

How Is Abraham the Father of Us All?

Scripture: Romans 4

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Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised. (4:9–12)

Paul anticipated the question that Jews would be asking at this point in his argument: “If Abraham was justified by his faith alone, why did God demand circumcision of Abraham and all his descendants?”

Most Jews in New Testament times were thoroughly convinced that circumcision was not only the unique mark that set them apart from all other men as God’s chosen people but was also the means by which they became acceptable to God.

The Jewish apocryphal *Book of Jubilees* declares:

This law is for all generations for ever, and there is no circumcision of the time, and no passing over one day out of the eight days; for it is an eternal ordinance, ordained and written on the heavenly tables. And every one 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, for he belongs to the children of destruction; nor is there moreover any sign on him that he is the Lord’s but (he is destined) to be destroyed and slain from the earth. (15:25ff.)

Many Jews believed that salvation was based on their obedience to God in being circumcised, and that, therefore, their eternal security rested in that rite. In his commentary on the *Book of Moses*, Rabbi Menachem wrote, “Our Rabbins [rabbis] have said that no circumcised man will ever see hell” (fol. 43, col. 3). Circumcision was considered such a mark of God’s favor that it was taught that if a Jew had practiced idolatry his circumcision must first be removed before he could go down to hell. Since it is humanly impossible to remove circumcision, presumably that would be accomplished by a direct act of God.

The *Jalkut Rubem* taught that “Circumcision saves from hell” (num. 1), and the Midrash Millim that “God swore to Abraham that no one who was circumcised should be sent to hell” (fol. 7, col. 2). The book *Akedath Jizehak* taught that “Abraham sits before the gate of hell, and does not allow that any circumcised Israelite should enter there” (fol. 54, col. 2).

Such beliefs were so strong in Judaism that many of them were carried over into Christianity by Jewish converts in the early church. Circumcision and following the law of Moses became such issues that a special council of the apostles and elders was called in Jerusalem to settle the matter. The unanimous decision, expressed in a letter sent to all the churches, was that obedience to Mosaic ritual, including circumcision, was not necessary for salvation (see Acts 15:19–29).

Paul had come out of a strongly legalistic Jewish background, being “circumcised the eighth day, ... a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee” (Phil. 3:5). Yet the Holy Spirit had revealed to him, and the Jerusalem council had acknowledged, that neither circumcision nor any other ceremony or human act, no matter how divinely ordained, could bring salvation. Circumcision had never saved a Jew and it could never save a Gentile (Rom. 2:25–29). Paul therefore warned his fellow Christians, especially Jewish believers, to “beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:2–3). He gave a similar warning to believers in Galatia:

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. (Gal. 5:1–4)

A person who trusts in circumcision, or in any other ceremony or work, nullifies the work of Christ on his behalf. He places himself under the law, and a person under the law must obey it with absolute perfection, which is humanly impossible. “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6).

In the region of Phrygia, which bordered Galatia, the dominant pagan religion involved the worship of Cybele. The Cybelene priests normally castrated themselves as an act of sacrificial devotion, and that is perhaps the mutilation to which Paul refers in Galatians 5:12. If so, he was suggesting, in effect, that if the Judaizers thought the act of circumcision was such a religiously meritorious act, why did they not continue to the extreme self-mutilation of the Cybelene priests?

The Judaizers—those who claimed that a Christian, Gentile as well as Jew, had to keep the law of Moses in order to be saved (see Acts 15:5)—were such a persistent and powerful threat to the Galatian churches that in his closing words to them Paul reiterated his previous warnings. “Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ” (Gal. 6:12). In other words, even many of the Judaizers were hypocrites about circumcision, using it as a means of escaping persecution from fellow Jews.

Genesis 17:10–14 makes clear that the act of circumcision was a God-given mark of His covenant with Abraham and his descendants, the Jews. It was on the basis of that passage that the rabbis taught, and most Jews believed, that obedience to that rite was the means of pleasing God and becoming right with Him. But Paul uses that very passage to demonstrate that, to the contrary, Abraham was *not* made righteous before God by his circumcision but that when he was given the command of circumcision he had *already* been declared righteous.

