

# BaptistWay: A faithful example

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• *The BaptistWay lesson for Oct. 4 focuses on Romans 4:1-25.*

Having just stated justification is based on faith, the Apostle Paul's discussion shifts its focus to Abraham, the prime ancestor for the Jewish people. At first glance, one might expect Paul to argue the gospel is different than the circumstances of Abraham's relationship with God. Often, this discussion centers on the question of whether salvation is a free gift or something earned.

Paul opens by referring to Abraham as "our forefather according to the flesh" (v. 1). Does this mean God's righteousness requires we be joined to Abraham's ethnic family? Clearly, Paul is not focused on the usual discussion of Abraham; his primary question seems to be: Who are the children of Abraham?

## **Justified by faith**

Rather than seeing Abraham's righteousness as tied to good works, Paul states Abraham is the one who "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (v. 3). This may seem strange to readers who have contrasted Christianity and Judaism by arguing Judaism is built on works, while Christianity is grounded in faith. Indeed, this common understanding of the Jewish covenant precisely is what Paul intends to refute. He even invokes King David to further emphasize Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, was justified by faith apart from works.

Because Abraham believed before he was circumcised, good works and obedience—such as the act of circumcision—had nothing to do with his justification at all, Paul argues. Abraham believed God in Genesis 15:6, but he was not circumcised until Genesis 17. The physical act of circumcision

served as a sign or seal “of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (v. 11).

Physical circumcision, while not bad in itself, is not sufficient for the redemptive goals sought. The significance of this point needs to be stated more directly. If Abraham, the father of Israel, was uncircumcised when he believed, then he is more or less a Gentile, one who “trusts God who justifies the ungodly” (v. 5).

This “Gentile Abraham” reverses the expected logic of the people of God. Instead of the Gentiles being incorporated into the promises of Israel, it is Israel that is incorporated into the promises to the Gentiles through Abraham. Thus, Israel is part of the people of God, not on the basis of circumcision, but as a result of faith: “He is the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised” (v. 12).

### **Children of Abraham**

The result of Paul’s playful discussion of the timeline of Abraham’s encounters with God is Abraham is the ancestor of both Jews and Gentiles on the basis of belief regardless of circumcision status (vv. 11-12). Both Jews and Gentiles are tied to Abraham on the basis of faith. In other words, all believers are children of Abraham (v. 16). This should not be surprising to us. God’s covenant always was bigger than merely Israel.

In fact, we see this in the first promise made to Abraham: “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). The covenant with Israel always was intended to be a Jew-and-Gentile enterprise, and Jesus’ messianic work brings to fruition the covenant promises given to Abraham from the very beginning.

One of those promises—to be “heir of the world”—came through “the righteousness that comes by faith” (v. 13). That is, it comes through God’s

faithfulness to the covenant made with Abraham, a covenant that now includes Gentiles and the whole world. This covenant faithfulness extends “to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham” (v. 16). This radical openness displayed by the Israelite covenant should serve as a challenge to the church as it considers its boundaries—and those outside those boundaries—in light of the gospel.

Therefore, we should follow the example of faithfulness provided by our great ancestor, expectantly awaiting new life from “the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not” (v. 17). One commentator notes this phrase likely comes from the early church’s worship material, indicating “faith in Christ crucified and resurrected is the way to inherit Abraham’s promise.”

### **Patient way of life**

Not surprisingly, this patient way of life requires hope. Indeed, Abraham’s faith took shape as hope God was working even when he could not see it, such as when he saw “that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was dead” (v. 19).

Abraham is more than simply our example, though. He was patient God would provide him with his reward for belief—a family. Usually we see the birth of Isaac, the only child born to him and Sarah, as the fulfillment of that promise and the embodiment of that reward. However, if, as Paul has argued, we find our justification linked to Abraham’s by faith, then we must broaden our understanding of Abraham’s reward.

Indeed, through the covenant faithfulness of God in Jesus Christ, we—the church—are Abraham’s family and reward. May the God who was faithful to Abraham, the father of many nations, continue to show that covenant faithfulness to the church, continually giving life to the dead.