

# Abraham Father of All

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Date: 16 November 2014

Preacher: Chris Trousdale

[ 0 : 00 ] Take out your Bibles, if you would, and open up to Romans chapter 4.

We're going to be reading in Romans chapter 4, verses 9 through 12 this morning. It's not a long passage. Romans chapter 4, verses 9 through 12. If you're using one of the Bibles that we scatter in the chairs around you, the hardback black Bibles, it's on page 941, so you're going to have to search for it.

But Romans chapter 4, verses 9 through 12. And if you're there, I'd like you to stand with me in honor of God's Word as we read together. The Apostle Paul writes, Is this blessing then only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised?

We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.

He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith, while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well.

[ 1 : 21 ] And to make him the father of the circumcised, who are not merely circumcised, but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Father, help us to understand these words. Help us to see in them not obscure language, but beautiful, hope-giving, life-giving words.

I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. I remember several years ago, I listened to an audio recording of a debate that I had downloaded offline.

I downloaded it, and it was a debate on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, which is what we have been talking about now for a number of weeks as we go through the book of Romans. It was a debate between an evangelical and a Roman Catholic.

And as the two were debating, really things were kind of heating up and getting, you know, they had stated their positions, they had gotten, they were doing the cross-examination period where they get to go back and forth and ask one another questions.

[ 2 : 25 ] And the evangelical, his name is James White, he asked a very simple question. He read from the middle of Romans chapter 4, he read in verses 7 and 6, which we did last week, Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin. And he asked one question that was a devastating question in the middle of that debate. He simply said, Who is the blessed man of Romans chapter 4?

Tell me who that man is, and we will settle this issue once and for all. To which the Roman Catholic debater had no real response. He stammered and stuttered and directed the conversation in another area.

Because that question, Who receives God's blessing? Who are those that are the recipients of this great blessing that the Apostle Paul has been talking about?

How we answer that question determines everything for us. It determines our eternal destiny. It determines the way that we live our lives. It determines the things that we value in this life.

[ 3 : 29 ] And so I want to begin this morning looking at these four verses and ask a very simple question that is drawn from verse 9. Take a look at verse 9 once again, where Paul begins by saying, Is this blessing then only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised?

I want to ask the question to start with, What blessing is the Apostle Paul talking about in verse 9? Is this blessing, to whom does it belong is what he is asking.

Who gets to receive this blessing? And before we can move on to his answer to that question, we have to answer the question, Precisely what blessing are you talking about, Paul?

And we need to get a firm, thorough understanding of that. Because even though we have been walking through this book now for several months, and even though we have been sitting on this one issue for a while, we have to be very, very clear in our minds as to what the Apostle Paul was talking about when he begins to talk about the blessing.

And it is clear, it is what we have been talking about. The blessing is the blessing of justification. Take a look up at some of the verses we just looked at. Verse 6, for instance. Paul says that David speaks of the blessing.

[ 4 : 40 ] There it is. David speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works. And then blessed is the man whose lawless deeds are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man against whom the Lord does not count his sin. So that the blessing of which Paul speaks here has two sides to it. It is a two-fold blessing, but you cannot have one part of the blessing without the other.

So that on the one hand, the blessing of which Paul is speaking here is the counting of a foreign righteousness, a righteousness that you have not performed and that does not belong to you. It is a counting of someone else's obedience and righteousness to be yours in your place. That is exactly what he means in verse 1 when he talks about God counting righteousness to someone apart from works.

In other words, you have not done the necessary works for you to earn the label righteous. But someone else has. And God counts that someone else's righteousness.

[ 5 : 41 ] He counts their obedience to be yours by faith. It is the righteousness of Jesus himself, his life of perfect obedience all the way up and to the point of death that God counts to be ours when we believe.

So there is a positive counting. Theologians use the word imputing. Some of the older translations use that word. It is a positive counting, reckoning or imputing of someone else's, namely Christ's righteousness, to us and to our account.

