

## **Romans 4:1-22**

### **Introduction**

Paul's argument to this point has been that there is no privileged status for the Jew based on their election and the possession of Torah or the covenant of circumcision that keeps them from being helplessly under the power of sin any more than the Gentile without Torah. What God has done through Jesus is a demonstration of His covenant faithfulness to Abraham, which is a demonstration of His covenant faithfulness toward the whole of creation (both Jew and Greek) because the covenant with Abraham, as attested by the law and prophets, was to equally bless all nations.

Paul's dialogue continues with the Jewish Teacher, as the teacher is portrayed as continuing his challenge of Paul. To prove his point, Paul turns to the Father of Israel and the one to whom the covenant was made. Both the Jewish Teacher and Paul believed Abraham was the perfect "Poster Person" who proved of their positions. Whoever ends up with Abraham on their side of the argument wins the debate.

Some Jews of Paul's day believed Abraham perfectly lived the Mosaic Law even before it was written. The prayer of Manassah is thought by some to have been written in the first or second century C.E. by a Jew who was imagining what the prayer of Manasseh spoken of in 2 Chronicles 33:12-13 might have said. Notice its view of Abraham.

"Therefore, O Lord God of the righteous, you have not appointed repentance for the righteous, such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who have not sinned against you, but you have appointed repentance to me a sinner."

Consider also Sirach 44:19-21 (second century B.C.E).

"Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations, and no one has been found like him in glory; he kept the law of the Most High, and was taken into covenant with him: he established the covenant in his flesh and when he was tested he was found faithful. Therefore the Lord assured him by an oath that the nations would be blessed through his posterity."

The question this section addresses is, "Should we read Torah through our works-focused understanding of Abraham or through what you, Paul, are proposing?" Included in this is the question about the relationship of Gentiles to the promise given to Abraham. Paul turned to Genesis 15 for his proof, quoting from or referring to that passage in vv. 3, 9-12, 13, 18-22, 23.

Chapter 4 is an extended discussion of the themes of 3:27-31. The themes of boasting, justification, law, works, and faith are in 3:27-28 and 4:1-8. Circumcision, as it relates to God being the God of all people is the discussion in 3:29-30 and 4:9-12 is. Law is the theme of both 3:31 and 4:13-22.

## **Abraham, The Test Case: 4:1-22**

Paul's diatribe style continues.

**Jewish Teacher (4:1-2a):** *“What about our father Abraham? He was justified by works, and therefore he had something to boast about.”*

To the Jew, Abraham's relationship to God was not only seen in Genesis 15, but this text was often linked to Genesis 22 and the offering of Isaac. Take note the themes in the above quote from Sirach. Abraham's keeping of the law is mentioned before being taken into covenant. Abraham established the covenant of circumcision (in his flesh). Abraham was found faithful when tested (sacrifice of Isaac). This is also seen in 1 Maccabees 2:52 that states, “Was not Abraham found faithful when tested (sacrifice of Isaac), and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?”

Abraham was viewed as an unquestionably devout Jew who kept the Mosaic Law, even before the law was written; and who, under an extreme test (Isaac), remained faithful. It was believed he was given favored status because of his devotion (“works”), and therefore could boast. That is how the Jew typically viewed Abraham and their own relationship with God.

**Paul's Response:** *Abraham could not boast in works in God's presence (4:2b-10a)*

Paul's quote is from the LXX translation of Genesis 15:6. The only difference in Paul's quote and the LXX is that Paul used the name Abraham; while in the LXX it is Abram. Abram's name was not changed until 17:5 with the covenant of circumcision. Dunn (pg. 202) suggests that this could be a purposeful change designed to connect chapter 15 with the covenant of circumcision, which is traditionally the way the Jew thought.

For Paul, this was not the way Genesis 15:6 was to be read. In Genesis 15 Abraham was fearful. Abraham's fear might have been more than fear that he would never have an heir. Based on the culture Abraham came from, it may be that Abraham was afraid that the reason he still had no children was because he had not fully lived up to the obligations he would have assumed were a part of the Genesis 12 promise. God was letting him know that the covenant from Genesis 12 was unconditional and unilateral. Abraham responded with trust in God's faithfulness, understanding that it all depended upon the faithfulness of God. The word “reckoned” is in the passive form indicating that the reckoning was not anything Abraham did but was the passive recipient of the blessing. God then, through a covenant ritual, gave overwhelming evidence to Abraham of His commitment to keep the promise. For more on “reckoned righteous” see the document “Righteousness.”

