

## Romans 4:9-17 Abraham's righteousness and ours

### Introduction

A friend serving in the British Army spoke some years ago about the seriousness of a soldier being convicted of going AWOL –absent without leave. Now of course there were a small number of cases where, for example, a soldier might have a moral conviction that a particular war was morally unjustified –as a number of American soldiers did re the war in Iraq. A few slipped into Canada on home leave and simply declined to come back to the USA, raising some difficult legal questions for the two governments to resolve. However, the vast majority of cases concerned men who had authorised leave who were simply late in returning to barracks, by a matter of hours or maybe a day late. Although in practice if not serving in a war zone or engaged in specific training for a tour of duty this might not make a big difference, it was a matter of principle that the law be obeyed. However, this regiment apparently devised a novel scheme to provide a way of escape for those caught returning late. They were required to give an original reason not provided by another soldier as the explanation for their predicament. It was understood that this was an exercise in creative thinking not evidence that could be considered factual in a court of law! It was viewed as an attempt both to uphold the legal standard, but also to make a reasonable allowance for human nature –as long as it didn't happen too often!

Paul has previously explained the Gospel –the good news to people who have sinned –in chapter three and raised the question: *Where then is boasting?* (Romans 3:27). In Romans 4:1-8 the apostle has demonstrated by pointing to the Old Testament evidence that not even some of the greatest individuals from that era –as viewed by the Jews of his day – could boast that they had lived such good lives that God credited them with salvation through their good works. He cites two examples, Abraham and David and demonstrates that they too like his hearers and readers needed to be saved by God's grace alone through faith alone. Paul then asked a second question: *Is God the God of the Jews only?* (Romans 3:28) In other words, Paul you have proved that all Jews should be saved in this way, after all Abraham and David were Jewish. How is this relevant to Gentiles –the vast majority of human beings? How does the example of Abraham help us, connect with us? Paul will spend the rest of chapter four explaining how God worked in the life of Abraham in such a way that he is the spiritual 'father' of all who believe from whatever background.

### 1. Romans 4:9-12 Faith and Ceremonies

(a)Confirmation of the timing of Abraham's acceptance by God (Romans 4:9-10)<sup>9</sup>*Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness.* <sup>10</sup>*Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but **before!*** <sup>11</sup>*If we accept that Abraham was saved by faith in response to God's grace where did that leave the acts of obedience he performed during his life? What significance, therefore, is there in the act of circumcision which he underwent which appears to be very important in the Old Testament? The relevance of this question naturally has implications for us as Christians with respect to the two ordinances Jesus left with His Church, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. To come to Abraham's situation first Paul has already quoted Genesis 15:6: *Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness.* However, Abraham was not circumcised, the sign of the covenant and a mark of entry into the Jewish community, until at least fourteen years later in Genesis 17. Therefore the example of Abraham, prior to the giving of this sign, places him in a similar position to Gentiles –us- prior to us taking a step of faith to trust Jesus as Lord and*

Saviour. He did go through this special ceremony that was an identifying marker for the Jewish community –but not uniquely so, as some other nations around them for different reasons practiced this ceremony on young boys in their communities. In other words Paul’s opponents had been claiming that you need to trust in Jesus and be circumcised in order to be saved. On the contrary, says the apostle, Abraham was saved before he participated in this ceremony as an act of obedience to the calling of God. It was part of his calling as an Old Testament disciple to participate in this ceremony.

This principle is true also in the New Testament era. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are two special gifts from the Lord Jesus to His Church. As disciples of Jesus we receive them as a part of the walk of faith, not in order to be saved, but as blessings given to us by God in order that we might grow in our faith as men and women of God. It was a tragedy in the early centuries of Christian witness that a false view of baptism arose which stated that without baptism a person could not go to heaven. In an age of very high infant mortality when only a minority of children reached adulthood, it was inevitable that the age at which baptism was administered was reduced from that of a person old enough to make that choice for themselves to a young baby on whose behalf their parents made promises –which they were required to confirm for themselves. This wrong teaching has caused appalling distress for centuries to many parents of young children that died so young on top of their natural grief at the loss of a precious child. Thankfully at the end of the last century the Roman Catholic Church changed its doctrine on this subject and in the early part of Pope Benedict’s leadership in that church, clarification was given that the biblical understanding that a God of love would not deny entrance to heaven to an individual who died before being of an age to make decisions for themselves on faith questions was now the official teaching of that denomination. This brought the Roman Catholic Church back in line with other Churches and the consistent biblical teaching on this subject. A Christian is not saved by being baptised or by partaking of the bread and the wine at the Lord’s Table. We come to receive these gifts from Jesus as people who have already been given the gift of salvation