That is one side of the coin when we talk about the doctrine of justification. But the other side of the coin is exactly what Paul talks about when he quotes David in Psalm 32. Because not only is Christ's righteousness counted as ours, but our unrighteousness, our failure to be obedient, our disobedience, our sin itself is no longer counted against us.

So there is a counting for us and a not counting against us. Christ's righteousness is counted for us and our sins are no longer counted against us. Against us.

And when we put those two things together, positive righteousness applied to our account and our unrighteousness removed from our account, when we put those two things together, Paul calls that justification and he tells us over and over and over throughout this letter that that happens by faith alone.

[ 7 : 07 ] But now this morning, in our passage, Paul's going to return to an issue that we saw him deal with in quite a bit of detail at the end of chapter 2. And that's the issue of how does circumcision relate to the doctrine of justification by faith alone?

What role does it play? To which we, as 21st century Americans, probably think, most of you probably thought as we were reading through that passage, certainly a couple of months ago as we were in chapter 2, we talked about this, the issue of what does that have to do with anything else that he's talking about here?

Why would you bring up that issue? Isn't that just sort of like a medical issue that's dealt with at the hospital when baby boys are born? Why does that figure so prominently?

In fact, Paul uses words for circumcised and uncircumcised 24 times in the first four chapters of this book. So we're sort of forced to ask, why is that such a big deal?

Why does that matter so much to you, Paul? And I think if you were to ask the Apostle Paul that question, he would probably say, it doesn't matter to me. I don't care about circumcision or uncircumcision.

[ 8 : 22 ] It's not a big deal to me. The problem was that it was a big deal to Paul's opponents. It was a big deal to the Jewish religious leaders of Paul's day. It had been a big deal in Paul's life up until the time that he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus.

So that this issue loomed large in the minds of the Jewish people. It still does for many of them today. And if you tell them it doesn't matter anymore, it doesn't count anymore, you have now

created a major rift between those who follow Christ and those who adhere only to what we call the Old Testament.

In fact, I want to share with you a couple of quotes here regarding circumcisions that come from the ancient world, from Jewish writers in the ancient world. One comes from a book, some of you have heard of it, called the Book of Jubilees.

It was written maybe a hundred years before Christ was born, roughly. Listen to what this particular Jewish writing says. It says, Everyone that is born, the flesh of whose foreskin is not circumcised on the eighth day, belongs not to the children of the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham, but to the children of destruction.

Nor is there, moreover, any sign on him that he is the Lord's. In other words, standard Jewish interpretation, standard Jewish understanding of circumcision was that if you are a male and you have not received this sign, you do not belong to God's covenant people.

[ 9 : 47 ] You cannot be counted and reckoned as one of Abraham's children. Even if you are from the Jewish people, if this right does not take place for you, you are not counted as one of the Jewish people.

Writing that comes a few centuries later, though, that reflects the same sort of thinking in a commentary on the book of Exodus. Listen to what one rabbi says. He says that no Israelite who is circumcised will go down to Gehenna, which is a word for hell.

No Israelite who is circumcised, this rabbi says, will go down into hell. And then he begins to address the issue, well, what about very, very wicked Israelites?

I mean, what if you just have someone who was circumcised, who is a Jew, and yet they are just evil and wicked? Maybe they are a mass murderer. What then? Are they protected because of that? Listen to this.

You would think that they might say, well, no, in that case, circumcision doesn't count. No. Circumcision is far too important in their thinking to just say, well, it doesn't count there. Listen to what they say here.

[ 10 : 50 ] It's strange. They say that in such a case, God sends an angel who stretches their foreskin and then they descend down into Gehenna, into hell.

I mean, that's kind of graphic language. That's weird, okay? I have to just tell you, I came across that quote this week and I just thought, what in the world? That is just strange.

