

The Bible (Unmuted) Transcript
Episode 21
Romans, Part 9 (Rom 4)
July 11, 2023
Teacher: Matthew Halsted

Episode Summary:

In this episode, Matt offers an interpretive tour through Romans 4. In this chapter, Paul quotes from Psalm 31 (LXX) and key portions of Genesis. One of the interesting questions about these quotations is the way in which Paul employs them as part of his argument that circumcision (works of Torah) are not required for covenant membership. But how would Paul's contemporaries (his non-Christian Jewish interlocutors) have thought about Paul's argument? Would they be persuaded by his interpretations of Genesis and Psalm 31? We answer these questions and more in this episode, addressing the nature of Paul's interpretive posture with respect to these important Old Testament texts.

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Transcript:

0:00 Hey everybody! Welcome another episode of The Bible Unmuted. My name is Matt Halsted and I will be giving the tour through Romans chapter 4 today. I'm super excited about it...because well, I like Romans, but too I really like Romans 4. I think as we'll see today, Romans 4 gives us a really cool glimpse into the worldview of Paul. Specifically, I guess you could say his Christological worldview and the way his Christology, his commitments to Christ, were a presupposition. A pre-judgment we might say with respect to his interpretation of the text. So, we're going to see that first hand today. Paul quotes some key texts in Romans 4 and we're going to see how he handles those texts and I think it's going to be quite surprising perhaps. So, I'm really excited about that today. I've been really looking forward to getting to this moment to get into Romans chapter 4. Of course, I'm super stoked about our favorite chapter – Romans chapter 9, so I'm really excited about that. If you're excited about that... all the stuff about election and Romans 8 – predestination and all of that stuff, we will get to that. But in the meantime we'll have fun wading in the waters of Romans 4.

Before we get to that today, I thought I would share a few thoughts I've been having. It's been my tradition to post these podcast every Tuesday morning. It just seems to be the rhythm I've gotten into and it seems to be working really well. And part of the structure of the show has been to do interviews with other scholars and I think there's a lot of value in that. I think there is a ton of value to bring others onto the show to dialog, to converse, to talk, because we grow that way. I know I do when I talk to other scholars. I'm just always learning something so I think that's always valuable to do. So I think we will continue to do that.

The other thing we've been doing is these long form studies – going for about 45 minutes to an hour each time. I like that. I think it's so important to do these long form studies and to wade through the Scriptures and Scripture motifs and themes, topics, and so forth. We are going to keep doing all of those things. I'm not going to stop that. I'm not even going to change the rhythm of it, or the timing. Every Tuesday my

goal is to produce something long form that you can use, hopefully, as a resource. I pray that it's a good resource.

But, I'm thinking of adding something. And I'd love to hear your thoughts on this. I'm thinking of mixing it up a little bit and adding perhaps some random off the cuff thoughts that are posted here on the podcast as their own episode, but they are only going to last five minutes long. So they are just really quick soundbites sort of things because I got to thinking...I think about things all day long. There are little things that I'm writing about, and little things like that. And I thought this would be really cool to just share those publically and post them on the podcast. So they're off the cuff thoughts, they aren't well formatted thoughts which could be quite scary. But I do think there is virtue in thinking long and hard about things before you say anything. And I want to develop that as a habit personally, and of course professionally. But there is also value in throwing out those musings and tossing them out there for evaluation and thoughts in getting them out there. Because when you do that, when you toss these off the cuff thoughts out, these are seeds for further thought and further exposition down the road. So, I'm thinking about doing that. I might just post things occasionally, maybe on a Wednesday or Thursday. I thought it would be fun to do these short five minute things – maybe as you're hopping in the car to grab milk, you might have something to listen to on your short commute to the grocery store. I thought it would be fun and diversify the podcast a little bit. So be on the lookout for that. I think it will be a lot of fun.

Thank you to all the Patreon members. Thank you so much for your support and I am so grateful for you.

The other thing, I want to share is I've been reading this past week. And it's interesting because I am a Biblical scholar, mainly. I have a background in philosophy, in fact my PhD, a good portion – half of it, was philosophy, hermeneutics and the philosopher of Godemer. All of that is reflected in my Paul book, if you've read that or looked at it. The first half is just philosophy. While I consider myself a biblical scholar, I have such a great respect for philosophy and systematic thinking, and theology. So as a result, I seldom read theology, I do, but it's just not where I'm focused at the moment so I don't often read the church fathers. But I've found myself these past month...long story short, I was asked to write an article on a really cool article on a really fun subject. I cannot wait to share it with you. It will be posted for sure down the road whenever it's published. Anyway, while working on that article, I had to go back and read some stuff on Thomas Aquinas and specifically his work on the incarnation. So I found myself wading through multiple times through Thomas's musings on the incarnation. Which was a lot of fun. It's so good to read really smart people. I continue to learn a lot. I don't agree with everything he says, but I do really appreciate his very careful way of thinking through very complicated subjects. So I encourage you to go and read the incarnation stuff by Thomas.

