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The Father of All Who Believe Romans 4:9-15

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We human beings benefit from signs and symbols. It's one thing to hold an abstract idea in your head, but it's another to have a something that represents or communicates or gives assurance of that idea—something physical that you can touch and that you can see. On the fourth finger of my left hand I wear just such a symbol. It's not much, just a plain gold band, but it symbolises something very important. My wife wears a gold band on the same finger, although hers is more intricate and has a diamond mounted on it. We exchanged them when we were married. And these rings symbolise the *covenant* we entered into with each other twenty years ago. These rings, circles that never end, remind us of the words said by the priest: "Those whom God has joined together let no man put asunder." Every time I look down at my right hand, every time I fidget with this ring, spinning it around me finger, I'm reminded of the life-long covenant between me and my wife.

I mention all of this because, as we get into verses 9-15 of Romans 4, Paul's going to be talking about another covenantal sign. The sign he's interested in is the sign of circumcision. He's brought up circumcision several times so far and that's because one of the key themes of his letter to the Roman church is the issue of the oneness or the unity of the body of Christ. There were both Jews and Christians in this church, as there were in most of the churches, and people were struggling with how this worked. What does Jesus mean for God's covenant with Abraham? Was there one covenant or two? Were

Christians sort of a Jewish subset? Did Gentile believers in Jesus need to first become Jewish proselytes, which meant being circumcised and then following the *torah's* regulations for diet and Sabbath and everything else? Or, on the other hand, did the law or did being ethnically Jewish even matter? There were some Gentiles who were thinking that God was done with Jews.

To answer these questions, Paul has been stressing that the righteousness of God is revealed in the good news about Jesus, crucified, risen, and now Lord of Creation. Jesus is the proof that God has made good on his promises and done what he said he would do. But what was his promise? What did he say he would do? Well, that takes us back to Abraham. The covenant started with him and if we are counted as right because we are in Jesus, then that means we're part of Abraham's family. But as Chapter 4 began, as we saw last week, that raises the question: *How* are we part of Abraham's family? A lot of Christians were saying that Gentile believers in Jesus had to become sons and daughters of Abraham in the flesh—which meant being circumcised and becoming ethnically Jewish. (They were telling people they had to make a choice: Jesus or bacon!)

So Paul took us back to Abraham. Specifically, he took us back to Genesis 15, which is where we read the story of God making his promise to Abraham. God promised to bless Abraham. It was an impossible promise, but as Paul points out—his key point, quoting Genesis 15:6—Abraham believed God's promise, and God reckoned or counted him as righteous. On the basis of faith, God made Abraham the first and founding member of the covenant family. In the first part of Chapter 4, Paul was countering the idea that the *torah*, the law given through Moses, was the basis for covenant membership. This is why he stressed that Abraham, the first member of the covenant family,

was made a member of that covenant hundreds of years before the law was given. Abraham was an ungodly pagan, but that's just it. *The whole purpose of the covenant was and still is to solve our human problem of ungodliness*—to find rebellious sinners and to turn us into loyal saints. Contrary to the way many Jews saw it, the point of the covenant was *not* for Jews to congratulate themselves for having the law. To make his point again, Paul pointed to King David in verses 6-8. Now, David was a member of the covenant family too. David had the law. But, quoting from Psalm 32, Paul reminds us that David was a sinner and a lawless man and that he knew it. "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered," wrote David. David knew as well as anyone could that it wasn't the law or his biological descent from Abraham that made him a member of the covenant family. He experienced the blessing of God's forgiveness on the grounds of faith.

We'll pick up at Romans 4:9 now. Paul writes:

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?

Is this blessing of forgiveness that David wrote about, is this blessing of membership in God's covenant family for *anyone*? Or is it just for those who bear the sign of God's covenant with Abraham? Paul goes on:

For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

But some would say, "Yes, but Abraham was circumcised." For the right perspective we need to go back to Genesis again. We saw in Genesis 15, last week, the story of how God entered into covenant with Abraham. He promised to make Abraham great—to make his descendants like the stars in the night sky. That was crazy. Abraham was an old man and his wife was an old woman well past her childbearing years. But Abraham

believed the Lord and, as Paul stresses, the author of Genesis says that on the basis of that faith, God reckoned Abraham to be righteous—part of his covenant family. Abraham was the family’s first member. But the Lord didn’t leave it at that. In Abraham’s culture people entered into covenants by sacrificing animals. The idea behind it was that the parties were committing themselves to the promises they made and saying something like, “May I have my throat slit like this goat if I fail to uphold my end of the covenant.” The Lord did this with Abraham, establishing his sure and certain witness. That night, as the Lord passed back and forth past the animals Abraham had sacrificed the covenant was established.

