

## Righteousness by Faith Romans 4:13-25

Were you raised in a Christian home? Did you learn at an early age to prayer before meals? Were you taught that there were rules for living that would make you pleasing to God? If so you were blessed indeed! The Jewish members of the Church of Rome thought they were better off than the Greek members of the congregation. They said they had been keeping the laws of God all our lives because they were from the true people of God. They had the laws of Moses, the religious laws, the dietary laws, the ceremonial laws and therefore they had a right to be members of the church more than non-Jews. However Paul in this letter to the Romans tells them and all who would read it in the time to come, that all have sinned and are in need of salvation.

In our scripture Paul anticipated that the Jewish Christians in Rome would ask, “How does this teaching of righteousness by faith relate to us and our history? Paul had said that this teaching was witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets. Well, what about Abraham?”

Paul accepted the challenge and explained how Abraham was saved. Abraham was called “our father,” referring primarily to the Jews’ natural and physical descent from Abraham. But in Romans 4:11, Abraham was also called “the father of all them that believe,” meaning, all who have trusted Christ (see Gal. 3:1–18). Paul stated important facts about Abraham’s salvation that prove that Abraham’s spiritual experience was like that of believers today.

First Paul said that Abraham was made righteous by faith and not by works of the Law. The Jews took pride in their circumcision and the Law. If a Jewish male was to become righteous before God, he would have to be circumcised and obey

the Law. Paul taught that there must be an inward obedience to the Law, and a “circumcision of the heart.” Mere external observances can never save a person.

But Abraham was declared righteous before he was circumcised. So from the Jewish point of view, Abraham was a Gentile. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised (Gen. 17:23–27). This was more than fourteen years after the events in Genesis 15 or when he was declared righteous. The conclusion is obvious: circumcision had nothing to do with his right relationship to God.

Therefore circumcision was a sign and a seal (Rom. 4:11). As a sign, it was evidence that he belonged to God and believed His promise. As a seal, it was a reminder to him that God had given the promise and would keep it. We as believers today are sealed by the Holy Spirit of God (Eph. 1:13–14). We have also experienced a spiritual circumcision in the heart (Col. 2:10–12), not just a minor physical operation, but the putting off of the old nature through the death and resurrection of Christ. Circumcision did not add to Abraham’s salvation; it merely attested to it.

But Abraham was also justified hundreds of years before the Law was given. Abraham was placed in right relationship to God by believing God’s promise, not by obeying God’s Law; because God’s Law through Moses had not been given. The promise to Abraham was given purely through God’s grace. Abraham did not work for or earn it. So today, God puts us in right relationship to God when we believe God’s gracious promise, not because we obey God’s Law. The Law was not given to save, but to show us that we need to be saved (Rom. 4:15).

The fact that Abraham was declared righteous by grace and not Law proves that salvation is for all. Abraham is the father of all believers, both Jews and non-Jews (Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:7, 29). Paul was saying that instead of the Jew complaining because Abraham was not saved by Law, they ought to rejoice that God’s salvation is available to all, and that Abraham has a spiritual family of all true believers as

well as a physical family that consists of the nation of Israel. Paul saw this as a fulfillment of Genesis 17:5: “I have made you a father of many nations.”

Paul also said that Abraham was put in right relationship to God by Resurrection power, not human efforts. Paul saw the rejuvenation of Abraham’s body as a picture of resurrection from the dead; and then he related it to the resurrection of Christ.

Paul states that one reason that God delayed in sending Abraham and Sarah a son was to permit all their natural strength to decline and then disappear. It was unthinkable that a man ninety-nine years old could produce a child in the womb of his wife who was eighty-nine years old! From a reproductive point of view, both of them were dead.

But Abraham did not walk by sight; he walked by faith. What God promises, God performs. All we need do is believe. Abraham’s initial faith in God did not diminish in the years that followed God’s initial promise. Even with the delay, Abraham was “strong in faith.” It was this faith that gave him strength to produce a son in his old age.

The application to salvation is clear: God must wait until some of us are “dead” and unable to help ourselves before God can release God’s saving power. As long as we think we are strong enough to do anything to please God, we cannot be saved by grace. It was when Abraham admitted that he was “dead” that God’s power went to work in his body. It is when we confess that we are spiritually dead and unable to help ourselves that God can save us.

The Gospel is “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16) because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Jesus Christ was “delivered up to die on account of our offenses, and was raised up” to give us his righteousness (Rom. 4:25). This means that the resurrection of Christ is the proof that God accepted His

Son's sacrifice, and that now we can be put in right relationship to God without God violating God's own Law or contradicting God's own nature.

The key, of course, is "if we believe" (Rom. 4:24). God's saving power is experienced by those who believe in Christ (Rom. 1:16). His righteousness is given to those who believe (Rom. 3:22). We are put in right relationship with God by faith (Rom. 5:1). The object of our faith is Jesus Christ who died for us and rose again.

These facts make Abraham's faith that much more wonderful. He did not have a Bible to read; he had only the simple promise of God. He was almost alone as a believer, surrounded by heathen unbelievers. He could not look back at a long record of faith; in fact, he was helping to write that record. In spite of his circumstances Abraham believed God.

The promise that all families of the earth would be blessed in his descendants was given to Abraham when he was an old man. His wife, Sarah, had always been childless; and now, when he was one hundred years old and she was ninety (Genesis 17:17), there came the promise that a son would be born to them. It seemed, on the face of it, beyond all belief and beyond all hope of fulfillment, because he was long past the age of producing and she long past the age of bearing a son. But, once again, Abraham took God at God's word and once again it was this faith that was accounted to Abraham for righteousness.

It was this willingness to take God at God's word which put Abraham into a right relationship with God. The Jewish Rabbis had a saying to which Paul refers. They said, "What is written of Abraham is written also of his children." They meant that any promise that God made to Abraham extends to his children also. Therefore, if Abraham's willingness to take God at God's word brought him into a right relationship with God, so it will be with us. It is not works of the law, it is this trusting faith which establishes the relationship between God and us.

The essence of Abraham's faith was that he believed that God could make the impossible possible. So long as we believe that everything depends on our efforts, we are bound to be pessimists, because experience has taught us that our own efforts can achieve very little. When we realize that it is not our effort but God's grace and power which matter, then we become optimists, because we learn and believe that with God nothing is impossible.<sup>1</sup>

Today we have a complete Bible to read and study. We have a church fellowship, and can look back at centuries of faith as recorded in church history and the Bible. Even with all this many refuse to believe!

Dr. Harry Ironside, for eighteen years pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, told of visiting a Sunday School class while on vacation. The teacher asked, "How were people saved in Old Testament times?"

After a pause, one man replied, "By keeping the Law."

"That's right," said the teacher.

But Dr. Ironside interrupted: "My Bible says that by the deeds of the Law shall no flesh be justified."

The teacher was a bit embarrassed, so he said, "Well, does somebody else have an idea?"

Another student replied, "They were saved by bringing sacrifices to God."

"Yes, that's right!" the teacher said, and tried to go on with the lesson.

But Dr. Ironside interrupted, "My Bible says that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin."

By this time the unprepared teacher was sure the visitor knew more about the Bible than he did, so he said, "Well, you tell us how people were saved in the Old Testament!"

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Letter to the Romans*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 67

And Dr. Ironside explained that they were saved by faith—the same way people are saved today!

Whether you are a Jew or a non-Jew, you are a child of Abraham if you believe on Jesus Christ. This makes you righteous by faith. Abraham “believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness.”<sup>2 3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Ro 4:1

<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:453