

The Sign and Seal of Faith

Father Abraham – Part IV

Romans 4:9-12

Introduction

In Romans, chapter 4, Paul is attempting to illustrate that justification is not earned and that it is not deserved as a result of living a perfect life of holiness. He has illustrated this fact by using the two most prominent men in Israel's history – the greatest patriarch, Abraham, and the greatest monarch, David.

Neither Abraham nor David could ever claim to be perfect. And, we have rediscovered enough illustrations in the pages of the Old Testament to prove it. It has become obvious, from a close study of their lives, that they were both sinful men.

Abraham lied on two occasions, which put Sarah at great risk. He also disobeyed God's instruction to leave his family, when he took his idolatrous father and his nephew Lot along. Both of these men caused delay and division. Abraham failed to trust God during a famine as well, when he went to Egypt and relied on the pagan Pharaoh.

David, we have rediscovered, was guilty of adultery, murder, lying, and hypocrisy.

Paul is simply trying to prove, by way of illustration, that these two men did not deserve to go to heaven.

Abraham – Justified by Faith Alone, Not Circumcision

Now Paul anticipates the response of his Jewish audience. They would naturally say, "Okay, Paul, you've shown us that these two men sinned, but don't forget, they were circumcised; they had the physical

mark of the covenant, therefore they were as good as saved."

In Romans, chapter 4, verses 9 and 10, Paul writes,

Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness." How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised;

Abraham's circumcision/justification timeline

Paul, in these verses, simply reminds the Jewish reader of his history timeline.

Abraham – circumcised at age ninety-nine

- Abraham was circumcised when his son, Ishmael, was thirteen years old and Abraham was ninety-nine years old. That is found in Genesis, chapter 17.

Abraham – justified at age eighty-five

- Turn back to Genesis, chapter 15, however, and we are told, in verse 6, that,
... [Abram] believed in the Lord; and [God] reckoned it to him as righteousness.

In other words, Abraham placed his faith in the one true and living God and God justified

him! That took place when Abraham was eighty-five years old.

Therefore, Abraham was justified by God, fourteen years before he was circumcised.

I can imagine all the Jewish readers and rabbis scurrying about to locate a scroll of the Torah. They find their place in Genesis, re-read these passages, and say, "Phooey."

Translated, that means, "Paul's right again and we're wrong."

Notice Romans, chapter 4, verse 11.

and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them

In other words, circumcision did not give Abraham righteousness before God; circumcision was simply the sign and seal that he was, in fact, already considered righteous before God.

Jewish circumcision – what was it for?

The problem was, by the time of the apostle Paul, the Jewish nation had forgotten the purpose of the sign and had simply fallen in love with it.

The rabbis taught, "Circumcision saves from hell."

In the *Midrash*, a Jewish commentary, it is recorded that "God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised should be sent to hell."

In fact, it was further developed in another Jewish commentary that, just in case a circumcised Jew "slipped through the cracks" and was somehow headed for hell, that, "Abraham sits before the gate of hell, and does not allow that any circumcised Israelite should enter there."

So, Abraham, poor guy, is confined to sit at the gate of hell to make sure that none of his descendants accidentally go in. Imagine the kind of existence to which that belief confines Abraham. He, the great patriarch, the father of the faithful, who should be enjoying the greater part of paradise, is confined to sit at the doorway of hell in order to be sure that no Jew goes in.

So, what about a Jew that was so despicable and sinful that he should not go to heaven? The rabbis took care of that knotty little problem by teaching that, if a Jew was so bad that he just had to be

condemned by God, there was an angel whose job it was to make these men uncircumcised once again, before they were sent to hell.¹

By the way, there was so much confusion and angst over the issue of circumcision that it nearly divided the church in Jerusalem. In the book of Acts, in chapter 15, the debate was raging as to whether or not new Gentile believers had to be circumcised. A council was convened and the decision was made to allow Gentiles to become full members of the church without being marked as Jews.

