

## **Romans 4 How were people saved before the coming of Jesus?**

### **Introduction**

All of us are aware of a reasonable number of questions that are repeatedly asked about the Bible by people enquiring about our faith. They range from simple factual ones like ‘Where Cain find a wife?’ to more profound philosophical ones like: ‘If God is all loving and all powerful how come that He allowed evil to exist, even flourish in the world?’ Or ‘What about people who have never heard the Gospel, how can they be saved?’ Paul has already addressed that one in Romans 2:12-16, possibly it was a familiar question at his open air meetings. His answer was simple yet profound -on the basis of how they responded to the knowledge they had of God in their consciences each would be judged by God. Those people who had greater knowledge of the truth and opportunities to respond to it would have higher expectations placed on them than someone in a less advantageous position. Another staple one concerns the way people are accepted by God into His family. It is at the heart of this chapter and Paul’s answer is a vital component to our evangelistic message today also. For many of his readers /hearers were Jewish and the man they most revered was Father Abraham. How was he saved? Did God accept him on the same basis as us –or in a different way? This is a crucial question that had to be answered clearly as the shape and identity of the Early Christian Church depended on it. If Abraham (or anyone else for that matter) was saved by some other way, then the question is immediately raised about whether that possibility might be open to other people as well. However, if the opposite was true, that is showing that the way God accepted Abraham was in principle no different to people living after the start of the Christian Church on the Day of Pentecost, then this implies a consistency of the way of salvation on God’s part. For us in the twenty-first century it might be no major issue to find that God worked in a different way before the coming of Jesus. We could easily handle a ‘then’ and ‘now’ scenario. After all in the practise of worship there were some big changes not least the contrast between repeated animal sacrifices and the once-for-all time sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Therefore, on the surface it appeared likely that something very different was happening in New Testament times. It was essential, then, for Paul to address this issue in the first century AD context, and so appropriate that he chose as his first example the most revered figure in the Jewish faith –‘Father Abraham’. Did the death of Jesus and his sacrifice in any way connect with or apply to people who had already lived and died? Were they saved primarily through Jesus’ sacrifice, although they never knew Him or had the chance to respond directly to His message as we understand it? In Hebrews 11, a key chapter for interpreting some of the Old Testament faith stories, it states: *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him* (Hebrews 11:6). Is there any way in which these prominent Old Testament figures were justified by faith through the grace of God, rather than on the basis of their good works? The stakes could not have been higher. The first part of Romans 4 is taken up with answering this important question.

### **1. What was it that Abraham believed?**

(a) **The crucial question** (Romans 4:1) *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?* This was the pivotal question for a significant number of Jewish followers of Jesus. There were some in their ranks who held so strongly to their Jewish identity that they were convinced that a Gentile (anyone not born Jewish) must become a Jew and practise all the Jewish religious rites –as well as believe in Jesus –in order to be saved. Representatives of these views seemed to follow Paul around visiting churches

he had planted and telling the new converts that Paul had missed out an essential part of the Gospel message. This was especially true in the churches of southern Turkey (part of Galatia), to whom the letter to the Galatians was written, to which we will turn shortly. Cutting a long story short, Paul's convincing explanation was accepted at the Council of Jerusalem in AD 48 (details recorded in Acts 15) and the argument of this minority group was shown to be contrary to the biblical message. Abraham was the obvious test case to prove the matter one way or the other.

(b) **The dilemma to be considered** (Romans 4:2) *If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God.* The claim of Paul's Jewish opponents was very clear that Abraham could in fact boast in his meritorious life. Listen to these claims that were made in Jewish sources familiar to people in that era. 'We find that Abraham our father had performed the whole Law before it was given.' (Kidd.4:14); A second source makes this statement: 'Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord' (Jub.23:10); 'Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were seen as men 'who did not sin against God (Prayer of Manasseh, 8) Also Jub.24:11: 'And in Thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed because thy father obeyed My voice, and kept My charge and My commandments, and My laws and My ordinances, and My covenant (words allegedly spoken to Isaac by God) (Quotations found in L.L. Morris, *Romans*, p. 195). In other words Abraham lived such a perfect life of good works God just had to accept him on that basis. This is the standard line of argument made by many Jews of that day against Paul and other early Christian preachers. Interestingly it is a line argued by Muslims that all the prophets or holy men of the past must have been close to perfect and without sin. They are horrified at the claims of the failures of key Old Testament figures recorded in the Bible. Yet the Jewish opponents of Paul were insistent that Abraham had something to boast about-without appearing familiar with the Old Testament evidence that this mighty man may have accomplished great things for God, yet he was an imperfect creature who also made some serious mistakes as well as one who honoured God by taking such big steps of faith.

