

Lesson 10: Precedent, part 1

Romans 3:31 – 4:8

³¹ Do we then nullify the Law through faith?

May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? ²

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

³ For what does the Scripture say?

“Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

⁴ Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due.

⁵ But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness,

⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: ⁷ “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven,

And whose sins have been covered.

⁸ Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.”

NASB

The Question of Consistency: Do we nullify the law through faith?

One summer I was sitting at the beach in Zadar, talking to a small group of college students about the gospel. There were five or six of us sitting on concrete slabs on a rocky beach. The apparent leader of the group of friends was quite relaxed and confident. I asked if he believed in God. He thought God was more of a power source. I commented that to see God as a power source would mean God could not love us nor we love him. It eliminates love. He said he believed God was a power source and that God loves us. We moved on. He claimed to believe Jesus was from God and was not from God. That hell exists and does not exist. That nobody and everybody goes to heaven, except that there is no real heaven. The problem was not that he lacked consistency in his thought, but consistency didn't seem to even occur to him as a value. He had this smorgasbord faith. It was like we were at a buffet of Christian ideas, Hinduism, Humanism and Agnosticism. He would look over the buffet and fill his plate with whatever looked good to him. And he claimed to believe it.

I think what really frustrated me was that he kept disagreeing with me while insisting that he was agreeing with everything I said. There was no coherence, no consistency to the whole range of his beliefs.

Biblical Christians pride themselves on their consistency. It all comes from the Bible, right? The Old Testament must agree with the New Testament. Well, the Bible being consistent is one thing. We as Christians understanding that consistency is quite a different thing. We can really argue anything we want to argue by pulling a verse from here or a verse from there. We can end up with this same kind of smorgasbord faith.

Paul has just made some pretty strong claims. He has claimed that human beings are declared righteous by faith. And he has claimed that this was witnessed to by the law and the prophets. But was it, what then was the whole point of the law? What was God doing with Moses?

Isn't it really correct to say that Paul has nullify the Law through this gospel of faith? That's the charge being leveled in Romans 3:31. Have we just voided out the first five books of the Bible with the surprise verdict of the gospel. The law is not necessary. The law is not effective.

How does Paul answer this charge? Well, it is telling how he does not answer this question. He does not say, “You know, that's right. We have moved on to grace. Don't worry about the Old Testament. Don't worry about all the things there that trouble you. You have got the New. Let's just start and go from there.” Paul is not going to say that, because he is not just making this up as he goes along. The Old Testament is the word of God. If his gospel does not agree with the Old Testament Scriptures, then his gospel is not from God. He has got a big problem. On the other hand, if his gospel does

agree with the Old Testament Scriptures, then he has the support of biblical authority in what he is teaching us.

Paul is going to reach back into biblical history to provide a precedent for the argument of the defense. And not just any precedent. He is going back to the precedent of Abraham and the first covenant with the not yet nation of Israel. Paul is going to show us that justification by faith has been God's way and God's plan all along.

Let's read Romans 3:31 – 4:8.

[Read Romans 3:31-4:8]

Paul's Proof of Consistency is the Precedent of Abraham (Romans 3:31-4:8)

We start with the challenge followed by Paul's short answer. "Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the law."

Paul is going to have to explain that short answer. How is that the gospel of faith establishes or fulfills the law? The long answer is going to come in chapters 5-11 when Paul answers the two questions raised at the beginning of chapter 3. Paul is almost ready to start in with those questions. But not yet. First, he wants us to know that the premise is all wrong. The gospel is not a rejection of the law, the gospel is the establishment of the law. There is newness here, but it is not wholly new. It is the newness of fulfillment. This is what the law was looking forward to.

To that we might respond, "Okay, Paul. Prove it." To which Paul answers, "Great, I will."

And this really is great, because we now get Paul helping us to understand Old Testament covenant and how Old Testament covenant fits together in the gospel.

"What then shall we say that Abraham our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God." Paul's contention is that no flesh can be justified in God's sight by the good moral or religious works they do. So, let's look back at Abraham. How was it for Abraham.

