

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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10/12/25

Sermon Title: Abraham Part 2: Covenant Signs and Faith

Sermon Text: Romans 4:9-12

Rom. 4:9 ¶ Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

Rom. 4:10 How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.

Rom. 4:11 He 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,

Rom. 4:12 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.

Main Point: God justifies sinners by faith apart from and prior to any works or ceremonies.

Outline:

1. The Timing of Abraham's Circumcision
2. The Implications of Abraham's Circumcision
3. The Faith Demanded by Abraham's Circumcision

Introduction

We're going to be spending three weeks looking at the faith of Abraham. Last week was week one, in which we looked at just what it is that Abraham knew about Christ, and how Paul could say that God declared him righteous by faith alone, and not by works.

Now, previously Paul was showing us that Abraham was justified by faith in the coming seed that God promised to bring from him.

The church father Irenaeus said that “Our faith was anticipated in Abraham.” And because of this, what we’re seeing in Abraham is directly relatable to us. It isn’t just that “Oh, there’s a good example here,” or something like that. What Paul taught, what the church fathers taught, was that in the faith of this man, we are seeing the same faith that we are also called to.

And if you’ll remember, in Abraham’s case, he believed in Christ even before the incarnation. There was a professor at Westminster Seminary named Geerhardus Vos, who said this about belief in Christ before the incarnation: “Even before his incarnation, it was only possible to believe in Him as the one who would become flesh.”

We see this faith, not only in Abraham, but also in Job. If you remember, in the midst of his sufferings Job makes this statement in Job 19:25: “I know that my redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.” So here Job is, saying, God is my redeemer. He is the one I trust in the midst of my suffering, and I don’t know how and I don’t know when, but one day God himself will stand on the earth. Here Job is, anticipating the incarnation of Christ his redeemer, long before he had actually come. But he had his eyes fixed on Christ.

Well today we continue to be blessed by Abraham’s faith, but Paul is interested specifically today in Abraham’s circumcision. Here is this man, he receives the promise, he believes the promise, God counts him as righteous, and then God gives him a sign of this covenant that he’s making. And it’s a sign that is meant to be applied to him. It’s the sign of circumcision in which not only Abraham but all of his male descendants were to have their foreskin removed. That’s what circumcision is.

Now, here is a caution: do not make the mistake of thinking that circumcision is really about just physically modifying the body. Circumcision is what Paul calls a sign and seal of the righteousness of God. So what that means is that circumcision is more than just a physical gesture. It’s an ongoing message that preaches the righteousness that is ours through faith in Christ. This is something that in the New Testament has been replaced with bloodless baptism.

Just like Abraham and his children, we also receive the covenant sign, and just like with Abraham’s children, our children are baptized. The covenant continues through the generations. And because of this, the sign of the covenant continues to be applied to believers and their children, just like it was in the Old Testament.

But for Abraham there are three important things that Abraham’s life tells us about circumcision and God’s promises. First, Paul says this is important: the timing of Abraham’s circumcision. Second, Paul pushes us to consider the implications of his circumcision. And then finally today we’ll look at the faith that is demanded by Abraham’s circumcision.

1. The Timing of Abraham's Circumcision

First today, Paul wants us to dwell on the timing of Abraham's circumcision.

Paul makes a lot of this, and he hangs his argument on it. Let's look closely at this. In verse 9 he asks this question. He's setting us up for where he's going. Paul says, "Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?" In other words, he wants to know, is justification something that is only for people who have obeyed and kept the moral and ceremonial law?

And Paul's answer is in verse 10: Paul keeps asking questions to get us to answer them for ourselves. "How then was it counted to him?" How was righteousness counted to Abraham? When was it counted to him? "Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised."

This is a big point Paul is making. The declaration of Abraham's righteousness happens before he has obeyed. It happens before he does any works. It is before he does what God tells him to do.

Why is that such a big deal? Because this is always how God has saved in Scripture. It is his pattern. First he promises and saves, THEN he calls his people to obedience.

Think about it.