(c) **The statement to acknowledge** (Romans 4:3) *What does Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).* Here is a direct challenge to that perspective and it comes right out of the Scriptures. God accepted this man's faith in Him and credited to him the righteousness of Jesus and transferred his sins / guilt and placed them on Jesus, although Abraham could not possibly have expressed it in those terms. What might have been understood in that extraordinary covenant agreement between Abraham (called Abram at that time) and God? It began in a vision God gave to Abraham with these unsolicited words of assurance: '*Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward (Genesis 15:1).* In response Abraham acknowledges that God is sovereign, but cries out that the blessings God intends to pass to his descendants seems impossible since he and his wife are childless and his nominated heir is one of his servants Eliezer of Damascus (Genesis 15:2). There followed an extraordinary message from God in Genesis 15:4-5: *Then the word of the Lord came to him: 'This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.'* <sup>5</sup> *He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.'* Then He said to him, '***So shall your offspring be.*** In this additional context alongside the earlier revelations from God to this special person, must be put Abraham's declaration of faith in Genesis 15:6; In the immediate context it was a trust that God would grant him and Sarah physical descendants. In the broader context it was an acceptance of all the promises given by God for his life with the assurance that God was able and willing to ensure it all came to pass. The fuller and foundational revelation is inevitably Genesis 12:1-7: *The Lord had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.'* <sup>2</sup> *I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.* <sup>3</sup> *I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.* <sup>4</sup> *So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old*

when he set out from Harran. <sup>5</sup> He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. <sup>6</sup> Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup> The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. In essence in Genesis 15:6 Abraham is putting his faith wholly in the Lord who made these promises to him. God I trust you fully with all my life –if not stated earlier in his life, certainly from that particular unforgettable occasion. However, in Galatians 3 there is a fuller commentary on this passage to which we need to turn.

## 2. The evidence from the Letter to the Galatian Churches (Galatians 3:6-9)

Genesis 15:6, the crucial statement about Abraham is quoted three times in the New Testament in Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6 and by James in James 2:23. In his letter to churches in Southern Turkey (Galatia) Paul wrote these words: <sup>6</sup> So also Abraham 'believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' <sup>7</sup> Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' <sup>9</sup> So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:6-9). He had successfully planted a series of congregations in that region proclaiming the Gospel message of justification by faith alone through God's grace alone as a result of Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice in our place. This message was welcomed and accepted. However, some Jews came from Jerusalem and taught that in addition to believing in Jesus it was essential (for the men!) to be circumcised, to keep the Jewish religious rituals and laws in order to be acceptable to God, thus undermining the basis of the Gospel Paul had proclaimed. The Letter to the Galatians was Paul's rebuttal of these errors. In simple terms he reminded these young Christians first of his calling as the Apostle to the Gentiles and his faithfulness in proclaiming the truth to them, in contrast to the false gospel of these unknown and uncalled Jewish teachers. He reiterates the Gospel message he had preached to them and its implications for daily living, crucially arguing in Galatians 3 that even Abraham the Father of the Jewish people was justified by faith not by his good works for salvation. This fuller understanding of Abraham's faith is behind Paul's words in the first few verses of Romans 4, a letter written less than a decade later. It is helpful then to turn to Galatians 3 and examine what Paul believed concerning the faith of Abraham and the Gospel he believed several thousand years earlier, though first a brief digression to mention the other passage when Genesis 15:6 is cited in James 2:23.

