

Favor, For Free

August 28, 2022

Paul's first major reason for writing this letter to the church at Rome was to correct their thinking about salvation; that is, who would go to be with God when they die. It was widely held by Jews that circumcision was the key that opened the door to salvation. As taught in the Midrash, a compilation of rabbinical interpretations of the Torah, it is not possible that a circumcised man can be prevented from going to heaven and it is not possible that an uncircumcised man can go to heaven. In other words, circumcision earns you favor with God.

Brit Milah is the ceremony during which a circumcision is performed on Jewish baby boys when they are 8 days old. The final blessing that is made at a Brit Milah ceremony is:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who sanctified the beloved one from the womb, set His statute in his flesh, and sealed his descendants with the sign of the holy Covenant. Therefore, as a reward of this (circumcision), the living God, our Portion, our Rock, has ordained that the beloved of our flesh be saved from the abyss, for the sake of the Covenant which He has set in our flesh. Blessed are You Lord, who makes the Covenant.

The Jews taught that because of the covenant with Abraham, circumcision secured salvation. This covenant was a one-sided covenant, dependent on the faithfulness of God only. Paul had believed all the Jewish doctrine until he met his Messiah on the road to Damascus. This encounter changed him—he became a new creation – and has made an immeasurable impact on the whole world.

After an initial greeting and introductory remarks to the church at Rome, Paul immediately begins to correct the Jews misunderstanding of the way of salvation: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" (Romans 1:16-17)

In verses eighteen through thirty-two of Chapter One, Paul has described the downward spiral of the behavior and consequences of the ungodly. He continues his argument by pointing out that the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness with the punishment being death. At this point, his readers are probably in agreement with him that those filthy, Gentile dogs deserve to die. However, he essentially slaps them in the face when he says, "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things." (Romans 2:1) And "But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." (Romans 2:5) He continues his assertions by quoting from Psalms fourteen and fifty-three, 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.' (Romans 3:9-12) He then asks the rhetorical

question, “What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.”

After reading these accusations, more than likely many of the Jews were quite angry with Paul for equating them to the despised Gentiles. However, Paul knew that before the Jews could embrace the good news of salvation by grace, they had to renounce their belief in salvation by merit and confess their lostness. The Jews thought they earned God’s favor by circumcision and by being obedient to the law, but had Paul stated in Romans 3:20 that no one is justified by works of the law; for the law only brings knowledge of sin. Being told that their way of salvation is wrong begs the question: *How then does a person acquire righteousness?* Paul addressed this in Romans 3:21-24 – it is a gift from God through faith in Jesus Christ, apart from the law. (Also see Ephesians 2:8-9)

If the Jews had earnestly sought truth, they would have understood the fact that Abram, an idol worshiper, being called to be their first patriarch was solely an act of God’s grace; Abram had no merit of his own. This is Paul’s point in the opening verses of Chapter Four: Abraham was justified by faith, not by works.

Salvation being a gift from God through faith is unique to the Christian faith. All other religions require various types of good works in order to receive favor with God. For example, Hindus believe in a plethora of gods with Shiva being the greatest god. They teach that you must go to temple every Monday with a clean mind and body to offer prayers. When you go, dress nicely, offer milk and honey to Lord Shiva by dripping in through a copper pot with a hole in it that drips onto an image of Shiva. You say a special chant while doing this and Shiva is propitiated by this offering. He looks favorably upon you.

Hindus do not claim to be Christian, but Catholics do. The strict adherents to Roman Catholicism believe that you will be saved from hell if you go to church every week, dress nicely, and participate in all the sacraments of the church. “The Roman Catholic Church has seven holy sacraments that are seen as mystical channels of divine grace, instituted by Christ. Each is celebrated with a visible rite, which reflects the invisible, spiritual essence of the sacrament. Whereas some sacraments are received only once, others require active and ongoing participation to foster the ‘living faith’ of the celebrant. Baptism is seen as the sacrament of admission to the faith, bringing sanctifying grace to the person being baptized.” (<https://www.britannica.com/list/the-seven-sacraments-of-the-roman-catholic-church>) The remaining six sacraments are Eucharist, Confirmation, Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Marriage and Ordination. The church teaches that since no one except those canonized (declared to be Saints) are sinless, all others go to purgatory until they have suffered sufficiently to pay the penalty for their sins. Praying those in purgatory and giving financially can shorten the person’s time there.

What do these, and all other false religions, have in common? They are based on a concept that it is a Ceremony that Saves. True biblical Christianity is based on a Person, Jesus Christ. Our righteousness is based on His righteousness. He is our propitiator; His righteousness is imputed

to us by faith, and it guarantees God's favor. God's favor toward His children is evidenced clearly in 1 John 4:9-10, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

All false religions teach that we must be our own propitiator. Because of our pride, this concept appeals to us; we want to think that we earn our salvation, and we can pay the penalty for our own sins. We want to be judged by the Covenant of Works instituted in the Garden; we are fooling ourselves if we think we can keep this covenant. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones said it well, "It is the whole tragedy of mankind that it keeps on arguing against its own salvation. Man in sin is always anxious to claim a little credit for himself. He resents the doctrine that salvation is solely and entirely the free gift of God."

