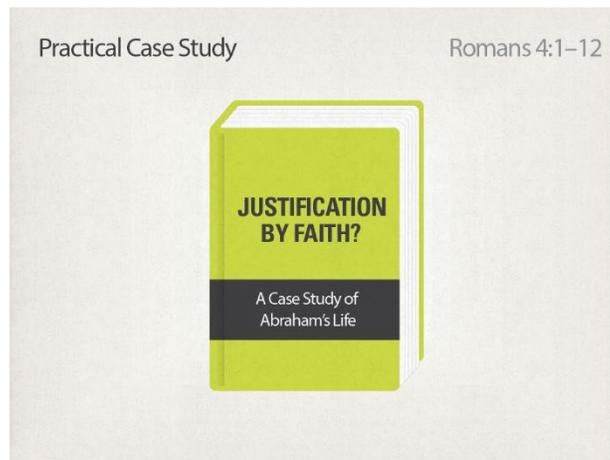


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Romans 4:1-8

Verse [31](#) functions as something of a hinge as Paul closes off one discussion and opens the next. He introduces this section with a connecting word that indicates he is about to offer a summary or thesis drawn from the preceding discussion. He frames this summary as a rhetorical question: Has the law somehow been nullified based on the exclusive role of faith in justification? Paul provides another resounding “No way!” in response, but then moves on to another question in [4:1](#). Because Paul is asking yet another question, it may seem that he is moving on to another topic. However, the Greek connecting word in [4:1](#) indicates that he is building on the preceding argument. The potential of Abraham’s boasting in [4:2](#) builds directly upon the rhetorical question of [3:27](#).

How does it build? Well, Paul is going to discuss the question about the nullification of the law, but instead of providing a logical argument, he uses Abraham as a case study to make his point. But more than just offering a case study, Paul uses this discussion to drive home the continuity of God’s plan for humanity from the beginning. The righteousness of God revealed in the gospel is not a new, last-ditch effort to redeem people. Rather, it has been attested by the law and the prophets ([3:21](#)), and is explicitly connected here to the promises given to Abraham and his response of faith.

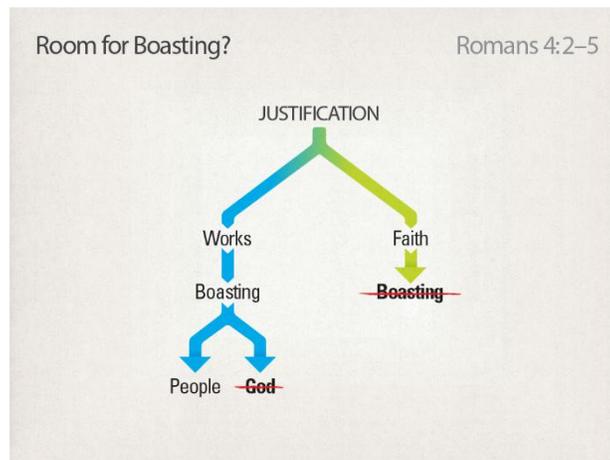


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Practical Case Study: Paul draws from the life of Abraham to demonstrate that God’s plan has always been based on grace through faith. This case study explicitly connects the gospel with God’s original promise to bless all the nations through Abraham.

Pay close attention to how Paul introduces Abraham: “our ancestor *according to the flesh*.” In [Romans 7–8](#), Paul develops a flesh/spirit dichotomy, but here flesh stands in opposition to belief. Abraham is the ancestral father, the patriarch from whom Jews and many other peoples trace their lineage. But not all of the descendants of Abraham’s flesh are considered part of the covenantal community, and Paul asserts in [4:11](#) that belief matters more than lineage. Introducing Abraham here as the ancestor “according to the flesh” sets the stage for this.

The big idea for this section is Abraham’s discovery regarding faith and righteousness. The remainder of material strengthens Paul’s argument and fills in important background information before he concludes with the question in [4:9](#). In verse [2](#) he introduces a hypothetical situation that considers the implications if Abraham had actually been justified by works instead of by faith.



Room for Boasting? Justification by faith versus works leads to different outcomes. Justification by works might be something to boast about, but not before God. In contrast, justification by faith leaves no room for boasting, either before men or God.

