

## Romans 4:1-12

### *Abraham's Faith Apart from Works*

In this section, Paul brings up Abraham, a man of faith as well as one of the great names in history. Abraham obeyed God and moved from Haran to Canaan (Genesis 12:1-5). He also believed God's promises (Genesis 15:6), after which, through obedience, he and his entire household were circumcised (Genesis 17:9-27). When asked by God, he offered up Isaac, his son of promise, on the altar (Genesis 22:1-19). Abraham could respond in this manner for only one reason: God had promised that Isaac would have descendants (Genesis 17:19, 21:12). Therefore, he knew that God would resurrect Isaac (back to natural life) should he (Abraham) take Isaac's physical life (Hebrews 11:17-19). Can you see the importance of knowing God's promises? Doesn't this encourage you to know God's Word!

Abraham possessed tremendous faith. But he also, like us, was beset with weakness. For instance, he twice asked Sarah to lie about their relationship as husband and wife and pose as his sister, Genesis 12:10-20 and Genesis 20. She was, in actuality, his half-sister (Genesis 20:12), but God hates the sin of half-truths. However, Sarah was supernaturally protected in Genesis 20:6 when Abimelech, king of Gerar, took her:

*Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her." (Genesis 20:6)*

Some theologians use this passage in an attempt to prove that man does not possess a free will. They argue that God, in His sovereignty, prevented Abimelech from sinning—that Abimelech had no choice in the matter. They then contend that God does the same with all mankind not only in the area of preventing sin but also in the area of causing it. In fact, they conclude that God is the cause of all things: every sin, heartache, trial, difficulty—everything that occurs from eternity past through eternity future. God, in their minds, must rule in this manner if He is to retain His rightful position as the Sovereign of the Universe. Thus, they believe that should anything transpire that God has not caused, He would lose His sovereignty.

Genesis 20:6 proves nothing in regard to God causing man to refrain from sin. It simply shows that Abimelech's prudent choice to honor Sarah was based on information supplied through the avenue of a dream whose source was God. If you read the entire account (Genesis 20:1-18), you discover that Abimelech was totally blameless in the matter. Yes, God warned him through a "dream" (verse 3) that Sarah was Abraham's wife, but that warning did not control Abimelech's actions. In fact, once Abimelech understood the severity of the matter, he immediately returned her to her husband.

Even though Abraham possessed great faith, he possessed character flaws that only God could mend. His sinful impatience carried a huge consequence. Yet, God mentions none of his sins in Hebrews 11:8-12 and 17-19. Instead of waiting for Sarah to conceive and bear the son of promise, his impatience resulted in Ishmael's birth through Hagar (Genesis 16). The enormity of Abraham's sin is proven by the instability of Ishmael and his descendants (Genesis 16:12):

*“And he will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand will be against everyone, and everyone’s hand will be against him; and he will live to the east of all his brothers.” (Genesis 16:12)*

The scope and correctness of this prophecy, regarding Abraham’s son through Hagar is staggering. Ishmael’s descendants are the Arab nations who have brought persistent grief to the Jews—the Jews being Abraham’s descendants through Sarah. In fact, the ever-present problems in the Middle East can be traced back to Ishmael’s birth. Even September 11, 2001, that horrendous day when many innocent people died, can be linked to Abraham’s error. Ishmael’s descendants were responsible for the calamity. The Arab nations view America as pro-Israel, and a thorn in their side. In their minds, anyone who is a friend of Israel is the enemy of Ishmael’s descendants, the Arab nations.

