

VIII. *Sola Fide*

December 15/16/17, 2015

Romans 4:1-12

Aim: To look to Abraham as the father of faith for all those who believe, understanding that God's plan of salvation was the same for saints of all ages – *sola fide*.

Moo

In chapter four, Paul appeals to Abraham to support his insistence that righteousness can be attained only through faith. But, as in 3:27-31, Paul's purpose is not only to establish the doctrine of justification by faith alone, but also, indeed especially, to draw out the implications of this *sola fide*. To accomplish these purposes, Paul 'exposits' Genesis 15:6. This text is quoted in verse 3 after Paul sets of his problem in terms of Abraham's 'right' to boast (vv. 1-2). Thereafter, Paul quotes or alludes to this text in every paragraph of the chapter, using a series of antitheses to draw out its meaning and implications. In vv. 3-8, Paul shows that the 'reckoning' of Abraham's faith for righteousness is an entirely gracious act that by its nature excludes any appeal to works. The contrast between circumcision and uncircumcision dominates vv. 9-12. Here, Paul shows that the 'reckoning' of Abraham's faith for righteousness took place before he was circumcised, thereby enabling him to become the 'father' of both Jewish and Gentile believers. This same concern with the inclusive importance of Abraham is stressed in vv. 13-22, where Paul faces on the promise that Abraham would be the father of 'many nations,' or 'all the seed.' The ruling contrast is between 'faith' and 'law,' with a minor contrast perhaps suggested in vv. 18-21 between faith and 'sight.' The quotation of Genesis 15:6 at the end of v. 22 brings Paul's exposition back to where it began in v. 3; the final three verses of the chapter apply the lessons Paul has drawn from his text to his Christian readers.

Why has Paul singled out Abraham as the reference point for this expansion? One reason is undoubtedly polemical. Abraham was revered by the Jews as their 'father' and his life and character were held up as models of God's ways with His people and of true piety. In keeping with the nomistic focus of first-century Judaism, Abraham was held up particularly as a model of obedience to God. His righteousness and mediation of the promise were linked to this obedience, it even being argued that he had obeyed the law perfectly before it had been given. Paul would naturally want to show his Roman readers that this understanding of Abraham, which his Jewish and Jewish-Christian opponents undoubtedly cited against his teaching (cp. Gal. 3-4), was not in accord with the OT. Through Paul's interpretation of Genesis 15:6, Abraham is wrested from the Jews as an exemplar of Torah-obedience, and made into an exemplar of faith. As a result, Abraham ceases to be for Paul the father of Jews exclusively but the father of all who believe.

But Paul is drawn to Abraham for more than polemical considerations. That Paul cites Abraham as an example for believers is clear. But Abraham is much more than an example. Both Paul's insistence that justification is by faith alone and his concern for the full inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God make it necessary for him to integrate Abraham theologically into his scheme. At least, it was necessary if Paul's teaching was to have any claim to continuity with the OT.

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MacArthur

The entire fourth chapter of Romans is devoted to Abraham, whom Paul uses as an illustration of the central biblical truth that man can become right with God only by faith in response to His grace, and never by works. We can assume several reasons for Paul's choosing Abraham as the supreme example of salvation by faith. First, Abraham lived about 2,000 years before Paul wrote this letter, demonstrating that the principle of salvation by faith rather than by works was not new in Judaism. He lived long before the law was given and obviously could not have been saved by obedience to it. Second, Paul used Abraham as an example of salvation by faith simply because he was a human being. In Abraham he gives a flesh and blood illustration of justification by faith. The third, and doubtless most important, reason Paul used Abraham as the example of justification by faith was that, although rabbinical teaching and popular Jewish belief were contrary to Scripture as far as the *basis* of Abraham's righteousness was concerned, they agreed that Abraham was the Old Testament's supreme example of a godly, righteous man who is acceptable to the Lord. He is the biblical model of genuine faith and godliness.

