***No Salvation through Rituals
RO36-01***

**© Berean Memorial Church of Irving, Texas, Inc. (1977)**

We now move on to a new section in Romans 4:9-12.

You have perhaps noticed that unregenerate people try to find salvation apart from the scriptural order generally in two ways. Either they lean on their own human good, and count on making it with God that way (which will not work, because God looks upon human good as part of the evil from the sin nature), or else these people come up with some kind of a religious ritual – some kind of a work that a human being can perform in order thereby to achieve favor with God. Of course, one of the things that we have learned very clearly thus far in Romans 4 is that salvation is never on the basis of any work system. Salvation is not on the basis of any ritual.

So, our point and our topic this morning is "No Salvation through Rituals." Paul, in Romans 4, has clearly indicated that human good works and God's grace are mutually exclusive. Therefore, salvation is entirely a gift of God by grace. Salvation cannot be secured partly by human works and partly by the grace of God. This is what people very often do. They want to try to get a halfway point.

Well, the result is that many churches today, I'm sorry to say, are actually sending people forever into the lake of fire by the sheer fact that they are teaching them this kind of a salvation by mixture – a salvation which may go partly by works and partly by grace. And yet, God says that this will not work.

Paul takes up David to prove the point that justification is by faith, apart from human works. David is in contrast to the religious ritual crowd, because David didn't rejoice in anything that he had done. David has demonstrated that God forgives sins. David has demonstrated that God covers sins. He forgets them. David demonstrates that God imputes to a believing sinner the righteousness of Jesus Christ instead of imputing the sins that he has coming.

**Circumcision**

So, we're dealing with a very critical question. It is the question of the relationship of religious rituals and salvation. What does the Lord's Supper have to do with a person going to heaven? What does water baptism have to do with a person going to heaven? And in our passage here, Paul is going to use one of the greatest and most important ritual of the Jewish people: circumcision – the circumcision of the male Jew. What did that have to do with salvation?

Paul takes this up because circumcision was a very clearly a religious ritual, and one that God had appointed. It wasn't one that man had just come up with. It's easy enough for us to look at some of the Buddhist priests with their prayer wheels. They make this little device, and they paste prayers on them, and then they spin the wheel. And every time the wheel goes around, a prayer has been uttered to the gods. And you say, "Oh, that's dumb." We can dismiss that because that is purely a human invention. But it's not so easy to dismiss those animal sacrifices that God said that the Jewish people were supposed to bring. It's not so easy to dismiss circumcision, which God told them to do. There were consequences if you didn't bring those sacrifices; and, there were consequences if you didn't perform that circumcision upon the male child.

So, the business of religious ritual has to be dealt with. The apostle Paul takes the key one of the Jewish people. His point is that if he can show that the religious ritual of circumcision had absolutely nothing to do with salvation, then I don't care what ritual you come up with, you have established that the ritual is out. I don't care whether God has appointed it, or whether man comes up with it. In either case, it is totally irrelevant to salvation.

So, let's begin at verse 9: "Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also?" The word "come" is not actually in the Greek Bible, but you do need some such word to be supplied in the translation of "this blessedness." The word "blessedness" is that word we said before: "makarismos." "Makarismos" means "a pronouncement of blessedness." This is the same word that we had previously up in verse 6, where it says, "Even as David also described the blessedness." This is as David pronounces the blessedness: "O, the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputes righteousness apart from words.

He is obviously referring here back to verse 6, to that statement of David: "this blessedness;" that is, this one that David is speaking about in verse 6. Then it says, "Then upon." These words are introducing a conclusion. Does it come upon whom? Upon a group that he calls "the circumcision?" The word looks like this in Greek: "peritome." "Peritome" literally means the cutting around, which describes exactly what is done to the male sex organ in the process of the rite of circumcision. It is used here of a group who have been circumcised. This was true, obviously, of the Jewish people, uniquely and primarily. It would be true only in a lesser degree to those who were proselytes, and who came under the Jewish system.