The tiny nation of Israel is incapable of defending herself without the support of her allies; her most prominent ally is America. In fact, should the United States cease backing Israel, Israel would lack the military means (planes, tanks, and weapons) to remain in the land. She has the most highly trained military personnel in the world, but these personnel are powerless without the state of the art equipment needed for present-day warfare (that is, so long as she refuses to trust God for victory in battle). Israel has every right to defend herself. The land for which she is fighting was promised to Abraham (Genesis 13:17; 17:8) and his descendants (Genesis 15:18; 17:8), the Jews, many generations before Mohammad and Islam existed. Furthermore, Isaac was the son of “promise,” not Ishmael:

*For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman [Ishmael] was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman [Isaac] through the promise. (Galatians 4:22-23)*

According to the Scriptures, the Jews own (as a gift from God) from “*the river of Egypt*” to “*the river Euphrates*” (Genesis 15:18), a territory she has never fully inhabited. She will inhabit it in its entirety during the one thousand year reign of Christ (the Millennium), as confirmed by Ezekiel 47:13—48:29. In the meantime, however, she will struggle significantly to remain in part of the land due to personal sin.

A major political debate rages in the United States over what to do with Israel. One line of reasoning parallels a movement within modern Christendom teaching that God is done with Israel, and that the Arabs possess as much right to the holy land as do the Jews. Such a position is rooted in Replacement Theology where the writing prophets are allegorized and the church takes Israel’s place in the unconditional covenants promised to the Jewish people. Should the church fully embrace that ideology and decide that Israel is no longer a viable component in God’s strategy and support the election of men who are not pro-Israel, an adventure awaits us, for God has promised to “*bless*” the nations who support Israel but “*curse*” the nations who do not:

*And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* (Genesis 12:3)

History verifies that the nations who have cursed Israel have been cursed, and the nations who have blessed Israel have been blessed. The United States of America has been blessed for several reasons, the main one being her commitment to the Jewish people—God’s chosen people.

The Netherlands is another nation who found blessing through her favorable attitude toward Israel. The Dutch welcomed Jews who had been expelled from Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century. As a direct result, the tiny nation became a great colonizing influence in the new world building a commercial empire that stretched from Brazil to the West Indies. Likewise, the Ottoman Empire enjoyed the fruit of God’s blessing by welcoming Jewish immigration during that same era. That blessing enriched them for centuries.<sup>1</sup>

The list of nations who have mistreated God’s chosen people and reaped the negative consequences begins with Egypt and Pharaoh’s refusal to let the children of Israel go and includes: the people of Amalek who fought against Israel soon after they left Egypt and were defeated (Exodus 17:8-16) [Moses reminded the Jews that once they were given rest from their enemies they were to *blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven* (Deuteronomy 25:17-19)], Spain, Portugal, England, Germany, Poland, and most Arab nations.

*What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.”* (Romans 4:1-3)

To the Jews, none is greater than Abraham; he is their father (Romans 4:1; John 8:37-39). The answer to how Jews, being descendants of Abraham, obtain a righteous standing before God is embedded in Romans 4.

Had Abraham been “...*justified by works, he has something to boast about...*” (Romans 4:2). However, no one can work his way into a right standing with God. Abraham’s faith, exercised while depraved, caused God to reckon (count) him as righteous (Romans 4:3).

*Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due.* (Romans 4:4)

So long as we perceive our good works as gaining points with God, we may wrongly view God as owing us something. Unless this attitude is replaced with repentance and “*faith*” (Romans 4:5), the holder will face God’s judgment of Revelation 20:11-15.

God is in the business of justifying “*the ungodly*” (Romans 4:5):

*But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness, (Romans 4:5)*

Before God made us righteous, we were required to acknowledge (while depraved) that we were “*ungodly*”—totally and completely shipwrecked in regard to righteousness and holiness. This “*repentance*,” a change of attitude concerning sin, “*leads to life*” (Acts 11:18), the eternal “*life*” that God gives to the depraved who choose to repent and believe. These facts negate the argument that God must spiritually regenerate the depraved and grant them “*the hidden wisdom*” of 1Corinthians 2:6-8 before they can repent and believe. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth concerning the subject:

*Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; (1Corinthians 2:6-8)*

The depraved who repent and believe are “*ungodly*” (Romans 4:5), not spiritually regenerated beings who have been given God’s “*hidden wisdom*” of 1Corinthians 2:7. This “*hidden wisdom*” is the “*wisdom*” possessed by the “*mature*” believer—a truth discovered when 1Corinthians 2:6-8 is studied in context and according to the full counsel of God’s Word. How could a man who is spiritually regenerated, but unsaved, possess the wisdom of a mature believer? He cannot!

