

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS
Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch
Lesson 6 - Romans 3:29-4:15

Romans 3:29-31

Notice that these three verses form the end of the segment entitled “Righteousness through Faith.” Paul continues to present reasons why salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ and that this salvation is open to all people.

In verse 29, Paul introduces another element to his argument which he knows his Jewish readers cannot deny. The most basic Jewish prayer is called the **Shema**. It expresses the monotheism which is the core belief of Judaism. The Shema is found in Deut. 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” Paul reminds the Jews of this truth in order to convince them that God is also the God of the Gentiles. Since there is only one God, this God must also be the source of salvation for the Gentiles.

Circumcision is another important factor in Judaism. But in verse 30, Paul reminds his readers that the physical mark means nothing when it comes to justification. It is a sign of the covenant which God made with Abraham, but all who believe and have faith participate in this same covenant.

Paul knows the mind of his Jewish people. He understands that their foundations are being disturbed. In verse 31, he imagines them asking, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?” meaning, “Is the law useless?” Paul could have answered “Yes,” if he wanted to speak in terms of justification. But Paul says the law is important, “We uphold the law.” He is saying that the law still expresses God’s will. It still gives commands on how to live with one another. And so the law is still beneficial, as a guide, but not as a means of salvation.

Romans 4:1-12

In this present segment, Paul draws his readers’ attention to two major figures from the Hebrew Scriptures. Abraham is the main figure as the father in faith. King David is also invoked as the author of Psalm 32 in which he proclaims God’s mercy toward humanity. Paul will show that Abraham was granted righteousness because of his faith. His circumcision did not take place until after God had made his covenant with Abraham. Circumcision is the sign of a reality which is already present.

Verse 1 is a difficult verse to understand. The major commentators disagree on how it should be translated and they disagree on what point Paul wants to stress. Some commentators reword the question this way, “What did Abraham gain by his act of faith?” and the answer is “Righteousness”: Others restate the question as, “What was so unique about Abraham that brought about his righteousness?” and the answer to this question is “his faith.” The reason for this uncertainty is that the Greek texts vary in the different manuscripts. There is possibly a hint in verse 2 which can help us. At the beginning of this verse, Paul speaks of “works” and since he has been contrasting “faith” and “works,” it would be logical that verse 1 would pertain to “faith.” But this is only a guess.

The second half of verse 1 describes Abraham as “our ancestor according to the flesh.” In this part of the verse, Paul shows that he is identifying himself with his Jewish readers for he calls Abraham “our ancestor.” He reminds his readers that he is also of Jewish origin, and that he takes Abraham as his own father in the flesh, as well as in the faith. Paul knows that he is challenging some of the tenets which the Jews have been taught since their youth. He wants to employ any reconciling association that is available to him.

With Paul’s permission, we might use our imaginations to add a few words to verse 2 to help us understand it. When Paul says, “For if Abraham was justified by works” we would naturally add “works of the law.” This would be a safe assumption for Paul has already used this phrase numerous times in his letter. Also, when he says, “He has something to boast about,” we could add “before people.” This seems to fit the sense of the text because the next words reveal a contrast, “but not before God.” The reason we want to consider these additions is to clarify the unspoken question which Paul is raising. The question is “How could Abraham have fulfilled the law when the law would not be instituted until several hundred years later?” Paul is challenging the reasoning of his readers who are saying that Abraham was justified because he kept the law. Paul says “How can this be when the law did not yet exist?” If Abraham had kept the law, then he would have had something to boast about before people. But he still could not boast before God, because God knows that righteousness is a gift which cannot be earned.

Verse 3 is a quotation from Genesis 15:6. If we go back and read this text, we find that God has just promised Abraham that he will have a son and that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. And we are told that Abraham “believed the Lord.” It was this act of faith which brought about Abraham’s righteousness. He trusted in God’s promise. He took God at his word. The love and promise of God came first, and Abraham accepted the gift. The scriptures testify to this.

In verse 4, Paul brings another analogy into his discussion. He says that when a person works, that which the person receives is not considered a gift but as something which is due in justice. This is the wage, something the person has earned. But in Genesis 15, Abraham received the promise of descendants.

He received this promise without earning it, so it was a gift, not a wage. And when Abraham believed the promise which God had made, God counted this as righteousness. The righteousness was again a gift, not something which Abraham had earned.

In verse 5, the phrase “who justifies the ungodly,” should be seen as a description of God and not necessarily a description of Abraham. To “justify the ungodly” means to forgive sins, and this is exactly what Paul will present in the next verse. The ungodly are those who have no relationship with God. Paul says that even these will be offered the gift of salvation. The question is, “Will they recognize the gift and accept it?”

In verse 6, Paul draws on another source to support his claim that righteousness comes by faith. It was the commonly accepted belief of the Jewish people that King David was the author of the psalms. Most commentators today say that David may have composed some of the psalms, but very few. The word “blessed” is usually understood to mean “fortunate.” This is also the meaning in the section of Matthew’s gospel (chapter 5) which we call the Beatitudes. The last words of this verse, “apart from works:” are intentionally placed just before the quotation so that the reader has this phrase in mind as the psalm verses are read. Paul wants this thought to be carried over into the text.