I also found myself sitting down and reading 1 Clement. And that was really fun. If you aren't familiar with the early patristics, Clement was a bishop of Rome. I don't know the date he was doing his ministry, but 1 Clement was written in the later part of the first century, so not too long after the Book of revelation. If you think like I do, the Book of revelation was written around 80 to 95. So, it was in that era that Clement was written. I read the whole letter. And there was a great little quote and I posted it to Facebook. I want to pull it up here and just share with you because it was so good, devotionally and in terms of prayer. Just a lot of things to think about. So this comes from 1 Clement 59:4

"We ask you, Master, to be our helper and protector. Save those of us who are in tribulation; on the lowly, have mercy; those who fall, raise; to those who pray, reveal yourself; the sick, heal; those of your people who wander about, turn back; feed those who hunger; ransom our prisoners; raise up those who are weak; encourage those who are discouraged. Let all the nations know you that you are the only God, and Jesus Christ is your child, and we are your people and the sheep of your pasture."

That's just such a beautiful prayer and I posted it to Facebook because it's just so good. And it gives me a lot to think about. If you have some margin in your schedule, start reading the early patristics. Clement and Ignatius, for example. There is a lot of value in reading the writings of earlier years. It's true that if you are in a western context, though maybe some of you are listening in a non-western culture or country. But if you are living in America or Europe, there is this strong sense of individualism. I grew up in this individualism. You know, it's just me and Jesus. You come to the altar, you say your prayer, you confess... Now not every tradition is like that, but I grew up in and cut my theological teeth in a tradition that was highly individualistic. And some of the other churches, perhaps more liturgical churches have more of a corporal element, which I think is beautiful. That's a whole other topic, but I just found myself thinking that we today in 2023, we need the church fathers and the church mothers. We need to read their stuff and hear them out. We need St. Gregory of Nyssa, who I absolutely love reading. And Macrina his sister, through his writings we get her teachings. It just reminds me that none of us are Lone Ranger Christians. We need each other. We not only need the living, those who are still with us, but we need those who have gone before us to teach us and remind us of the things that we have forgotten or the things that we have neglected to remember. So that's what the fathers do for me. Unfortunately, it's not my area of study so I don't read them a lot. But, it is worth pausing, in your cycle of reading, finish what you are reading and read one of the church fathers, then go back to your modern book. Cycle back and forth between the two. We need the early Christians to speak to us, they still teach and they have left us a legacy. And truly it's an old trite saying but it's true – "we stand on the shoulders of giants." And it's so important to realize there are many Christians who have gone before us and the Christian tradition is huge. It's not just our little church. It's part of the big church, the universal church. So, I encourage you, read the patristics, the fathers. You may not want to start with Thomas, but read Clement, read Ignatius and you will be super blessed.

Let's dive into today's show.

11:25 So in today's episode we are going to look at Romans chapter 4, and I highly recommend that if you are new to the podcast, go back and listen to part one of the Romans series and work your way up this. It all builds on one another. And I think this is especially true for today's episode because the last episode we did, I included it as part of the Romans study. We didn't actually look at Romans, we looked at Philippians but that episode was helpful because it gave us a preview of how Paul interprets the Old Testament and how he understands Jewish monotheism in light of Jesus the Messiah. I think last week's episode on Philippians and Isaiah's servant is super important. As you listen to this one you may recall some of that because I think it's a good foundation to what we are going to be talking about today.

Today in Romans 4, we are going to focus on Paul's use of the Old Testament. In Romans 4 Paul quotes from the Psalms and Genesis multiple times and he alludes to key sections of the Genesis story specifically Abraham. And the way Paul uses the Abraham story to advance his argument is super cool. His argument is that circumcision is not required for covenant membership in the Christian community. To make that argument and substantiate that claim, he brings up the Abraham story and starts quoting from those texts in Genesis 15. And he alludes to chapter 17 and so forth. And that's how he is substantiating his claim that circumcision isn't required. So we will get into all that.

For Paul, suffice it to say, the Abraham story is super, super important. And I think it's important to realize that the Abraham story was important to many people in Second Temple Judaism. When I say that, I mean the era of Judaism of the second temple. The first temple was destroyed and the second was rebuilt. You know that story. So that era of Judaism was a very multi-faceted era. It's probably not helpful to say there was a Judaism of that era. There were Judaisms. There were different factions. Of course you had the Pharisees, you had the Sadducees, and you had the zealots, the Essenes and all that during the time roughly of Jesus. That's easy to tell. If you read the New Testament you can see that everybody is arguing about all sort of things. So there were Judaisms at that time. This is very different than the mosaic Judaism that we read about in the Old Testament – the exodus, the monarchy and all of that. This is a very different world that Jesus is living in.