So, what was circumcision for? Why did God give this rite, this act to Abraham and his descendants? It was an act that was set aside later, with the establishment of the New Testament church.

Paul answers this question. Look again at the first part of verse 11.

and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith . . .

Circumcision was a sign and it was a seal.

Circumcision was a sign

Circumcision was a sign. It was a sign that:

1. the Jews were a distinct race of people,
2. the Jews had a covenant with God, and
3. the Jews were separate from all other nations unto God.

What a sign points to

Now, a sign points to something far more important than the sign itself!

If you have ever traveled across this country, you have seen signs all along the way. After you have been traveling for days, you finally see the first sign with the name of your hometown, "Raleigh 135 miles". When you see that sign, you do not pull over, get out, hug the sign, and say, "I'm home!"

No. It is a sign that points to a more wonderful truth that home is closer than ever!

The problem concerning religious symbols and ceremonies exists today, as well as for generations in the recent past. They forget what the sign points to and fall in love with the sign.

Let me explain this with an illustration. I wear my wedding ring as a sign that I am married. Wherever I go, whether it is somewhere locally or to another state or country, everyone can look at my left hand, see the wedding band, and assume that I am

married. Now, if I took it off (let us assume I can take it off), that would not mean that suddenly, I have become unmarried.

Now, continue to follow me in this. I am *not* married because I wear a wedding ring; I wear a wedding ring because I am married! In fact, I could be single and wear a wedding ring, just because I do not want to be bothered by anyone. I am not married just because I wear a wedding ring; I wear a wedding ring as a sign that I am married!

In the same way, with or without circumcision, a person can be a true believer in God through Christ.

The question for Paul, in Romans, chapter 4, verses 9 through 12, is not, “Was circumcision important for Abraham?” The question is, “Did circumcision save Abraham?”

The answer, according to Paul, is, “No!”

Circumcision was a seal

Paul also said that circumcision was a seal.

A seal, in biblical times, could be melted wax on a document with a symbol pressed into the wax. It represented a declaration of authority.

I recently applied for a passport for my youngest daughter. She will be traveling with me to the island of Malta, where I will minister to ABWE (Association of Baptists for World Evangelism) missionaries from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. It arrived in the mail and there, stamped on top of her photograph, is the seal of the United States of America. That seal communicates the message that she is a citizen of the United States and that all of the authority of this country stands behind her as she travels abroad.

What is the New Testament seal of the believer? Just as Abraham was given a physical seal, communicating the fact that he was a citizen of the Jewish nation, so we have been given the seal of our faith, communicating that we are citizens of heaven. It is not a physical mark, by the way, it is a person indwelling us. His name happens to be, the Holy Spirit of God.

Paul wrote, in II Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 21 and 22,

Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.

He also wrote, in Ephesians, chapter 1, verses 13 and 14,

In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory.

Both the old and new covenants had and have a seal, but with differences; such as:

Old Covenant Seal	New Covenant Seal
Temporary	Permanent
Physical	Spiritual

Here is the stunning point of Paul’s paragraph, in Romans, chapter 4, verses 9 through 12, “Abraham is not the father of those who have simply been circumcised; he is the father of those who make the same act of faith in God!”ⁱⁱⁱ

The shocking truth, ladies and gentlemen, is that the Gentile does not get into heaven by coming to God as a Jew; the Jew gets into heaven by coming to God as a Gentile! This is seen in the fact that Abraham was a Gentile when God justified him, and He justified him fourteen years before he received the mark of that distinct nation of Jewish people.

Abraham – “Father of All Those of Faith”

The question remains then, “How is Abraham the ‘Father of All Those of Faith’?”

We call William Carey, the “Father of Modern Missions,” because he was among the first to leave the United Kingdom for a foreign field, which was India.

We call Martin Luther, the “Father of the Reformation,” because he was the figure-head of what would become the Protestant Church. He risked his life to follow the scriptures.