(b) **The significance of the signs** (Romans 4:11a) *And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.* What is a sign? It is a pointer to something; it is not the thing to which it points as well. For example, just before the turn into St Vincent Street at the traffic lights next to the New Kirk, there is a sign with the name of this church building and a pointer indicating the need to turn right at the traffic lights. The premises of Broughty Ferry Baptist Church are located nearby. The sign is helpful to a person unfamiliar with the geography of Broughty Ferry who wishes to visit us here for a service or attend some other activity during the week, to indicate to them where they should turn to arrive at the correct location. In a similar way circumcision was a public ceremony that drew attention to the pre-existing faith of Abraham. It was a declaration by Jewish families in successive generations that they were accepting the promises made by God to Abraham as not only there for him, but as the inheritance of future generations of Jewish people as well. A male child was, therefore, entering a community of faith, a shared inheritance in Judaism by that ceremony. Our Christian friends who hold to infant baptism will claim that this ceremony has replaced circumcision in the Christian Church, even though it nowhere makes such a claim in the New Testament. In fact Paul expressly rules out this possibility in Colossians 2:11. There the apostle, very carefully, stresses the fact that in Christ it is the work of the Holy Spirit within a person, making them a new creation in Christ when they profess faith in Him, that is the equivalent of the Old Testament ceremony of circumcision. He wrote: *In Him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ.* Such a person who has had this ‘inner’ work carried out will follow that up with the profession of their faith in public with baptism as a believer. Colossians 2:12, following on immediately

after Paul's words previously quoted, states: *having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead.* Almost certainly the apostle has in mind the changes in the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah in Jeremiah 31:31-34: *'The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.<sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke My covenant, though I was a husband to them,' declares the Lord.<sup>33</sup> 'This is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time,' declares the Lord. 'I will put My law in their minds **and write it on their hearts.** I will be their God, and they will be my people.<sup>34</sup> No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the Lord. 'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.'* When a Christian goes through the waters of believers' baptism, this action does not make them a Christian or a higher type of Christian; instead it is a visible sign of an inner work performed by the Holy Spirit in their life over previous weeks, months or possibly years. It is a public testimony of the grace of God in someone's life and is a commendation of the Gospel to any present who have yet to come to Christ. In the same way communion does not save us. The bread remains bread and the wine likewise; there is nothing magical taking place. Yet these elements are a sign of the goodness of God to His Church through His beloved Son. By faith as we partake of bread and wine we are identifying with all that they represent in the finished work of Christ on the cross. They are a reminder that the promises God made to us in Christ are being kept and a visible reminder of the cost of our redemption.

Paul also uses here the term *a seal*. This is less familiar territory for us as seals are so rarely used today. In the ancient world a seal from an Emperor on a document placed the full authority of that ruler behind the contents of the document. It was a guarantee of its authenticity. When I occasionally served as a driver for the Baptist Union of Scotland Aid agency 'Eurosave' we took trucks with a variety of goods to distribute to refugees and other needy people in Croatia. Interestingly after our trucks had been checked at the border the locks were sealed with a seal that could not be broken except by the internal customs officials at an agreed destination in the country. Only once they confirmed the seal was intact were the papers signed and the goods made available for distribution to the people for whom they had been collected. An intact seal carried the authority of the Government. A willing participation in the ceremony of circumcision, says Paul, was a kind of seal pointing to an inner work of God in Abraham's life. Now the most significant seal of God's commitment to our fellowship with Him is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 1:13-14: *And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,<sup>14</sup> who is a deposit **guaranteeing our inheritance** until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.* Yet in the same way, as Paul refers to Abraham with respect to the ceremony of circumcision, a pointer is given to the New Testament ordinances; those who profess faith in Christ are welcomed to be blessed through the reception of believers' baptism and the elements of bread and wine; one an initiatory ordinance performed only once and the latter the ongoing sacrament offered on a regular basis to Christians. I must repeat that just as circumcision did not save Abraham, neither does baptism nor the Lord's Supper save Christians. However, the apostle would suggest to us that they are signs and a seal of the Old and New Covenants respectively that God made with His Covenant peoples. Have you been blessed by the reception of these gifts from God? Do you value and appreciate their significance?

