

Romans 4:13-25

Abraham's Faith Apart from Law

In Romans 4:9-12, Paul uses Abraham to prove that physical circumcision has nothing to do with making man right with God. In Romans 4:13-25, he again refers to Abraham, this time to illustrate that righteousness, a right standing with God, is unattainable through the works of the Law.

According to Romans 4:13, God promised Abraham “...that he would be heir of the world...”:

For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. (Romans 4:13)

God made this promise in Genesis 17:4-6 and again in Genesis 22:17.

“As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. “No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations. “And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. (Genesis 17:4-6)

...indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. (Genesis 22:17)

Shortly, we will study the details of this promise. But for now, note that it was made prior to the issuing of the Law: The promise given in the book of Genesis, the Law issued later in the book of Exodus.

Do you see Paul's point? Many Jews had believed the lie that the Law was their ticket to heaven. Paul exposes the error in their thinking, for God's “promise” to Abraham came some “four hundred and thirty years” before the Law:

What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. (Galatians 3:17).

Thus, the apostle writes:

“...if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise [given to Abraham] is nullified” (Romans 4:14).

Paul again proves that the Law cannot save.

The Law cannot save because “...the Law brings about wrath...” (Romans 4:15):

for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation. (Romans 4:15)

The Law was given to shut our mouths (Romans 3:19) and show us our need for a Savior (Galatians 3:24). No one will ever be saved by keeping the Law (Romans 3:20), for its purpose is to reveal man's need for Christ. Anyone who declines to acknowledge this need and refuses to exercise repentance and faith while depraved will be condemned at the "great white throne" judgment of Revelation 20:11-15. No doubt, "...the Law brings about wrath..." (Romans 4:15).

The latter part of Romans 4:15 is extremely interesting: "...but where there is no law, neither is there violation." Is Paul teaching that sin was not judged prior to the Law (the Law given to Moses)? No way! The Law was given in Exodus 20, yet sin was consistently judged between Genesis 1:1 and Exodus 20. This judgment resulted because man lived under moral law prior to the issuing of the Mosaic Law. Paul is saying that the Law was given to increase the lost man's awareness that he is in violation of God's standard for holiness. Paul emphasizes this point in Galatians 3:24, where he states that "the Law" was given as a "tutor to lead us to Christ." The Law's main purpose is to show the lost (depraved) that they need a Savior and are living a life of "violation" (Romans 4:15). These truths confirm why Paul wrote that the Law is only "for the ungodly and sinners":

But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching, (1Timothy 1:8-10)

These truths also verify why Paul taught that the New Testament believer is "not under law, but under grace":

For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace. (Romans 6:14)

Abraham's Faith in the "Seed" (Christ)

The story doesn't end here, for Paul writes:

For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, (as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the sight of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. (Romans 4:16-17)

God saves the lost (depraved), once they exercise “*faith*” (and repentance), in order that salvation might be presented to man on the basis of His “*grace*” (Romans 4:16). By doing so, He offers salvation to everyone—not just the recipients of the Law (the Jews). In fact, God makes all New Testament believers spiritual descendants of Abraham regardless of their nationality (Romans 4:16-17).

“*Christ*” is Abraham’s “*seed*” (Galatians 3:16):

Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but rather to one, “And to your seed,” that is, Christ. (Galatians 3:16)

When a person during the church age exercises faith in Christ (while depraved), he is placed “*in Christ*” and made “*new*” (2 Corinthians 5:17):

Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (2Corinthians 5:17)

Once “*in Christ*,” that individual, regardless of nationality, is Abraham’s spiritual descendant (Galatians 3:7 and 29). The book of Galatians was written to Gentiles:

Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. (Galatians 3:7)

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:29)

Abraham is the father of many nations because all believers from Acts 2 (the beginning of the church age) through the Rapture become a member of the body of Christ, the church, through being placed in Christ (Abraham’s descendant) the moment they exercise repentance and faith while depraved. We will discuss how the New Testament believer is placed in Christ later in the commentary.