Paul makes a critical distinction between false religions and biblical Christianity: No ceremony can save us, no checklist can save us; it is God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ that saves us, so that He gets all the glory. Paul anticipates the objections to this, for he knows that Jews believe salvation comes through circumcision and in keeping the law. So, Paul sweeps away these objections by launching into a case study of their father Abraham. Paul argues from the greater to the lesser. If salvation works this way for the Father of the Jewish people, the father of all the faithful, then it works this way for his descendants. If election works this way for Jacob and Esau it works this way for us.

In Romans 4:1-8, Paul relies on Genesis 15:6 to prove that Abraham was declared righteous by faith, not by works – "And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness." If Abraham had done anything to help secure his right standing before God, then he would have something to boast about – but not before God. Paul also argues that to the one who works, his wages are his due, not a gift. Then Paul quotes Psalm 32:1-2, 10 where David had acknowledged God's blessing on those who trust in the Lord. The Jews would say that the blessings of Psalm 32 are only for them.

In **Romans 4:9**, Paul challenges their understanding of God's blessings by asking, "Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?" For Paul's Jewish readers this would be a hot button issue. Prior to Messiah's advent, this would not be controversial; all Jews would agree that God's blessing was only for the circumcised. However, the controversy developed when Jews who acknowledged Jesus as their Messiah, saw Gentiles also coming to faith in Christ. When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch at the end of Paul's first missionary journey, some men came from Jerusalem and argued, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." (Acts 15:1) John MacArthur said that these Judaizers "were self-appointed guardians of legalism."

To resolve this matter, Paul, Barnabas and others were appointed to inquire of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. "But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.'" (Acts

15:6). After much deliberation, this Jerusalem Council decided that it was sufficient to only command the Gentiles to “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.” (Acts 15:29) Paul’s letter to the Galatian was penned in large part because of this heresy. Stephen was stoned to death after he reminded the Jews of their history, then claimed that members of the Jewish religious rulers were uncircumcised in heart and ears. He said they opposed the Holy Spirit and refused to believe the prophets who had foretold of The Messiah, whom they had murdered. (Acts 7:51).

In **Romans 4:10**, in order to help his readers understand the role of faith and circumcision, Paul asks the question, *When was Abraham circumcised and when was he counted righteous?* Paul forces the Jews to reexamine their teaching that circumcision secures salvation. Genesis clearly teaches that Abraham was seventy-five years old when he departed Haran for Canaan. (Genesis 12:4) Abraham was counted righteous when he believed God that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars. (Genesis 15:6) Then after living in Canaan for ten years (Abraham was 85 then), barren Sarah gave her Egyptian servant, Hagar, to Abraham to birth a child for them. (Genesis 16:3) Abraham was 86 years old when Ishmael was born to Hagar. (Genesis 16:16) The covenant of circumcision was given to Abraham when he was 99 years old. (Genesis 17:1-10) The point that Paul is making is that circumcision came after Abraham was declared righteous; in Abraham’s case it was roughly 24 years after. The sign of the reality came after the reality itself. For the Christian, baptism, the sign of faith in Christ, comes after the reality, faith in Christ. (See for example: Mark 1:5; Acts 2:41; Acts 8:12; Acts 10:47-48; Acts 16:13-16; Acts 16:31-33; Acts 18:8; & Acts 19:1-5)

Paul’s elegant argument effectively decouples justification from any earned righteousness that could potentially be derived from obedience to circumcision, and here Paul destroys any argument that ceremony can be our propitiation. But church family, could it be that *salvation by ceremony thinking* may be alive and well in this congregation?

- ❖ Do you come from a church background that teaches Baptismal Regeneration, that you are forever justified before God by your baptism?
- ❖ Do you come from a church background that teaches that infant baptism saves?
- ❖ Do you come from a church background that teaches that infant baptism conveys some type of blessing to the child?

R. C. Sproul, who espoused infant baptism, taught that if your child has not been baptized as an infant then he is impoverished. By missing this ceremony, he is missing part of the blessings of God. Sproul also said, “What is conveyed to an infant at baptism is a sign of God’s promise to give that child the benefits of the person and work of Christ when he comes to faith. Baptism is the sign of the covenant, which is that God promises salvation to all who believe. It does not convey faith, nor does it convey the benefits. However, the sign does convey, symbolically, the promise of God to all who believe.” (<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/qas/what-is-conveyed-to-an-infant-at-baptism>)

The problem with infant baptism is that the sign occurs before the reality, contrary to what Paul is teaching from the example of Abraham.

