

The Faith of Abraham

Romans 4:1-12

¹ What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” ⁴ Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵ But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. ⁶ So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

⁷ “Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;

⁸ blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not
reckon sin.”

⁹ Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” ¹⁰ How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have

righteousness reckoned to them, ¹² and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Theme Statement

As we see the contrast between works and faith in Abraham and Sarah’s life, we have the pattern for a relationship with God. Paul’s wisdom to the Roman believers also informs us as twenty-first-century Christians.

Exploring the Word

Paul uses a question-and-answer method to engage his readers. Originally developed by Socrates, the approach “uses questions to examine the values, principles, and beliefs of learners” and what they think about them, rather than looking to an outside authority (see “The Socratic Method,” Stanford University, <https://tinyurl.com/y8u9oddn>). Knowledge can be drawn out by linking questions with answers. Paul’s first questions start in chapter 2 as he lays the foundation for discussing the Law with Jewish believers in Rome. He systematically examines their beliefs and opens up an expanded understanding of how one becomes righteous in God’s eyes.

Romans 4:1-2 What did Abraham earn?

The idea of justification by faith was not unique to the Christian gospel. Paul ties it to the Law and the Prophets. He uses two people from the Hebrew Scriptures, Abraham and Sarah, to illustrate this.

Abraham is foundational to the Jewish faith. He is the example of God’s new beginning following the worldwide judgments of the flood and the tower of Babel. Abraham and Sarah and their family are the new covenant people called to carry out God’s mission of blessing for all the world.

Paul asserts that his audience is related to Abraham and Sarah, not just biologically but also spiritually. Abraham and Sarah's justification came not from obedience to the Law but from trusting that God was gracious and would work through them. What did they earn? Nothing. What did they receive from God? Everything connected to a relationship with the Lord.

Romans 4:3-8 What does the scripture say?

When Paul asks, "What does the scripture say?" (v. 3), he employs a phrase commonly used by the Jews of his time when questioning practices that seemed contrary to scripture. Paul cites Genesis 15:6 as verification from scripture that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works. This faith was not based on Abraham's own accomplishments but was simply a response to God's call and promise. Any promise relies on trust. Hebrews 11:1 describes the faith that holds to promise: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The King James Version states it more poetically (emphasis added): "Now faith is the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen." Substance and evidence make faith more concrete; they give shape to hope.

In addition to Abraham and Sarah, Paul references David and quotes Psalm 32:1-2. God's blessing of righteousness is described as one's sins being covered and one's iniquities forgiven. The Roman believers would immediately recall that even though David was "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14), he was also a practiced sinner. In his sin, he knew that the only response was to trust God's restoration. Psalm 51 is a banner psalm for repentance and has found its way into the church's liturgy in the offertory "Create in me a clean heart."

Romans 4:9a Who benefits from this?

In this verse Paul sets up the conclusion that observing the law does not make one righteous. This blessing of forgiveness is given even to those who have sinned or who have not been associated with the Law. Remember, Romans was written to Jewish believers. Their experience of the Law was central to their understanding of the relationship with God. Paul's answer to this question is "mind blowing."

Romans 4:9b-12 Why was Abraham considered righteous?

Paul goes deeper into the narrative of Abraham, opening righteousness by faith to those who do not follow the Jewish faith and practice the Law (circumcision). At the same time, those who do practice the Law are able to experience this same righteousness by faith as they follow Abraham's example. Faith in God's graciousness is the key. With it, hope is possible. In using Abraham as the prime example of faith, Paul demonstrates that God does God's best work through broken people. Abraham was far from perfect, yet God chose him to be the father of blessing.

The Word Today

Abraham and Sarah started their faith journey with a promise—not one that they made, but one made by the Lord.

It's recorded in Genesis 12:1-2: "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.'" They were holding on to that promise when they walked out Terah's door and left Haran.

This promise was one-sided. The One making the promise didn't ask for anything but trust from the one to whom the promise was made. The Re:form Ancestors Old Testament DVD from Sparkhouse tells the story of Abraham and Sarah in a delightfully funny way. No matter what Abraham is asked to do, his response is "OK." (There is a moment of hesitation when God mentions circumcision.)

OK. It's an interesting word in American English. You might want to do an internet search to learn its origin and see how it has been used for nearly two centuries. The most common explanation for its meaning is a misspelling of all correct—"oll korrekt," OK—which was part of a fad in the 1830s, like LOL and IMHO today.

All correct. That's what God does for those who trust in God's grace and faithfulness. No matter what life brings, we say "OK" as we move forward with faith that God keeps promises. And God's greatest promise is that of salvation, which has been sealed by the Holy Spirit at baptism.

What might we be asked to respond "OK" to on our own faith journeys? We may have to choose leaving the comfort of the familiar to go to an unknown destination. We may have to adopt new ideas about relationships and community that challenge our past and point to an unclear future. We may even have to give up our sense of pride in "doing it ourselves" and trust that God will do something we can never do—earn our own salvation.

The blessing of trusting that God will always love and forgive us allows us to say "OK" to the call of faith, with the confidence that when we get off track, God will draw us back to faith through grace.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Who in your life has left a legacy of faith? How has that legacy left an impression?

Exploring the Word

1. What might be some reasons Paul uses the question-and-answer approach to this part of his letter to the Romans?
2. Make a list of words that help you understand righteousness. How do you think it is seen in people's lives?
3. What most impresses you about Abraham and Sarah and their faith story? (See Genesis 11:31—22:19.)
4. Read Genesis 12:10-20 and 20:1-18. Why is Abraham unable to boast before God?
5. What problems might a person of faith experience if they didn't also have the Law to constrain their actions?
6. How would you explain the complex relationship between faith and works to a new believer?

The Word Today

1. What is the hardest thing God could ask you to say "OK" to?
2. How does trusting God inform your faith when you have to make a difficult choice?

Closing Prayer

*For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.*

*He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.*

*On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.*

*Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;*

God is a refuge for us. Psalm 62:5-8

Further Study

Galatians 2:15-21

Daily Readings

M. Genesis 15:1-8

F. Romans 4:19-21

T. Genesis 12:1-9

S. Romans 4:22-25

W. Romans 4:13-15

S. Romans 4:1-12

T. Romans 4:16-18

Memorization

Romans 4:3b

Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.