

Romans (4:9-16)

A Sign of the Seal

Part 14 - October 10, 2004

FAITH ALONE?

- Paul is talking about circumcision again.

The last time we covered this subject, I told you about when I learned what circumcision was ... in Mrs. Ellis' 8th grade class! She mentioned it from the front, and I had to ask what it was. Remember a girl got up and whispered it to me?

Well, I wish that was the end of it. But, afterwards at recess I said to my buddies, "Aren't you glad we're *not* circumcised?" And they said, "We are!" I was really confused; because that girl had whispered that they cut the end off!

- Paul's point is: Abraham was justified by faith alone.

Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. – Romans 4:9-16 NIV

And so, "The promise comes by faith!" By faith *alone*. But, now look at what *James* wrote on this same topic:

... "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone. – James 2:23-24 NIV

Q: Whoa! How do you resolve this huge contradiction?

WHY CIRCUMCISION?

Let's start digging for the answer.

Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? - Romans 4:9a NIV

- The term "circumcised" is synonymous for: law-keeping Jew.

It was widely believed in Paul's day, that God supernaturally uncircumcised any Jewish men who were sentenced to Hell. Circumcision had become the mark of a man's salvation.

So, this next statement comes as a real shocker:

We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! - Romans 4:9b-10 NIV

Abraham was declared righteous as an uncircumcised Gentile! The rite had nothing to do with his redemption!

- He was 85 when he was declared righteous. (*Gen. 15:6*)
- He was 99 when he underwent circumcision. (*Gen. 17:1,23*)

Q: But, if righteousness was credited to Abraham *before* he was circumcised (rather than *because*), then *why* was it done?

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. - Romans 4:11a NIV

Circumcision served a very specific purpose (and this is a vital step for resolving the issue between James and Paul).

- It became a "sign" of the "seal" of righteousness.
- The seal of righteousness is an invisible reality.
- The sign of circumcision was a visible indication.

The city limits of Burlington have been established (sealed) but they're invisible. So, we put up a sign that says: City Limits

- A sign indicates what the seal authenticates.

Circumcision was the *symbol*, but not the *source* of Abraham's faith. It didn't *confer* righteousness ... it *confirmed* it.

IN HIS FOOTSTEPS

Abraham's faith was sealed 15 years *before* he was "signed".

So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. - Romans 4:11b-12 NIV

You see, what makes us "children of Abraham" and "fellow heirs" of the promise is not any rite or ritual, but whether or not we: "Walk in the footsteps of the *faith* that our father Abraham had"

Q: What are those footsteps of faith?

Genesis tells us three things about Abraham's faith:

- A. His mind believed.
 - He believed that God alone could seal his righteousness.
- B. His heart received.
 - He opened his heart to receive what God was offering him.
- C. His actions agreed.
 - His devotion was a sign of the seal of their relationship.

That's why - even though God had already told Abraham that his faith was credited to him as righteousness - God also said:

... through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me. - Genesis 22:18 NIV

If you're wearing a wedding ring, hold it up.

- That's a sign of the seal of a devoted relationship.

The one I wear was a sign of my great-grandfather's commitment, and of my grandfather's commitment, and now of my commitment.

Q: If you let your neighbor wear your ring, would they be married to your spouse?

A: No. What makes us married is the commitment in our heart.

NOT THE LAW

Abraham's obedience was a *result* of his commitment. That's why Paul says:

It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. - Romans 4:13-15 NIV

Again: "It was not through law" that he received the promise, because the Law didn't exist for another 430 years (*Gal 3:17*). Going back to James now, he tells us that the law is like a window; you can't just break part of it.

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. - James 2:10 NIV

If we must earn righteousness by living perfectly by the law: our "faith has no value" and God's "promise is worthless," because the only thing the "law brings [on us, is] wrath". And Paul points out that "where there is no law there is no transgression." In other words, the only way to keep from breaking God's law is to have no law.

If there's no speed limit you can't get a speeding ticket. Although there'd still be plenty of death and destruction.

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be **guaranteed** to all Abraham's offspring — not only to those who are of the law [Jews] but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. - Romans 4:16 NIV

Grace offers a guarantee that good works can't. His grace is received by faith, and faith is revealed by obedience. Acts of obedience are a sign of the seal of righteousness.

That's why James also said that Abraham's ...

... faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. - James 2:22 NIV

When James says that "a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone," he's not describing how to *become* a believer (the law makes that impossible); he's describing how to *behave* like a believer.

Just as a city makes its limits visible through road signs, and marriage partners declare their love through rings ...

- Faith makes itself visible through actions.