But what about circumcision? That was *the* thing that marked out the Jews as covenant members. You could observe every tiny detail of the law, but if you weren’t circumcised you weren’t part of the family. And yet, in that great passage where the covenant is so dramatically established, there isn’t a single mention of circumcision. No, circumcision doesn’t enter the picture until Genesis 17—years after the events of Genesis 15. In the intervening years, Abraham had to try to bring about God’s promise himself, fathering a son by his wife’s maid. That boy, Ishmael, is now a young teenager. But God speaks to Abraham again: “Ishmael is your plan, not mine. Ishmael is not the son and heir I promised. Because he is your son, I will make him great. But the covenant family is going to come from the son I will give you miraculously.” The Lord, again, reiterated his covenant promises to Abraham. He said to Abraham:

“As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be

circumcised...and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you...So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” (Genesis 17:9-11, 13b-14)

Circumcision was to be the *sign* of God’s covenant with Abraham, as the ring on my finger is the sign of my covenant with my wife. All the Jews would agree with Paul up to this point. But now Paul asks the all-important question in verse 10:

How then was it counted to him?

What was the basis of Abraham’s being counted as righteous? Paul has said, it was faith. And now he asks:

Was it before or after he had been circumcised?

And the answer, which is now obvious: Genesis 17 follows years after Genesis 15. Paul writes:

It was not after, but before he was circumcised.

Abraham was reckoned to be part of the covenant family, on the grounds of faith, long before he was circumcised. This is Paul’s point in verse 11:

He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

Does that make sense? God gave circumcision as a sign and seal of his covenant with Abraham. Circumcision was a reminder that he belonged to God’s covenant family. Circumcision was a reminder of God’s sure and certain promise. But it was also a reminder that the basis of the covenant, on Abraham’s end, was faith, was trust in God’s promise and allegiance to him alone as the Creator

and saving God. Abraham’s hand held the knife during circumcision. The act itself of receiving this covenant sign in the flesh was an act of faith and trust in the God who had given it, but that’s just it: *It was God who stood behind the promise.*

Think of baptism. Much as circumcision was the sacramental sign of the old covenant, Baptism is the sacramental sign of the new. God offers us righteousness. He offers us forgiveness and membership in his covenant family, in his kingdom, now breaking into the world because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. He’s made a promise and Jesus is the evidence of his faithfulness to that promise. And he holds out this water as a sign of this covenant. In faith we pass through, whether like Abraham, on our own, or like Isaac, by the faith of our parents, one day to become our own. The water is just water, but it is the means by which God has called us to express our faith in his promise of life and we come out the other side, marked as his own, counted righteous, sure in his promise, on the basis of our faith. Contrary to what many people think, we are not Christians because we are baptised. We are Christians because we have *faith* in the crucified and risen Jesus. Baptism is God’s chosen means of expressing that faith and sealing his covenant promises, much as circumcision was in the old covenant.

You see, most of the Jews thought—and Paul had once thought this way himself—that circumcision was what made you a Jew—just as many people today think that baptism is what makes you a Christian. This is why some in the Church were insistent that Gentile believers had to be circumcised and then follow the law. But Paul now understands that this isn’t the case. God’s covenant and his plan are bigger than ethnic Israel. He writes in verses 11 and 12:

He [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him 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.

There's a reason why the Lord delayed Abraham's circumcision and it was just so that Paul could point back to that delay and show his erring brethren that the basis of covenant membership is faith. It was to show that Abraham is not and was never intended to be the father merely of all who are circumcised, of ethnic Israel, but that Abraham would be the father of *all* who believe the Lord's promises, whether circumcised or not. God's covenant faithfulness has been revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah and the Gentile who believes and trusts in Jesus is as much a son or daughter of Abraham as the Jew who believes and trusts in Jesus the Messiah. When God called Abraham to be the first member of his covenant family, he intended for him to be the father of *all*, as Paul puts it so vividly, those who walk in the footsteps of Abraham's faith. Being able to trace your physical ancestry back to Abraham isn't what makes him your father—at least not in the way that counts. As Paul stresses, Abraham isn't the father of those who are merely circumcised. He's the father of the circumcised who follow him *in faith*. Abraham was an ungodly pagan when God called him and established his family through him and Paul implies that Gentile believers, ungodly pagans who submit to Jesus as Lord, actually have more in common with Abraham—who left home and family to follow the Lord to

a strange land—than do the Jews who have ridden in on Abraham's coattails.