Verse 7 and 8 are taken from Psalm 32:1-2. This is a psalm of personal thanksgiving; the title is “The Joy of Forgiveness.” It is considered a late psalm, perhaps from the sixth century B.C. These two verses speak of the happiness of the person who trusts in the forgiveness of sins. In his mercy God freely chooses to remove the punishment that sin deserves. To “cover” the sins means to forgive. This is a common usage in the Hebrew Scriptures. Verse 8 reveals that God not only forgives past transgressions, he will also forgive future ones. As Paul will point out, this does not give license to sin. What it should give is a deep appreciation of God’s love which in turn should motivate us not to sin.

The next four verses, 9 through 12, concentrate on the theme of circumcision. Paul shows that Abraham was justified before he was circumcised, and so his circumcision is not the cause of his justification. Paul also shows that Abraham is the father of all believers. This is Paul’s way of reminding the Roman Christians that whether they are Jews or Gentiles, they are all united in their common faith.

In verse 9, Paul asks the question whether the “blessedness” spoken of in Psalm 32 is meant only for the Jews, or is it for everyone? He again points the Jewish readers to Genesis 15:6, and he reminds them that Abraham was justified by his faith. God is merciful to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. God shows no partiality.

Abraham’s righteousness came before he was circumcised. This is the thrust of verse 10. Paul does not point out the chapter and verse, but he knows that his readers are familiar with the scriptural account of Abraham.

The story of his righteousness is in Genesis 15, but the introduction of circumcision does not come until chapter 17, fourteen years later. Paul continues in verse 11 to show that circumcision is the sign of a reality already present. The covenant had already been sealed between God and Abraham. Genesis 15:7-21 describes the episode in which Abraham is told to cut the animals in half. The custom of the time was that each party of the covenant would pass between the halves and say the words equivalent to, "If I break my part of this covenant, may what happened to these animals happen to me." In the scene in Genesis 15:17, God is represented by the flaming torch. He pledges his fidelity to Abraham. Abraham in turn pledges to worship only the one true God.

In verse 11, Paul continues to show that Abraham is the father of all believers. In this verse, Paul is again addressing the question of "Who is the real Jew?" The real Jew is not the one who follows the law. The real Jew is not the one who is circumcised. The real Jew is the one who lives by faith as Abraham did. In thinking this way, Paul is trying to expand the mentality of his Jewish readers. They should no longer think of Jewishness as a nationality or something inherited, rather, they should think of their association with Abraham as based on their fidelity to God's promises. And God promised that he would send his Son who would bring salvation to all people.

Verse 12 basically repeats the message of verse 11. Some of the Jews who lived during Paul's time believed that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Some went so far as to say that circumcision in itself was sufficient for salvation. It was the belief of some of the rabbis that an angel stood at the gates of hell. If a Jew was so bad as to be sent to hell, then it was the angel's task to reverse the Jew's circumcision before the person entered hell. God would never allow a circumcised person to be condemned.

Romans 4:13-15

With verse 13, we begin a segment which concentrates on the promise God made to Abraham. In this commentary we examine the first three verses of the segment.

If we go back and read the story of Abraham in the book of Genesis, we see that God made several promises. He promised that Sarah would have a son, that Abraham would possess the land, that all nations of the earth would be blessed in him. Paul is mindful of these promises, but he is also extending this universal promise to include eternal life. The promise to Abraham did not come through fulfillment of the law, but through faith in the word of God. God can be trusted to keep his promise.

In verse 14, Paul uses a very logical approach. He says that if the people who fulfill the law are the ones who will inherit the promise of God, then there is a serious problem. No one is able to fulfill the law and therefore no one can inherit the promise. Since God knew this ahead of time, then for God to make such a promise is deceitful.

But God cannot be deceived. If the promise comes through keeping the law, then the promise is meaningless. And the faith which should have made the promise is also meaningless. If faith is meaningless, then righteousness is meaningless, and if righteousness is meaningless then God’s word in the scriptures is not true. Paul’s Jewish readers had to give serious thought to this reasoning.

In verse 15, Paul returns to a theme he has presented before. He reminds his readers that since no one can fulfill the law, then knowledge of the law only brings wrath. The law told people what should be done, but it did not give them the power to accomplish it. On the other hand, the promise which God makes to Abraham shows that God takes the initiative, and therefore, salvation depends on God. In this new relationship with God, based on God’s merciful love, there is no fear of his wrath for not fulfilling the law. In the new relationship, God has promised his forgiveness. We are called to respond in love.

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Side Note: Jewish Customs

The Jewish prayer called the **Shema** is found in Deut. 6:5. This is the verse which Jesus quotes in Matt. 22:37, when he is asked which commandment is the greatest. Jesus then adds Leviticus 19:18 which says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus certainly knew his Hebrew Scriptures. Deut. 6:6 tells the Jewish people to keep these commandments in their hearts. To emphasize this point, Deut. 6:8 tells the Jews to bind them on their hands and fix them on their foreheads. This became the source of the Jewish custom of wearing phylacteries. These are leather boxes, containing tiny scrolls of the Shema, which Orthodox Jewish men wear on their foreheads and left arms during prayer. Also, Deut. 6:9 tells the Jews to “write them on the doorposts of your house.” The house of an Orthodox Jewish family will have a small cylinder called a **Mezuzah** attached to the doorpost, inside the Mezuzah is a small scroll containing the Shema. The custom is that the Jewish person touches the Mezuzah when entering or leaving the house as a reminder that God is Lord alone.

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