14:15 During Second Temple Judaism, the Abraham story was often appealed to make arguments and to remind readers where they came from and who they should emulate and so forth. Many Romans commentators will point this out too. For example, James Dunn in his Romans commentary - it's a dated commentary from 1988, so it's been around for a while, but it's still fun to read. It's still cool to look into and I will pull some things from his commentary in today's episode. But anyway, he mentions this volume, page 226 about how the Abraham story was often appealed to by Second Temple Jews and one example of this comes from the book of Sirach which is an apocryphal work, or if you are Orthodox or Roman Catholic, you would call this a deuterocanonical text. If you are Protestant you would call this an apocryphal text. But anyway, and on a side note, I highly recommend that you read all of Sirach. It's a lengthy work, but its well worth the read. In chapter 44 of Sirach verse 19-21 you see this appeal to Abraham. It's pretty important. I will read the whole thing, its Sirach 44:19-21 and I'm reading from the new Revised Standard Version. It says this,

*19 Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations,
and no one has been found like him in glory.*

*20 He kept the law of the Most High,
and entered into a covenant with him;
he certified the covenant in his flesh,
and when he was tested he proved faithful.*

(MH: or you can translate this as he was found faithful)

*21 Therefore the Lord assured him with an oath
that the nations would be blessed through his offspring;
that he would make him as numerous as the dust of the earth,
and exalt his offspring like the stars,
and give them an inheritance from sea to sea
and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth.*

So that's Sirach and its interesting how he appeals to that story of Abraham. And I will make some comments along the way. And there is another text that makes an appeal, a very brief one, but none the less very forceful to the story of Abraham. And this comes from 1 Maccabees 2:52 and I'll read that verse here from the NRSV,

Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?

That comes from 1 Maccabees. If you are a student of the New Testament, you have got to read 1 Maccabees.

It's so important. My students in my Jewish and Romans background of the New Testament class, they read that text and it is just indispensable. It's super helpful, I think.

Let me make some comments about this. In both of these texts, in Sirach and 1 Maccabees, it's interesting how the language is the same. It's this, "When tested, he was found faithful". They both use that same construction. And I think that's important here, because it suggests that this way of thinking about Abraham here was very typical and common of the era. Abraham's faith, or faithfulness, is tied to his having been tested. Which again, likely refers to his test of being called to sacrifice Isaac. So yeah, they are appealing to Abraham. He was found faithful. And it was accredited to him as righteousness. It was reckoned to him as righteousness. So, Abraham's faith and his testing of offering Isaac were intricately linked. In the Jewish mind of the second temple period, you really couldn't separate the two events. And I think that's very important. So keep that in the back of your mind as we study Romans 4 here.

18:00 So to illustrate this I want to go back and look at Sirach 44:20 and read it again, a little bit slower so that we can get that point across about how Abrahams entrance into the covenant is not separated from his being tested and subsequently being found faithful. So Sirach 44:20 says,

*20 He kept the law of the Most High,
and entered into a covenant with him;
he certified the covenant in his flesh,
and when he was tested he proved faithful.*

Now notice here. You have Abraham entering the covenant and this can be found in Genesis 12 and 15. Those are two very important texts about this entrance into the covenant and being justified by faith. You get this in Genesis 15 because Abraham believed God and it was accredited to him as righteousness and so forth. So, you have he entered into the covenant in Genesis 12 and 15. And that, according to Sirach is connected to his circumcision. That circumcision rite is found in Genesis 17. So Sirach says, that Abraham entered into a covenant with him and he certified in his flesh. And that entering and certification of the covenant in his flesh, or the circumcision, all of that is connected to his being tested with sacrificing Isaac which can be found in Genesis 22. And Sirach says when he was tested he was proved faithful. So you can't miss the logic here. The command, or the rite of circumcision, (Genesis 22) is intricately linked to Abraham's being declared righteous in Genesis 15. In fact, Sirach even says at the beginning of that verse we read, that Abraham kept the law of the Most High.

Now, that gives us some insight into how thoroughly linked this story of Abraham was with the Mosaic Law for many Second Temple Jews. Historically, we know that Abrahams story took place a long time before the law was given through Moses. And yet for Jews those stories are theologically un-severable. You can't separate them. That's how they can say that Abraham kept the law of God. That's how Sirach says that.

All of this is interesting. Why is this interesting? Because in Romans chapter 4, