

THE BLESSINGS PROMISED TO ABRAHAM (vv. 7-9)

As Paul has already pointed out, our faith is not only credited to us as righteousness, it also places us in the family of God, as Abraham's rightful heirs and secures for us the blessings promised to Abraham.

VERSES 7-9 Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. ⁸Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." ⁹So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

1. How do you think Paul's detractors would have told the believers in Galatia that they could become "children of Abraham?"
2. How does Paul describe what it means to be a true heir of Abraham?
3. What are some of the blessings we receive by faith "along with Abraham, the man of faith?"
4. What would be some of the major differences between a person who relies on "works of the law" rather than "believing what they heard?"
5. How can we make sure we are responding to God by "believing what we have heard" rather than simply pursuing empty "works of the law?"



360 DISCUSSION 03.12.17

ABRAHAM'S CHILDREN

GALATIANS 3:5-9



The story of redemption begins a lot like the opening crawl from "Star Wars," "A long time ago in a galaxy far far away..."

While we are still in the same galaxy, it was a long time ago, and in a land that would be as strange to us as many of the ancient civilizations depicted in the Star Wars sagas.

The story begins with Abram, we know him as Abraham, but before his dramatic encounter with God he was simply known as Abram.

We have no idea what Abram's life might have been like before we meet him in the pages of Scripture, but by the time we meet him he is already seventy-five years old. Most of us hope our life will be winding down by the time we are seventy-five, but Abram's life was just beginning.

Without much warning we are invited to witness a moment between Abram and the living God. Genesis 12 begins with the words,

¹"The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you."

The outrageous demand that God makes upon Abram is followed by one of the most incredible promises in Scripture.

²"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM (vv. 5-6)

According to Paul, that last line wasn't written for Abraham's benefit, it was written for us. God had you and me in mind when he told Abram, "All the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you."

In response to God's promise, Abram uproots his life and begins to follow God to a place that will be revealed to him along the way. He will not know exactly where he is going until he gets there. When he finally arrives, God tells him to take in the panorama that stretches out before him, and promises to give everything Abram can see, and much more, to his descendants after him.

Fast forward fifteen years. Abram has been living in a tent. Although God promised Abram numerous descendants and a spacious land, the clock is running down. Abram is in his nineties. He doesn't own one square inch of real estate, and more importantly he does not have a heir. He and Sarai are childless.

We pick up Abram's story in Genesis 15.

¹After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

²But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"

³And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

⁴Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir."⁵ He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

⁶Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Once again, Paul tells us the last line wasn't simply written for Abram's benefit. It was written for you and me. It is the very foundation of how we come into a right relationship with God and enjoy his blessings—the blessings that, in fact, were promised to Abram.

Paul tells us that those who believe God the way Abraham believed God, are the ones who will enjoy the blessings of God that were promised to Abraham.

Paul has already made a huge distinction between "the works of the law" and "believing what you heard." When we rely on "works of the law" we place great confidence in our ability to secure and enjoy God's blessing for ourselves. When we "believe what we have heard," we place great confidence in God's ability to deliver on his promises and bring us into a right relationship with him.

In verse 6, Paul reminds us that faith has always been the hallmark of people who enjoyed a vibrant relationship with God. The gospel as we know it, didn't begin with us, or even the first century church, it began with Abraham.

VERSES 5-6 So again I ask, does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you by the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?⁶ So also Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

1. When Paul refers to "believing what you heard," what is he talking about?
2. According to this passage, what are the results of "believing what you heard?"
3. What do you think it means to have righteousness credited to you?
4. What does it tell you about Abraham, that he needed righteousness credited to him?"
5. What does it tell you about us, that we need righteousness credited to us?
6. Why are "works of the law" inadequate for achieving the same result?



360 BIBLE STUDIES 03.12.17

PAUL'S STUDY NOTES | GALATIANS 3:5-9

ESSENCE OF THE TEXT: Those who have faith like that of Abraham are sons of Abraham, justified before God, and beneficiaries of the promises made to Abraham.

ANALYTICAL OUTLINE

I. ABRAHAM'S FAITH (vv. 5-6)

- A. ⁵ So then, does God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law?
- B. Or is it by believing what you heard — ⁶ just like Abraham who believed God,[†] and it was credited to him for righteousness?

II. ABRAHAM'S CHILDREN (vv. 7-9)

- A. ⁷ You know, then, that those who have faith, these are Abraham's sons.
- B. ⁸ Now the Scripture saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and proclaimed the gospel ahead of time to Abraham,[†] saying, All the nations[‡] will be blessed through you.
- C. ⁹ Consequently those who have faith are blessed with Abraham,⁻who had faith.

COMMENTARY

⁵ So then, does God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law? Or is it by believing what you heard — ⁶ just like Abraham who believed God,[†] and it was credited to him for righteousness?