The majority of Jews in Paul's day believed that Abraham was made right with God because of his own righteous character. They believed God chose Abraham to be the father of His people Israel because Abraham was the most righteous man on earth during his time. Instead of understanding faithfulness as being a fruit of faith, they had the notion that justification could be earned through one's efforts to be faithful. In the same way, the rabbis interpreted Genesis 15:6 as referring to Abraham's faithfulness rather than to his faith. Several Jewish apocryphal books taught that Abraham was justified by keeping God's law (e.g., *Ecclesiasticus* or *The Wisdom of Sirach* 44:19-21; *The Prayer of Manasseh* v. 8; *The Book of Jubilees* 23:10).

By using Abraham as the supreme scriptural example of justification, or salvation, by *faith alone*, Paul was storming the very citadel of traditional Judaism. By demonstrating that Abraham was not justified by works, the apostle demolished the foundation of rabbinical teaching – that man is made right with God by keeping the law, that is, on the basis of his own religious efforts and works. If Abraham was not and could not have been justified by keeping the law, then no one could be. Conversely, if Abraham was justified solely on the basis of his faith in God, then everyone else must be justified in the same way, since Abraham is the biblical standard of a righteous man.

Hughes

Abraham was the prime example of a man who was justified by his works, as rabbinic literature eloquently testifies. The Mishnah's third division *Kiddushin* (4:14) makes a specious interpretation of Genesis 26:5, wrongly concluding: 'and we find that Abraham our father had performed the whole law before it was given, for it is written, "*Because that Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.*"' The earlier book of *Jubilees* (c. 100 BC) similarly says, "For Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life." So perfect was Abraham thought to be that another book, *The Prayer of Manasses*, concluded that Abraham never had need of repentance: 'Thou, therefore, O Lord, that art the God of the righteous, hast not appointed repentance unto the righteous, unto Abraham...' What claims! 1) Abraham performed the whole Law before it was written; 2) he was perfect in all his deeds; and 3) he had no need of repentance. Conclusion: Abraham was justified by his works and therefore is an example to follow. Case closed!

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Perhaps closed for some, but not for the Apostle Paul, the lawyer of grace. Paul acknowledges that Abraham was righteous, but he denies that the Jews had any right to present him as an example of righteousness by the works of the Law. Here in Romans 4 Paul takes Abraham away from the proponents of works-righteousness and brilliantly sets him forth as an example of those who are saved, not by works, but by faith alone—*sola fide*.

Sproul

It is important to understand that salvation occurred in the Old Testament in the same manner that it occurs in the New Testament. When Paul speaks of Abraham's justification as being by faith, that is shorthand for saying that Abraham was justified by the righteousness of Christ. The only difference between our justification and Abraham's is that Abraham looked forward to the promised one. He trusted in the promise of the Redeemer, whereas we look backward to the work of Jesus. The ground of Abraham's justification was exactly the same as ours, namely, the person and work of Jesus.

That is very important to understand, because the dominant theology in our country today tends to see a strong disjunction between salvation in the Old Testament and salvation in the New Testament. The Old Testament is viewed as the age of law and the New Testament is viewed as the age of grace; therefore, God's way of salvation differed in the two covenants. Paul refutes that idea right here when he brings forward as his example of the doctrine of justification by faith not someone from the New Testament but someone from the Old Testament, Father Abraham.

Barnett

Romans 4 is Paul's exposition of the great reality expressed in Genesis 15:6. Like Romans as a whole, however, this chapter is not teaching without a real and precise historical context. Paul is responding to the typical Jewish objector who appears to have been opposing Paul's Christ-centered, Law-free gospel. Most likely this kind of objector was to be found in the constituent house churches in Rome. Paul is seeking to address and resolve such objections in the letter before he arrives in person.

A. Faith Apart from Works (Romans 4:1-8)

1. The Father of Faith (4:1-2)

a) Abraham as an Example (4:1)

¹*What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?*

As so often in Romans, Paul uses a rhetorical question to introduce the next stage of his argument. But just how does Paul's discussion of Abraham in chapter 4 advance his argument? The deliberative question in 4:1 will connect the chapter generally with the discussion in 3:27-31. Paul in chapter 4 elaborates through the history of Abraham each of the key points he has made in 3:27-31.