If justification is really by faith in what God has done, there is absolutely no room for boasting in what we have done. But if justification is based on works, then people may



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boast in self-righteous pride, even though there is no legitimacy for boasting before God, or before people for that matter. Paul is driving home the point that there is no room for Christians to boast—other than in our need for and unworthiness of God's gracious gift. He wants to reveal boasting for what it is: an illegitimate arrogance that fundamentally contradicts the gospel message of justification by grace through faith. In 4:3 Paul offers support for his assertion by quoting Genesis 15:6. Since it was Abraham's faith that led to him being credited with righteousness, there is no room for boasting.

The next point in Paul's argument supports the big idea introduced in [4:1](#). He makes his first point in [4:2-3](#), and in verse [4](#) he introduces the next one, consisting of two parts. The first one contrasts how we regard the credit someone has worked for versus credit granted without work. Paul likens it to the difference between a paycheck and a gift.



Wages or a Gift? There is an important difference between receiving something as a gift rather than as wages. Whereas wages are owed for work performed, there is no obligation associated with a gift. It is freely given and freely received.

When you work, you expect to get paid. In fact, James 5:4 condemns those who do not pay their workers. But there is no grace involved in payment—it is an ethical obligation. And consider the corollary: If you get paid for work you claim to have done but never did, you have committed fraud. Paul's point is that work and wages go hand in hand; if you have one without the other, it is probably illegal. So if works are somehow involved in justification, then there is no room for grace.

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Paul's assertion becomes more apparent when we consider the opposite side of the coin: being given something that we did nothing to earn. If we did no work, we have no grounds to boast (3:27; 4:2). The defining characteristic of a gift is that it is free, not based on anything we have done. Think back to the relationship between work and wages. Obligation distinguishes wages from gifts.

The key takeaway here is that grace negates any need for us to work for our justification—it can only be construed as a faith-based gift. As soon as we add works into the equation, it fundamentally changes the proposition. Note Paul's use of an alias expression for God in [4:5](#) to reinforce his point. An overt mention of God might prompt us to think that He is not gracious to unworthy folks like us. But by calling Him "the one who justifies the ungodly," Paul evokes a grace-based image that all but excludes the notion that works could be involved. The idea is that God justifies us versus us doing something to be justified.

Paul creates one big subordinate clause in [4:6–8](#) in which he bolsters his claim from verse [5](#). His sentiment about the righteousness we receive is reflected in David's proclamations, quoted from [Psalm 32:1–2](#). **The focus here is not on forgiveness being a gift, but on the blessing that comes from receiving this unmerited favor.**

We might think that Paul's argument in [4:1–8](#) would end any debate about the nature of justification by faith and its relationship to works. But Paul goes on to tackle several other potential counter-arguments to demonstrate the free and unmerited nature of the justification God offers through Jesus' death and resurrection.

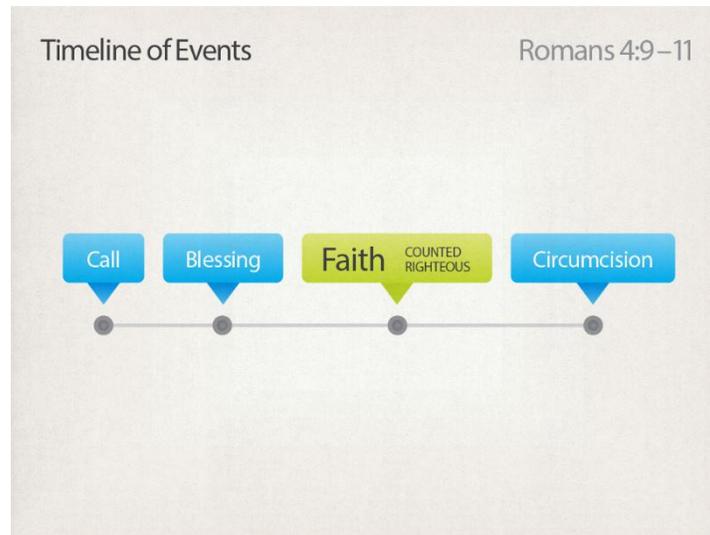
Romans 4:9–25

Many English Bibles include a paragraph break at [4:9](#) but do not have a new topic heading until verse [13](#). The Greek word introducing verse [9](#) suggests the sentence acts as a summary proposition drawn from the preceding argument. Again Paul uses a rhetorical question and answer to introduce a big idea—the role Abraham's circumcision played in him being credited with righteousness. If Abraham's faith brought about his justification, then what role does circumcision play? Abraham's experience also has implications for those who come after him—if circumcision qualified Abraham for his blessing of righteousness, then the same should hold true for us.