From circumcision, Paul now goes returns to the subject of the law in verses 13-15. Circumcision is not the basis for covenant membership. The Jews had narrowed down God's family. Paul opens it up and shows us what God had intended from the beginning. That said, what happens if a Jew still wants to insist that it's about the law. Paul now writes:

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Paul does something here that no one had done before. The Jews understood God to have promised Abraham the land of Canaan, more or less what we call the "Holy Land" today. In Paul's day this promise fueled the Jew's nationalistic ambitions. It was a major reason why they were so upset at being ruled by the Romans and much of their hope for a day when the Romans would be overthrown was fueled by this promise of the land. It was *their* land. God gave it to them and he would give it back. The same thing continues today, driving the modern Zionist movement. But Paul looks back to God's promise in Genesis 15 and as he thinks on what God's plan was from the beginning, he expands the promise. If the covenant was, as the Jews thought, strictly about God being the God of and for the Jews and judging the nations, then this fixation on this little piece of real estate makes sense. But Paul's been explaining that this was never God's plan. God's plan wasn't just to establish a kingdom by setting the biological family of Abraham to rights on a little plot of land. God's plan was

to set the *whole world* and *all of humanity* to rights *beginning with and through* Abraham and his family. And so Paul makes this astounding statement that, from the beginning, the Lord intended for Abraham and his children to be "heirs of the world". Righteousness—membership in the covenant family—wasn't through the law. In fact, Paul writes, if inheritance were to be based on the law instead of faith, the promise of the land would be null and void. Paul has Deuteronomy 28 in mind. The Lord there explained to Israel the *negative* side of the covenant. "Whereas you were as numerous as the stars of heaven, you shall be left few in number, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God" (28:62). Whereas "the Lord took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you." They shall be "driven away from the land to which you are going in order to inherit it" (28:63). As Paul has stressed many times now, Israel had failed to be faithful to the law. She violated the covenant. That's why Jesus came: a faithful Jew to set things right—and to remind everyone that God's covenant is and always has been about bringing the nations, the whole world to himself. But if the Jews insist on the law, well, then the law brings wrath. That doesn't mean the law is bad. The law did its job. God gave the law to reveal sin and, as we can see, there was and still is a lot of sin to that the law reveals—not least in Israel. If the covenant depended on the law, God would have no covenant people at all. Paul will expand on this idea in Romans 7. But his point here is that the basis of the covenant is faith—and that because the basis is faith, it includes all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile.

Now, what does this mean for us? First, what Paul says here about the primacy of faith ought to give us assurance. I regularly talk with Christians who question their status

with God. It always seems to come down to, “Have I done enough?” or “My faith isn’t always as strong as I think it should be?” Have you ever asked questions like that or thought along those lines? Brothers and Sisters, Paul deals with that first questions right here. If the basis of membership in God’s family wasn’t about the law for the Jews, but ultimately about faith, that also means that the basis of membership in God’s family isn’t, for us, about any kind of “works” that we do or about how good we are. Remember: God is in the business of redeeming the ungodly. He renews us with his grace and by his Spirit, turning out hearts and minds away from sin and fixing them on him, but holiness is the *result*, the *consequence* of being in covenant with God, not the cause.

Similarly, faith is something that grows over time as we experience God’s faithfulness in our own lives and as we spend time—year after year—reading in Scripture of God’s faithfulness to his people in times past. Again, Abraham’s faith was far from perfect. So was David’s. For that matter, look at the disciples. When Jesus was arrested, Peter was afraid of being arrested too and denied three times that he knew Jesus. But in all these cases, God grew and strengthened the faith of these men. Faith is his gift in the first place and it’s a gift that takes root and grows over time. It’s a gift that flourishes as we avail ourselves of the means of grace and assurance that God has given. Dear Friends, your faith will grow the more you immerse yourself in the Scriptures and learn that God is righteous and faithful. Your faith will grow as you walk with God yourself and experience his faithfulness. But the Sacraments, too, have been given to us by God to assure us of our membership in his family. Abraham wasn’t counted righteous because he was circumcised. It was by faith. But his circumcision was a reminder—it gave him assurance—of God’s promise and in that, Abraham’s

circumcision strengthened his faith. The Israelites weren’t counted righteous because they celebrated the Passover—the other sign of the Old Covenant—but as they celebrated that meal that God gave them, it served as a reminder of God’s past faithfulness and it strengthened their faith. And just so with us. Brothers and Sisters, your baptism is a means of assurance. When you think on it, it should strengthen your faith in God’s promise of forgiveness and life. In the baptismal waters, God made a promise to you—one you or your parents appropriated by faith. That promise is sure and eternal, and that knowledge ought to strengthen the faith that brought us to the baptismal font in the first place. And consider, as we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, that here in the bread and wine he draws us back to the cross, to the place where his Son, Jesus, gave his life for the ungodly. Here he reminds us of his faithfulness to his promises. In Jesus, particularly at the cross, God fulfilled the promises he had made to Abraham. As the Articles of Religion tells us, we have here a “certain sure witness” and “an effectual sign of grace” of “God’s good will towards us”. Here in the sacrament he “doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him”.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, let us remember each day what we affirmed in today’s collect: “Apart from you nothing is strong and nothing is holy”. We have been forgiven, redeemed, and filled with the life of your Spirit not because of our merits, but by your grace because you are in the business of making godly men and women who were once ungodly. Remind us and teach us to rest in faith on your grace, trusting in your promises. Teach us as we read in your Word of your past faithfulness. Teach us as we come to your Table, reminded of the body and blood of your Son, given not for the righteous, but to redeem ungodly sinners. Through him we pray. Amen.