In this context, 'what then' is the equivalent of *therefore*, tying the discussion of Abraham to all that Paul has said in the preceding chapter. He was asking, in effect, 'Because we agree that Abraham is the peerless example of a justified man in God's sight, why don't we look at him carefully in order to determine the basis of his justification?'

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Abraham was the human forefather of God's first covenant with His chosen people. He was therefore, 'according to the flesh,' the human standard of a genuine Jew and of a man who is right before God. 'According to the flesh' refers first of all to physical lineage. But in this context it also suggests human effort in regard to justification.

Paul calls Abraham 'our forefather.' Paul is speaking as a Jew to fellow-Jews. Indeed, the whole chapter is a conversation between Paul the Jew and fellow-Jews answering their objections and questions. And the subject? The contribution (or otherwise) of 'works of the Law' to 'righteousness' with God. Working backwards from Paul's words about Abraham, it is evident that Jewish theology then held that Abraham 'found' God's approval on account of his works. Most likely they pointed to the patriarch's obedience in leaving Ur of the Chaldees, to submitting to circumcision, and in being prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac.

b) *Abraham as a Hypothetical (4:2)*

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

In this verse, Paul explains why he has asked about Abraham's experience in verse 1. The flow of thought may be paraphrased: 'What shall we say about Abraham. *For* if we say he was justified by works, he has reason to boast, and my claim in 3:27-28 that all boasting is excluded is called into question.' The question about Abraham's being justified by works is no idle one. The Jewish interpretation of Abraham stressed his works as the essence of his piety and the basis for his extraordinary, exemplary relationship to God. Paul's conditional sentence assumes the reality of this situation for the sake of argument and draws out the consequence: he 'has reason to boast.'

Paul's major premise is that, if a man could be justified before God by his own human efforts, then he has ground for boasting in himself. The minor premise is that Abraham, as a man, was justified by works. The necessary conclusion would be that Abraham 'has something to boast about.' The major premise is true: if a man *could* be justified by works, he would indeed have something to boast about, because he would have merited his own salvation. But, as Paul goes on to demonstrate, the minor premise is *not* true. Consequently, the conclusion is untrue. Abraham did not have anything in himself to boast about 'before God.'

Paul contests this conclusion in a brief rejoinder: 'but not before God.' But does this rejoinder limit Abraham's boasting or reject it altogether? Paul is speaking of Abraham's works in relation to his justification. And since Paul rejects any possibility of justification by works (cp. vv. 3-5), it is more likely that Paul rejects Abraham's claim altogether: *all* boasting in this context, whether before God or people, must be ruled out. 'But not before God,' then, rejects the logic stated in the conditional sentence: when God's viewpoint is considered, Abraham has no right to boast at all.

Whatever one's religious beliefs, and whether one lives after the cross or before the cross, no one who has ever lived—not even faithful Abraham—has been able to stand before God and demand eternal salvation on the basis of his or her good deeds. Salvation comes only through the covenant of grace. There is no place for works and no room for pride or boasting. As humans, we don't like this. It hurts our pride to have to come before God with nothing in our hands. But there is no other way to come, according to the Bible.

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2. The Example of Faith (4:3)

³*For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'*

Paul now explains this 'but not before God' by citing the scriptural teaching about Abraham's justification. The text that he cites, and which becomes the reference point for the rest of the chapter, is Genesis 15:6. Not only is this the first time the word 'believe' occurs in Scripture, but it is connected with the attaining of righteousness – one of the very few times in the OT that this connection is made. And the verse, of course, describes Abraham – the 'father' of Israel and recipient of God's promise. Paul therefore has very good reasons from within the OT itself to make this a banner verse for his gospel, as he does both here and in Galatians 3.

