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

"Why then the law?" Paul rhetorically asked the Galatian Christians. "It was added," he explains, "because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary" (Galatians 3:19).

As already noted, the law was not given to save us but "was put in charge [i.e. given] to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24, *NIV*).

III. Abraham Was Justified by God's Grace (4:16-17)

And third, Abraham was justified by God's grace.

The crux of this passage is verse 16. God reckons the Christian's **faith** as righteousness in order that salvation **may rest on grace** (4:16).

Were it not for God's sovereign **grace** providing a way of salvation, even a person's faith could not save him. That is why **faith** is not simply another form of human works, as some theologians throughout the centuries have maintained. The power of salvation, or justification, is in God's **grace**, not in man's **faith**.

Abraham's faith was not *in itself* righteousness but was *counted* to him as righteousness on the basis of the One who himself would graciously provide for Christians, including Abraham, the righteousness they could never attain by themselves.

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring (4:16). That Paul is speaking of spiritual, not physical, **offspring**, is made clear by his going on to say, **not only to the adherent of the law**, that is, the Jew, **but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all** (4:16).

As noted before, when Abraham was called in Ur of the Chaldeans, he was an idolatrous pagan. Before God's covenant with Abraham, there were no Jews and therefore no Gentiles, strictly speaking. But Paul's point here is that God reckoned Abraham's faith as righteousness before any such distinctions were made. It was for that reason that Abraham's faith was a universal faith that applies to all mankind, not merely to Jews, those who are **adherents of the law**.

And it was for that reason that **Abraham** became **the father of us all**, that is, of all who trust in Jesus Christ, regardless of racial or religious heritage.

Abraham was the spiritual prototype of every genuine believer. He was a pagan, idolatrous, ungodly sinner who trusted not in his own efforts but in God's gracious promise.

As always, Paul's defense is scriptural. "**As it is written**" (4:17), refers to Genesis 17:5, which Paul here renders as, "**I have made you the father of many nations.**" The promise to Abraham

was fulfilled **in the presence of God in whom he believed.**

Lest there be any doubt about what **God** was speaking about, Paul gives two qualifications. First, this God is the one **who gives life to the dead.** Abraham had experienced first-hand that power of God. He was miraculously given Isaac, the son of promise, long after Sarah had passed her child-bearing years and after Abraham was “as good as dead” as far as his fathering a child was concerned (Hebrews 11:11-12).

Second, this God is the one who **calls into existence the things that do not exist.** Paul here obviously refers to God’s power as expressed through creation, in which “what is seen was not made out of things that are visible” (Hebrews 11:3). He is the one true **God** who calls people, places, and events into existence solely by his divine and sovereign determination.

Conclusion

Paul’s entire point in this passage is that Abraham was not justified by circumcision or by keeping the Mosaic Law. Instead, he was saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

You and I cannot be saved by religious ceremony. You and I cannot be saved by obedience to some moral code, even the law of God. You and I can only be saved by the grace of God as we trust in the promise of God, namely that Christ’s perfect righteousness is the only basis of acceptance with God.

So, today, trust in Jesus and his perfect righteousness. Don’t trust in your baptism or good works. Trust in Jesus alone. Amen.

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

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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 grace alone through faith 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.