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Paul tackles this issue by looking at the chronological order of events. Which came first, circumcision or being declared righteous? After clarifying the timeline, Paul draws some conclusions.



Timeline of Events: Timing is everything, especially for those claiming that Abraham's circumcision played a role in God declaring him righteous. Paul recounts the timeline of events to highlight that Abraham was declared righteous before receiving the sign of circumcision, not after.

Paul asks a question in verse [9](#) without providing an immediate answer. He asks several more questions in verse [10](#). Remember that the language from the Psalms quotation uses "blessing" instead of "gift" to characterize righteousness. Notice also that Paul's question concerns the exclusivity of the blessing, whether it is only for the circumcised or for everyone (i.e., the uncircumcised as well). He gives a partial answer at the end of verse [9](#), where he repeats the Genesis quotation he cited in [4:3](#). He cuts to the chase in verse [10](#), asking whether Abraham was circumcised or uncircumcised at the time he was credited with righteousness. In the second half of the verse, he answers with both positive and negative statements to reinforce his point.

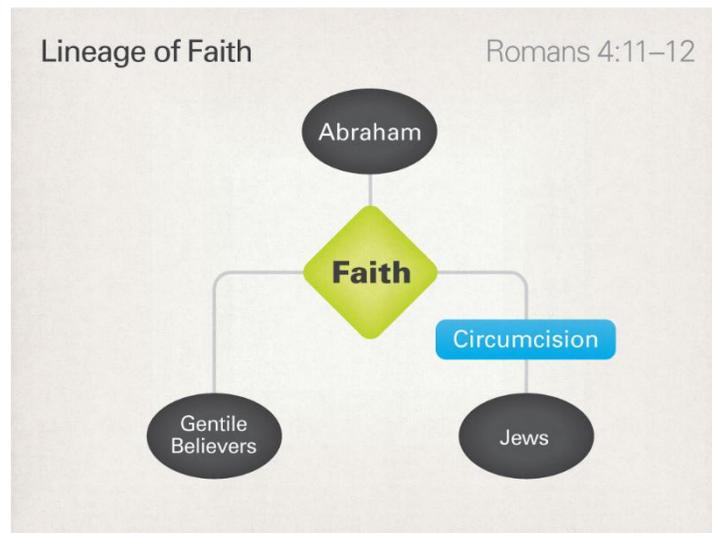
What role does Abraham's circumcision play, since it did not factor into his obtaining righteousness? Paul provides the answer in verse [11](#): Circumcision never figures into justification. Rather it is a sign, a seal of what has already been obtained by faith. Why

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does this matter? It opens the door for Abraham to be considered the father of *all* who believe, circumcised or not.

Paul describes one part of this “all who believe” at the end of verse [11](#)—the ones who believe “through uncircumcision.” The Greek wording makes this sound more like a path than a state of being, as in verse [10](#). Paul characterizes uncircumcision as if it were part of the means by which some obtained their righteousness. Paul words it just as he did the other means he has mentioned: “through the righteousness of faith” at the end [4:13](#) or nullifying the law “through faith” in [3:31](#). This first group believed through their uncircumcision. Stating it in this way, Paul heads off the possibility of misconstruing his claim. There is nothing deficient or lacking in how they obtained their justification.

In contrast, the second group is introduced through Paul’s statement that Abraham is the “father of the circumcised.” He goes on to elaborate that Abraham is father not only of the circumcised (in state, not by means), but also of those who follow in the footsteps: “the uncircumcised faith” of our father Abraham. It is a specific kind of faith—not their circumcision—that defines them. It is the faith that Abraham had *while uncircumcised*.



Lineage of Faith: Paul makes the bold claim that the heirs of Abraham’s promise are those who respond in faith. Therefore, both Jewish and Gentile believers are counted as heirs. Circumcision (or lack of it) does not affect this status.

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Talk about a slap in the face—Paul has reversed the expected descriptions for these groups. Abraham has always been thought of as the father of the circumcised. His faith might have been credited as righteousness, but circumcision has traditionally been his link to his descendants. The uncircumcised Gentiles are late arrivals who have been grafted into the family tree after the fact, as in [11:17–20](#), where native branches were broken off to make room for the wild olive branches to be included. Here, though, Paul characterizes the situation as if circumcised believers are following in the footsteps of the uncircumcised believers, of whom Abraham is the father. Paul does not use “means” language of any kind in his description of the circumcised. He describes circumcision as a state that by itself is not sufficient to qualify people as descendants. It is their faith that qualifies them, nothing else—an uncircumcised faith, the kind Abraham had when it was credited to him as righteousness.