Abraham understood that through his lineage the “*seed*” of Genesis 3:15 would be born. The degree to which he understood this truth is debatable, but Paul’s words in Galatians 3:6-9 verify that Abraham possessed at least some knowledge of the gospel prior to Jesus’ birth:

Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “ALL THE NATIONS SHALL BE BLESSED IN YOU.” So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. (Galatians 3:6-9)

“*The gospel*” was “*preached*” to Abraham by God when He stated: “*All the nations shall be blessed in you.*” These words are taken from Genesis 12:3:

...*And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" (Genesis 12:3)

Following Genesis 12:3 (the passage confirming that Abraham heard "*the gospel*"), several significant events transpired. First, he moved from Haran to Canaan (Genesis 12:4-5). After building altars to the Lord in Shechem and Bethel (Genesis 12:6-8), he traveled toward the Negev (Genesis 12:9). As a result of a famine, he moved to Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20)—afterwards returning to the Negev in Canaan with Sarah and Lot (his nephew), along with an abundance of livestock, silver, and gold (Genesis 13:1-2). After proceeding to Bethel, and to the altar he had previously constructed (Genesis 13:3-4), Abraham and Lot eventually separated due to strife between their herdsmen (Genesis 13:5-8). Abraham told Lot to choose the land best suited for his needs. Lot chose the valley of the Jordan (an extremely fertile land), which included Sodom (Genesis 13:9-13). Abraham, meanwhile, elected to live in Canaan (Genesis 13:12).

Upon Lot's departure, God promised Abraham that he would eventually possess all the land (which included Lot's portion—"the valley of the Jordan") as well as have an abundance of descendants (Genesis 13:14-17). Subsequently, Abraham moved to Hebron and "*built an altar to the Lord*" (Genesis 13:18). After saving Lot from a band of evil kings (Genesis 14:1-16), Abraham was blessed by Melchizedek, who was "*king of Salem*" and "*priest of God Most High*" (Genesis 14:17-20). Interestingly, after Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils of battle to Melchizedek (Genesis 14:20), the king of Sodom insisted that Abraham take the remainder (Genesis 14:21). Abraham declined because he had "*sworn to the Lord God Most High*" that he would take nothing from the king. In fact, Abraham responded in this manner to prevent the king from claiming that he had made him rich (Genesis 14:22-23). Thus, Abraham desired that the blessings upon his life be explained in terms of God alone—never man. As a result, Abraham took only what his men had eaten while engaged in battle. He did suggest, however, that Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre (his assistants) take their share of the spoils (Genesis 14:24). How they reacted is not stated in the text.

At this juncture in Abraham's life an amazing event transpired. "*The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision*" in Genesis 15:1 and communicated that: (1) He was his "*shield*" (2) Abraham's "*reward*" would "*be very great.*" In other words, God richly honored Abraham's commitment to having his life explained in terms of Him alone. After God's promise to supply Abraham an abundance of descendants (Genesis 15:4-5), we arrive at that famous verse from Genesis 15:

Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.
(Genesis 15:6)

This statement is intriguing considering that the gospel had been preached to Abraham earlier in Genesis 12:3 (reference Galatians 3:6-9). Thus, Abraham did not believe the gospel initially offered in Genesis 12:3 to the degree that he later believed it in Genesis 15:6! How encouraging to be reminded that as we grow "*from faith to faith*" (Romans 1:17) in our understanding of God's righteousness displayed through the gospel we are increasingly willing to believe His promises! (Remember for future reference that Abraham's offspring would have been exposed to his knowledge of the subject.)

Do you realize that “...God...gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist” (Romans 4:17)? According to Romans 4:18-21, God met Abraham’s need through responding in this miraculous manner. After all, God spoke the world into existence, “...so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” (Hebrews 11:3). But someone might ask, “Does God function in the same fashion in the present?” Absolutely, for many believers today walk in the realm of the supernatural through yielding to Christ’s life within (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:4). In such cases, God is perceived as the God in charge, the God capable of performing the impossible regardless of the circumstance—and God miraculously provides. God accomplishes these feats by merely speaking a word. Truly, nothing is more exhilarating than the life of faith.

Much of what we will experience as a believer is described in the first phrase of Romans 4:18:

In hope against hope he believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, “SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE.” (Romans 4:18)

Abraham knew how to “*hope against hope*,” and so must we. To “*hope against hope*” means to “*hope*” when no logical reason exists to remain hopeful. Only through perceiving God as capable of speaking into existence that which we lack can we continue to “*hope*.” Abraham continued to “*hope*” because of God’s promise. As a result, God did the “impossible,” giving him a son in the midst of adverse circumstances (Romans 4:19-20). He will allow the “impossible” to occur in our lives as well if we will but rest in His promises. Where are His promises found? They are found in His letter to man! Need I say more!