"What does the Scripture say?" Paul's authority is the word of God. That's the foundation for Paul's understanding of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. "What does the Scripture say?" Paul tells us. The Scripture says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." That is a quote from Genesis 15:6 from the life of Abraham. The basic idea here is the same as the gospel. There is a way for righteousness that is not accomplished by what we do but comes through belief.

The word "reckoned" is key for Paul in this chapter. It occurs eleven times. Five times here in verses 3-8 in what we are looking at. So, we need to understand what this word means. English Bibles tend to translate the word here as counted or credited. Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. I like reckon, probably because I am southern. But it does a good job carrying the double meaning of the Greek. The word could mean to consider. "God considered Abraham's belief as righteous." It has to do with God's thought towards Abraham. That's the most common use of the word today. "I reckon he is an okay guy." It means that I think he is okay. I consider him okay. An older use of the word reckon is to count. You can reckon up someone's bill. "Hold on, let me reckon that." That means to count it up. It's an older use, but it fits this Greek word well. It means to count or credit something to someone's account. It is an economic term.

Paul wants to make sure that we understand the term, so he clarifies in the next verses. If you get a job and are paid for that job, then your wages are not reckoned to you or credited to you as a gift. Your boss is not doing you a favor. You worked. You deserve to get paid. And if you want to boast about it, that's fine. You did the work. But there is another way. Verse 5, "But to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness." This is not the case of the lazy person looking for a hand out. This is the case of the drowning man caught in a pit of mud who cannot get out. There is no way out. We are unable to earn our righteousness. If we are willing to trust God, righteousness can be reckoned to our account.

Paul adds on another Scriptural support. This time he is quoting David from Psalm 32:1-2. “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.” It is a great passage to support the idea of the atonement from 3:25. Our sins have been covered by the sacrifice of Christ. “Blessed is the man whose sin is covered.” It is a great verse for Paul to quote for another reason. The phrase at the end of verse 8 is probably translated in your Bible as “whose sin the Lord will not take into account.” The original text is using our word for reckon. Literally, it is “whose sin the Lord will not reckon.” The word provides a literary link between Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:2. And Paul has picked up on this link. But even more importantly, he is emphasizing a conceptual link. Genesis says it positively, “Righteousness is reckoned to you by faith.” The Psalmist says the same thing, but in the negative form, “By faith, sin is not reckoned to you.” So, positively righteousness is reckoned to you. Negatively, sin is not reckoned. Both are good things. It is good to have righteousness reckoned and sin not reckoned.

The text of Genesis 15:6 clearly and powerfully supports Paul’s contention. By clearly teaching that righteousness comes by faith and by teaching that this was true of Abraham. Still, if we want to get the full force of Paul’s precedent with Abraham, we need to go back to the original story. Just like the quote from Habakkuk back in 1:17, Paul’s use of the Old Testament is not proof texting where somebody wrenches a verse out of context to prove a point. Paul’s use comes from understanding the much broader context from which he draws out a representative or key verse. That verse is intended to stand alone in Paul’s context. We do not have to go back to Genesis 15:6 in order to understand Paul’s point in Romans 4:3. The words he uses work here. But it does invite us back to the original context for even more insight.

Abraham’s story establishes God’s plan to provide righteousness by grace through faith (Genesis 15:1-21)

1. Four covenant moments

So, let’s follow Paul back to Abraham’s story in Genesis. I’d love to look at the whole life of Abraham. That is Paul’s broad context, but that would be overdoing it a bit right now. Instead, I will limit myself to the major covenant moments in the Abraham narrative. There are four. I am thinking about the covenant promise in Genesis 12:1-3, the covenant ceremony in Genesis 15, the covenant sign in Genesis 17 and the covenant test in Genesis 22. I am going to briefly mention the covenant promise and then focus in on the covenant ceremony in chapter 15. I will leave the covenant sign and text for next time.

