

# By Grace, So by Faith

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Romans 4

We are returning to Romans 4 this morning, recognizing how central the salvation of Abraham is to this chapter.

Abraham's name appears seven times here – we are learning to believe from this great old patriarch.

Now one of the strangest lessons comes from chapter 15 of Genesis, where it says that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

I want you to see grace of God in what is to our minds a bizarre ritual of cutting animals in half before the Lord.

Abraham, the father of the faith, understood this perfectly.

In ancient days, a captured and enslaved people would swear to be loyal to their new master by this ceremony.

They were made to walk in between these dead animal parts as a picture of what will happen to them if they are unfaithful, or unloyal to their new king. It was a solemn and serious commitment to be faithful and obedient. Or else!

But here is the twist.

Abraham expects God to make him walk in the middle of these slain animals and swear allegiance to God.

But instead, in the emblem of a smoking oven and flaming torch, God himself passes between the pieces! Everything is reversed! God promises faithfulness and loyalty to Abraham with all of his family, that the Lord will never fail him!

So it is God's work, and not Abraham's. All Abraham had to do was believe – to receive the promise of grace.

This is exactly what we have been seeing in Romans 4.

Romans 4.1-8 says it is by faith, not works, that he was accounted righteous.

Next, it is by faith, not circumcision, which came 14 years later, after Genesis 15, when Abraham was accounted righteous by God – Romans 4:9-12.

And today, it was by faith, in order that it might be according to grace, and not law – Romans 4:13-17.

The Jews of Paul's day were very confused on this matter.

They were teaching that Abraham was an heir, the blessed one, on the basis of the law. They believed that there was a special gift of the Mosaic covenant given to Abraham. They believed that Abraham was not only a son of the law, but the father of it! This is what the Rabbis taught, and it is what Paul, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, grew up learning and believing. Abraham's faith was work that won him his salvation. He kept the sacrificial laws of Moses. He obeyed all the moral and holy laws. He even kept the food laws – he didn't eat pork or shellfish!

This is what Paul is addressing in these 4 verses.

See how very orderly the passage is: There is thesis in verse 13 – Paul's statement. There is an antithesis in verses 14-15, what is not true, it is not by law. Then there is his synthesis in 16-17a. – the way of Abraham therefore is the sure promise and guarantee to all believers, Jew and Gentile, as one, under the father of US All!

So let us begin with the **Thesis** – 13

The promise to Abraham that he would be the heir of the world is through a righteousness of faith and not law.

This is the first time Paul uses the word “promise” in Romans. This exceedingly great and precious word appears 52 times in the New Testament, half of which are from Paul.

So what is the Apostle saying? Well, take a piece of paper, and draw a line down the middle, making two columns. In the one, list the righteousness of God, by faith, by grace, by promise. In the other column, put righteousness by unrighteous man, by works, by merit, by law.

There is the opposition found between verse 13 and 14-15.

How are these promised attained? How did Abraham find them? By faith, or by works? By circumcision, or before circumcision?

It was an unconditional gift of grace, received by faith, under a promise from God’s own love and mercy.

But here are Paul’s Jewish kinsmen believing something quite different than what the Bible teaches.

That brings us to the **Antithesis** of 14-15. Three things here:

- a. Law vacates faith and promise – they are contrary one to the other.
- b. Second, no Law was published at this period of time. If it were, there would be conditions about obedience and disobedience, and wrath for failure.
- c. Third, there is no law to speak of at this point to reveal transgressions.

What is the law here? Well, law and promise are mutually exclusive. It is not a both/and but an either/or. And what is Paul dealing with? Justification! Being declared righteous in the sight of God!

Those who are of the law are those governed by law as the determining principle of their religion. This is in contrast to those who are guided and determined by faith as the basic principle (Murray).

Law is the same law as in 3:31. It is not the whole Mosaic covenant, or OT revelation. Paul is not saying the OT doesn't teach faith. But rather law speaks of the demands of obedience, as summed up in the 10 commandments.

It was not through law that Abraham was accounted righteous – Mosaic or otherwise. He was not saved by his obedience, but God's promise, God's grace, by faith.