So, his question is: is this blessedness of being justified (being pronounced just in the eyes of God) without any human effort involved – is this something that David is talking about in reference to those who have practiced the religious right of circumcision? The word “only” in verse 9 is not in the Greek. Then he says, "Or," and he gives an opposite side here: "Is it upon?" And again, it uses the same little preposition "epi," that he had before, indicating the subject to be discussed. Is it upon another group which he calls "the circumcision?" This looks like this in the Greek: the "akrobustia." The "akrobustia" refers to those who have not received the religious ritual of circumcision. This would be true, in general, of the gentiles as a group.

I must point out that Paul's question here is not about gentiles and Jews. Paul is not saying: "is this blessedness, of being justified apart from human works for just the Jews alone and not for the gentiles? Is it for Jews and gentiles both? That is isn't what he's talking about. His question has to do with the ground of justification, not who is eligible for it. Paul is raising the question of the ground. He is asking the question: "is the religious ritual of circumcision the ground for salvation, or is the lack of circumcision the ground for salvation?" He's raising the question of how this ritual fits into salvation.

So, we could translate this in this way: "Is this pronouncement of blessing upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised?"

Then it says, "For," which is the Greek preposition "gar," which introduces an explanation: "For we say." The word "say" is "lego." "Lego" is the word that emphasizes the content of the statement (the information). It's present tense. It's a constant emphasis of what was said in Genesis 15:6 – that Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. It's active. It is those who are quoting the Scripture. When he says, "We say, he's referring back to Genesis 15:6. It's indicative. It's a statement of fact.

What do we say? "For we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness? That's what Genesis 15:6 tells us. Faith, of course, is the Greek word "pistis." We've had that before, and it is the word that is emphasizing trust in the statement of some authority. Here it is *the* faith. It has the specific definite article "the" before it, so it's *the* faith, indicating the specific trust of Abraham that Genesis 15:6 talks about – his actually believing God, and the result of his believing God – that something was reckoned.

Again, we have this word that has come again and again and again in this passage: "logizomai." Perhaps you've learned by now that "logizomai" means "to put to one's account." This is a business term meaning "to impute." It's aorist tense. Aorist means a point in time. And this point in time is when Abraham, in Ur of the Chaldees" believed God. It's passive voice in this case because Abraham didn't credit himself with righteousness. God did this for him. Abraham was the recipient. It's indicative – a statement of fact.

Abraham, back in Ur of the Chaldees, at some point, made a move toward God of faith, and God responded by doing something for Abraham; namely, declaring him justified. He specifically identifies him as: "Faith was reckoned to 'Abraam.'" The Greek says "*the* Abraam." It has the definite article – the very specific father of the Jewish people. Then it says, "For." "For" is the Greek word "eis." It's a preposition. Actually, it means "resulting in." Resulting in what? "Dikaiosune" again. We've had that word many times. This, of course, is referring to absolute righteousness. This time, the word "the" is not in front of it. It spoke about *the* faith and *the* Abraham, in order to stress the specific faith and this specific man. Now it just says, "dikaiosune." When the Greek does not have the definite article, it's talking about quality. That's why we know that this is absolute righteousness that he has in mind.

**Abraham had Faith in God**

So, now here's the issue that Paul has raised in verse 9. No Jew would actually deny that Abraham had faith in God. Don't make that mistake. Any Jew who read Genesis 15:6 would say, "Yes, our father Abraham certainly had faith in God. There's no question about that. He clearly believed in God's promises. The fact that he left Ur of the Chaldees, and took that long journey over to the Promised Land that he had never seen, and didn't know what it was all about; what it looked like; or, what was there, this obviously indicated that he believed what God had told him when God had said, "If you'll leave Ur, I'll take you over to another country, and I'm going to give you the whole country, and I'm going to give you a family, and you're going to become a great nation."