First-century Judaism generally focused on Abraham's obedience, and especially the obedience he so memorably revealed when God "tested" him by calling on him to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22). On the basis of Gen. 26:5, Jewish interpreters also viewed Abraham's obedience as directed to the law itself (see the additional note on 3:6). The agitators were probably using this view of Abraham to argue that righteousness was tied to doing the law. The appeal to Gen. 15:6 may, then, be a reflection of Paul's own reading of the Abraham narrative (Martyn 1997: 297). MOO

Paul teaches here that Abraham's right standing with God was a result of his trust in God. The conjunction "just as" (καθώς), links 3:6 with 3:1–5. Scholars dispute the significance of the connection between 3:1–5 and 3:6. Can we infer from the use of the conjunction that Paul argues that Abraham received the Spirit just as the Galatians have? Can we go further and infer from this that the term "righteousness" is not merely forensic but also includes the idea of transformation since those who are righteous

have also received the Spirit? Such conclusions overread the connection between 3:1–5 and 3:6. Elsewhere in Paul and the rest of the NT, the gift of the Spirit is considered to be a gift of the eschaton. This is not to say, of course, that the Spirit was not active in the OT, but nowhere else in the OT or the NT do we find the claim that Abraham had the Spirit. It seems the connection between 3:1–5 and 3:6 is loose. The point of comparison is that both Abraham and the Galatians exercised faith. It also follows, then, that it is too ambitious to derive a definition of the term “righteousness” by the use of this conjunction. Finding a transformative meaning for righteousness must be established on other grounds. Indeed, I will argue shortly that the context supports a forensic meaning instead. SCHREINER

Just as God supplies the Spirit and works miracles among them ‘by hearing of faith’, so it was by faith that he justified Abraham. The connexion implied in καθῶς would be lost unless there were the closest possible link between receiving the Spirit and being justified. True, Abraham could not be said to have received the Spirit through faith, for he lived in the age of promise, not of fulfilment (see note on v 14). The Galatians, who lived in the age of fulfilment, had received the Spirit as well as righteous standing before God—alike by faith. Similarly, it was ‘by the hearing of faith’ and not by legal works that Abraham received a righteous standing before God. When he heard the promise of God, he believed, ‘and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’. BRUCE

In addition to misunderstanding the gospel, the Judaizers were also guilty of misunderstanding the Old Testament. Therefore, in order to refute their performance-based version of Christianity, Paul had to go back to the Hebrew Scriptures. In verses 1 through 5, his argument for justification by faith alone appealed to experience—the Galatian experience of the Holy Spirit. In verses 6 and following, he argues for faith alone on the basis of biblical history, using Abraham as a test case: “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Gal. 3:6). RYKEN

Paul’s choice of an Old Testament text was inspired. The Judaizers loved to go back to Genesis 17, where God’s covenant with Abraham was signified by circumcision. But Paul went back even further, to God’s promise of a child in Genesis 15.

- God made Abraham quite a few promises in his time: “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’ ” (Gen. 12:1). Then God promised to make him into a great nation, to bless him, and to make his name great (Gen. 12:2–3). Abraham believed God’s promises. No sooner had he received his instructions than he “went, as the Lord had told him” (Gen. 12:4). In its short biographical summary of this period in Abraham’s life, the book of Hebrews says: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb. 11:8–10). So Abraham left the land of his fathers and journeyed by faith to the Promised Land.
- Some years later, God came to Abraham with another promise. This time it was the promise of a son. Frankly, it was hard to believe. In the past, God had promised him land, but Abraham still did not own any property. Now he was promised an heir, but he still didn’t have any children. And he wasn’t getting any younger either! In fact, he was pushing one hundred. Abraham, a father, at that age?
- To show Abraham what he had in mind, God took him outside and showed him the stars. He said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said, “So shall your offspring be” (Gen. 15:5). What God promised to do for Abraham was impossible. Yet Abraham believed that God would make it so. He took the promise the way every divine promise ought to be taken: by faith. As the Scripture says, “He believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as

righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Or, as Paul quoted it for the Galatians, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Gal. 3:6).

- What Paul emphasized was the result of Abraham’s faith. His faith was “counted” or “credited” (elogisthē) to him as righteousness. When Abraham believed, God reckoned that he was righteous. To put it in financial terms, he accounted him righteous. Trusting God was like opening a bank account. Immediately, God transferred righteousness into Abraham’s account.
- This does not mean that Abraham was actually righteous, only that he was declared righteous. He was considered to have a right standing before God. To use the proper theological term, God “imputed” righteousness to Abraham. God is the one who has the legal right to state whether a man is righteous or unrighteous, and in this case, he considered Abraham righteous through his faith. RYKEN

[Genesis 15:6] is one of Paul’s two key-texts for his teaching about justification by faith (cf. Rom. 4:3), the other being Hab. 2:4b (quoted in v 11 below; cf. Rom. 1:17). BRUCE