Wow! Despite the clear and unchanged chronology of events, Paul’s audience likely treated circumcision as part of justification. This belief was the motivation for Jewish believers who wanted Gentile believers to adopt Jewish practices, as in [Acts 15:1](#). Over time, cultural mores can take on greater significance in practice, even if we understand theologically that they are secondary. We must keep in mind that we are not immune to making our own additions today.

Although [4:13](#) begins a new paragraph in most Bibles, it is clearly marked in Greek as supporting information for verses [10–12](#). Paul adds information to his argument, but it is not his next new point. The rest of chapter 4 offers support for his assertion that Abraham was circumcised after his faith was credited as righteousness, and that circumcision was a sign or seal of this righteousness.

Paul uses positive and negative statements to say the same thing twice in [4:13](#). Either would have been sufficient, but stating in verse [13](#) that the promises to Abraham were not given through the law sets the stage for the supporting statement in verse [14](#): If the promises came about through the law, then faith is void and the promises null.



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Abraham

Genesis 6–8	Worldwide flood destroys all except eight people: Noah, his three sons, and their wives.
Genesis 9–10	Noah's sons and their wives repopulate the earth.
Genesis 11:1–26	Abraham (Abram) descends from Noah's son Shem. Abraham's father's (Terah) family resides in Ur in southern Mesopotamia (modern Iran).
Genesis 11:27–32	Terah moves his household northwest to Haran (modern Syria) in anticipation of settling in Canaan. Terah dies in Haran.
Genesis 12:1–8	God calls Abraham to leave Haran and go to Canaan. There he makes promises to him about his and his descendants' future.
Genesis 12:9–14:24	Abraham sojourns in Canaan, Egypt, and the Negev.
Genesis 15	God makes promises to Abraham about his descendants (vv. 4–5) <i>and declares Abraham righteous when Abraham trusts in those promises</i> (v. 6).
Genesis 16	Ishmael, an “illegitimate” son, is born to Sarah's maid Hagar, when Abraham was 86 years old (v. 15). The implication is that Abraham was 85 when he was declared righteous since Ishmael was apparently conceived and born after the promise of a son to which Abraham responded in faith (15:4–6).
Genesis 17	Rite of circumcision instituted as a sign and seal of God's promise and Abraham's faith-response (v. 11). This is when Abraham is 99 years old and Ishmael is 13