God calls Abraham to leave his family and go to a new land at the beginning of Genesis chapter 12. This is a new chapter in covenant history with God. Prior to Genesis 12 God has made covenant with all of human kind, first through Adam and then he renewed that through Noah. At the Tower of Babel, God switches to a divide and conquer strategy. He decides to work from within one special covenant people and from them reach out to the rest of mankind. Not wanting to start with any nation already proud in their own identity, God chooses an older couple unable to have children and makes covenant with them.

This is what he promises Abraham. [Read Genesis 12:1-3] It is great news for Abraham. God promises the blessings of land, children, provision, protection, and purpose. Through Abraham all the nations of the world will be blessed.

There is no reference to the making of covenant in Genesis 12:1-3. What we have here is God’s promise, but we do not yet have a formal covenant. The word covenant is not going to come until chapter 15. Genesis 12 is like a betrothal that can come a long time before the marriage ceremony. We do not have the ceremony yet, but we have the promise.

2. Understanding the cultural idea of cutting covenant

Let’s go now to covenant cut in chapter 15. This is where we find our key verse Paul quotes in Romans 4:3. I am calling this covenant cut, because whenever you read that God made a covenant in

the Bible, the verb translated “made” is actually the Hebrew word “cut.” You do not make a covenant, you cut a covenant. The reason for this is that ancient covenants were ratified by a symbolic act of sacrifice. Today we ratify a marriage covenant today by the signing of a document before witnesses. Which is a lot less messy. They ratified covenant by killing animals, though there was a symbolic meaning involved.

We have thousands of tablets from the Ancient Near East giving us examples of covenant that are outside of the bible. Here is just one example. This is from a treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati’ilu of Arpad, a smaller city-state which was north of Israel. Ashurnirari was the great king. He was over an empire, and Mati’ilu was his vassal. The treaty required ratification by sacrificing a lamb and cutting its head off. Messy. The treaty explained the symbolism of the sacrifice this way. “This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati’ilu, it is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land. If Mati’ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off, and its knuckle placed in its mouth, [...], the head of Mati’ilu be torn off, and his sons [...]. (ANEAnth 1:49).”

The sacrifice performed by the vassal was what is called a self-imprecatory curse. You are calling a curse on yourself when you go through a ceremony.

It’s not that different from a shotgun wedding. A boy gets a girl pregnant and daddy says, “You’re going to do right by her aren’t you boy?” And boy says, “Yes, sir.” Just to make sure the boy understands his responsibility, daddy brings his 12-gauge to the wedding. The symbol is a curse. “If you break your oath to my daughter, then you get to meet my shotgun.”

Another way of symbolizing the covenant oath in the Ancient Near East was to cut the sacrificial animals in two and require the vassals to walk through the pieces, declaring, “If we break covenant with you O King, then let us be cut in two like these animals.” We can hear the threat of that kind of covenant oath being carried out in Jeremiah 34:18-20. “I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not fulfilled the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between its parts— the officials of Judah and the officials of Jerusalem, the court officers and the priests and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf— I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. And their dead bodies will be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth.” Covenant cut ratifies a covenant through sacrifice which is a symbolic curse that you bring on yourself. “Let this happen to me if I break covenant with you great king.”

3. Faith and Grace in Genesis 15

That sets us up for Genesis 15. We had covenant promise in Genesis 12. The next stage of actually cutting covenant or ratifying covenant is now going to happen in Genesis 15. The dialogue that precedes the cutting of covenant is where we find Paul’s key verse, “Abraham was reckoned righteous by faith.” In fact, that verse comes in the very center of the dialogue. On either side of that verse we have a parallel pattern. In verses 1-5, God is going to speak, then Abraham is going to speak, then God is going to speak again. In verse 6, Abraham faith is reckoned as righteousness. Then in 7-21 we get the pattern again. God is going to speak, Abraham is going to speak, God is going to speak again. God, Abraham, God, faith, God, Abraham, God. That is the pattern of the text.