In Genesis 15:5, Abraham's 'faith' is his complete trust in God with reference to God's promise that he would have a natural descendant (vv. 4-5). But since this promise is a renewal of the one that God made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, the promise with reference to which Abraham believes in Yahweh includes the worldwide blessing promised in the earlier text. The 'reckoning' of Abraham's faith as righteousness means 'to account to him a righteousness that does not inherently belong to him.' Abraham's response to God's promise leads God to 'reckon' to him a 'status' of righteousness. Abraham's relationship with God is established as an act of God's grace in response to Abraham's faith, is the same as in both Genesis and Romans. Paul distances himself emphatically from the typical interpretation. For Jewish interpreters often viewed Genesis 15:6 through the lens of Genesis 22, so that Abraham's 'faith' became his obedience to God and was regarded as a 'work' for which God owed Abraham a reward.

'Was reckoned' is from *logizomai*, which carried the economic and legal meaning of crediting something to another's account. The only thing God received from Abraham was his imperfect faith, but by His divine grace and mercy, He 'reckoned' it to Abraham's spiritual account as 'righteousness.' That gracious reckoning reflects the heart of God's redemptive revelation and is the focus of both the Old and New Testaments. God has never provided any means of justification except through faith in Him. Abraham was chosen by God's sovereign, elective grace, to because of his works or even because of his faith. It was not the greatness of Abraham's faith that saved him, but the greatness of the gracious Lord in whom he placed his faith. Faith is never the *basis* or the *reason* for justification, but only the *channel* or *instrument* through which God works His redeeming grace.

Paul's point here is that Abraham was justified by faith *before* he did any of the great works for which he is so famous. The word, 'counted,' *logizomai*, appears eleven times in Romans 4 and has the idea of crediting to one's account. This is evident despite the various ways different translations render it: *counted, considered, imputed, computed*. These all mean that righteousness was credited to Abraham's account because of faith, not because of works! Paul destroyed the wrongful use of Abraham as an example of the conventional works-salvation view—and he did it using the sacred text of Genesis Torah.

3. The Principle of Faith (4:4-5)

In vv. 4-5, Paul draws two theological consequences from what is said about Abraham's justification in Genesis 15:6: 1) works have no part in justification; and 2) this is so because God's justifying verdict is not earned, but given freely. Paul's purpose in vv. 4-5, then, is to show that the faith that justifies is 'faith alone,' faith 'apart from works.'

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a) *The One Who Works (4:4)*

⁴*Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.*

Verse 4 picks up the key word of ‘reckoning’ from the quotation in v. 3, as Paul lays down a general principle about the ‘reckoning’ or ‘accounting’ of ‘wages’ to a worker. If a person ‘works,’ says Paul, the pay he or she receives in return is a matter of obligation, or fair compensation; the employer ‘owes’ the worker a certain wage and is not giving it ‘freely,’ or ‘without compulsion.’ Since work means the reward is given by obligation, the reward of righteousness must not be dependent on work – for God is never obligated by His creatures; justification is a gift, freely bestowed, not a wage, justly earned. That God acts toward His creatures graciously – without compulsion or necessity – is one of Paul’s non-negotiable theological axioms. He uses it here to show that the faith that gained righteousness for Abraham was a faith that excluded works.

If man were able to save himself by his own ‘works,’ then salvation would be apart from God’s grace, and Christ’s sacrifice on the cross would have been in vain. If such righteous works were attainable by men, then salvation would not be a gift of God’s grace but would be a ‘wage’ that is ‘due.’ No only would works righteousness obviate God’s grace, it would also rob Him of His glory, for which all creation was made.

If anyone, instead of coming to God under the covenant of grace, is somehow able to find salvation on the basis of works, this means that God must owe him something. As we shall see, however, all God ‘owes’ us is the ‘wages’ of our sins against Him, which is ‘death’ (6:23).

b) *The One Who Does Not Work (4:5)*

⁵*And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...*

With this clause Paul is not ‘canonizing laziness’; nor does he mean that a Christian need never produce ‘good works.’ As Calvin rightly emphasizes, Paul is the last theologian who would countenance a complacent Christian, unconcerned with the active putting into practice of one’s faith. What Paul has in mind is the person who does not depend on his works for his standing before God. ‘The one who justifies’ the ungodly’ is justly famous as a succinct and bold statement of Paul’s conviction that our standing with God is wholly of God’s free grace. To appreciate the boldness of this characterization, we must set it beside OT condemnations of human judges who ‘justify’ the guilty (Is. 5:23; Pr. 17:15), and especially with God’s declaration in Ex. 23:7 that ‘I will not justify the wicked.’ What is involved, of course, is a new application of the word ‘justify.’ Paul has in mind a creative act, whereby the believer is freely given a new ‘status.’ It is the person who believes in *this* God, and who thereby in his belief renounces any claim on God that his good works might exert, whose ‘faith is reckoned for righteousness.’