Paul then gave an illustration. Wages paid because of work done creates an obligation on the part of the one who hired out the work. Any thought of a gift would be nullified. God did not make a covenant arrangement with Abraham that obligated both parties to some standard in order for the covenant to be fulfilled. This can be seen in Genesis 15 when God was the only party who walked between the divided animals. If this were the way Genesis 15 was to be read, it would mean God was in a position of being obligated to give something to Abraham on the basis of something Abraham had

done. When God made the promise, He obligated Himself to be faithful to His own righteous character, but He was never obligated in any way to Abraham. God and Abraham are not equals in any sense of the word in this covenant. Only God could fulfill this covenant.

The idea of Abraham being ungodly (v. 5) would have been repugnant to a Jew. There are Jewish writings that speak of Abraham being a devout person who always kept the law. As we see from the above quotes from the Prayer of Manasseh and Sirach.

Paul then turned to a writing of David's to show that the prophets, of whom David was one, supported his gospel. In Judaism was the view that when the Kingdom of God returned through the Messiah the national sin of Israel would be set aside and the Spirit would be given on the basis of their privileged status. This would in no way be true of Gentiles unless they took on the markers of Judaism. Paul is saying here that the time of forgiveness is now, but not in the way they imagined. "Those to whom God reckons righteousness (covenant partner status)" are being given this blessing apart from any presence of works (i.e., rituals of cult and law).

Instead of using the passive form of "reckon" as he did in verse 3, Paul changed the order of the wording here to clearly state what the passive in verse 3 implied, is that it is God who does the reckoning ("God reckons righteous"). Another change Paul made here in verse six was to place righteousness as the direct object of the reckoning. In doing so, Paul was making the point that faith is not a substitute for covenant partnership (righteousness). It is full acceptance as covenant partner that is actually counted. God fully accepted Abraham apart from works.

By putting Genesis 15:6 (Rom. 4:3) with Psalm 32:1-2 (Rom. 4:7-8), Paul was using David to illuminate what it means to be a covenant partner. It means, among other things, that a person is forgiven of their sins. The two verses from the Psalms are themselves a parallelism doing the same thing. The first verse talking about forgiveness is parallel to the statement in the second verse about "not reckoned sin." Being reckoned a covenant partner includes being forgiven. Paul's use of the word translated "iniquities" or "transgressions" (Lit. "lawlessness") would have been shocking to a Jew because this is the word they would have used of Gentiles. This may again be Paul purposely showing that the Jew is in the same boat. God puts the status of covenant partner in the ledger of people who trust in His faithfulness and He does not put in their ledger "sinner." Covenant partner status is not a "your forgiven/your not forgiven" roller coaster ride. Forgiveness, and therefore covenant partnership, is a state of being.

Abraham was an example of someone reckoned righteous while uncircumcised, and David was an example of someone reckoned righteous while circumcised. So, Paul says, "We (you Jewish teacher and I) both believe Abraham's relationship with God as covenant partner was fulfilled when Abraham put his trust in the faithfulness of God. Was it while uncircumcised or while circumcised? Since Genesis 15 comes before Genesis 17 when Abraham was circumcised, the answer is obvious.

**Jewish Teacher:** 10b

He had to admit it was before Abraham was circumcised.

**Paul continues: *Covenant partnership is not dependent on circumcision* (11-12)**

Circumcision in Genesis 17 validated or ratified (sealed) the relationship of covenant partner that God had extended to Abraham. Abraham's covenant partnership with God was not dependent upon circumcision, as the Jew would have thought. Abraham is the father of all. Both the circumcised and uncircumcised that trust God, as did Abraham, experience the acceptance of covenant partner with God.

The most common way to address the question as to whose faith/faithfulness is under discussion is to pick one and eliminate the other (God or Abraham/humanity). The sentence structure of the first half of verse 11 related to the words "righteousness" and "faith/faithfulness" having the article and no evident antecedent ("the faith") may be intended to direct the reader to think of both the faithfulness of God and the faith of Abraham. Both God's faithfulness and Abraham's trust in God were involved in the giving of the covenant of circumcision. Of course, God's faithfulness is foundational to this whole discussion but there would have been no real relationship without Abraham putting his trust in God. Paul was drawing a contrast between the relationship of faith, which is seen in the relationship between God (His faithfulness to the promise) and Abraham (his trust in God); against the performance of works (devotion to religious ritual and circumcision), which is how the Jew saw their relationship with God. Abraham's trust in God is the reason he is the father of all (Jew and Gentile) whom also trust in God's faithfulness.