A God restates the promise	15:1
B Abraham questions about a son	15:2-3
C God affirms with an illustration	15:4-5
X Abraham believes	15:6
A God restates the promise	15:7
B Abraham questions about the land	15:8
C God affirms with covenant	15:9-21

Let's walk through it. In verse 1, God speaks. [Read 15:1]

Now, Abraham is going to speak. Listen to Abraham's words and think about whether it sounds like faith to you or not. [Read 15:2-3] How does that sound? Does that sound like faith? ... This is one of the challenges of biblical narrative. The words someone speaks do not always give you a clear read on his or her heart. This could be a lack of faith with Abraham not believing God to fulfill his promise to give him descendants. Or it could be something else. It could be the weakness that comes with being a human being. We are dependent. We don't see what is going on. Its taking so long. It has been almost 10 years since God made the promise. How long Lord? When Lord? How are you going to fulfill the promise of descendants if I have no child? Is it really going to be through a servant of mine? How is this going to work out.

Often in biblical narrative, it is the response of God that gives us insight into the heart of a person. God sees inside. God understands how the words we speak relate to what is going on inside. It is significant that God does not rebuke Abraham right now. God sees into his heart, and it is as though God puts his arms around Abraham's shoulders and guides him outside to look up at the sky. And God says this. [Read 15:4-5]

Notice here that God does not answer Abraham's question of how it is going to work out. Abraham still has to choose to believe. But God does speak to Abraham's heart, and he gives him reassurance. "Your descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky."

So, Abraham believes the promise of God. That is where we get our key verse, verse 6. [Read 15:6]

The assertion of Abraham's faith in verse 6 causes what comes next to stand out. We are going to have God speaking again, and then Abraham speaking, then God speaking. God starts by restating the promise again. So, listen to this. [Read 15:7] The first half of the dialogue was about descendants. Now we are talking about the land. As you listen to Abraham's response, again ask yourself, "Does it sound like faith?" [Read 15:8] Does that sound like faith? ... Same problem. I love it. It is so human. "How Lord?" Abraham has no land at all. He is surrounded by other peoples, wandering around with his flocks, looking for water and pasture, trusting the good will of his neighbors. But he owns none of it. Before he dies the only land to his name is going to be the cave he was allowed to buy in which to bury Sarah. "How Lord? I do believe, but I cannot see it."

There is a deeper question here. A question that is not expressed directly by Abraham but is addressed in God's answer. Since God addresses it in his answer, we can be sure it is something that God sees in the heart of man. God knows what needs to be spoken. It's like the rich young ruler who came to Jesus wanting to know how to get into heaven. And he claimed to have held to all the law. Jesus saw the pride in that young man. He saw that the only hope for him was to be shaken. So, he spoke a challenge straight into his heart, straight into his internal identity. And he said, "All you have to do is sell everything you have and follow me."

God saw into Abraham's heart. The words may have been saying, "How are you going to accomplish this Lord?" But there is a deeper how question. The deeper how question for each one of us is, "How are you going to accomplish this Lord through me?" Isaiah, the righteous prophet, saw a vision of God and immediately cried out, "I am undone. I am under the curse. For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips." Who can say, "Here I am Lord, I will be your man!" and have any hope of living up to the calling of God. Isaiah was overwhelmed by the very nature of God and the reality of his own sin. So, the biggest part of the how question is not, "How is God going to do it?" but, "How am I going to stay faithful to God, so that the mission can be completed?" I am sinful. I cannot continue on faithfully. Whether nobody else sees it or not, I know in my heart that I do not have what it takes to be God's man, good and faithful and true and pure. "You are holy God. How do you complete your promise through me?"

Well, for Isaiah, God took his fears away by touching his unclean lips with a burning coal, telling him, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven." God

took care of his sin, so that he could be God's man. The next thing he said was, "Here I am Lord, send me." God has the same message for Abraham, but a different way of communicating it. "How can it be you ask. Let me tell you, not in an illustration, but by a formal cutting of covenant."

Now what we are going to get next, the whole of verse 9 to the end of the chapter, is all going to sound strange to us but only a part of it would have sounded strange to the Israelites following. Here is the part that would have made sense. When they hear this, they know exactly what is going on. [Read 15:9-11] The people hearing this, they know what this is. Abraham is preparing for a covenant sacrifice. This is the cutting of covenant.