Paul begins by asking, **Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised?**

The relevance of this basic truth for our own day is great. Although few people, even Jews, now believe that circumcision brings salvation, countless millions firmly trust in some other form of religious ceremony or activity to make them right with God.

Among those claiming the name of Christ, the Roman Catholic church is by far the greatest offender. Throughout its history it has taught salvation by human works, made effective through the mediation of the Catholic priesthood.

In his book *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1962), Dr., Ludwig Ott explains the cardinal teachings of Roman Catholicism in regard to salvation and spiritual blessing.

Ott defines a sacrament by the Roman Catechism (II I,8) as “a thing perceptible to the senses, which on the ground of Divine institution possesses the power of effecting and signifying sanctity and righteousness” (p. 326). He goes on to say that the sacraments confer grace immediately without the mediation of a person’s faith (p. 326) and that the sacraments confer sanctifying grace on the receivers (p. 332). Since sacramental rites confer regeneration, forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life, “for the dispensing of this grace it is necessary that the minister accomplish the Sacramental Sign in the proper manner” (p. 343). Roman Catholicism maintains that neither orthodox belief nor moral worthiness on the part of the recipient is necessary for the validity of a sacrament (p. 345).

In the mid-sixteenth century the Council of Trent issued a statement that declared, “If anyone denies that by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ which is conferred in Baptism, the guilt of original sin is remitted; or even asserts that the whole of that which has the true and proper nature of sin is not taken away ... let him be anathema” (p. 354).

Quoting from the apocryphal *Letter of Barnabas*, Ott reports that Catholics believe “we descend into the water [or baptism] full of sins and filth and we arise from it bearing fruit as we have in our hearts the fear of God, and our spirit hope in Jesus” (p. 355), Catholics teach that according to Scripture baptism has the power both of eradicating sin and effecting inner sanctification. “Baptism effects the forgiveness of all punishment of sin, both of the eternal and the temporal” (p. 355), and that baptism is “necessary for all men, without exception, for salvation” (p. 356).

Roman Catholicism holds that the sacrament of confirmation imparts the Holy Spirit to a person and increases sanctifying grace (p. 365). The sacrament of the Eucharist (the mass) unites the recipient with Christ (p. 390). As spiritual food, the mass “preserves and increases the supernatural life of the soul” (p. 395). Consequently, if a faithful Catholic in any part of the world is asked if he has received Christ, he will likely answer that he received Him at the last mass, and at every other mass he has attended.

The sacraments of penance, holy orders, marriage, and extreme unction also are claimed to impart, in and of themselves, other spiritual benefits of divine grace.

Some Protestant groups hold similar doctrines, believing, for example, that baptism places a person into the New Covenant, apart from any knowledge or faith on his own part. Consequently, the baptism of an infant is as valid as the baptism of a mature, professing adult.

But all such doctrines are forms of magic, in which neither the recipient nor the source of the desired result needs to be consciously involved. The result is conferred solely on the basis of the appropriate words being spoken or actions being performed. Even God is not involved directly in the efficacy of the sacraments. They operate not only without the recipients having faith but also without God directly imparting His grace. The power is in the formula of the rite.

That is exactly the kind of power the Jews of Paul’s day attached to circumcision. And because they believed that what was true for Abraham in regard to justification was true of every person, especially every Jew, Paul continues to use that patriarch as his model. Answering his own question about the time of Abraham’s being declared righteous, the apostle declares that it was **not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised**.

The obvious chronology of Genesis proves it. When Abraham was circumcised, Ishmael was thirteen years old and Abraham was ninety-nine (see Gen. 17:23–25). But when Abraham was declared

righteous by God (15:6), Ishmael had not yet been born or even conceived (16:2–4). When Ishmael was born, Abraham was eighty-six (see 16:16). Therefore Abraham was declared righteous by God at least fourteen years before he was circumcised.