Abraham had to sit there in Ur of the Chaldees and think this over. Obviously, his response was going to evidence whether he believed it or not. If he didn't believe God, he'd say, "Well, that's nice, God. That really would be wonderful, but I've got a terrific business here. You know, I come from a wealthy family. And I live in Ur. Ur is a great metropolitan center. I mean we have everything here. We have the Ur Symphony Orchestra; we have got the Ur boys clubs; we have the Ur YMCA; we have the Ur university' we have the Ur junior high; and, all the rest of them. You know, we have it all here. We even have the Ur surfing club, and we don't even have an ocean here. I mean, we have it. Everything is here. We ski up and down the Tigris Euphrates. We have a wonderful time." And he could have stayed. And if he had stayed, it would have been very clear that he didn't believe God.

However, he believed God, and that included trusting God for his personal salvation. That was involved. When it says that he believed God relative to these promises of his future (including being a blessing to all the nations of the world), obviously, he could not be a blessing to the nations of the world unless God was going to bring a Savior from his line to provide for the sins of the world. And God was not going to bring a Savior from his line unless he himself, Abraham, was a born-again man. So, believing these promises of God concerning his future included his personal salvation.

Abraham had faith. There's no question about that. No Jew would have denied that.

However, what the Jews did claim about Abraham (and this is what Paul has in mind), is that while they said, "Oh yes, Abraham had faith," they said, "Abraham didn't have righteousness until he had the ritual of circumcision performed upon him. He had faith in God, but he did not have righteousness until he performed the ritual.

So, in verse 9 Paul is not asking whether the blessedness of justification is for Jews and gentiles for circumcision or uncircumcision. Paul is raising the specific question of the role of circumcision in securing justification. This was the most important religious ritual to the Jews. No Jewish male would have been without it. In Paul's day, there were many Jewish Christians who maintained that salvation was impossible apart from circumcision. You can read about this in Acts 15:1-5, where these people were Christians in the New Testament church, but they were Judaizers (they were legalists). And they rose up and said, "Listen, I want to tell you gentiles that you cannot be saved unless you have performed the act of circumcision upon your male men and upon your male children. If you want to be saved as gentiles, you better perform the work of circumcision.

Some of them even went further. They said, "If you don't live by the Law of Moses, you're not going to go to heaven. And they brought the Law of Moses, and the circumcision ritual, into the Christian life. It was a major problem in the New Testament church. It wasn't just a couple of characters walking around a local church here and there that were suggesting this. It was widespread. In Acts 15, you have the culmination of that issue, where the church just got together with all the apostles, and they sat down, and they had an ecumenical council, and they took up the question of what relationship a gentile has to the old Mosaic order, and what relationship he has to this issue of circumcision. Is circumcision part of salvation? Is keeping the Mosaic Law part of salvation.

Of course, the decision of the council, you will find, was in the negative. Circumcision is not part of salvation. Keeping the Mosaic Law is not part of salvation. But in Paul's day, many Jewish Christians claimed that it was.

**Religious Rituals**

The question involves a more general issue. And that more general issue is the place of religious rituals of any kind in securing salvation today, whether it's the Lord's Supper; water baptism; good works; animal sacrifices; circumcision; or, the keeping of holy days. And every one of those things that I have mentioned (make no mistake about it) – there are vast numbers of people in the world today who believe that these are steps to salvation, and that these are essential to salvation. There are people who believe that you cannot be saved if you do not take the Lord's Supper.

There are people like the Roman Catholic Church who believe that you cannot be saved unless, at the very moment of your death, there is a priest on hand to give you extreme unction – to give you the last final cleanup absolution, so that you can go out into eternity with a minimum number of sins on your soul to face God with, in order to minimize your time in purgatory (the dry-cleaning plant of the Roman Catholic Church for cleaning up the sins that you went out into eternity with). There are vast numbers of people (whole church denominations, as you well know), that teach that unless you have water baptism (baptismal regeneration), you cannot be saved. There are some people I have known who have had babies born under conditions where the child was dying, that rushed to a faucet in the kitchen in order to sprinkle water on the child to baptize him before the life left the child, in order to ensure that that child would go to heaven.