That is just bizarre. That is foreign to our way of thinking. But it's foreign to our way of thinking because whether you realize it or not, if you've been in a gospel preaching church for any time at all, your thinking about these kinds of issues is shaped and formed and fashioned by the Apostle Paul's thinking on this issue.

And so we're going to take a few minutes this morning to try to understand what Paul says about this particular issue and then why he says it. I don't just want us to have some sort of understanding of a disagreement that happened between Paul and some other Jews back in the first century.

I want us at the end of this morning to have some sort of helpful thinking about why. I get why Paul would talk about this. Why does it matter to us today some 2,000 years later?

[ 11 : 59 ] What's the big deal? Can we not just dismiss this stuff and move on? What's the big deal? So first let's take a look and see exactly what the Apostle Paul has to say on this particular issue. Notice what he says at the second half of verse 9.

He says, We say, that is we Christians and those who believe in the book of Genesis, we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

Now that should sound familiar because he said essentially the same thing in last week's passage. Verse 3, What does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God and was counted to him as righteousness.

That's a quotation from Genesis chapter 15 verse 6. And it matters where that quotation is found. It matters that it's in Genesis chapter 15 and not in Genesis chapter 18 or 20 or 50.

It matters a big deal that it's in Genesis chapter 15. Go on and see why. Notice. Verse 10, How then was it counted to him?

[ 13 : 01 ] How was faith counted to Abraham for righteousness? Was it before or was it after he had been circumcised?

It was not after but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

It matters that God credits faith to Abraham as righteousness in Genesis chapter 15 because in Genesis chapter 15 Abraham's just like everybody else. He's uncircumcised. He hasn't received that commandment yet. In fact, if you will turn all the way back to the book of Genesis, I want you to see this because it's important for us to not only understand Paul's argument but it's important for us to see where he's getting these things from.

So turn back to Genesis chapter 15 where you can see the initial counting of Abraham's faith as righteousness. Chapter 15 verse 1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.

[ 14 : 07 ] Fear not, Abram, I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great. But Abram said, O Lord God, what will you give me? For I continue childless in the air of my house as Eliezer of Damascus.

Now pause right there for just a moment. In Genesis chapter 12, God called Abraham to leave his family, to leave the place where he lived and to go to what we now know as the land of Israel or the land of promise.

He said, Go to that land and I will make you the father of a multitude of nations in that land. If Abram is going to be a father of a multitude of nations, he needs to at least have a child.

Right? That just makes sense. Now here Abraham is several years removed from that particular promise and he says to God, God, what are you going to give me?

A slave in my household is going to be my heir. The promise you gave me then cannot be fulfilled unless I have a child. To which God responds. Verse 4, Behold, the word of the Lord came to him.

[ 15 : 10 ] This man shall not be your heir. Your very own son shall be your heir. And he brought him outside and said, Look toward the heaven and number the stars if you are able to number them.

Then he said, So shall your offspring be. Now I want you, if you underline in your Bible, I want you to underline the word offspring or seed in your Bible.

Because that's what sets off the promise of Genesis 15 from the promise of Genesis chapter 12.

You have to wonder, if God called Abraham in Genesis chapter 12, Abraham obeyed that call, and then there are several years between chapters 12 and 15, why is it that Abraham's faith is not counted as righteousness until Genesis chapter 15?

What if Abraham obeyed the command, went to the land of promise, tripped and fell, and hit his head on a rock and died? Righteousness hasn't been counted as his yet, right?

He's still a sinner in God's sight. And you have to wonder, why does God wait until Genesis chapter 15 to count Abraham's faith as righteousness?

[ 16 : 20 ] Why not chapter 12 when Abraham obeys a simple command? Why can't that be counted as a faith that counts for righteousness? Why not? Because of the nature of the promise.

The promise becomes much more specific in Genesis chapter 15, and the key word in this promise is the word offspring or seed. Now, if you were to do a study of the book of Genesis, and you were just to look at every time the word seed or offspring is mentioned throughout the book of Genesis, you would suddenly realize that that particular term carries great weight and significance in the book of Genesis.