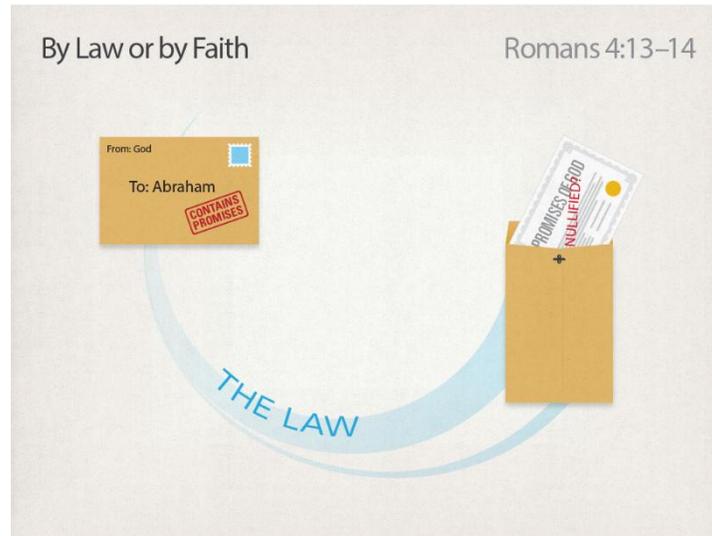


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	(17:1, 24–25). <i>Therefore, if Abraham was 85 years old when declared righteous, justification occurred 14 years before he was circumcised at age 99.</i>
Then, skipping forward to ...	
Exodus 20	The law is given, 430 years <i>after the giving of the promise</i> (Gal. 3:17). The 430 years is from Exodus 12:40, and is the number of years Israel was enslaved in Egypt. (The Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, indicates that 435 years was the period of time Israel was in Egypt <i>and in Canaan</i> , which would then amount to a span from Abraham to the giving of the Law. However, the actual number of years from Genesis 15 to Exodus 20 would be considerably more than 435. Paul's point in Galatians is not chronology, but theology: the promise given to Abraham was not just for him and his immediate descendants, and was not replaced by law at Sinai. If it had been only for Abraham and been fulfilled in his lifetime, the Law would have superceded it as a separate agreement. But since Abraham's inheritance of land, seed, and blessing [Gen. 12:1–3] were not completely fulfilled in his lifetime [nor 430 years later] the promise still stands and is not abrogated by the giving of the law at Sinai. The law and its works does not set aside the promise and its faith as the basis of man's relationship with God.)



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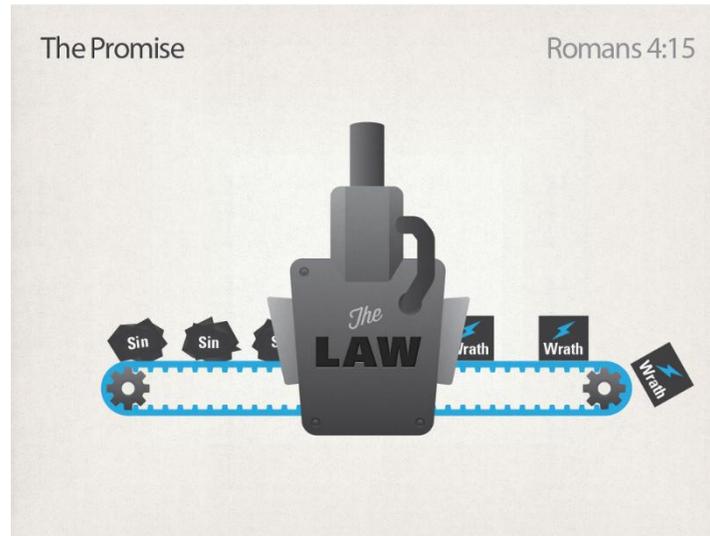


By Law or by Faith: How is it that Abraham received the promises of God? Was it through the law or by faith? If it was through the law, then the promises are nullified.

Paul's next support statement, in verse [15](#), describes what the law does produce—wrath stemming from the judgment of sin. Note that this only happens where the law exists. No law means no sin. The context of Paul's argument here is similar to that of [2:12](#), where Paul suggests that the Gentiles respond to a different sort of law, one which is written on their hearts. Here he simply considers what the law produces, not the potential response to it. The differing arguments lead to differing conclusions all stemming from a very similar starting point.

Recall that in [Romans 3](#), Paul asked whether some Jews' unbelief nullified God's promise. Here he considers how these promises came about in the first place. If some received the promises based on keeping the law, then according to Paul these promises are nullified.

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The Promise: The law promotes knowledge of sin, and thus was never intended to produce anything besides wrath.

Why? The law produces nothing but wrath, as it was designed to do. It reveals God's character to a sinful world in order to convict people of their sin.

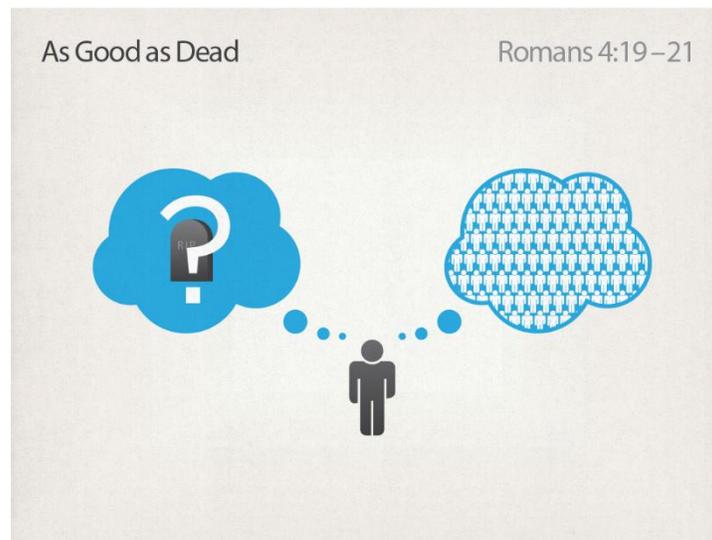
In [4:16](#) Paul draws a logical conclusion from his statements in verses [14–15](#), affirming his initial claim in verse [13](#) about the promise being based on faith rather than the law or works. He places the two beneficiaries in opposite order from that of [4:11–12](#), but with the same “not only ... but also” connection. Instead of “circumcised” versus “uncircumcised,” he describes them as “those of the law” versus “those of the faith of Abraham.” Although it is clear which is which, Paul manipulates the terminology to thematically characterize each group for the purpose of his present argument. This is not just stylistic variation. Despite the significance Paul has attributed to faith, he casts Jews as if they are not in this faith-based group. We might have expected “those of the law” versus “those not of the law,” or “those with the faith of Abraham” versus “those without the faith of Abraham.” Instead we find a mixed metaphor. After all, not every Gentile possesses Abraham’s faith—only those who believe. Nevertheless, Paul paints with broad strokes to accomplish the rhetorical task at hand.

