

FPFWC Christian Development



Faith and Salvation

July 2021

Summer Quarter

July 17, 2021

Lesson #3 -Faith of Abraham

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Romans 4:1-12

ICE BREAKERS-

1. What is true faith?
2. What causes many people to think that works are more important than faith for pleasing God?

Key Verse- Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.—Romans 4:3b

LESSON BACKGROUND –

During Paul’s ministry, a key issue concerned the role of the Jewish law for Christians who were not of Jewish descent. At the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, the famous Jerusalem Council had already recognized that Gentiles would be welcomed into the church without being required to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:7–11, 19–21, 28–29). This included forgoing circumcision, which symbolized the entire law for Jews (see Romans 4:9, below).

Circumcision was perhaps the most honored of all Jewish traditions. The rite began with Abraham, the forefather of the entire nation of Israel (see Romans 4:1 and following, below). Jewish men had proudly borne the mark of circumcision for hundreds of years, a physical sign of their separation from Gentiles. The traditional adversaries of Israel were called uncircumcised, an epithet spit out in scorn (example: Jeremiah 9:26; see Romans 4:9, below). Any foreigner who wanted to be accepted into Israel had to be circumcised (Exodus 12:48). To be an uncircumcised Jewish man was to be expelled from Israel and thus *not* part of the nation (Genesis 17:14).

Gentiles did not welcome the idea of circumcision as a condition for worshipping God. The physical act of circumcision was culturally repugnant and physically painful. In the Roman world, this hesitation resulted in Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism to be identified as “devout” (Acts 17:4, 17) in contrast with a “proselyte” (Matthew 23:15), who converted fully.

The “devout” chose to honor the Lord. However, they were excluded from full participation in the temple or synagogues because the men in these families had not undergone circumcision. Peter’s encounter with Cornelius, during which time the Holy Spirit came to a group of Gentiles (Acts 10:44–48), was the beginning of a new understanding about what would and would not be required in the church (11:15–18).

In part, the discussion of what Jewish customs to retain in the church—and require of Gentiles—was a discussion about the relationship between faith and works. Though these two concepts can be held in tension, most Christians

understand that works flow out of faith (James 2:14–26). We are “saved through faith, ... not of works” (Ephesians 2:8–9). The work that we do for Christ is faith manifesting itself in our lives (2:10); it is not an attempt to save ourselves. Paul’s discussion of Abraham considered in our lesson text today is an example of this fact.

Paul ended Romans 3 with a crescendo that emphasized that people can be pronounced righteous only through faith (Romans 3:30). But this raises an important question: What about the ancient and hallowed Jewish law, the law that Moses received from God himself?

LESSON COMMENTARY

4:1–3. Beginning in 4:1, Paul presents Abraham as the illustration of the principle in 3:27 that faith eliminates boasting. The phrase **according to the flesh** (v. 1) refers to Abraham being the physical **forefather** of the Jewish people, and does not refer to what he discovered “in the realm of the flesh” regarding salvation. Paul refers several times to Gn 15:6 (Rm 4:9, 22) as he employs Abraham to illustrate the principles of 3:27–31. **CREDITED TO HIM** (v. 3) translates a Hebrew phrase (the verb *hashab* followed by the preposition *le*) that means “to assign something to a person for his benefit *that he does not possess*” (cf. Lv 7:18; Nm 18:27, 30; 2Sm 19:19 [MT 19:20]; Ps 106:31 [MT 106:30]). God reckoned to Abraham the status of **RIGHTEOUSNESS** (“moral excellence and virtue”; see the comments on 1:17) that made him acceptable to God. Faith is not a work that makes one right with God. Faith is reliance upon *another’s work* (after the cross, the work of Christ), and is a gift from God (Ac 18:27; Eph 2:8; Php 1:29).

4:4–8. Here Paul explores the principle from 3:28 that justification is by faith. If salvation were given on the basis of works (v. 4), then it would be a **wage** one had earned that God was obligated to pay. But Paul made it clear earlier (3:24) that **righteousness** is **credited** as a gift (v. 5). Both Ps 32 and Gn 15 use the same Hebrew verb, *hashab*, translated differently by the NASB in these verses (“reckoned” in Gn 15:6; “impute” in Ps 32:2a). Paul used a rabbinic interpretive method (called *Gezerah Shevah*) that links verses sharing common words (here “reckon to”) to demonstrate a general principle. If God credited Abraham with righteousness on the basis of his faith, then David must have had faith for God to “credit” or “reckon” him with righteousness as well. Paul cites Ps 32:1–2 to emphasize that the imputation of righteousness includes forgiveness of sins, a point not found explicitly in Gn 15:6.

4:9–12. Paul unpacks another principle presented in 3:29–30, that God justifies everyone (Jews and Gentiles) by faith (v. 9). Abraham was counted righteous while he was a “Gentile” (**uncircumcised**) (v. 10). **The sign of circumcision** (v. 11) is described further as **a seal** (proof or validation of something; 1Co 9:2) of Abraham’s righteous status by **faith**. Abraham’s faith preceded his circumcision (Gn 15:6 vs. Gn 17:9–14). Circumcision contributed nothing to his righteousness. Circumcision was a sign that God (apart from human effort) would fulfill His promise, that Abraham had faith in Him, and that God credited righteousness to Abraham on the basis of his faith. Because he was saved as a Gentile, Abraham

is the spiritual father of believing Gentiles. But he is also the father of believing Jews (v. 12), for he was a circumcised believer.

LESSON NUGGET – Abraham was saved by faith and not by works. Salvation is not like wages that you earn or works that you can boast about. Abraham was not saved by keeping the law because the law had not been given, nor was he saved by obeying a religious ritual. It was all by God's grace.

Sources: *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary and Wiersbe Expository Outlines on the New Testament*