And not only in Genesis, but really throughout the entire Old Testament. Because there's a promise made in Genesis chapter 3 after Adam and Eve have sinned and fallen in the garden.

And according to that promise, there will be a seed, the seed of the woman, who will defeat the serpent, who will defeat Satan, who will reverse the effects of the curse.

All of the effects of sin having entered into the world will be reversed by this offspring, by this seed. And so now, Abraham is promised a seed.

[ 17 : 31 ] Because you see, the faith of Abraham in Genesis chapter 15 is not a vague, general faith which causes him to respond to a voice that he hears in obedience.

Most of you, if God came to you and He appeared to you in some sort of way and said, go and do this, you would probably do it. Most people would.

Most people would be so stricken with terror with having heard from God in such a direct way that we would respond in obedience. But we would not necessarily have saving or justifying faith at that point.

But now Abraham receives a specific promise concerning, ultimately, a Redeemer. A seed. And he believes that promise.

And because he believes that promise and because he believes in the promise of a coming seed, a coming offspring, God counts Abraham's faith as righteousness.

[18:33] And if you're not sure about that, if you think that seems like it may be stretching in a bit, then I want you to hold your place in Genesis and turn all the way to the New Testament to the book of Galatians really quickly. If you're using one of those Bibles that we leave here that's page 973, you can get there really quickly.

Galatians chapter 3. Paul says a lot of things about Abraham. He talks a lot about Abraham's children in Galatians chapter 3. He says, for instance, in chapter 3 verse 7, it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham, he says in verse 9, so that those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

He has a lot to say about Abraham's true descendants, about Abraham's true children. So you might think that if Paul's going to go back to the promise of an offspring of Abraham, he would immediately apply that to those of faith.

But he does not do that. He does something much different. Look in verse 16. Now, the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring.

There it is. There's the key word from Genesis 15, 5. It does not say and to offsprings, referring to many, but referring to one, and to your offspring who is Christ.

[19:50] So the Apostle Paul hears the word seed in Genesis and his mind immediately goes to Christ, the true seed, the one promised all the way back in Genesis chapter 3, the one promised to Noah, the one promised to Abraham, the one later on promised to David later in the Old Testament.

This one seed, this fulfillment of all the promises given to Abraham would come into the world and because Abraham believed in that kind of a promise, granted, he didn't have all the details about the seed that we have, but he believed that promise and that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

So in the Apostle Paul's mind, the fact that this promise is given before circumcision, the fact that Abraham believed it was counted righteousness before circumcision was given, elevates this promise and elevates the nature of Abraham's faith above the issue of circumcision.

Circumcision comes into play in Genesis two chapters later. So turn back to Genesis again and then we'll get back to Romans and we'll stop flip-flopping around in our Bibles, alright?

Back to Genesis again. This time, two chapters over. Again, several more years pass between the giving of the promise and the fulfillment of the promise. In chapter 17, God makes a covenant with Abraham.

[21:16] And in verse 9, it says that God said to Abraham, As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.

This is my covenant which you shall keep between me and you and your offspring after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins.

It shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. So the order of events goes something like this. Abraham is called, in Genesis chapter 12, to go to a foreign land and he obeys the call.

Abraham, in chapter 15, is given the promise concerning a coming offspring or seed. And he believes that promise and because he believes it, his faith is counted for righteousness.

Then, years later, in Genesis chapter 15, 17, God commands Abraham to be circumcised as well as all of his male offspring and that right, that religious ritual, God says, will serve as a sign between me and you that I have made a covenant with you.

[22:22] Circumcision was intended to be a physical marker and sign with Abraham and Abraham's descendants because God had counted Abraham's faith for righteousness.

Nowhere are we told in Genesis that obedience to that command or any other command is what causes you to be reckoned as righteous in God's sight.