This does not mean your faith itself is the righteousness that is the grounds for our salvation. Faith only lays hold of Christ. Faith is the instrument by which we are linked to Jesus. Only Christ’s righteousness is the grounds of our justification. When God declares His legal judgment of our status in His sight, when He sees our faith, He counts us righteous—even when we are still sinners.

The principle stated here was shocking indeed to the traditional Jewish ear, first because Paul discourages working for salvation! To be sure, in other places he encourages good works (cp. Phil. 2:12-13), but not here where the doctrine of salvation is at stake. Second, this was shocking

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because the paradoxical description of God as a God ‘who justifies the ungodly’ assaulted traditional sensibilities. In the Old Testament the acquittal of the wicked and the condemnation of the innocent is repeated denounced (e.g., Ex. 23:7). To say that God justifies the ungodly seemed outrageous to the law-abiding Jews. How could this be? The answer lies in the difference between law and grace. God forbids in the Law what in fact He does in the gospel. *Sola fide*, the doctrine of faith alone, offends our natural sensibilities. We naturally think justification ought to go to the good, those who are trying to do their best. But not to the ungodly! We can understand how Abraham was justified by faith, because he was a God-fearer. But the wicked? The truth is, *we are all ungodly/wicked*. None of us are good enough. Salvation will be *sola fide*, or it simply will not be.

God only saves the person ‘who does not’ trust in his ‘work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly.’ Until a person confesses that he is ‘ungodly,’ he is not a candidate for salvation, because he still trusts in his own goodness (cp. Lk. 5:32). Those who are righteous in their own eyes have no part in God’s redemptive work of grace. The ‘reckoning’ Paul speaks of here is justification, that forensic act of God whereby He imputes Christ’s perfect righteousness to the sinner’s account, then declares His verdict that the forgiven one is fully just. God thus ‘justifies the ungodly,’ not by simply disregarding their sin—but having imputed our sin to Christ, who paid the penalty in full. He now reckons Christ’s righteousness to us (cp. Is. 53:4-5).

For a person to accept Christ as Savior, he must first of all know he is a sinner. He must know that he cannot earn his way into the presence of a holy God. He must understand he is justly under the wrath of God. Then, he must believe the God who has promised, ‘He that believes on the Son has everlasting life.’

4. The Blessing of Faith (4:6-8)

a) David’s Faith (4:6)

...⁶*just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:*

Paul’s concern to exclude ‘works’ from justification surfaces again in this verse. Paul’s addition of the negative ‘apart from works’ makes it likely that vv. 6-8 confirm vv. 4-5. But Paul probably also intends to add a further OT confirmation of his doctrine of justification by faith (v. 3). If so, Paul may be imitating Jewish homiletical practice by adding to his primary proof from the Pentateuch a secondary witness from ‘the prophets and the writings.’

Paul here cites David in order to establish that the greatest king of Israel understood and taught that justification is by faith alone. The ‘blessing’ David is speaking about is salvation. Abraham was justified only by faith, David was justified only by faith, and every believer before and after them has been justified only by faith.

Paul presents the experience of another great Old Testament saint—King David. Here he refers to David’s blessedness and joyous relief at having his sins against Bathsheba and Uriah forgiven, an *undeserved* righteousness bestowed upon him, as described in Psalm 32:1-2.

The Jew understood blessedness always in terms of the proximity that one had to the presence of God (cp. Num. 6:24-26; Mt. 5:3-10). We tend to cheapen the word *blessed* by saying, ‘Bless you, my friend’ or ‘God bless you.’ Yet the highest experience and joy of the human soul is to experience that blessedness that only God can give.