Abraham was in God's covenant and under His grace long before he was circumcised, whereas Ishmael, although circumcised, was never in the covenant. Circumcision *became* a mark of the covenant relationship between God and His people, but the covenant was not established on the basis of circumcision. When Abraham was first given the covenant promise, he was only seventy-five (Gen. 12:1–4). Circumcision came not only at least fourteen years after Abraham was declared righteous but also twenty-four years after he first entered into a covenant relationship with God. In addition to that, because there were no Jews at that time, when Abraham was declared righteous he was, as it were, an uncircumcised Gentile.

The natural question to be asked, therefore, would be, "Why circumcision? Why did God make that rite a binding law on all of Abraham's descendants?" First of all, Paul says, circumcision was a sign. Abraham **received the sign of circumcision**. Circumcision was the physical, racial mark of identity for His people. Even under the New Covenant, Paul had no objection to a Jew being circumcised, as long as the act was seen in this light. In fact Paul personally circumcised Timothy, who was only half Jewish, in order that Timothy might have better opportunity to witness to Jews near his home area who knew him (Acts 16:3).

Circumcision was also a mark of God's covenant, setting Abraham's descendants apart as uniquely His chosen people, the Hebrews, or Jews as they became known during the Babylonian Exile. During the wilderness wanderings in Sinai, circumcision was not performed by that disobedient generation, whom God allowed to die out before they could enter the Promised Land. But when God readied His people to enter the land, the mark of circumcision was reinstated by Joshua under direct command from God (Josh. 5:2).

Second, circumcision was **a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he**, that is, Abraham, **had while uncircumcised**. In other words, every time circumcision was performed God's people were to be reminded of God's **righteousness** that Abraham had, and all other believers have, through **faith**, completely apart from circumcision.

Although they convey similar ideas, a sign points to something, whereas a seal guarantees it. When an official seal was stamped on a letter or decree, for instance, its authenticity was guaranteed. In that sense, circumcision was the authentication that God's covenant promises would be fulfilled. It pointed to the fact that God wanted to circumcise, that is, place His authenticating seal upon, His people's hearts, not simply their bodies.

That was always God's intent, and the Jews should have known it long before Paul pointed it out in his Roman letter. Moses had declared, "Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live" (Deut. 30:6). God had always wanted first of all to cut away the sin that covered the heart. "For thus says the Lord to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem," Jeremiah wrote, "Break up your fallow ground, and do not sow among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest My wrath go forth like fire and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds" (Jer. 4:3-4). Through that same prophet the Lord declared,

"Let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the Lord. "Behold, the days are coming," declares the Lord, "that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised-Egypt, and Judah, and Edom, and the sons of Ammon, and Moab, and all those inhabiting the desert who clip the hair on their temples; for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart" (Jer. 9:24-26).

Every male child of Israel was a testimony that miffs hearts need spiritual circumcision, or cleansing.

In a similar way, baptism symbolizes a believer's death and resurrection with Christ. Communion symbolizes His redemptive act on our behalf, which we are to commemorate until He comes again. Neither rite has any merit in itself, and the elements of water, bread, and wine certainly have no merit or power in themselves. Both baptism and communion are outward demonstrations and reminders of the inner reality of salvation through Jesus Christ.

As Paul had already made clear in this epistle, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God" (Rom. 2:28-29).

Contrary to the teaching in some churches today, infant baptism does not correspond to the circumcision of Jewish male infants. Even if it did, however, baptism would no more provide salvation than did circumcision.

The Passover meal, which has been celebrated by Jews for some three and one-half millennia, has never been considered a means of deliverance but only the symbol and reminder of it. For the Jew, Passover is a collective symbol of deliverance and circumcision is an individual symbol of justification. For the Christian, communion is the collective, corporate symbol of our relationship to Christ; baptism is the individual symbol of it.

Abraham received circumcision *after* he was reckoned righteous in order **that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.**

Racially, Abraham is the father of all Jews; spiritually, he is the father of both believing Gentiles, **who believe without being circumcised**, and of believing Jews, **who ... are of the circumcision**. Both groups of believers are reckoned righteous because of their **faith** in God through Jesus Christ, and they **also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.**

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