It is faith and faith alone in Genesis 15 before Abraham does anything else that is counted as righteousness. And Paul keys off on that order of events in Genesis to show us and to answer the questions of his critics the justification really is by faith alone and not by any works, not even by that most central work in Jewish life that is the right of circumcision.

Notice the way that Paul talks about it. Verse 11 back in Romans 4. Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal. So circumcision is thought of in two ways by Paul.

As a sign and as a seal. In other words, it was intended under the Old Covenant simply to mark people out. Especially for Abraham to mark out Abraham.

[ 23 : 43 ] A seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. I suppose that God could have combined these events together.

God could have given Abraham the promise of an offspring and commanded him to be circumcised and then Abraham's response to all of that could have been faith and circumcision and God counting that faith as righteousness.

I suppose that God could have done things that way. But in his providence God did not do things that way and he separated these events by several years so that later on the Apostle Paul would be able to untangle the knot of confusion that the Jewish people had gotten themselves in over this entire issue.

And he is able just simply by looking back at the book of Genesis to say, look, Abraham was justified Abraham was counted to be righteous by God long before he even received the command about circumcision so that now Abraham could be the father of all those who are uncircumcised. Now those who do not follow Jewish laws and Jewish customs, those who do not submit to the litany of laws in the Mosaic law can be counted as righteous by God in the same way that Abraham was.

[ 25 : 05 ] By faith alone apart from works of the law even apart from circumcision so that now all those who trust in the promise of the seed all those who trust in the seed in the Messiah in Christ and his work upon the cross on their behalf all those who trust in that now like Abraham are counted as righteous and they do not have to submit to rules and regulations like circumcision and dietary laws and temple rituals or even the moral commandments of the law even our obedience to the moral law things like do not kill do not steal do not commit adultery from the Ten Commandments even our obedience to those things is not required for justification obedience to those things will flow out of the one who is justified but they are not required for justification that is exactly why Martin Luther when defending this doctrine said we are at the same time justified and sinner in other words at the moment of your conversion at the moment that you put your faith in Christ you are then considered righteous by God though you are just as sinful as you were 30 seconds before you trusted in Christ you are at the same time justified declared righteous and yet still a sinner having done nothing before God to earn a right standing but given it as a gift through faith we are at the same time justified and sinner and that reveals to us a very very important aspect of the doctrine of justification if Paul is so keen now I want you to hear me very clearly because I think this has some important application to us in how we think about the gospel and in how we think about conversion alright if Paul is so keen to pinpoint the moment in time in which

Abraham was justified before he received the commandment to be circumcised Paul is so intent on pinpointing that moment that means that justification is in fact something that happens in a moment one time for you justification is not something that happens over and over throughout your life justification is not a prolonged process by which righteousness is poured into us justification is something that happens in a moment when we trust at that moment righteousness is counted to be ours it doesn't happen over a long period of time nor does it happen repeatedly because there are those who would seek to redefine what justification means contrary to what Paul teaches us there are those who would seek to say to us that justification is not being declared righteous by God justification is God actually working righteousness into your life which would be a process and I think

Paul would say no Abraham was justified when he believed not when he believed and then when he obeyed the command to be circumcised and then when he obeyed this and when he obeyed that no justification is an event that happens in a moment because it does not involve any of your own righteousness it involves what theologians call an alien righteousness a foreign righteousness that is not yours but is counted to be yours so that we need to be very clear when we proclaim the gospel to people although we say often times that it is very difficult to pinpoint the moment of someone's conversion and that is true that is particularly true when you talk about kids who are raised in the church and they have known the gospel from the time that they could speak really they have been taught the gospel very early on it is often times very difficult to pinpoint the moment when they had real genuine faith in