(c) **Abraham the father of us all** (Romans 4:11b-13)

*So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them.<sup>12</sup> And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are*

circumcised but who **also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised**. It was, though, not just Abraham who and David who were saved by faith in response to God's grace in the Old Testament era. Hebrews 11 records a whole host of notable people from that time in history. The list begins with Abel, the son of Adam and Eve; it also includes Enoch and Noah, both ancestors of Abraham, but most significantly does not state that this was true for them alone, but leaves open the possibility, even the probability, that these were examples and illustrations of living by faith in former generations. The list includes many other Old Testament figures, including Isaac, Joseph, Moses, together with the children of Israel in leaving Egypt and on entering the Promised Land. It records the names of Gideon, Barak Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and various unnamed prophets, but also a Gentile woman, *the prostitute Rahab* (Hebrews 1:31). In the time of Jesus on earth it must have included individuals like Anna and Simeon who were part of a small congregation that met regularly in the Jerusalem Temple, a body of people who *were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem* (Luke 2:38). It also included John the Baptist, whom Jesus viewed as the greatest of the prophets, but who had no doubts concerning Jesus, that *He must become greater and I must become less* (John 3:30), because John recognised Jesus as *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29).

In the Gospels there were pointers about the future Gentile seekers after truth who placed their faith in the God of Israel from the Magi, the wise men, who came from Iraq (or possibly Iran), searching for the King of the Jews to worship Him (Matthew 2:1-2); there was a Syro-Phoenician woman who persisted in seeking Jesus' touch for her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus eventually would say to her: *Woman you have great faith! Your request is granted* (Matthew 15:21-28); in Matthew 8 Jesus met with a Roman centurion who put his faith in Jesus and heard our Lord utter these amazing words in Matthew 8:10-11: *When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, 'Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. <sup>11</sup> I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.* Abraham is truly the father of us all, the apostle declares –that includes you and me if we have put our faith and trust in Jesus.

## **2. Romans 4:13-17 Faith and The Law**

Paul's final and third question at the end of Romans 3 was this: *Do we then nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law* (Romans 3:31). Here in Romans 4:13-17 the apostle expands on that shorter answer to his key question.

(a) **The meaning of the promise** (Romans 4:13)<sup>13</sup> *It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.* Notice carefully here that the apostle has progressed in his thought here from personal salvation to the wider implications of the extension of God's kingdom in the world as a result of Abraham's obedience. In Genesis 12:3 God declared to Abraham: *... all peoples on earth will be blessed in you.* This promise from God of necessity could not be restricted to the Jewish people dedicated to keeping the Old Testament law, it had to include Gentiles who were outside the bounds of that law, but who identified with Abraham through their personal faith in God. Abraham is our father in faith as well. This double blessing through Abraham, both to the physical descendants of the patriarch and the wider human population in the Gospel is captured clearly in Genesis 22:17. In context Abraham and Isaac have gone up to Mount Moriah and been willing for Isaac to be the sacrifice –if that is what God had commanded. As a result of their trusting God implicitly with their lives and their futures, the promise of Genesis 12:3 was reaffirmed. <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 [singular- see Galatians 3:16] all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me. The physical descendants of Abraham received the physical inheritance of the land, but together with Gentile ‘descendants’ by faith of Abraham, these Jewish believers will share spiritual blessings far greater than they had ever imagined. This is made even clearer in a footnote to Genesis 22:18, in a more recent printing of the NIV. It gives an alternative translation to the second part of this verse: Or *and all nations on earth will use the name of your offspring in blessings*. How has this come about? Is it through people of other ethnic backgrounds adopting the Jewish law with all its detailed rules and regulations or is it through faith in Christ, the Jewish descendant of Abraham whose Gospel has been taken to the ends of the earth? God keeps His promises. Do you need to hear that today? Do you need to be encouraged with that conviction today? Abraham had no idea of the details of what this meant in future centuries, neither do we in this generation. What we can be certain of is that the God who made this promise will keep it. One step at a time He reveals His will as we go forward by faith. When we want all the details in advance – in effect walking by sight- we betray a lack of trust in the God of the promise. Abraham and Sarah did that sadly by resorting to him taking a second wife, her slave girl Hagar, to produce a child Ishmael (Genesis 16). God’s way took place in God’s time to honour the promise He made.