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b) David's Quote (4:7-8)

⁷'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; ⁸blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.'

The words of David are taken from Psalm 32:1-2a. One of the key reasons why Paul quotes these verses is the presence in them of the key word 'reckon.' Paul's association of Psalm 32:1-2 with Genesis 15:6 and his exposition of it is very much to the point. For the Psalm verses closely associate the forgiveness of sins (v. 1) with the Lord's 'not reckoning' a person's sins against him (v. 2). In other words, it is not the 'reckoning' of people's good works but God's act in *not* reckoning their sins against them that constitutes forgiveness. This perfectly accords with Paul's concern to portray justification as a free act of God that has no basis in a person's works. Two other implications follow from the association of these Psalm verses with Paul's exposition. First, it is clear that the forgiveness of sins is a basic component of justification. Second, Paul reveals again his strongly forensic understanding of justification. For he uses this quotation to compare justification to the non-accrediting or not 'imputing' of sins to a person. This is an act that has nothing to do with moral transformation, but 'changes' people only in the sense that their relationship to God is changed – they are 'acquitted' rather than condemned.

Ostensibly, Paul turned to the psalm because of the rabbinical principle of interpretation that when the same word is used in two Biblical passages, each can be used to interpret the other. (Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:2 both contain the same word—*logizethai*, LXX and *hasab*, MT) for 'counted' or 'count.' But a deeper reason David had unmerited righteousness credited to him is, it was because of faith! Paul calls David blessed, and David twice calls himself 'blessed' because when there was no work that could possibly atone for his sins, he was forgiven on *sola fide*! So the principle of faith alone was mightily established and illustrated in the life of Israel's greatest king.

David declared 'blessed' the man or woman who has been forgiven by God. This is the other side of the coin; to be forgiven by God is to be 'reckoned righteous' by Him. Whether rich or poor or somewhere in-between, this is where God's truest blessing is to be found.

'Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.' The opposite expression would be this: 'Cursed is the man to whom the LORD imputes sin.' In Galatians, Paul says that on the cross our sin was transferred to the one who was sinless, to the one who was perfectly righteous. God imputed our sin to Him and then cursed Him. That is why Paul says that Christ on the cross became a curse for us by imputation, by the transfer of sin from our account to His. Again, the opposite of the curse is the blessing, and the blessing is stated here: 'Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute sin.' That is us.

It is Christ's righteousness that justifies us. All we bring to the table is our trust in Him and His righteousness. If we add one ounce of our own righteousness as our confidence, we repudiate the gospel. That is why Paul cites David. There is no greater blessedness under heaven than to have God in His mercy and grace transfer the righteousness of Jesus to our account.

There is a tremendous unity throughout the Bible as it presents the covenant of grace. Certainly, there are differences in how this was expressed before and after the cross. Nonetheless, the basic message is the same. Salvation is always the same, before the cross and after the cross, before Moses and after Moses. No matter how many subdivisions you might visualize in trying to understand the Bible on either side of the cross, the unity is there, the unity of the covenant of

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grace. Salvation is always on the basis of the finished work of Christ, and the instrument is always faith. This was always the purpose of the law.

B. Faith Apart from Circumcision (Romans 4:9-12)

Quickly returning to his key text, Paul notes another significant aspect of the reckoning of Abraham's faith for righteousness – it took place before he was circumcised. This circumcision allows Paul to claim Abraham as the father of *all* believers, both circumcised and uncircumcised. Paul thereby makes clear that it is not necessary to be Jewish to become a member of the people of God. Faith *alone* – apart from works (4:3-8), apart from circumcision (4:9-12) – is sufficient to gain entrance into Abraham's spiritual 'family.' It becomes evident here that Abraham is much more than an 'example' of faith. As the recipient and mediator of the promise, his experience becomes paradigmatic for his spiritual progeny.

