

PAUL'S USE OF ABRAHAM IN ROMANS

In Romans, Paul affirmed that Abraham was justified by faith, not by works (Rom. 4:1-3). Although Abraham demonstrated his obedience by an act of works when he was circumcised, his faith made the critical difference in his life (vv. 12-13).

Abraham was so important that he became known not only as the father of those who were his heirs physically but also those who were his heirs spiritually (v. 16). Abraham believed the unbelievable. He believed God would do the impossible and give him a son when he himself was beyond the normal age of producing a child (vv. 19-20). He further believed God would restore his son Isaac if he sacrificed him (Heb. 11:17-19). Abraham was convinced God would do what He promised (Rom. 4:21).

The significance of Abraham for the Roman Christians was crucial. Although the Roman church was comprised of Jews and Gentiles, it seems to have been mainly Gentile. Paul addressed his readers as Gentiles (1:5-6,13; 11:13) and as Jews (2:17-29; 4:1; 7:1). His uses of “our” seem to include both Jewish and Gentile elements in the church (4:1,12; 15:4). Yet he spoke of Israel as “my” (not “our”) brothers (9:3). Why was this important? The answer goes back to Abraham. Abraham’s righteousness was not based on works or the law. His righteousness came prior to his circumcision and prior to the law (4:2,10,13). Therefore, Paul undermined a prevailing Jewish argument that legalism was necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1; 1 Cor. 7:17-20; Gal. 2:15-16; 3:11; Rom. 2:17-29; 3:21-23). All genuine believers at Rome were linked to Abraham, regardless of their lineage, and they did not have to become “sons of the law” to be rightly related to God.

Although Abraham was the Jewish forefather “according to the flesh,” he was also “a father of many nations” (4:1,17). He was “heir of the world,” not through the Jewish law “but through the righteousness of faith” (v. 13, KJV). Only in this way could he truly be “the father of us all” (v. 16, KJV). Paul’s argument demonstrated that all of the truly righteous get that way through faith alone, not through Jewish ceremony or law. This meant all believers who were part of the Roman church were on equal standing before God, regardless of their background. Paul affirmed that a physical lineage in Abraham was no guarantee of righteousness (9:6-8). Seeking righteousness through works leads to stumbling rather than to spiritual security (vv. 30-33).

Paul wrote to the church at Rome for several reasons. He commended their faith (1:8). He informed them about the offering he was taking to the saints in Jerusalem (15:25-27), and he told them of his plans to visit them on his way to Spain (1:9-15; 15:22-32). He urged them to pray for his effectiveness in ministry (vv. 30-32). He urged them not to be arrogant toward each other and to resist false doctrine (11:18; 16:17-19). Paul also explained to the church at Rome the fullest statement of his doctrine. Why Paul did this we are not sure. Perhaps he sensed the vital role of this church, and he wanted to make certain they understood the nuances of the gospel—especially since he had not yet visited them. Regardless, Paul explained that righteousness comes through faith (chaps. 1–11) and exhorted the Roman Christians to live in a way that demonstrated faith (chaps. 12–16). Moreover, Paul declared God’s righteousness is available to all people of all backgrounds, be they physical descendants of Abraham or not (1:16-17; 3:21-31).

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