This is not something that was just in Paul's day. This is a livid, vivid, living issue in our day to day – religious rituals. What do they have to do with salvation?

Well, if circumcision has anything to do with salvation, then justification has to be by works. Paul has already declared that that's false. This is where he came into conflict with these people that he's writing to. Remember that, at this time, when he wrote to the city of Rome, there was a large body of Jews who lived in this city at that time. Here Paul is writing to them, and he's taking up their most significant religious ritual, and he's coming down on it, and coming down on it hard, saying that works have no place in salvation. Circumcision is a work. If it has part in salvation, then works do have a part in securing justification.

So, the refutation by Paul of circumcision is the refutation of all of the religious rituals. In other words, somebody may come up to you, and they may want to discuss some religious ritual. I don't care whether it's Lord's Supper; circumcision; keeping holy days; water baptism; joining the church; or, anything else (whatever the religious ritual is). If they come up to you on that question, you can answer it right here with this passage. This passage gives the spiritual axiom and the basic principle of the place of religious rituals. When Paul answers this thing about circumcision, he has once-and-for-all answered everything else about religious rituals. And it is devastating. His logic is devastating, and his conclusions simply knocked the wind once-and-for-all out of these who are trying to add rituals as a means of salvation.

All religious rituals do portray a spiritual reality. That is true. They are not the reality in themselves, but they do perform a service. I'm not trying to say that these religious rituals are not important, or that they're insignificant. We're not saying that they are meaningless, because obviously they have a purpose and they have a meaning, because God ordained many of these.

**The Ritual of Circumcision**

For example, circumcision pictured the removal of the sin of the flesh in the one who trusts in God. Circumcision pictured a person being brought out from under the domination of the sin nature, which the Bible calls "the flesh." So, even as a piece of human flesh was taken off the male body and cast away, it was a symbol that the domination of the soul by the old sin nature flesh had been torn away and thrown away by the one who had trusted in Christ. Obviously, the ritual did not do it. A person who was a total unbeliever (a godless sinner) could be circumcised, and many were. And he was headed for the lake of fire in his circumcised condition. That didn't affect it.

**The Ritual of Water Baptism**

What does water baptism do? Well, the Word of God shows us that that portrays an identification. It portrays our identification with Jesus Christ. It very simply portrays the work of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is the baptism of the Holy Spirit that identifies us in the death; the burial; and, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Water baptism very clearly portrays that. We are buried with Him in baptism, and we are raised up with Him in baptism. It's an excellent picture. And as long as you use immersion, you have a very meaningful picture. Once you get to sprinkling, and pouring, and these other matters, the picture is lost, and they do not conform to the Greek language. But when you stick with the meaning of the words (of immersion), which is what baptism means, you have a beautiful picture of what God the Holy Spirit does for those of us who trust in Christ, in placing us into Him. This ritual is real. It stands for reality. But water baptism is not the reality.

You could be the most livid sinner in the world. You could be as rotten to the core as any human being ever was, and you can have water baptism, and many such have had it. Has that now changed your destiny? No. But you can be like the thief on the cross in your final moments of life, and turn to Jesus Christ in salvation, and never have water baptism, and go straight into the kingdom of God, because the ritual is just a picture. It is a thing that we do.

**The Ritual of the Lord's Supper**

The Lord's Supper portrays the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world in order to secure divine propitiation. The Lord's Supper portrays to us how God's justice has been satisfied against us. If you are an unbeliever, you may participate in the Lord's Supper, and many unbelievers do. I used to cringe when I was in the military service, and periodically (not very often, but once in a while), I'd attend a chapel service because usually, unless you were fortunate in having a chaplain with some understanding of the Word of God, it was a very humanistic, human viewpoint, religious experience, and certainly had no value in worship. But one of the things they would always love to do was to give the Lord's Supper to the military personnel.