In this same way, Abraham is the “Father of All Those of Faith,” because:

- he was the first one of those who would become a nation of followers; he “blazed the trail” of faith, so to speak, and
- he risked his own life in obedience to the Word of God.

Paul uses a wonderful phrase to illustrate this truth in verse 12b.

... those ... who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham ...

How to Emulate Abraham

How did Abraham “blaze the trail” of faith for all of us to follow, whether an Old or New Testament believer? Let me give you two ways.

Abraham believed in God’s Word without ever experiencing the fullness of its promises

1. Abraham believed in God’s Word, without ever experiencing the fullness of its promises.

Even though Abraham saw the miracle of a son born to him and his wife when they were decades past childbearing or conceiving years, the promises to Abraham would occur in the future.

Think, for a moment, about the promise of the land being his own possession. The amazing thing is that Abraham never owned any land in Canaan, except for that small field where the cave of Machpelah was located. The cave wherein he buried his beloved wife, Sarah.

Imagine, Abraham saw the Promised Land and lived in the Promised Land and wandered through the Promised Land as a nomad, but he never possessed it. In fact, his descendants did not possess the land until more than five hundred years after the promise was given!

Yet, Abraham believed the promise. The truth is, the promise that Abraham believed was not even the possession of the land by his descendants. What was Abraham really looking for? Hebrews, chapter 11, verse 10, tells us.

[Abraham] was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

He was looking forward to the kingdom of God on earth.

Abraham believed in God’s Word, without ever experiencing the full expression of its promises.

Abraham believed in Jesus Christ without ever seeing Him in person

2. Abraham believed in Jesus Christ, without ever seeing Him in person.

Abraham believed in Jesus Christ, even when he knew much less about Him than those of us who have the New Testament. We know the details of Jesus’

birth, life, death, burial, and resurrection. We do not know how much Abraham was told by God concerning Christ, but we know that God announced the gospel to Abraham in advance.

Listen to what Paul revealed in Galatians, chapter 3, verses 8 and 9.

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “All the nations will be blessed in you.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

Can you imagine that?! God, who is the preacher, delivered the gospel of Jesus Christ to Abraham, centuries before Christ arrived.

You may remember the doubting of Thomas the disciple. In John, chapter 20, verse 28, Jesus arrived on the scene and Thomas exclaimed,

... My Lord and my God!

Jesus answered, in verse 29,

... Because you have seen Me, have you believed? ...

“Let me tell you something, Thomas.”

... Blessed are they who [do] not see, and yet [believe].

In other words, “Blessed are all those who, like Father Abraham, believe I came from God, without ever seeing My face.”

Conclusion

So, Abraham becomes the “Father of All Who Walk in his Footsteps of Faith”. He, the forerunner of faith, would become the father of:

- Caleb, who sought to possess the mountain by faith in God’s power;
- Mary and Joseph, who walked by faith to Bethlehem, bewildered and amazed at what God was doing in and through them;
- Rahab, who desperately wanted to leave her sordid past of prostitution and cling to the people of God;
- Ruth, the Moabitess who clung to Naomi and left her people and her home;
- The Magi, from Persia, who came to worship the newborn King;
- The Ethiopian statesman, who believed;

- Cornelius, the Roman soldier who dared Caesar's wrath to follow Christ;
- Luke, the Gentile doctor, who wrote his own gospel account, as well as the book of Acts;
- And Tertius, the Gentile, who, with his own hand, penned the book of Romans as Paul dictated it to him.

That is just the beginning, however. Abraham has become the father of every one of you who

believe, without seeing, the Son of God; who believe, without experiencing until a future day, the kingdom of God on earth – you are sons and daughters of Abraham!

That is not because of some physical mark, but because of a spiritual life, which is brought about by the Spirit of God in the hearts of all those who have placed their faith in the Son of God.

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ⁱ William Barclay, The Letter to the Romans (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 66.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 66.