

## *Bible Study Romans chapter 4*

*4:1 “What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?*

By calling Abraham “our fathers,” Paul is directly referring to the Jewish Christians in his audience. Abraham is literally the father of the Jews in a way that he is not to his Roman, Greek, or any other Gentile readers. However, in Paul’s other writings, Paul states that Abraham is the spiritual father of Gentile Christians as well:

*“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28-29).*

Moreover, Christ said that being a physical descendant of Abraham is of little consequence. To his Jewish opponents who believed that their biological connection to Abraham made them special, Christ said:

*“Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones” (Luke 3:8).*

Abrahamic ancestry is not important unless it is accompanied by righteous actions (“bear fruits worthy of repentance”). It’s not about ancestry. It’s about actions.

*“<sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup> For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”*

The phrase “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness” is a quote from Genesis 15:6. The key to understanding this verse can be found in its original context.

*“But Abram said, ‘Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ Then Abram said, ‘Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!’*

*And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ‘This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.’ Then He brought him outside and said, ‘Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’*

*And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:2-6).*

God told Abraham would father a son, and Abraham believed the promise, and it was a righteous faith. However, for Abraham to receive this supernatural blessing of a son, he had to do something:

***“<sup>8</sup> And he said, “Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?”***

**God told him what he must do:**

***“So He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” <sup>10</sup> Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two” (vv. 8-9).”***

**This was a work, specifically performing a ritual animal sacrifice. He had to go find five specific animals, each of a specific age, kill them, and cut their carcasses in a specific way. Without doing that work, Abraham would not “inherit” the promise of a son. Those specific actions were absolutely necessary for Abraham to receive the promise of a son.**

**Our Protestant friends do not believe that doing works has any role in salvation. They believe that faith alone saves. Yet here is a verse and context from Genesis, quoted by Paul in the book of Romans, which says certain works are required to be saved. One could ask what would have happened if Abraham had believed that works have no role in receiving the promises of God?**

**What would have happened if Abraham had said at that moment, “Lord, thank you for promising me a son in my wife’s old age. I believe your promise. I believe you will make it so. Yes, you gave me certain actions to accomplish in order for me to “inherit” this promise. But I don’t believe that I really need to do those works. Therefore, if I do not gather the 3 year old heifer, 3 year old female goat, the 3 year old ram, a turtle dove and a pigeon, and if I do not cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other, that will make no difference. Thankfully, the vast majority of our Protestant friends do saving works even though they don’t believe they need to. They get baptized, forgive, help the poor, etc. However, the small minority that don’t do saving works are led astray because of the Protestant doctrine of “salvation by faith alone,” which is an enormous tragedy.**

**If Abraham had not performed the works God gave him, he would not have “inherited” the promise of Isaac.**

***“<sup>4</sup> Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.”***

**This verse rightly states that salvation is always salvation is always 100% grace. To this, Orthodoxy totally agrees. Relationship with God is entirely based on His mercy and forgiveness. We cannot possibly earn it by our own efforts. It is a debt we cannot possibly repay. Our Protestant friends have good intentions by removing all works from salvation. They want to give all the credit of our salvation to go to God. To them, it is an attempt at humility and desire in to preserve the honor of God’s grace.**

**When Abraham was preparing the sacrifices that God required of him in order to receive the promised son, he never thought, “If I do this, I someone might think I am robbing God**

credit for what He said He would do for me,” or, “My doing this sacrifice means that I am earning what God promised. Maybe if I offer even more animals to sacrifice, God will reward my work ethic and give me twin boys!” Of course not. Abraham knew that no amount of animal sacrifices could earn him a son, and his small efforts were of no comparison to what a miracle son was worth. All he knew was God promised him a son, and gave him some small tasks to do in return, so he was going to do them with instant obedience and awe. To Abraham there was no contradiction between the incredible gift being given and the small works being asked. This is still true of Orthodoxy.

*“<sup>5</sup> But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness...”*

In reading the book of Romans, there is often confusion over what Paul means by “works.” Throughout this book, when Paul refers to “works” which do not save, he is referring to the works of the Jewish law. As we have seen, Jewish converts to Christianity were a major part of his target audience in Romans. From childhood, these Jewish Christians were to taught to keep the Jewish law of the Old Testament law, and especially as interpreted by the rabbinical scholars at that time. These lifelong habits needed to undergo a total renovation as Christians. As a fanatical rabbi, and then convert to Christianity on the road to Damascus, Paul spent three years of deep soul searching. He examined in every detail of his original Jewish faith, and being transformed by the Holy Spirit from rabbinical Judaism to Christianity:

*“But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. <sup>18</sup> Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days” (Galatians 1:15-18).*

Paul was uniquely qualified to teach his fellow Jewish converts to Christianity in Rome how they should approach the Old Testament law. To be a devout Jew, obeying the Old Testament law was the one goal of life. Salvation was achieved by keeping the law down to its finest details. Paul taught them that obeying Jewish laws was no longer the one goal of life. The new Christian goal of life was to have a relationship with the God of their fathers, through Jesus Christ His Son, and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The rest of all the Old Testament laws are of little importance.