Christ that is true it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint a moment but we need to be clear when we share the gospel with people that though we may looking back have difficulty pinpointing the say the day the minute the hour we need to be clear though when we preach the gospel when we share the gospel to people that there must be an event there must be a point in time when you finally put

your faith and trust in Jesus there must be because if we hold out the hope that they will just sort of ease their way into faith then we have not called them to a life transforming repentance and faith by which God justifies us it happens in a moment it happens the moment we trust in Christ not over a period of time not repeatedly throughout our lives but in a moment and that has a massive impact on the way that we think about evangelism we are we are not trying to get people to just sort of join our team we are not we are not out there sharing the gospel sharing our faith getting into people's lives so that we can slowly over time get their lives to look more like our own lives or get their lives to look more like a

Christian lifestyle! That's not our aim that's not our goal our not no matter what lifestyle changes they might make no matter what efforts they might they might direct towards living a Christian lifestyle they will never have the hope of eternity they will never enter into God's kingdom they will never be proclaimed to be righteous in his sight if they do not simply trust in Christ and what he has done on their behalf so understanding this understanding that Paul for a reason wants to pinpoint the moment of justification because it happens in a moment and when it happens determines what's necessary for it to happen it happens only when we believe and so

[ 31 : 54 ] Paul says to his to his Jewish kinsmen to those who oppose his teaching he says to them look to the scriptures consider when Abraham was declared!

righteous by God and understand that Abraham serves as a pattern for all those who will be declared righteous by God and now because Abraham was justified by faith alone Abraham can now be the spiritual father of even the uncircumcised who trust in Christ because they are just like Abraham was so what about the circumcised Paul what about the religious people what about the people who were brought up with all the customs and all the traditions does the fact that they participated in those things prior to hearing the gospel prior to trusting in Christ does that make it impossible for them now to enter in absolutely not notice what else he has to say here verse 12 this was also to make him the father of the circumcised the father of those who follow the rituals the father of those who are obedient to the law throughout their lives the religious people he's also the father of those but not those who merely externally take on the right of circumcision he says not merely circumcised but those who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised so when you preach the gospel to a lost person who has no connection with the church or Christianity or religious life you say to them trust in the promises about Christ alone and you will be declared righteous by him you will be rescued from your sin and you will receive eternal life and when you preach the gospel to religious people who sit in church week after week you say to him trust in Christ alone and what he has done for you for your salvation and in the moment that you trust in him you will be declared righteous and your sins will be washed away the gospel message does not change regardless of the background of the people to whom you preach the gospel you may have to untie different knots for them Paul has to untie the knot that these people have gotten themselves in over the issue of circumcision and so he does that other people may have issues with certain Christian morality that they just find unacceptable and you have to teach!

them and explain to them why those areas are found in the scriptures and what they mean you have to deal with different objections to the gospel from different people but the gospel message will be the same no matter who you proclaim it to it will be the same and that means that the gospel by which you can be saved is the same for you as anybody else if you!

right now put your confidence in such a way as to bring them up in a Christian household if you put your confidence in anything that you are doing or have done or will do your confidence is misplaced and you must trust in Jesus alone for your salvation Martin Luther also said regarding the doctrine of justification by faith alone he said that it is the doctrine by which the church either stands or falls that is the significance of this particular area of theology it is not just words it is not semantics it is not just making sure we say the right things and sort of cross all of our theological T's and dot all the theological I's it is not about that it is not about saying things in the right way it is about getting the gospel right because without this teaching the gospel this particular teaching is the head and cornerstone it alone begets nourishes builds and defends the church of

[ 36 : 00 ] God and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour or as the apostle Paul said if anyone preaches to you any other gospel than the one which you have received let them be anathema cursed these are important issues because the gospel is important these are important issues because whether you think the way that the bible thinks about this or not determines your

eternal destiny and whether the people around you think or don't think the way that the bible thinks about this determines their eternal destiny this is indeed the doctrine by which the church stands or falls but more importantly it is the truth by which you are!  
or if you reject it by which you are condemned let's pray to