Another point to be made here is that there was an understanding in Judaism of Abraham having been a Gentile idol worshiper prior to God making a covenant with him in Genesis 12. Joshua 24:14, Jubilees 12, and the Apocalypse of Abraham all show this concept of Abraham. There was a position taken in Jubilees and the Apocalypse of Abraham that it was Abraham who first sought out God. If Paul, in any way, had this part of Abraham's life in mind, then Abraham stood as the standard for a Gentile being given status of covenant partner. Talbert (pg. 119) says of this, "Paul has here made the pattern of Gentile righteousness by faith normative for Jewish righteousness rather than the reverse." If the Jew were to be reckoned righteous, it would be the way a Gentile (Abraham) was reckoned righteous rather than a Gentile being reckoned righteous by first becoming a Jew. This would have been a blow to nationalistic Jewish pride.

*The promise rests on faith, not law: 13-15*

The Jews self-understanding was bound up in the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12. In that promise was the promise of inheriting a land (Canaan). Over time, the Jews came to believe when the Kingdom of God was restored, they would, by virtue of their favored status with God, inherit the cosmos. The way the world would operate in this restored time would be through the Mosaic Law. Using this Jewish view of the promise and the Law, Paul again made the point that covenant partnership with God does not come through Mosaic Law but through the faithfulness of God.

If being an heir of the promise comes through practicing Mosaic Law then the whole idea of faith (faithfulness of God and trust in God) as well as the promise are both

null and void. Mosaic Law brought the knowledge of sin (3:20) and wrath. It is not, as the Jews thought, the solution. Law is part of the problem (1:18-3:20). The promise was fulfilled through God's faithfulness and is realized in a person's life by means of a person's trust in God. Covenant membership is not affected by the existence of law. Technically speaking, the Mosaic Law did not exist when Abraham was given the status of covenant partner. Therefore, because the Law did not exist in regard to Abraham, Abraham did not violate the law.

*The promise rests on grace: 4:16-17a*

So, the only way the promise can be guaranteed to both Jew (adherents of the law who at the time do not trust in God), and Gentile (share the faith of Abraham) has to come from the faithfulness and grace of God. "God's gracious outreach to man is of such a character that it can only be received in unconditional openness. Whatever restricts or obscures that openness, and the character of faith as sheer receptivity and dependence on God, denies and restricts that grace" (Dunn. pg. 215).

The quote in verse seventeen comes from Genesis 17:5, the circumcision text. By placing this quote into his exegesis of Genesis 15:6, Paul was stating that the promise of making Abraham a father of many nations is included in a correct understanding Genesis 15:6 and is not limited to the discussion of circumcision.

*Unquestioning Trust in the power of God: 4:17b-22*

An understanding of the God in whose presence Abraham received the promise and in whom Abraham put his trust is vital to understanding Paul's gospel. The idea of giving life to the dead (resurrection) and calling into existence things that do not exist (creation) were familiar elements of Jewish theology. The One who first gave life to all things also has power to return life to that which is dead. Neither the things that did not exist before God's creative work nor that which is dead has any say about what happens or any power to make anything happen. There is total dependence upon the one who creates life and gives back life.

With his and Sarah's bodies being as good as dead in terms of having a son, human wisdom would say they had no hope. But Abraham, having nothing but the promise of God, believed he would become the father of many nations (not just Israel) because he trusted in the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that did not exist. Rather than arguing in distrust, Abraham grew in his trust because he was fully convinced God would be faithful to His promise.

Paul exegesis of Genesis 15 concludes in 4:22. The basis for everything has been the faithfulness of God in fulfilling the promise that He would make Abraham the father of many nations. The blessing of covenant partner with God was not realized in Abraham's life through the Mosaic Law or through circumcision. There is no place for boasting in any national favored status before God. Covenant relationship with God was realized in Abraham's life when he unconditionally trusted in the God of the promise rather than in his own power or in his own devotion to God expressed through religious ritual.

## **Conclusion**

A Jew who struggled with the notion that being God's chosen people and having been given the law and the covenant of circumcision gave the Jew no favored status with God would have turned to Abraham to make his argument against Paul's gospel. They believed God's acceptance of Abraham was based on his practicing of Torah before it was even written and on being circumcised. God would accept Jew and Gentile alike on that same basis.

Paul showed from Genesis 15 that their understanding of Abraham's relationship with God was false. God's acceptance of Abraham as covenant partner preceded Torah or circumcision. Abraham trusted in God's faithfulness and in nothing else. The Jew also failed to see in Abraham's life that the promise was to make Abraham the father of many nations, not just Israel. Abraham is not father based on Torah or circumcision. Abraham is father of all based upon God's promises experienced through his (Abraham's) faith. "For the one who is thus reckoned righteous has done and can do nothing except trust, the very opposite of any status or act which might be thought to lay an obligation on God. It is this complete match between divine ability and human inability, as indeed the complete mismatch between a wholly generous promise and a confidence based on race and law, which emerges so clearly for Paul from this text" (Dunn, pg 239).