- God goes to Noah and promises his salvation before he ever obeys God by building the ark.
- God goes to Abraham and picks him out. He could have picked anyone to call, but he picked Abraham. God takes the initiative with Abraham.
- When Jacob is fleeing from Esau and has done nothing but be a trickster all his life, God appears to him in a dream at Bethel and says, "I am with you and will keep you." Only then does Jacob respond with a vow and a life of faith.
- When God delivers Israel from Egyptian slavery, he calls Moses, and he works his saving power, bringing these people out of slavery before they've worshiped him or obeyed him, or before they even have His written law.
- When God does give them the law in Exodus 20, the first thing he does is tell them before he gives them his commands, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Then in the next verse he gives the law: "You shall have no other gods before me." First comes the deliverance, and then comes the law.
- Think of the thief on the cross. This is a man who has done nothing good or pleasing in God's sight all of his life. And he asks Jesus to remember him. And Jesus replies, "Today you will be with me in paradise." No obedience, no baptism, no Lord's Supper... and he's just *in*. He did no good, but he trusted in Jesus.
- Think of Paul in Acts 9. Jesus confronts Paul on the road to Damascus while Luke tells us that Paul was still "breathing threats" against Christ and his church. He is in full rebellion

when God grabs hold of him by his grace. Only after is Paul baptized and only then does he preach.

Over and over again, this is the pattern of God: God gives his promise, he brings deliverance, and only *then* does he call for obedience.

Why does this matter?

Because if Abraham receives the blessing before he has obeyed or kept the law, then God will do this for us, too. We can have Christ, whether we are circumcised or not. Whether we've kept God's law or not. Our lawkeeping is not the condition of being justified and having peace with God.

Peter Martyr Vermligi really highlights how different the gospel is from the way most people think about righteousness:

"According to the philosophers, no one is considered righteous, brave, wise, or self-controlled unless he has acquired those virtues through many good actions and right behavior. But in Christ's kingdom, we affirm the opposite: that even the worst sinner, as soon as he turns to Christ and embraces Him with true faith, is immediately regarded as righteous in the sight of God." (Comm. On Rom. 5:16).

"Even the worst sinner." Incredible.

You may be an outsider to God and his promises. But the door is not closed to you. You may be from a family where you were never taught about the gospel at all. Abraham was from that kind of family too before God saved him.

The gospel is all about bringing in outsiders who didn't belong before, and restoring them to fellowship with the God whom they were previously alienated from by their sin. Hosea 2:23: "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call beloved."

Do you feel like you are an outsider to God, an outsider to Christianity – maybe someone who is very new to these things? God is in the business of taking you – "not my people" and making you a part of his people, adopting you, bringing you in, making you his family.

2. The Implications of Abraham's Circumcision

Second, we need to appreciate what Paul says are the implications of Abraham's circumcision.

After Abraham was given the promise, after he believed the promise, after God had counted him as righteous, THEN he was circumcised. Paul says this about Abraham 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.”

So after the promise, after faith, he obeys and receives the covenant sign.

What does this circumcision mean? What does it communicate to Abraham and all of his descendants?

Well Paul uses two words to describe what circumcision means for Abraham. First, Paul says the circumcision is a **sign** of righteousness. A sign is a word, a picture, or a gesture that points to something other than itself. The example I’ve used before is a sign that says “Chic-fil-a, 5 Miles Ahead.” You would appreciate the sign, but you wouldn’t go to the sign to eat. The sign is not the destination, but it *points* us to the destination. In this case, circumcision is a sign of the promise that a Savior is coming... that a seed is coming. Peter Martyr referred to circumcision specifically as the sign of Christ. Every male among the Jewish people received this sign, and so they always carried with themselves a mark and a reminder that sin was passed down, but that a Savior would come to address their sin. Circumcision was a sign of Christ, and it preaches a sermon to its recipients: you have the sign; believe in the one the sign is pointing you to. Every Jewish male carried this around in his flesh.

But Second, Paul says that circumcision was a **seal** of righteousness. I think the idea of a seal is much more confusing to people than a sign is. We use signs all the time, but seals not so much. Let me see if this example is a little bit helpful:

[illustration] A couple of weeks ago, I had to go have some documents notarized. If you’ve ever gone to a notary, you know it can be a pretty big deal. You have to bring multiple forms of ID, you have to sign it with the witness right there watching you. But think about this: when a notary affixes their seal to a document, they aren’t creating the content or making the promises of that document true. Instead, the notary is authenticating and confirming the document’s legitimacy. They’re saying, “this is real. What this says is something that the signer will stand behind and be held to. You can trust it.”

In a similar way, circumcision didn’t create the gospel promises, nor does baptism for that matter. Instead, the act confirms and seals it to the believer, but in itself it does not make the promise happen.

Or think of a wedding ring. It is a visible sign that confirms the promises made in the covenant of marriage, but it does not make the marriage.