Anyway, I used to cringe as I would see men whom I knew well, and whom I knew well for their lack of any relationship to Jesus Christ at all, and for the godlessness – seeing them walking forward to take the Lord's Supper in a service in a military post. Why were they doing it? Very obviously, it was because they thought that they had raised so much hell during the week, that if they took the Lord's Supper, somehow it was going to cleanse them. After they had all coming and knelt at the front, and the chaplain had given them the elements, he would pronounce blessing upon them, and end up with the words, "Go thou and sin no more." Then they were pretty sure that they were clean, and they had a nice new week ready to go before them.

Well, obviously, those people were not in any way related to Jesus Christ because they took the Lord's Supper. And yet, the Lord's Supper is a very meaningful ritual. We are to observe it, and remember that it portrays for us the ground for our justification. It's fully possible, obviously, to perform these rituals as an unbeliever. That's the very thing that these Jews were guilty of. They had all the rituals, but they did not have the trust in the Messiah that was coming. After Jesus came, they did not trust in the Messiah who had come.

So, verse 9 raises this question: Does this blessing that David speaks of come upon those who are in the status of circumcision, or upon those who are in the status upon circumcision? We say that Abraham received justification. How did Abraham receive this justification? What he's thinking of is in relationship to Abraham's circumcision or circumcision. He clarifies that in verse 10.

In verse 10, we read, "How was it then reckoned?" The word "how" is the Greek word "pos." That is called an interrogative adverb, and it introduces a question about the status. That's what this word tells us. It's asking a question about a status that Abraham had when he was declared justified. This refers back to verse 9, and it ties into verse 9 to explain verse 9: "How then," or "How therefore was it reckoned?" The word "reckoned" is again our word "logizomai;" that is, how was it imputed? Under what status was it imputed to Abraham's account? This is aorist again, at the point of Abraham's justification. It is passive. It is declared by God about Abraham. It is indicative – a statement of fact.

"How was it?" This is, "How was it with Abraham?" This is the idea. Abraham is to be understood there. How was it then reckoned with Abraham. Then it explains what Paul has in mind.

"When he was in circumcision?" The word "in" is the Greek word "en," which indicates, again, status. Was it when he was in the status of circumcision, or in the status of circumcision? The answer is given with the word "not." It uses the Greek word "ou," which is the strongest negative. It was definitely, absolutely not in circumcision.

Then it says, "But." This is an adversative conjunction ("alla"). The contrast very definitely is in uncircumcision. Here is a time factor, and that's what Paul is referring to. That's how his logic is so irrefutable. He's a good debater here, and he really backs these Judaizers to the wall.

Notice Genesis 15:6. There we have Abraham declared justified. God tells us in Genesis 15:6 that Abraham was credited with absolute righteousness. At this point of time, Abraham is 85 years old. He's 85 years old, and God there declares him justified. We have his age set from Genesis 16:16, where we have the birth of Ishmael, which came a year after the declaration of Genesis 15:6. But in Genesis 17:23-24, we have the declaration of Abraham's circumcision. We are also told in this passage that Abraham, when he was circumcised, was 99 years old. At 99 years of age, Abraham received the religious ritual of circumcision. And it doesn't take too much mathematics to subtract these two, and to discover that there is a span of 14 years between them. From the time that the Scriptures declare to us that he was justified to the time that he is said to be circumcised is a span of 14 years.

The point that Paul makes is that this span of 14 years makes it very clear that his circumcision had nothing to do with his justification. Circumcision didn't come till 14 years after he was justified. By the same logic, of course, you can see that the Mosaic Law had nothing to do with his justification, because that came centuries after. Paul's argument here is devastating. And it's not only devastating to the issue of the ritual of circumcision, but by the same token, it's devastating to all religious rituals, because that's what Paul is zeroing in on. He's zeroing in on a ritual system of salvation.