*“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus said to him, “‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:36-40).*

Of all people, Paul understood and consistently preached the futility of keeping the Old Testament law as a path to salvation. He tried it with all his heart, and it failed him

miserably. He said of himself, *“I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”* And what did all that Hebraic zeal to keep the law turn him into? *“...Intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. for the traditions of my fathers” (Galatians 1:13-14).* His pursuit of holiness by keeping the Jewish law led him extreme unholiness: *“Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest” (Acts 9:1).* It took a confrontation with the risen Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus for Paul to see how what Jewish zealotry had turned him into. When Christ confronted him, and struck him with blindness, all his former delusions were gone. His zeal was no match for the Son of God.

Jewish scholars calculate that Old Testament has 613 laws. Many of them, especially the Ten Commandments, are still the basis of Christian ethics. However, many of the 613 commandments are strange. They may have made sense at that time, but have made little sense since. There are many examples. Leviticus 19:19 says, *“Do not mate different kinds of animals. Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material.”* Numbers 15:38 says, *“Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear”* and *“You are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel.”* Deuteronomy 14:21 says, *“You shalt not boil a baby goat in its mother's milk.”* Certainly, obeying these strange Old Testament laws do not save us.

In addition to the 613 laws of the Old Testament, there are many other laws that are not given in the Torah, but were equally binding on Jews. These were created by rabbis to explain the Old Laws, but eventually became their own authority. For example, the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment says, *“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”* From this simple law the Jewish rabbinical law made many laws about the sabbath. To this day, on the sabbath, a devout Jew can't drive a car, walk for more than .6 miles, answer the telephone, or use any electrical device. Because of the law *“You shalt not boil a baby goat in its mother's milk,”* Orthodox Jews must never mix meat and dairy products, not even in the same refrigerator or oven. Utensils that touch meat and dairy must also be kept separate.

Many of these rabbinical laws were already in place during the time of Christ, and He harshly condemned them:

*“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone” (Matthew 23:23).*

*“But the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day.’ The Lord then answered him and said, ‘Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it?’ (Luke 13:14-15).*

The Orthodox Christian view is Christ fulfilled and completed the Old Testament law. For us there is no more need to obsess over sabbath and kosher dietary minutiae. It is these

purely Jewish laws about what you can and cannot do on the sabbath (Saturday), whether you are eating pork or shellfish, whether you are mixing meat and dairy, whether you are planting two kinds of seeds in your field, whether you are wearing clothing made from two different fabrics, whether you are wearing tassels on your clothing – these are the “laws” and the “works” that Paul is referring to as being futile. These are Hebrew laws and works which are outdated and do not save. Protestantism tries to take these antiquated and worthless laws and works which do not save, and conflate them with New Testament laws and works which do save: Baptism (John 3:5, Acts 2:37-39), Communion (John 6:53-55, 1 Corinthians 11:28-30), Confession (1 John 1:8-9, John 20:22-23), forgiving others (Matthew 6:15, 18:35), helping those in need (Matthew 25:31-48).

One of the Jewish laws/works that were extremely important in the Old Testament, but are now completely irrelevant, is circumcision. Paul discusses this in depth:

*“<sup>9</sup> Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. <sup>10</sup> How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. <sup>11</sup> And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, <sup>12</sup> and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.”*

Paul emphasizes that this ritual is unnecessary to Christians. Both Jewish and Gentile Christians needed to know this. He also addresses the question of who are the real descendants of Abraham:

*“<sup>13</sup> For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. <sup>14</sup> For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, <sup>15</sup> because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.”*

Paul began this chapter addressing the Jewish Christians at Rome, expressing his solidarity with them and their shared Abrahamic heritage: *“What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?”* But now he is extending that heritage to faithful Gentiles. The heir of the world is not just to Abraham’s seed according to the flesh, but to all Christians. The inclusion of Gentile Christians in “the seed of Abraham continues:

*“<sup>16</sup> Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all <sup>17</sup> (as it is written, “I have made you a father of many nations”) in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; <sup>18</sup> who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, “So shall your descendants be.”*

No matter our ethnicity, we can become sons and daughters of Abraham by faith.

*“<sup>19</sup> And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. <sup>20</sup> He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, <sup>21</sup> and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. <sup>22</sup> And therefore “it was accounted to him for righteousness.”*

Abraham did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but his own wife Sarai was at his side during a divine visitation, and wavered:

*“<sup>1</sup> Then the LORD appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day...<sup>9</sup> Then they said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” So he said, “Here, in the tent.” And He said, “I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son.”*

*(Sarah was listening in the tent door which was behind him.) <sup>11</sup> Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. <sup>12</sup> Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, “After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?” <sup>13</sup> And the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?’ <sup>14</sup> Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son” (Genesis 18:1, 9-14).*

Similarly, the Zacharias the priest was visited by Gabriel in the Temple, and was told that he and his aged wife would conceive and bear a son.

*“<sup>18</sup> And Zacharias said to the angel, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years.” <sup>19</sup> And the angel answered and said to him, “I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and was sent to speak to you and bring you these glad tidings. <sup>20</sup> But behold, you will be mute and not able to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words which will be fulfilled in their own time” (Luke 1:18-20).*

Zachariah, like Sarai, wavered in faith when given good news from God.

The Theotokos was also visited by the angel Gabriel. Like Abraham, and unlike Zachariah and Sarai, she believed the message and did not waver.

*“<sup>30</sup> Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. <sup>33</sup> And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:30-33).*

**Like Abraham, and unlike Zachariah and Saria, she believed the message and did not waver.**

***“<sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.”***