The end of the chapter focuses on the impossibility of the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham: It's not just that he had many descendants, but that he and Sarah

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began their family well after the expected childbearing years. Paul includes extra thematic information at the end of verse [17](#) that re-characterizes God as the one who makes the dead live and calls things into being that don't exist. This image of God sets the stage for the exposition Paul offers next.

He also recasts Abraham as one who hoped and believed that God could fulfill what He had promised ([4:18](#)). By doing this, Paul gives us a glimpse, in verse [19](#), into how Abraham likely saw himself—as good as dead based on his advanced age, besides the fact that Sarah was barren.



As Good as Dead: Abraham's decision to trust God's promises did not come at a time when he had any hope of obtaining an heir naturally. He and Sarah were far beyond childbearing age, requiring a supernatural solution in order for the promise of heirs to be fulfilled.

So it's not just that Abraham received a promise and was willing to believe. He received an unbelievable promise, one that sounded impossible without some kind of divine intervention. This impossibility explains why Sarah offered her handmaid as a wife (see [Genesis 16](#)) since she couldn't begin to imagine that she could have children. In [4:20-21](#) Paul describes Abraham as unwavering and fully convinced in his belief. In [4:22](#) the Greek marks that Paul is drawing out his summary conclusion: Abraham shows complete and unwavering faith when faced with logical impossibilities, and this faith is credited to

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him as righteousness. **This is the benchmark Paul puts forward—this is the kind of faith that saves.**

Paul closes with a reminder that his quoting of this significant verse from [Genesis 15](#) was not an “attaboy” for Abraham, who is long since dead and buried. He quotes it for our belief, throwing down a gauntlet that would challenge everyone. He challenges the notion that works or outward signs like circumcision have any effect on God’s assessment of our lives. What matters is our unwavering faith in something that makes little sense—believing that God is both willing and able to accomplish what He has promised. **And this reliance on faith is not some late development in God’s grand scheme of things—it has always been the sole basis for justification, as Paul’s case study of Abraham’s life makes clear.**

With this case study, Paul also provides specific evidence to support his claim that “righteousness by faith” has been attested by the law and the prophets ([3:21](#)). By going back to where it all began with God choosing a people for Himself, Paul definitively demonstrates that his message supports and upholds the law and its teachings. Rather than overthrowing or contradicting the law, his quotations provide evidence that faith has always been the means of obtaining God’s gracious gift. The gospel is not a new plan, but fulfilment of what has long been anticipated by faith in things not yet seen.

Principles

- Attaining righteousness by grace as a gift through faith results in boasting—but boasting in God.
- There is nothing anyone can do to attain righteousness before God on their own.
- Works that glorify God are always preceded by faith.
- Faith is a “human” instrument; not a Gentile or Jewish instrument. Anyone wanting to know God may do so by faith.
- Abraham’s true descendants are those who know God by faith.
- True faith has God’s words and actions (his character and power) as its basis.



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Applications

- Has anyone recently heard me boasting of anything except that which God by grace has supplied?
- Can I identify anything in my life or ministry that I am tempted to think gives me standing before God (other than my faith in Christ)?
- Have I ever clouded the gospel message in any way that makes it less than totally available to anyone at any time by faith alone?
- Have I allowed the sole category of "faith in Christ" to dissolve all other categories and barriers into which the church sometimes places groups of believers?
- Is my faith weak because of a lack of intimacy and experience with God's character and his power?