(b) **The importance of the promise** (Romans 4:14-15)<sup>14</sup> *For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless,<sup>15</sup> because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.* Here once again Paul simply reminds his readers that if the plan of God could have been attained through perfect obedience to the law’s demands then Jesus need not have died on the cross. There is nothing wrong with the law in itself. It fulfils its purpose. In Romans 7:12 Paul will affirm: *So then, the law is holy and the commandment is holy, righteous and good...* It accomplishes its goal –that is to point us to the necessity of trusting in Jesus alone for salvation, because none of us could attain to that standard; by nature the law condemns us as transgressors under God’s wrath. The Gospel by contrast reveals the fulfilment of the law of God by the One who took its punishments in our place on the cross and provides for us a hope and a future through the good news of the Gospel. We cannot go back to an old way of seeking salvation when something far better has come. Could you imagine cyclists opting to go back to the days of the old solid rubber tyres rather than the pneumatic ones cushioned by air, invented by John Dunlop in 1888? Anyone fancy trading in their family car for a horse and cart; or restricting yourself only to the communication devices available a generation or two ago? Why would anyone want to trade in the glorious gospel of grace for a law-based religion as the basis for earning our salvation? Thank God for His promises, especially concerning the Lord Jesus and what He has done for us.

(c) **The significance of the promise** (Romans 4:16-17) (i) **Faith confirms grace** (Romans 4:16a) *Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace...* Faith and grace belong naturally together as do law and works. Laws tell us what we must do and an obligation is placed upon us to fulfil its demands. If the person sat next to you asked you to do a job in their house and the cost of the service was £40; upon the completion of the task you could not say I don’t owe you anything, but I want to give you a gift of £40. This would be nonsense! An agreement had earlier been reached to pay that sum upon completion of a task; therefore, there was an obligation to honour that commitment. Grace, by contrast might be a gift to someone in financial difficulties without any expectations of a favour being returned. God has granted us salvation as a free gift; it is a pointer to us about the attitude we will have regarding our service for the Lord. We willingly serve as a gift of grace to our church family or our community, because that is a reflection of how Jesus came *not to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many* (Mark 10:45).

(ii) Faith results in salvation (Romans 4:16b) *and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham.* If salvation depended on our good works outweighing our bad then it could never be certain – always conditional. Yet we don't love our children conditionally, so why should our heavenly Father not love us similarly with grace and with greater consistency due to His perfection of character! The best quality relationships are based on the security that is grounded in unconditional love. Our view of the Gospel, therefore, has social as well as personal implications. It is as applicable Monday to Saturday in the workplace or wherever we are based, as on a Sunday in church with fellow-Christians. It, therefore, refuses to allow us to compartmentalise our lives into a Christian 'bit' and the rest; the Gospel is holistic and intended to be transformative for the whole of society, not just to provide a means to a relationship with God and eternal life beyond the grave.

(iii) Faith opens the door to a Gospel for all nations (Romans 4:16c-17) *He is the father of us all.* <sup>17</sup> *As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations.'* *He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.* In a world where many millions live without hope –we can offer to them Jesus, the hope of the nations; no-one is ineligible to receive what He wants to provide for us. The only obstacle to the gift of grace is a person's unwillingness to accept what God has provided for them. Although as Jesus declared: *the Good Shepherd laid down His life for His sheep* (John 10:11); and as Paul reminded us that *Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her* (Ephesians 5:25), His sacrifice was of infinite worth so that our responsibility is to proclaim it to all people of whatever ethnic background, wherever they live in the world, to turn from self and sin and to the only Saviour from sin. It begins with us. Have you put your faith and trust in Him? This is the first step we need to take. Next, are you praying to the Lord that He may direct you to be in whatever way a means of pointing others to Jesus? I trust so, for Jesus' sake, Amen.