1. The Example of Faith (4:9)

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

Having used Psalm 32:1-2 to confirm and interpret Genesis 15:6, Paul now returns to Genesis 15:6 to add a further dimension to his application of Ps. 32:1-2. The question that is raised is whether 'the blessing' of forgiveness of sins, accomplished through the Lord's gracious 'non-reckoning' of them against a person (vv. 7-8), is applicable only 'to the circumcised, or to the uncircumcised also.' Paul here sets the stage for his answer by reminding his readers of the OT text that speaks authoritatively about these matters.

Paul anticipated the question that Jews would be asking 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 other men as God's chosen people but was also the means by which they became acceptable to God. The relevance of this basic truth of justification by faith alone for our own day is great. Although people, even Jews, now believe that circumcision brings salvation, countless millions firmly trust in some other form of religious ceremony or activity to make them right with God.

The intense Jewishness of Paul's argument could lead some at this point to assume that *sola fide* was for Jews only. After all, Abraham is the Jew of Jews, the grand patriarch. So Paul now asks the question, 'Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the circumcised?'

This blessedness of which David speaks is not for Jews only. It is not tied to the Old Testament sign of the covenant, which is circumcision.

2. The Timing of Faith (4:10)

¹⁰How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.

Paul does not justify his answer to his questions, but the course of the argument in v. 11 makes clear that Paul has in mind the chronological progression of the Genesis narrative about Abraham. Abraham's faith 'is reckoned for righteousness' when God promise him a son (Gen. 15); but it is not until much later – twenty-nine years, according to the rabbis – that he is

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circumcised (Gen. 17). Abraham was in God’s covenant and under His grace long before he was circumcised, whereas Ishmael, although circumcised, was never in the covenant.

Paul answers his own question in favor of the Gentiles. His answer indicates that Abraham was counted as righteous at least fourteen years *before* he was circumcised. But the time gap may be even greater, because traditional Jewish chronology places circumcision twenty-nine years after Genesis 15:6. The point is, Abraham was declared a righteous man while a Gentile—and remained so for some fourteen to twenty-nine years before he was a Jew! Therefore, *sola fide* was a Gentile principle long before it was Jewish reality. *Sola fide* is for everyone—Jew and Gentile!

Was Abraham ‘reckoned’ (declared) to be righteous before or after he was circumcised? It was at least seventeen years and perhaps as many as twenty-five years before he was circumcised. If being a Jew, for a male, means being circumcised, then Abraham hadn’t even become a Jew at the time of his justification by faith! Abraham was in effect a Gentile. How shocking! There were no Jews at the time of Abraham’s justification by faith.

The sign of the covenant, circumcision, was not the ground of Abraham’s justification; it was the imputed righteousness of Christ. When Abraham believed the promise of God, God counted him righteous, so Paul is arguing that Abraham was not justified by works, nor was he justified by circumcision. Abraham had faith before he was circumcised. His son Isaac had faith after he was circumcised. The faith to which circumcision pointed was not tied to the time in which circumcision was rendered.

3. The Sign and Seal of Faith (4:11a)

¹¹*He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.*

In the first part of this verse, Paul amplifies his answer at the end of v. 10 by showing the relationship between Abraham’s justification by faith and his later circumcision. What was the significance of Abraham’s circumcision? It was, Paul claims, a ‘sign.’ Paul tells us what this ‘sign’ was in an appositive addition: ‘a seal of righteousness of faith that was his when he was uncircumcised.’ Paul uses the word ‘seal’ to denote something that ‘confirms’ the truth or reality of something else, as in 1 Cor. 9:2, where Paul describes the Corinthian believers themselves as the ‘seal,’ the confirmation and authentication, of his apostleship. In like manner, Abraham’s circumcision confirms his righteous status, a status that was his by virtue of his faith. Circumcision, therefore, has no independent value.

Circumcision *became* a mark of the covenant relationship between God and His people, but the covenant was not established on the basis of circumcision. Circumcision was the physical racial mark of identity for His people. Circumcision was also a mark of God’s covenant, setting Abraham’s descendants apart as uniquely His chosen people, the Hebrews, or Jews as they became known in the Babylonian exile.