If you are a true believer in Christ and a parent, you probably desire, more than anything else, that your children come to saving faith. Life is complex and many decisions have to be made: What type of schooling is best for my child? What activities are best for my child? How do I steer my child to the friends that will be the best influence for my child? How do I teach morality to my child? Etc. These are all legitimate concerns and will have an impact on our child. However, we must keep in mind that the most important decision in life, trusting in Christ, is really not in our hands. If we think it is, then we are robbing Christ of His Kingship and stealing His glory; we are trusting in *salvation by ceremony*. If, as church leaders or teachers, we think we are responsible for the salvation of the congregation, we also are trusting in *salvation by ceremony*. God expects us to give our best effort to all we do (See Colossians 3:23), but if we are trusting in salvation by ceremony, we are assuming a responsibility that doesn't belong to us. Perhaps the greatest paradox in life is that God chose before the foundations of the world who would be saved and yet we are personally responsible for receiving or rejecting His free offer of grace. Belief in the promise is the only way to the blessing; it was for Abraham, and it is for us

In **Romans 4:11**, Paul explains that circumcision is only a sign. So, what does a sign do? It points to something. What does the sign of circumcision point to? It points to Abraham being justified by faith in God's promises to make him a great nation AND that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him. (Genesis 12:2-3). Hebrews 11:12 confirms that Abraham was justified in his faith in the promises, "Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore." Paul would later explain to the Galatians, "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ." (Galatians 3:16) This offspring is the one promised in Genesis 3:15 – the coming Messiah who would crush Satan. This Child of the promise is our propitiation. Signs do not impart salvation; salvation comes always by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. The sign of circumcision is to point to salvation by Christ alone and not by works.

A second aspect of verse eleven is that Abraham "was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well." In other words, Abraham is the father of Gentile believers as well.

Romans 4:12 states that the reality of the sign makes Abraham "the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised." Thus, Abraham is not the father of all Jews, only those who believe in Jesus. Paul expounds on this further in Romans 9:6-8, "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring." The promise is to both believing Gentiles (all those who believe without being circumcised) and to the believing Jews who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the

footsteps of faith of Father Abraham. And so, Abraham's belief is expressed in obedience to this sign - not to save, but in worship of the Promise and to bear witness to that promise; a seal placed in the flesh.

Romans 4:13-14 introduces the subject of heirs of Abraham. These two verses emphasize that the righteousness of his heirs does not come by adherence to the law. Paul continues to drive home the point in Genesis 15:6 that Abraham "believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness." The promise did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith – just like it does for us. In Galatians 3:5-6, Paul brings in the idea of the Holy Spirit working in believers: "Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'"? Galatians 3:18 reminds us that the inheritance came by promise: "For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise." Galatians 3:10 brings a dire warning to those who try to earn salvation: "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.'" Unless you can keep the law *perfectly*, don't take the path of salvation by works, for you will be bringing God's curse upon yourself. However, if you believe in the Promised Seed, Jesus, then He has redeemed you from the curse by becoming a curse for you. (Galatians 3:13) So, salvation comes by promise, not by law.

Romans 4:15 warns that "the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression." If there is no speed limit, you cannot be charged with speeding. Romans 5:13 declares that "sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law." Does this mean that all sinners from the time of Adam until Moses received a *free pass*? No! Verse fourteen explains that death reigned from Adam to Moses. So, there was a penalty of death for sin even though there was no law. The explanation is in Romans 2:15 which says that the law is written on man's heart. Mankind knew he was sinning, but he continued to do so anyway.

In Romans 7, Paul laments the fact that he has a sinful nature leading him to do the things he doesn't want to do while keeping him from the things he does want to do. In verses eight through eleven he says, "Apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me." What then is the purpose of the law? Galatians 3:25 says "the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith." Rather than *guardian*, the King James Version of the Bible uses the word *schoolmaster*. The point of the law has always been to make us see that we must rely on God's grace through faith for salvation.

Romans 4:16-17 Paul states that since the law brings wrath, salvation, justification, being declared righteous "depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be

guaranteed to all his offspring ... in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” [NOTE: Parenthetical clause removed for clarity.]

Salvation rests on faith so that it can be by God’s grace alone. So that it is only the presence of creator-God that saves; it is only He who can give life. He is our God that calls something out of nothing. Only he can give life to the dead, sight to the blind, and declare the unrighteous, righteous. Just as God called a people from Abraham and his barren wife, so God calls to himself a people, which he justifies by grace through faith and this is not of ourselves, but is a gift of God. To him be the glory forever and ever amen.

In conclusion: No work, no checklist, no ceremony, no sacrament, no church, no doctrine, nothing we do can secure or even assist in our salvation. Salvation is by Grace Alone, through Faith Alone, in Christ Alone, for God’s Glory Alone. This is the message of Scripture Alone.

Selah:

1. What traditions do you hold onto that might not be scriptural?
2. What do you think you contribute to gaining favor with God?
3. What does the law of God do to help you in your daily life?