If it is by law, then faith is compromised. It is no longer a matter of grace. The promise becomes worthless, not worth the paper it is printed on, as they say.

If God's promise depends on us, on our obeying the law in order to be justified, that is, by our performance, then we have left Paul's teaching and that of the Bible behind.

Paul appears to use this language, "of the law" as short-hand for legalism; for self-righteousness.

Self-trust swallows up faith in the Lord. Self-righteousness shuts out God's righteousness. A religion of self-effort is a false way, over the one of promise. This is restated clearly in Rom 11:6: *But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. (Rom 11:6)*

Those of the law are **not** those who of faith; who then love and obey God's commands, and show their faith by their works. No! These are those whose center is the law, their works, their rituals.

Faith and promise are negated if law is in operation in our justification. The two are antithetical.

And this provides the best understanding of what Paul means when he says, ‘where no law, there is no transgression, and no wrath.’

Law is not functioning here as the way of justification; and if it is not, then there is no sin or wrath since this is what law does – it produces sin and judgment rather than saving from it.

The way of law, of works, is the way of wrath – Rom. 1.18.

The law commands, produces wrath when violated; it knows no grace. The law does not bring heirship but banishment! Not closeness with God, as the Jews thought, but condemnation. “The Law shows us where we stand (says Morris) but does not save us.”

There was law but no published law from the Lord, outwardly. There was no law written, other than on the conscience by nature. So as circumcision was not decisive, 14 years later, so law is not decisive, 430 years later!

This brings us then to the **Synthesis** – 16 – the conclusion;

Paul repeats verse 13 with changing the 2 groups in 9-12 to 1 group now: “all his children”.

Here is not a *therefore* pointing back but a “*so that*” pointing forward.

The promise is sure to all the children of all who believe. Not to law-ones only, but for those who are of faith so as to be by grace and not law.

This is a strong statement in the Greek: ‘not only’ and ‘but also’ – synthesizes his thoughts; the word “all” is significant.

Gentiles and Jews are one in faith, righteousness, justification, salvation.

Paul wrote much the same in the sister letter of Galatians, chapter 3.

We are used to these words, but how radical they were when first written!

*<sup>26</sup> For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>27</sup> For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise. (Gal 3:26-29)*

This passage in Galatians is all the more striking when you hear the prayer with which every Jewish man began his day. He prayed, “I thank you Lord, that I am a Jew, I am a freedman, and I am a man!”

See how they rested, they trusted in privileges, instead of the gospel, the saving grace of their Messiah!

This is not some new teaching by Paul – he quotes the OT in support.

In 17a, God has spoken! What he said to Abraham – “I have made you!” is a present, perfect verb, indicating his abiding forever. He was made, not the father of the Jews and the Gentiles, separately; but the father of all the nations, who believe. Not the father of the Jews and stepfather of the Gentiles! Not the father of the Jews and the uncle of the Gentiles.

The promise is to all the seed. Not only the one, but also the other – a very powerful inclusion.

The church, the seed, the family of Abraham is one.

There is here a stronger word on unity than in 11-12; father of us all, not father of both 1 and 2.

Well, this is where we must end as we are brought into the power at work in this faith, where the flesh would say no and the Spirit would say yes.

Let us make **several applications** as we wrap up:

1. Is Abraham the heir of the whole world? Then see the nature of the gracious promise is to not only deliver you from all your sins, but to give you all things in Christ! This is an absolute blessing which forms a dividing line between those who are cursed and those blessed. The land promised to Abraham was a type of heaven. A greater garden than offered to Adam is found in Christ Jesus. All things yours because of Christ, and He is Lord of all! (1 Cor. 3:21-23).
2. Second, if our works are so sinful that they cannot be trusted to save us, then what does this do to all of our pride and self-righteousness? Christians, who have been given everything by grace through faith, by promise from a loving God who cannot lie, must be moved to great humility and lowliness of mind and heart!
3. Lastly, Christianity is a universal faith. The gospel is for all the world. Christ, by His resurrection power (as we will see next time), makes all things new. God saving Abraham was to the end that all the children of Adam might be saved. We are to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every nation, discipling them in these ways of grace and redemption! Praise God from whom all blessings flow, to every nation under the sun!