Circumcision and baptism are both signs and seals of the promises of God. They tell us, “this promise is true. Christ is a great Savior. Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.” When Abraham and all of his seed received circumcision, they received a seal of the righteousness of

God. It did not make them righteous, but it sealed to them the truth of the promise of righteousness.

Let me make this more concrete for you. We aren't circumcising today, but we are baptizing. So let me apply this to us today.

If you have been baptized, then you also have received a sign and seal of the promise of God. And just like the wedding ring, every time we remember our baptism, we're remembering the promise of God. But we are also reminded of how that promise is actually made ours: it's made ours by faith.

And so our baptism is constantly driving us to faith in Christ because we have the sign and the seal telling us exactly where and whom righteousness comes from: it comes from Jesus Christ alone.

3. The Faith Demanded by Abraham's Circumcision

Third and finally for today, we need to acknowledge the faith demanded by Abraham's circumcision.

I want you to think about this. We've already seen that Abraham's circumcision was a sign and seal of the righteousness of Christ. But notice how Paul says it in verse 11. "He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith."

No matter when you receive the sign of the covenant – either before or after you believe – notice that the sign itself demands faith. It is calling you to believe. It is like a light house pointing you to land, pointing you to your destination, showing you where you should go.

Imagine how different the book of Romans (and all of human history) would be if the lesson here was, "See? Abraham got circumcised. And when he got circumcised he received all the benefits that circumcision pointed to, apart from faith. He was accounted righteous because he got circumcised, so make sure that *you* get circumcised, too." If that was what happened, then the gospel would be reduced to just making sure you did the right thing, followed the right ceremony, gave the right amount, and so on. If righteousness through faith alone is not the destination and goal of all these things, then the gospel is not the gospel at all, it ends up being a list of works and actions that you are supposed to make sure to perform before God will be pleased to you.

This is why Paul *belabors* the fact that he was accounted righteous, by faith, before he received circumcision.

Why is *faith* so important? Why this huge scriptural emphasis on faith? Here is why: It is the very means by which the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ. And it is only when we are “in Christ” that we can receive the good things that God has for us in the gospel, and by God’s design, that happens by no other instrument than faith because we receive it from no one other than Christ.

This takes us back to what we saw earlier, and saw last week as well: the covenant of grace that God made with Abraham and all of his descendants required only one condition on the part of Abraham and his descendants; and that one condition is faith. It’s faith that comes to us as a gift, but it is still faith by which we rest in and receive Christ and what he has done.

The covenant given to Abraham was unconditional in its essence (foundation) in the sense that God would provide everything needed for it in Christ. But I think it is helpful to think of it as being conditional in its administration. To receive the benefits of the gospel, Abraham (and all who came after) were required to believe. Harrison Perkins:

“Faith is the condition of the covenant of grace through every era of God’s plan of salvation. There is no other way to receive salvation than in Christ, and there is no other way to receive Christ than by faith. Faith is the condition of the covenant of grace precisely because it is receptive. Faith believes that Christ as the last Adam has won our place in glory with him. Even then, upon the condition of faith, the covenant of grace remains entirely of grace because the Holy Spirit is the one who works faith in us as part of his mission in the covenant of redemption. Even what God has required of us, he grants to us by grace.”

There is no blessing, no benefits, no reckoning of Abraham as righteous apart from faith, because there is no Christ apart from faith. Circumcision can’t in itself unite you to Christ. Baptism in itself can’t unite you to Christ. The Lord’s Supper in itself can’t unite you to Christ.

This was true for Abraham, and it is true for us, as well. Those things *strengthen* faith, they signify and seal the covenant and its benefits, but apart from faith, all of them ultimately do nothing to make us righteous before God. Only Christ does that.

Jesus invites us, and even commands us to come to him, to be united to him by faith. John 15:4-5

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

Paul tells us in Galatians 2:20,

“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.”

For Paul it was always all about Jesus. For Abraham, as well, it was all about Jesus. There is no hope apart from him. Don't settle for things that are adjacent to Jesus. Don't just settle for things that point you to Jesus. Let me urge you to follow where those signs and seals point: You actually need Jesus.

It's time for many of us to be more than mere observers of the things of God. God is calling you to be united to Christ by faith. The word of God is telling us that today. Abraham was righteous by faith apart from works... apart from ceremonies. You can have that, too.

I beg you, please be more than just an observer of the things of God: come to Christ by faith. Enter in. These sacraments are blessings, but they were never meant to replace faith.

So be like Abraham and listen to and obey Jesus today: “Abide in me, and I in you. Apart from me, you can do nothing.” (John 15:5).

Pray with me.