

Romans Summary
Week 7, Wednesday October 26, 2016
Romans 4:1-12

The way verse one is translated by most translators, works with their assumption that Abraham is being used by Paul as an example of being saved by faith rather than being saved by works. However, if we keep in view what Paul has been saying about circumcision and uncircumcision then we can see what Paul is doing here a little differently. This context with a translation by Richard Hays helps to define what Paul is doing here. Paul continually asks the question in this letter, "What then shall we say?" or "What then?" If we hold that as one question then we can translate the remaining, "Have we found Abraham to be our father according to the flesh?"

We must remember that when Paul says works of Torah he isn't referring to good works in general by which people try to earn their salvation with God. He has been speaking of Torah and works of Torah, meaning the Jewish Torah which belongs to that people by birthright or by nature, and the works he refers to are those works of Torah which mark the Jewish people out as a distinct people from other peoples. Specifically, we should have in mind sabbath, food, and circumcision. These are the works of the Law that define Israel from the pagans in the second temple period.

In light of what Paul has been saying around the universal condemnation — Jew and Gentile alike stand in the dock with no defence — and the righteousness which has come through Jesus apart from the Law, this is an appropriate question for his hypothetical ethic Jewish questioner. Isn't Abraham the forefather of those who are circumcised? In short, aren't works of Torah necessary to be justified (be counted as God's covenant people and have sins dealt with)? So, this is not simply Abraham as example, but a demonstration that Abraham himself was justified by faith.

What Paul says about Abraham is shocking — Abraham was not considered righteous and then made a covenant person. Rather, Abraham was ungodly. That is Abraham was an uncircumcised pagan when he was considered righteous (a covenant member and one whose sins were dealt with). How did this righteousness come about for him? He believed God's covenant promise. Abraham has the obedience of faith that Paul says Christians have.

Paul calls a second witness, David. David is a famous sinner who can testify that when God forgives a person's sins freely and undeservingly then that person is blessed. David should know. Paul follows this up by going back to Abraham emphasizing that when God made Abraham a covenant member and forgave his sins Abraham was uncircumcised. More that circumcision was meant to point to the faith of Abraham rather than pointing to the mark of circumcision itself.

Paul's point is that we Gentile Christians who believe the gospel are actually closer to Abraham as our father because we walk in his footsteps of believing while uncircumcised pagans. The Jewish people need to not erase their mark of circumcision, but to consider it as besides the point as a means of covenant membership, taking on the faith of Abraham himself. And in this way Abraham is father of both those of circumcision and uncircumcision.

So the answer to Paul's initial question is, no. We haven't found Abraham to be our forefather according to the flesh, but our forefather according to the faith of obedience.

“Father and Mother of the Ungodly” reflection and discussion questions:

1. Why is it important that Abraham is the original ungodly person?
2. Why is it okay that we can't include everyone or make a plan which will please everyone?
3. How do we, or are we, to bear witness to the power of the promise of God?