The last extremely powerful phrase of Romans 4:20 states that Abraham “...grew strong in faith, giving glory to God.” Hence, Abraham’s faith was enlarged as a result of praise, for praise is the fuel for faith. We can’t read Psalms 145-150, Psalms of praise, without witnessing the value of worship. Praise energizes faith by restoring the worshippers’ perception of Who God is—the One and Only Sovereign of the universe. Once God is perceived in this light, His promises are easily appropriated. Praise isn’t always easy, for Hebrews 13:15 states that we are to “...continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God....” Yes, praise can be “*a sacrifice*,” but praise always empowers faith to the glory of God.

In Romans 4:22, Paul again emphasizes that God “reckoned” (counted) Abraham as righteous due to Abraham’s faith. Thus, Abraham was “reckoned” (counted) as righteous before he was made righteous through Jesus’ death in 30 AD. According to Romans 4:23-24, every person during the church age who exercises faith in Christ receives this same righteousness (is made righteous). No Jew could say, therefore, that anything but faith (coupled with repentance) could result in God making man righteous. Paul has proven his point and proven it well. (Have you noticed the degree to which Paul repeats himself? Every good teacher realizes the importance of hammering home his point.)

The last verse in this chapter speaks of the death and resurrection of Christ along with the purpose of each:

He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification. (Romans 4:25)

Jesus died for “*our transgressions.*” Consequently, the penalty associated with our past, present, and future sins has been eternally pardoned—a subject covered in greater depth later. Isn’t it wonderful to know that everything needed for “*our justification,*” “*justification*” being God’s gift to those who repent and believe while depraved, was also provided through the cross? Had this not been the case, Jesus would have remained in the grave—“*He...was raised because of our justification.*” In other words, had the cross been an insufficient means through which God could “*justify the ungodly*” (Romans 4:5), Christ’s resurrection would have never occurred.

Let’s take this truth and dig deeper into the issue of justification. Should the following input bring confusion, don’t be concerned. This subject will be covered in great depth in our study of Romans 5-8.

Indeed, forgiveness of sin was accomplished through Jesus’ blood:

*...To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood,
(Revelation 1:5)*

For God to justify us, however, the Adamic nature (old man, old self, sinful nature, dead spirit—all synonymous) that we inherited from Adam had to be eradicated because this “*nature*” made us “*children of wrath*”:

Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. (Ephesians 2:3 emphasis added)

Therefore, our acts of sin did not condemn us before God. Our nature condemned us—who we were in our person. Consequently, for God to justify our person, our person had to change. In fact, it had to be made new:

Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. (2Corinthians 5:17)

How were we made “*new*”? The Adamic nature was eradicated through the avenue of Jesus’ body:

Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ,... (Romans 7:4 emphasis added)

knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him,... (Romans 6:6)

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith

in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me.
(Galatians 2:20)

Only after the Adamic nature was eliminated was the new man (new self, new creation—all synonymous) born. Thus, when we exercised personal repentance and faith while depraved, God killed who we used to be and made us new. Hence, should any portion of the Adamic nature remain alive in us, we would remain unjustified. We cannot be the Adamic nature (old man) plus new man, with the Adamic nature (old man) wounded. We are the “new man” only! Otherwise, the cross was an insufficient work—a subject addressed in much depth in Romans 5:1.

Romans 4:25 will become more meaningful as we progress through Romans 5-8. In fact, as we transition into Romans 5 and examine justification in greater depth, be prepared to enjoy some of the most exciting Scripture in the entire Word of God.

Unfortunately, some theologians use the phrase, “*He who was delivered up because of our transgressions*” (Romans 4:25), in an attempt to validate the “L” of the TULIP, Limited Atonement—that Jesus died for believers only. We must be careful to interpret terms such as “*all, they, us, we, our, my, and world*” in their proper context. Just because this passage states that Jesus “*was delivered up because of our transgressions*” does not rectify all the verses that plainly teach that Jesus died for believers and unbelievers alike—John 3:14-15, John 3:16, John 7:37, Romans 5:6, Romans 5:18-19, 2Corinthians 5:14-15, 2Corinthians 5:19, 1Timothy 2:3-4, 1Timothy 2:6, 1Timothy 4:10, Hebrews 2:9, 2Peter 2:1, 1John 2:2, 1John 4:14, and many more. Again, context is critical, especially when coupled with the full counsel of God’s Word. Truly, what an amazing sixty-six books the Creator penned for our enjoyment!