

• LESSON 8 (June 1) •

Romans 4:1-25

Abraham, Who is the Father of Us All

What we have as the conclusion of Romans 2 in our Bibles communicates this important information:

No one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. (2:28-29)

Throughout Romans 3 and beyond, Paul anticipates and answers a number of Jewish objections to what he has written.

- Then what advantage has the Jew? (3:1)
- What is the value of circumcision? (3:1)
- Is God unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (3:5)
- Why not do evil that good may come? (3:8)

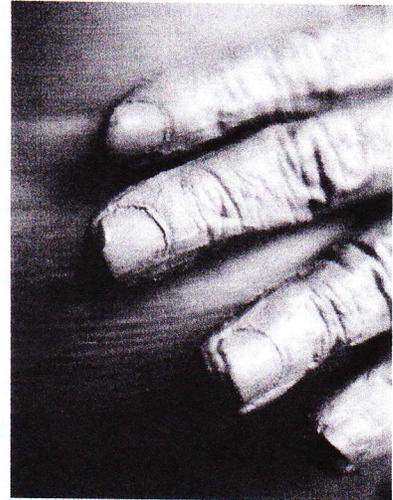
This leads us to a fifth question in Romans 4:1.

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?

Our entire fourth chapter of Romans addresses the case study of Abraham and his justification. Paul begins his answer by putting things into their overall perspective.

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. (4:2)

Why? In order to understand the full scope of Paul's answer, take the time now—before going any further—to read Genesis 15:1-20. If you'd like an even firmer grasp of the overall context, begin reading in Genesis 12 and read through Genesis 15.



When you think of Abraham, what comes to mind?

Why does Paul refer to Abraham as “our forefather according to the flesh” in 4:1?

Why is Paul so confidently able to proclaim that Abraham could not be justified by works before God (4:2)?

Why would Paul assert, “if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God”? He immediately takes us back to what the Scripture says:

“Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3)

“Now,” Paul reasons, making an appeal to our common sense.

To the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness... (Rom 4:4-5)

In fact, Abraham is not the only Old Testament figure to whom we can look for clarification of this principle.

..just as David also speaks of the blessings of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;
blessed is the man against whom
the Lord will not count his sin.” (4:6-8)

It’s a citation of Psalm 32:1-2 and Paul invokes it to lead his readers—particularly his Jewish readers—face to face with a fundamental question.

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? (4:9a)

In other words, are Jews the only ones who enjoy the blessing of justification? And think back to the two things Paul has already brought up in his letter that the Jews took such great pride in and relied upon:

- The Law of Moses (2:17-24)
- Circumcision (2:25-29)

Was Abraham justified by the Law of Moses? No! The Law wouldn’t be given for another 500+ years. Well then, was Abraham justified because of circumcision (Gen 17:1-14)?

Think for a moment about righteousness being “counted to” someone. The NASB translates it “credited.” The ASV renders it “reckoned.” The NKJV translates it “accounted.” What does this mean?

Can you illustrate in modern terms the basic principle Paul is relying upon in Romans 4:4?

What does Paul mean by referring to “the one who does not work” in Romans 4:5?

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

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, 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. In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (4:13-25)

CLOSING THOUGHT: As we wade through the deep waters of Romans, don’t forget the framing bookends of the entire letter (1:5; 16:26). Whether Jew or Gentile, God is looking to shape the obedience of faith within us. Paul is not contradicting Hebrews 11:8-19 or James 2:14-24. These God-breathed letters complement each other to establish:

- No human being is justified by works of the law.
- Circumcision in and of itself does not justify.
- Works without faith will not justify.
- Faith without works will not justify.

Why would Paul write what he wrote in Romans 4:14? Can you reframe his straightforward assertion in your own words?

“For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is not transgression” (4:15). What does this mean?

Notice the connection Paul draws between life being given to “dead” Abraham (4:19) and “dead” Jesus (4:23-25). What does this powerful connection have to do with “us who believe” (4:24)?

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. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. (4:9b-11a)

Don't miss this critical point: if Abraham could be "counted as righteous" without circumcision then, why can't the Gentiles be "counted as righteous" before God now? Remember, Paul was boldly proclaiming throughout the Gentile world:

Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal 3:23-29)

In order to make this point clear in his letter to the Romans, Paul takes a "big picture" look at what God was doing all along.

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, 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. (Rom 4:11b-12)

Having addressed the issue of Abraham and circumcision, Paul turns his attention to the issue of Abraham and the law.

In your own words, what was the issue confronting the first-century church when it came to circumcision? Perhaps Acts 15:1 will be helpful in formulating your answer.

What do you think it means to "walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised" (4:12)?