Verse 11 implies the objector’s next question: ‘If Abraham was declared righteous before his circumcision, why then was he circumcised at all?’ Paul’s answer reaffirms his key text, Genesis 15:6. Circumcision contributed nothing to God’s gift of righteousness to Abraham. Only the patriarch’s faith in God invited that pronouncement. Circumcision was merely an outer ‘sign’ or ‘seal’ to Abraham of the inner reality of faith that brought salvation to him.

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The point is that the sign of the covenant is the sign of all the benefits that God promises to His people who believe. Circumcision did not justify anybody. Baptism does not justify anybody. The sole instrument of justification is faith. Baptism and circumcision have this in common: not only are the both signs of the covenant—circumcision the sign of the old covenant, baptism the sign of the new covenant—but both are also seals. A sign points beyond itself. The sign of circumcision pointed beyond itself to the covenant promise that God had made with His people. Circumcision was a sign of the promise of justification by faith alone. So is baptism. It does not confer what it signifies, which is the promise of God to all who believe. But it is not only a sign; it is also a seal. God has put His indelible mark upon us. In the sacraments, God guarantees the consequences of justification to all who believe, not to all who receive the sign.

Second, circumcision was a seal. Every time circumcision was performed, God's people were to be reminded of God's righteousness that Abraham had, and all other believers have, through faith, completely apart from circumcision. 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.

4. The Father of Faith (4:11b-12)

In verses 11b-12, Paul depicts Abraham as the spiritual father of all believers, both Gentiles and Jews. Because Abraham believed while uncircumcised, he is the father of all Gentile believers; because he believed and was *also* circumcised, he is qualified to be the father of all Jewish believers.

a) *Father of the Uncircumcised (4:11b)*

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...

Paul now claims Abraham and the inheritance that is his (cp. vv. 16-17) for anyone who believes. It is through faith, and not through incorporation into the nation of Israel, that one becomes Abraham's spiritual 'child.'

Paul is saying that God's declaration of righteousness to uncircumcised Abraham back then at the dawn of salvation history opened the way to God's declaration of righteousness to uncircumcised gentiles now, provided they are believers, as Abraham was.

Abraham didn't 'receive the sign of circumcision' until many years after God had declared him to be justified. Circumcision was only a 'sign' and a 'seal' of the 'righteousness' that Abraham already possessed long before being circumcised. And because he possessed this righteousness before being circumcised, he is to be considered 'the father of all them that believe,' uncircumcised Gentiles as well as circumcised Jews. Abraham was a Gentile when he believed and became a Jew later with the sign of circumcision. As Christians, Abraham is our spiritual father.

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b) Father of the Circumcised (4:12)

...¹²and 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.

Abraham received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of faith, that he might be ‘the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.’ The circumcised Jew is justified by faith alone. Those who are uncircumcised are justified the same way—through the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.

What then of the circumcised, his fellow-Jews? Paul turns to them in verse 12. Believing Abraham is ‘father’ also to Jews (who believe in the Messiah). We are surprised, however, that Paul makes such a glancing reference to his fellow-Jews. He immediately returns to Abraham the *uncircumcised* who was a man of faith and to those Gentiles who ‘walk in his steps’ as believers. Clearly, it is Abraham’s faith in God rather than circumcision that is dominant in Paul’s mind (see 2:25-29). Let the Jewish objector grasp this radical truth.

Who comprises this category of ‘the circumcision’? The context strongly suggests that Paul is referring to Jewish Christians: those of the circumcision ‘who are not only circumcised but also walk in the steps of our father Abraham, who believed while uncircumcised.’ In addition to Gentiles who believe, Abraham’s children are also comprised of Jews who believe. In keeping with the theme of the paragraph, Paul stresses again that the faith of Abraham that the Jewish Christians imitate is a faith that was first exercised when Abraham was in an ‘uncircumcised’ state. Jews who follow their biblical paradigm will place the proper value on their circumcision: as a mark of a relationship they enjoy with the Lord through their faith rather than as a visa that will automatically insure their entrance into heaven.

Racially, Abraham is the father of all Jews; spiritually, he is the father of both believing Gentiles and of believing Jews. Both groups of believers are reckoned righteous because of their faith in God through Jesus Christ.

For next time: Read Romans 4:13-25.