In Romans 4:6, Paul speaks of David, the man after God’s own heart, the man beloved of God:

*just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: (Romans 4:6)*

Paul’s point, when taken through all of the Scriptures, is that David believed that God’s “*righteousness*” is bestowed (apart from the works of the Law) upon those who exercise repentance and faith while depraved. In fact, these passages prove that the Lord does not “*take*” a New Testament believer’s “*sin...into account*” (vv.7-8). Thus, God has no record of any sin we have committed in the past. Neither does He record any sin we commit in the present or future. We will discuss this truth in greater depth later.

### ***Abraham’s Faith Apart from Circumcision***

In Romans 4:9-10, Paul again discusses circumcision to prove that God declared Abraham righteous before Abraham was circumcised. By making his case from the Scriptures alone, he removes the Jews’ ability to say that Abraham was declared righteous because of circumcision. Observe as Paul develops his argument.

First, in Romans 4:9 he asks the Jews if the “*blessing*” mentioned by David in Romans 4:7-8 is “*...upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also....*” Then he again

references Abraham, because through Abraham the covenant of circumcision was instituted (Genesis 17:9-27). Next, in Romans 4:10, Paul asks if Abraham was declared righteous by God before or after he was “*circumcised*.” To answer this question, the Jews would have consulted the book of Genesis and discovered that Abraham was declared righteous in Genesis 15:6, at least thirteen years before he was circumcised (read Genesis 15:6; 16:16; 17:24). Therefore, the uncircumcised can be declared righteous, proving that circumcision guarantees no one a right standing before God. As usual, Paul proves his point while refuting his challengers’ allegation!

Romans 4:11 explains that the purpose of “*circumcision*” is both a “*sign*” and “*a seal*”:

*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, (Romans 4:11)*

Circumcision is a “*sign*” because every time a Jew sees someone circumcised, or is reminded of his own circumcision, he is to remember that God bestows righteousness on the basis of “*faith*.” Circumcision is “*a seal*” because it cannot be undone. It proves that once God makes us righteous, subsequent to our exercising repentance and faith while depraved, we cannot lose our righteousness and become unrighteous (John 10:29, Ephesians 1:13, Hebrews 7:25, and Jude 1 verify the same truth). The identical principle applied in Paul’s day. In fact, it applied to believers who lived before the cross, although they were only declared righteous prior to Jesus’ perfect sacrifice. The compelling news is that they were made righteous through Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. If you are somewhat confused do not worry because this subject is addressed in great depth in subsequent verses.

Abraham is “*the father of all who believe*” (vv.11-12), whether they are physically circumcised or not. This truth verifies that Jews and Gentiles alike become descendants of Abraham through faith. In other words, they become true Jews (Romans 2:28-29). Paul addresses this subject in Ephesians 2:11-16, where he states that “*both groups*,” believing Jews and Gentiles during the church age, are “*made...into one*” (Ephesians 2:14). Consequently, through repentance and faith, and God’s resulting salvation, Jews and Gentiles partake of the “*spiritual*” blessings promised to Abraham.

Don’t misunderstand. God continues to deal with the physical Jewish nation as a separate nation, as He has done since Genesis 12—when He began making promises to Abraham. He, therefore, will fulfill the physical and spiritual promises made to physical Israel.

Man can misinterpret God’s purpose. God’s purpose in circumcision was pure and wholesome, yet man misunderstood it and suffered the consequence of improper theology. Are we not guilty of the same mistake when we mishandle the truth of the gospel? Oh, if we could but perceive truth from God’s perspective! This clarity should be our goal as we continue.

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<sup>i</sup> Gerrish, Jim. *Does God Play Favorites? God’s Unique Relationship With Israel*, Originally published by Cornerstone Publishing, 2007. <<http://www.churchisraelforum.com/favorites-11/>>.