Paul does not discount Abraham’s obedience (cf. Rom 4). Nevertheless, in contrast to Jewish Second Temple literature, Paul puts the accent on Abraham’s faith. That faith was the fundamental reality of his life. Genesis 15:6 takes center stage in Paul’s understanding of Abraham. In Gen 15 Abraham wondered if his only heir would be his servant, Eliezer. The Lord promised him that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars of heaven. Abraham responded to that stunning promise by believing in what the Lord said. He did not perform any astonishing works for God but trusted in him. Genesis 15 concludes with the Lord himself, symbolized by fire, passing through the pieces of the animals alone, demonstrating that the covenant would be fulfilled by the Lord alone. Hence, the entirety of Gen 15 focuses on the work of the Lord and Abraham’s trust in what the Lord would do on his behalf. SCHREINER

Nor does Paul suggest that Abraham’s faith was his righteousness, as if faith could be considered to be a kind of work that makes one righteous before God. Rather, faith is counted as righteousness because it unites believers to Christ, who is their righteousness. Such a conclusion fits with one of Paul’s major themes in Galatians, i.e., that the Galatians’ righteousness derives from the cross of Christ. SCHREINER

But for Paul it is not only that Abraham was characterized by faith (a point that first-century Jews and the agitators would not contest). What is particularly important for Paul is to show that (1) the “blessing” of faith for righteousness was always intended to include Gentiles (vv. 8, 14; cf. “you all” in v. 26); and (2) faith is in itself adequate to secure this righteous standing with God. MOO

What gives rise to Paul’s confidence in the ability of faith “alone” to justify is his insistence that faith brings people into union with Christ (vv. 14, 26–29). It therefore is Paul’s conviction about the utter adequacy of Christ that engenders his insistence on the adequacy of faith. MOO

⁷ You know, then, that those who have faith, these are Abraham’s sons.

The verb “know” (γινώσκετε) could be an indicative or an imperative, and the meaning does not change dramatically on either scenario. It seems more likely that we have an imperative here, for Paul forcefully calls on the Galatians to realize a truth that has presently evaded them. What is required to be part of Abraham’s family, to be counted as his sons? Not circumcision or the other works required by the law. Those who belong to Abraham’s family believe just as Abraham did, for Abraham lived before the law

was even given. Therefore, his faith was what constituted him as righteous before God. The Galatians, then, do not need to be circumcised to be Abraham's sons. They are already his children if their faith is in Christ Jesus. SCHREINER

In Paul's exposition of salvation-history the Gentiles occupy a special place, as they did in God's promise to Abraham. The promise that in (or rather with) Abraham and his offspring all the nations of the earth—i.e. all the Gentiles (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη)—would be blessed was fulfilled in Christ, Abraham's offspring par excellence. BRUCE

The Galatians were being urged to become children of Abraham by adoption (since they were not his children by natural birth), and this, they were told, involved circumcision, just as it did for proselytes from paganism to Judaism. Paul maintains that, having believed the gospel and received God's gift of righteousness, they are Abraham's children already, in the only sense that matters in God's sight. Abraham's heritage is the heritage of faith, and those who share this heritage are thereby manifested as sons of Abraham. BRUCE

⁸ Now the Scripture saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and proclaimed the gospel ahead of time to Abraham,¹ saying, All the nations¹ will be blessed through you.

In verse 6 Paul proved that justification by faith was God's plan for Abraham. In verse 7 he showed that people like the Galatians could become Abraham's children by the same faith. Then in verse 8 he proves that justification by faith alone has always been God's plan for all people everywhere: "And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed' " (Gal. 3:8). RYKEN

This quotation takes us even further back in Abraham's story, to the very first promise God ever made to him: "And I will make of you a great nation, ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2–3). There is also an echo in Galatians from Genesis 18:18, where God said, "Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him." RYKEN

Because it was written by God—through human authors, of course—the Bible speaks with one mind and one message. That one message is justification by faith alone. God's plan of salvation, the covenant of grace, runs from Abraham right through to Christ: "The Scripture ... preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham" (Gal. 3:8). What God said to Abraham was nothing less than a proclamation of the gospel. Christians sometimes sing about "the old, old story of Jesus and his love." The story is older than some people realize. It goes back at least to the days of Abraham. Indeed, it goes all the way back to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15), who were the first to hear it. Ultimately, the good news of the Old Testament is the good news about Jesus Christ. RYKEN

The written text (γραφῆ) of Gn. 12:3 or 18:18 is, of course, centuries later than the lifetime of Abraham. But the scripture embodies and perpetuates the promise, so that the good news which was 'preached beforehand' to Abraham is still preached by the scripture to those who read it or hear it read, especially to those living in an age when the promise has been fulfilled. If the promise was good news for Abraham, it is good news also for the nations (Gentiles) who are to be blessed in (or with) him. BRUCE

Justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone has always been the very heart of God's plan for the salvation of sinners. Thus Ernst Käsemann has rightly concluded that "justification remains the centre, the beginning and the end of salvation history." RYKEN

⁹ Consequently those who have faith are blessed with Abraham, who had faith.

Therefore, what Paul emphasizes here is that the Galatians are blessed with (σύν) the believing Abraham. He does not say that they are blessed in or through Abraham. Indeed, the entire paragraph is repetitive intentionally, stressing that faith makes one a child of Abraham and allows one to receive the blessing of Abraham. SCHREINER

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