

July 18, 2021

“Faith of Abraham”
Lesson 2 of Unit

Romans 4:1-12

Intro

Jesus came from Jewish heritage, and the first apostles were Jewish. They preached the gospel message of a risen Christ to Jews. But not too long after the day of Pentecost, the Gentile Cornelius received the Holy Spirit in the same way as the first Jewish converts to Christianity. And this created a question of huge importance to both groups: what is the role of circumcision?

The Jewish practice of circumcision began with Abraham, a physical sign of their belonging to God and of being different/separate from the Gentiles. When Gentiles began to come to Christ, the converted Jews expected the Gentiles to be circumcised. The Jews had been; why shouldn't the Gentiles follow the same practices?

Cornelius' conversion raised two significant questions for the early church: 1) should Gentile converts be required to be circumcised? 2) What Jewish customs should the church keep, and which were not needed? This led them to a larger consideration of the difference between faith and works. Today's passage centers on Abraham, and the questions of circumcision, faith, and works.

Read Romans 4:1-12

1. vs. 1: Abraham's background and its significance

Abraham lived about 2000 years before Paul

His actions caused him to be called “The Father of Faith”

He went when God told him to go to a place he'd never heard of before

He trusted God to provide an heir even when he and Sarah were “too old”

He trusted God even when asked to sacrifice Isaac (which he didn't have to do!)

Abraham's actions model for us what a faithful relationship with God looks like

Paul reminds the Jews that Abraham is their ancestor in “the flesh”—biologically

He is setting up the difference between “fleshly” connections and “faith” ones.

2. vs. 2: Abraham's works

To be “justified” means to be counted or considered righteous

Abraham's works may provide bragging room or public notice

No works can provide justification

Paul reminds them that Abraham's works don't justify him before God

3. vs. 3: Cause of Abraham's righteousness

Paul reminds them of the value of God's word

“What does Scripture say?”

Paul quotes Gen. 15:6

Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness”

Abraham here believes God's promise about a future heir
His belief is credited to him as righteousness
He is righteous because of belief (faith), not any works

4. vs. 4: Righteous is not something we earn

Here, one who works is owed something by the employer, the "wages"

Rom. 6:23 says the "wages of sin is death"

We can't justify ourselves by our works

We have too many debts, too many sins, to earn salvation

Paul says in Rom. 3:20: "For by works of the law no person will be justified in His sight"

5. vs. 5: "Faith is credited as righteousness"

This verse includes the phrase "to the one who does not work..."

This means a person who doesn't try to do works to gain salvation

The opposite of works is faith, trust in God

This person relies on God as their means of righteousness, not their own works

6. vs. 6: Shift in patriarchs

Paul moves from Abraham to David

David's sins in the Bathsheba story are well known, including adultery and murder

Yet David is said here to be "one to whom God credits righteousness"

David repented and asked forgiveness

David sought to be faithful, and knew God was the justifier

David is called "a man after God's own heart" because of this faith in action

(I Sam. 13:14, Acts 13:22)

7. vs. 7-8: David's writings quoted

These two verses come from Psalm 32:1-2

These verses show both a recognition of one's own sinfulness, and God's mercy in both forgiving them and forgetting them

There is a joy in David's words—"Blessed" shows up in both verses

8. vs. 9-10: Circumcision or uncircumcision status

Paul brings up the question concerning the Roman Christians

Which way (circumcision or uncircumcision) is right?

Paul asks the rhetorical question: "Is this blessedness (of having your sins forgiven from vs. 7-8) only for the circumcised, or for the uncircumcised also?"

He then brings up Abraham, noting that Abraham was credited in God's eyes as being righteous because of his faith—he obeyed God

Abraham was righteous with God before the covenant of circumcision was introduced

Paul is saying that it's not circumcision that saves, it's obedient faith

This line of thinking would say that the Gentiles don't need to be circumcised

In Rom. 2:29, Paul talks about a "circumcision of the heart" as opposed to a physical circumcision

9. vs. 11: Abraham's circumcision a sign of his faith

Circumcision was a key part of the covenant relationship between Jews and God

It had value and importance in obeying that covenant

Paul notes that Abraham was righteousness and faith before he was circumcised

Therefore, he is the "father of all who believe but have not been circumcised"

This idea frees Gentiles from the need to be circumcised as a show of faith

10. vs. 12: Abraham's circumcision / leader of those circumcised

This is the other side of the point Paul is making to Roman (Jewish) Christians

Abraham was circumcised, but "follow(ed) in the footsteps of the faith"

Abraham's faith was more important than his circumcision

Being circumcised was an act of obedience to God's will

Acting in faith is also an act of obedience to God's will

Application: The essence of this passage seems to be, "What are we placing our hope in?" Is it in our good works, which will show God the degree to which we deserve salvation? Or is it in our faith in God, who sent Jesus to pay the price for our sins, which when we acknowledge it shows that we know we don't, in fact, deserve to be saved? Paul's words in Romans 4 encourage us to remember that we are called to live by faith daily in the God who alone can save us.

Prayer: Father God, help our faith to be in You and not in ourselves. Help us to live daily as people whose faith helps us to have absolute trust in You. In Jesus' name, Amen.