So, in order to demonstrate his point, he takes the key ritual of the Jews. The Jews knew very well that if the ritual of circumcision was not part of salvation, then no ritual was part of it. If they could not establish that circumcision was part of salvation, then they could forget about their animal sacrifices; their holy days; their sprinkling of water; their tinkling of bells; and, everything else that they did. None of those things could possibly have anything to do with salvation if circumcision had nothing to do with it. It was a religious ritual, and it is always, therefore, a human work. You cannot, therefore, contribute to salvation because works cannot be involved in salvation. Even if the rituals prescribed by God, it is never prescribed as a means to salvation, but it is prescribed as a means to picture something about salvation.

**Rituals are Pictures**

That's what's true of every one of these rituals that we referred to earlier. Every ritual is a memorial, whether it's an animal sacrifice; the Lord's Supper; water baptism; circumcision; or, whatever. They're all memorials of something that God is doing for man. That's why God has given us these rituals.

You may not fully appreciate this, because you come to this church. I doubt that there is even anyone here today that has for one moment thought that his water baptism provided him an entrance into eternal life; or, that thinks for one moment that when he participates in the Lord's Supper, he is taking a step which is going to ensure his eternity in heaven. You don't relate to that. So, therefore, you may not fully appreciate the fact that millions of Christians do, and that millions are ignorant of this very passage. If they are ignorant of this, then they are ignorant of the fact that they are offering works for eternal life. Therefore, they are playing the dangerous Russian roulette game of taking themselves into the lake of fire as church members. Ritual without previous reality is meaningless, because it absolutely portrays nothing.

You can see in the logic of this passage what Paul has done. First of all, he showed that there is no possibility of salvation through works. And now he is showing that there's no possibility of salvation by religious rituals, because they are works. And this principle, since it is established, must clearly guide us. And get this. This principle (clearly established here), of no rituals involved in salvation must clearly guide your interpretation of passages in the Bible that may sound like God is saying that a ritual is involved in salvation. There are some passages like "Believe and be baptized for eternal life (and be saved). The expression there sounds like, "Wow! It says, 'Believe and have water baptism, and you're saved.'" You have to go back to this principle and say, "Now, wait a minute. Whatever that passage means, and whatever the interpretation means, I know it can't be ritual baptism." Now, it could be Holy Spirit baptism in that passage. That would fit. Or it could be water baptism in its proper order later down the line, after salvation, as a portrayal of the salvation that's already taken place.

None of these rituals were meaningful until the reality had taken place. There was no meaning to circumcision unless the person had already had the sin of the flesh removed through new birth. There is no meaning to water baptism today unless the person has had the control of the old sin nature removed through faith in Christ. These memorials only have meaning if you have a reality first.

So, when you find verses that give you a question, you have to come back here to a place like Romans; get the basic principle; and, then go from there. Paul was doing this, and it was very important that he should do this in a dissertation like this. This is the most formal declaration we have in the Bible about salvation. It would have been terrible for him not to take up this business of rituals in salvation, because this is big with people, and Paul knows it. Therefore, he's dealing with it.

Now, beginning in verse 11, he picks up the story of why Abraham was circumcised, and why he was circumcised at that particular point in his history, well after he had been declared justified by God: "And he received the sign of circumcision." The Greek word for "He received" is "lambano." It has to do with taking something that's offered. It's aorist. This was at the point of his circumcision. It's active. It was done by Abraham. He received this sign. And it's a statement of fact.

The word "sign" is "semeion." "Semeion" means a distinguishing mark. And you can see how circumcision was, of course, a distinguishing mark on the body of the male Jew. It marked the Jew as a special beneficiary of the blessings under the Abrahamic Covenant. We won't look at those blessings now. We've done that before. You find them in Genesis 17:8-11, Acts 7:8, and Romans 4:11. These refer to this blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant.