But then things start to get strange. [Read 15:12-18]. Verse 18, "On that day God made a covenant with Abram." What does the Hebrew literally say? It says, "God cut a covenant with Abram." But what was Abraham doing during this covenant ceremony? He was asleep. He was as passive as you could possibly be without being dead. But this makes no sense. Abraham is supposed to walk through the sacrificed animals. We understood. He is preparing a covenant ceremony. Instead we have a fiery torch and smoking pot go through the pieces. And when we ask what smoke and fire symbolize in the books of Moses, we know immediately. The fire and smoke on the burning bush, the fire and smoke on the top of mount Sinai, the columns of fire and smoke leading the Israelites through the wilderness. Fire and smoke is the presence of God. The presence of God passes through the pieces.

Again, this makes no sense. The great King never walks through the covenant animals. The vassal does that. The point is for the vassal to bring a curse on himself, saying, "If I break covenant with you great king, then let it be done to me what has been done to these animals." And yet, here we have God walking through the cut up animals. Verse 12, "a deep sleep fell over Abram, terror and great darkness fell upon him."

How are you going to keep covenant with me Abraham? You are not going to. If left to you, the only guarantee is that you would break covenant with me. No flesh will be justified by his works. You must lie passively in deep slumber. You have no role here. I will walk through. The way you keep covenant with me is that I die. I take the covenant curse on myself. God is making a promise. He is offering himself as payment for our debt. Two thousand years later, darkness is again going to cover the land. This time at the sixth hour. Those who saw it were afraid. God himself died on a cross, making payment, fulfilling the promise that he established so many years before.

That is the answer to the deeper question of how this is going to work. Not by works, by grace. My substitution for you. Given by grace, received by faith.

The center of this chapter records the faith of Abraham. The end of the chapter records the grace of God. The faith is human, questioning. The grace of God provides the anchor, the sure foundation. Grace and faith work together like ice on a lake. It takes faith to step out onto the lake. If you have such great faith that you run and jump out onto the lake, what happens if the ice is only two inches thick? You shoot right through. If the ice is a yard thick, but your faith is weak, so that with great fear you edge inch by inch out onto the ice, will it hold you? Yes. The strength of your faith is not what holds you up. Weak or strong, whether you crawl out or jump out, you do need faith. You have to step out onto the ice. You have to receive the gift offered. But it is not the strength of your faith that ensures your salvation. It is the strength of God's arms that hold you. His arms have done the job, stretched out on a cross. Those arms don't break. They don't grow weary. They have done the work that must needs be done. Death is required for our rebellion against our holy and righteous God, for our sin. So, death he paid.

Those arms are still stretched out, stretched out to you. All you have to do is say, "Yes. Into your hands I commit my spirit."

"What shall we say that Abraham found? What does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

Abraham provides Paul with the precedent for his defense. We have his main point. Righteousness came to Abraham through faith in God, Genesis 15:6. In the rest of chapter four Paul develops for us the implications of this main point in this key verse. We will look at how Paul does that in our next lesson. But we will stop there for now.

Reflection Questions

1. What is something that stands out to you as important or interesting or confusing or strange in Romans 3:31-4:8?
2. Refresh your memory on Abraham's story. List 10 different episodes from the life of Abraham. Try to get 10 before looking back for help. Then skim over Genesis 12-25 to see how you did.
3. Put your list of Abraham episodes into order. Where do the four covenant moments in the life of Abraham from this lesson fit into the list you have made?
4. What stands out to you in Genesis 15? Is there something new here that you have not noticed before?
5. We are told in Genesis 15:6 that Abraham had faith and it was reckoned as righteousness. Yet, he questioned God twice (15:2-3 and 15:8) after God had restated his promise. What do you learn about Abraham, what do you learn about God and what do you learn about faith from this interaction?
6. How would you explain the relationship between faith and grace? Which is more important? How do they relate?
7. How would you answer the first question of covenant for Abraham, according to the story in Genesis 15. What percentage would you give to the role of grace and what percentage to the role of law in answering for Abraham, "What makes me acceptable to be in covenant with my righteous God?"