## 3. The use of Abraham's faith in the book of James (James 2:14-24)

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? <sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. <sup>18</sup> But someone will say, 'You have faith; I have deeds.' Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. <sup>19</sup> You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder. <sup>20</sup> You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? <sup>21</sup> Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. <sup>23</sup> And the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,' and he was called God's friend. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone* (James 2:14-24). James, tackles the argument of the people opposing Paul, in a letter written at the same time as Paul's Letter to the Churches of Galatia. He does so from a different angle. James is not asserting justification

by works, for Abraham or any later believer, rather that the person who has been justified will authenticate their faith by showing its good fruit- a life of good works . Their faith is revealed through the way they conduct their lives before God and for the benefit of other people. The example James uses to show the genuineness of Abraham’s faith comes from Genesis 22, more than two decades later. In that context when Abraham demonstrates his absolute trust in God the blessings first promised in Genesis 12 are repeated to the patriarch. Genesis 22:15-18: *The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time <sup>16</sup> and said, ‘I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, **your only son,** <sup>17</sup> I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, <sup>18</sup> and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed Me.’* What is crucial is that the one explicit link between the divine promise and Abraham’s obedience is given in God’s last spoken revelation to the patriarch after he had demonstrated his faith in God. It was not a motivation to Abraham to perform and to live up to God’s standards, rather an assurance from God that His promises were certain to be fulfilled in the future in the context of a commendation of the patriarch’s behaviour. [what is often missed in Genesis 22 is that Abraham is an old man and Isaac is at least a teenager. The events recorded on Mount Moriah required the consent of both and the chapter concluded with a pointer towards where Isaac’s wife would come from as well –thus providing the remaining piece of the puzzle. Abraham’s faith was vindicated as the details of God’s plans were revealed.] James’ emphasis is complementary to that of Paul. The apostle to the Gentile boldly declares how we are saved. James, the one who served as senior pastor in Jerusalem and chair of the gatherings of first generation Christian leaders in that city, stresses that someone who has been justified will show evidence of their faith by the way they live. Words and actions, belief and behaviour go together, not saved by works but saved for them – in essence saying what Paul stated in Ephesians 2:8-10!

#### 4. How did Abraham understand the Gospel? (Galatians 3)

Paul began by quoting the key text Genesis 15:6: *‘So also Abraham ‘believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ <sup>7</sup> Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. <sup>8</sup> Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ <sup>9</sup> So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:6-9).* A few verses later he states: <sup>13</sup> *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ <sup>14</sup> He redeemed us **in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit** (Galatians 3:13-14).* Paul’s opponents were claiming that Abraham was saved by faith in God demonstrated by keeping the law and by being circumcised. However, a more careful reading of Genesis shows that Abraham was first justified by faith (Genesis 15), at least thirteen years before the ceremony of circumcision, recorded in Genesis 17; neither was Abraham saved by keeping the Jewish law as that came through Moses hundreds of years later. Naturally Paul’s opponents would have replied –on that line of chronological reasoning –the death of Jesus took place even later, roughly 2,000 years later! How could Abraham have been saved through the sacrifice of a person he had never heard of? It is this latter question in particular that Paul answers in Galatians 3. The apostle asserts that Abraham did know of Jesus and that he looked forward to His coming and trusted Him as his Saviour from his sins.[J.M. Boice, *Romans*, Vol.1, pp.440-443 explains this in more details] How does Paul support such a claim? (a) **Abraham believed in the Gospel** (Galatians 3:8) *‘Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’* Abraham’s life was not simply taken up with the physical