A Jew received in his body a sign (a mark) that he was the beneficiary of the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant. Any male Jew who did not have this sign was cut off from the Abrahamic blessings (Genesis 17:14). Therefore, if a Jew wanted to participate in the blessings of national Israel, as a man, he had to have the mark of circumcision on his body.

Personal salvation was never based on the circumcision. Many who had this circumcision were not justified. It was simply a mark of belonging to the privileged nation. Circumcision was important to the Jews because it marked him as a participant in the covenant promises. It symbolized that justification by faith was available to those who trusted God as Abraham had trusted God. The real circumcision, as you read about this in the Bible (and we went over this in detail in the book of Philippians), is in the soul, where you put off control of the old sin nature in salvations. Colossians 2:11 refers to this removal of the control of the flesh of the old sin nature. Physical circumcision symbolically recorded the removal of the control of the old sin nature, while spiritual circumcision actually did remove the control of the old sin nature.

So, circumcision was a symbol of regeneration in the same way that water baptism is a symbol today. Not only was this a sign, but Paul says that this circumcision was also "a seal." And that's the word "sphragis" (a different word). "Sphragis" is an authentication. It is some kind of a mark that authenticates or confirms a fact.

Sometimes people like to send letters on which they drop on the flap on the back a little bit of sealing wax, and then they have a little ring, a signet ring, that has a little impression, and they push it into the wax, and it makes a special mark that identifies them. In ancient days, this was done all the time. When the person received the letter, he looked at this mark, and that mark authenticates to him that the letter really came from this person. It authenticate the validity (the reliability) of this letter.

So, this "sphragis" was a seal that authenticated a reality. The seal on the body in the form of circumcision confirmed; guaranteed; and, authenticated the fact of Abraham's justification. The seal is in apposition to the sign. The sign was the actual circumcision itself, but the significance of circumcision was that it was a "sphragis." It was a seal from God that authenticated that Abraham had something. What was that?

It was the seal of the righteousness (that same word – "dikaiosune," or absolute righteousness). This was the righteousness of faith, or by means of faith, which Abraham had. It was a definite righteousness. Paul's opponents admit that Abraham had faith, but they did not admit that he had righteousness until he had circumcision. And Paul has shown them that he had righteousness long before he had circumcision. He received a sign of circumcision, and an authentication in the form of: "A seal of the righteousness which he had received by means of faith, which he had, yet being uncircumcised, in order that he might be the father of all them that believe." The father is the progenitor: This faith of Abraham was before his circumcision: "That he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised.

In other words, while you cannot claim Abraham as your father physically, you and I can claim Abraham as our father spiritually. If you just stop and think about this faith of Abraham that brought him this righteousness, you will understand why it took some doing.

When Joshua was about to die, he reviewed Jewish history. And in a Joshua 24:2-4, he observes the fact that their father, Abraham, the founder of their nation, came from a family who were Satan- and demon-worshipers. All idol worship in reality is demon worship. Psalm 96:5 tells us that, as does 1 Corinthians 10:20. This is the kind of lifestyle that existed in Ur of the Chaldees where Abraham was born. He grew up as a youngster in this very unpromising background, to be the representative of the true God. He came from a family who were demon-worshipers, even though Abraham turned from it. Someplace along the line, the Bible tells us that the God of glory revealed himself to Abraham. Steven tells us this as he is about to be martyred. He says, "The God of glory revealed himself to Abraham." You can just imagine how, someplace along the line, one day Abraham, was well up in years. He may have been maybe 70 or 75 years old. And suddenly, bingo, the God of glory appears to him, and makes himself known. And Abraham response to that God.

However, Abraham had other members of the family. Abraham had Laban, a man who stayed in Ur of the Chaldees. Laban remained with the worship of the family demon gods. When Jacob wanted a wife, he went back to Ur of the Chaldees, to his Uncle Laban. He fell in love with Rachel. In time, the relationships were not very good between Jacob and his uncle. So, while Uncle Laban was away on one occasion, Jacob decides to pack up all of his belongings; all of his possessions; and, all of his family, and he moves off to go back to the land of promise. Laban comes home and discovers what has happened. He takes a posse; chases Jacob; and, catches him. And one of the things that Laban complains about is that: "You stole the household gods." Jacob said, "No, I didn't." Unbeknownst to him, his wife Rachel had taken the household images with her, and she put them under the saddle of the animal she was sitting on. Jacob says, "Go ahead and search everything. Laban did. And when they got to Rachel, Rachel says, "You'll have to excuse me. I have a condition. I can't dismount. So, they let her remain on the animal, and she's sitting on their gods. So, they never found them.

These were the gods from Ur of the Chaldees – the things that Abraham had turned from. Abraham had known nothing but this all his life – this worship of these demon gods. Isn't this something terrific that this man had that kind of faith? He was reared in a culture of Satan worshipers, so that for 70 years he was no better than they were? Yet, God, in sovereign grace, for some reason, chose Abraham, and Abraham alone, from the culture of the Chaldeans.

Isaiah 51:2 points out – that only Abraham was selected. The rest of whom had just as much need. Why Abraham? He was terrible. He wasn't any better than the rest of them. Why Abraham? Because God said, "It pleases Me to select him." He didn't merit it. He just was taken.

You and I must look at ourselves and say, "Why me? I'm on my way to heaven. I have family members who are on the way to the lake of fire. I have family members who have gone before me to the lake of fire." Perhaps everybody in your family is on his way to hell, or has already arrived, and you alone are headed for heaven. Why you?

I'm sure Abraham must have often thought about that and wondered. But the thing that made the difference was that he believed God. His case is a case for every sinner – from rags of sin to the robes of righteousness by God's sole provision.

So, in Acts 7:2, Stephen pinpoints when it all happened. It was not when Abraham was circumcised, but at the point when God revealed Himself to Abraham: "And he said, 'Men, brethren and fathers hearken, the God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran.'" The point of all this, Paul tells us back in Romans 4, is so that Abraham could be the father of those who come by faith without circumcision. Then verse 12 puts the other side. He's the father to them who are not of the circumcision only – not only those who have circumcision, but who are also walking in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had, being yet uncircumcised.

So, Abraham is the spiritual father of gentiles who, by faith, turn to God. He is the spiritual father of Jews who, by faith, turn to God. He is also the physical father of all Jews, whether they turn to God or not. So, he has twofold fatherhood. And God said that Abraham is the father of everybody. What that does is it closes the whole door. How does a person get to heaven? Well, you may say, "I'm a gentile. I'm not under circumcision." OK, Abraham is your pattern. He had faith in God; he trusted God; he trusted God's provision for salvation; and, it was imputed to him for righteousness. That's your pattern.

"Well," you may say, "I come out of a very terrible background." Abraham came out of a worse one, and God said, "I've chosen you. You provide nothing. You accept what I give." But you may come along and say, "I'm a Jew. I have circumcision." OK, Abraham again is your pattern. He's your father. He's your file leader. You walk in his steps; that is, you walk in his pattern. That's what this word here in the Scripture means: "Walk in the steps;" "walk in the lineup;" or, walk in the pattern of Abraham. You have circumcision. You too come by faith. Your circumcision is a ritual of what God will do for you, but it is not the reality.

So, Abraham is the spiritual father of Jew and gentile alike. Once-and-for-all, the apostle Paul has given the final, climactic, destructive blow to all religious ritual. If you're counting on your relationship to God on the basis of some ritual that you perform, you are mistaken. It will count for nothing. The most important ritual that the Jews had (circumcision) was absolutely worthless unless the man who had experienced it was also trusting in God to provide salvation. Abraham is our pattern, and religious rituals contribute absolutely nothing.

Dr. John E. Danish, 1977

[**Back to the Romans index**](http://www.christiandataresources.com/romans.htm)

[**Back to the Bible Questions index**](http://www.christiandataresources.com/allarticles.htm)