promise of a journey culminating in a Promised Land for his descendants, though it included it; it was supremely a spiritual calling in which all peoples across the world would be granted salvation through him and his descendants, in essence it was a faith in God's good news for the world that would bring them salvation. Undoubtedly there was much he did not know or understand when he left the city of Ur and began the long journey to the Promised Land, but his vision was much greater than one encompassing merely physical and material blessings in Israel (Hebrews 11:10). (b) **Abraham and the Gospel of Redemption** (Galatians 3:13-14) <sup>13</sup> *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'* <sup>14</sup> *He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit* (Galatians 3:13-14). Redemption, the payment of a price by which a person was ransomed or a produced obtained by purchase. Most commonly in the ancient world it concerned the setting free of a slave when another free person pays the redemption price for them. Jesus paid the redemption price to set us free from our sins, that we might be adopted, indeed welcomed into God's family. Clearly Abraham could not have known the detailed information to which we have access in the Four Gospels, detailing Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. Yet Galatians 3:8 does state: *Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham.* Then add to that the words of Jesus from John 8:56: *Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing My day; he saw it and was glad.* Jesus' words were spoken in the context of a heated debate with religious leaders who disputed Jesus' claims concerning His identity and the work He had come to accomplish. How much Abraham was told and how much he understood about God's saving purposes to be accomplished through him and his descendants we will never know, but he was certainly delighted with the information provided! (c) **Abraham and the coming Messiah** (Galatians 3:16) *The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say 'and to seeds', meaning many people, but 'and to your seed', meaning one person, who is Christ.* This specific promise of blessing through an individual descendant is given three times in Genesis 12:7; 13:15 and 24:7; inevitably there is an overlap of meaning in that the blessings would relate to his physical descendants, but supremely and specifically this blessing would come about through one particular descendant. Abraham would not have known His name, but it appears he had grasped that a future Messiah (Christ) would bring redemption not just for his physical descendants the Jewish people, but for all peoples on earth. Abraham's faith in God and trust in the future redeeming work of the Promised Messiah, whom we know is Jesus, led in Genesis 15:6 to God declaring Abraham a justified person. Therefore we too can rejoice in the extraordinary words of Galatians 3:8: <sup>8</sup> *Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.'* Abraham had the faith to believe not just concerning events in his lifetime, but in the future work of salvation to be accomplished by this individual descendant. This is the wonderful reason why I can have confidence that Abraham was justified by faith and not by his works, says Paul. The outstanding question is this: do you share his faith in God through Jesus?

##### 5. **How does this fit with the views of other Old Testament figures?**

In Genesis chapter three there is the sad story of the fall into sin by the first humans Adam and Eve. The judgement of God hands over that chapter, but in its midst one extraordinary verse Genesis 3:15: *And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.* These words were spoken to the evil one who under the guise of the serpent who had led Adam and Eve to disobey God. They were spoken in the hearing of Adam and Eve who learned of a spiritual battle that would take

place in the future generations, but God promised a future Saviour, an individual who would once for all time accomplish the work of redemption for God's people on earth, but who would be physically wounded in the process of carrying out that work. Adam subsequently named his wife Eve (Genesis 3:24) a name that means 'life giver' because she would be the mother of all future humans. Their first child was named Cain, a name that means 'Here it is' (Genesis 4:1) – most likely they had mistakenly thought that Cain would be the promised redeemer. How wrong they would be on that matter! What is important was the fact that knowledge of a future unknown redeemer had been revealed by God. A man through whom salvation would come to humanity; Jacob, grandson of Abraham, in his final prophetic blessing to his children said this with respect to his son Judah and his descendants in Genesis 49:10: *The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, **until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his.*** For Jacob, there was an acceptance of previous revelation, but now this eager embrace of the future Saviour and the success of his work amongst the nations. To Moses hundreds of years later, there was an acceptance of this revelation and he trusted in the God who keeps His promise concerning the future coming One. *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him* (Deuteronomy 18:15 –see also Acts 7:37-the words of Stephen). David, the King to whom Paul will turn next as a witness in Romans 4 had grasped something of the future death (Psalm 22) and resurrection (Psalm 16:10b –see also Acts 2:31 Peter's words) and victorious reign (Psalm 110:1) of this figure. Or as a final example, more than seven centuries before the coming of Jesus, Isaiah, who in the amazing words of Isaiah 53 spoke of the substitutionary sacrifice the Messiah would offer in our place. *But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed.<sup>6</sup> We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all* (Isaiah 53:5-6). These Old Testament figures had a fraction of the information we have in the time before Jesus, but put their faith in God and trusted His future promises concerning the One to come and were justified. We can look back to the cross and know the details of what Jesus endured in our place. We know that Jesus was miraculously raised to life that first Easter Sunday. If you are here and have not yet put your faith in Him –my question is this? What is stopping you? Can I urge you trust Him today and commit your future into His hands. Have you committed your life to Him, entrusting your future to Him? We began with the question: How were people saved before the coming of Jesus? I believe there is sufficient information that to different degrees they placed their faith in God and trusted His promise about a future Saviour for the world. In accordance with their response to the information revealed to them, God accepted them in principle on the same basis as us. Romans 4:3 reminds us that *Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness* –I hope the same statement can be made of each person here today, for Jesus' sake, Amen.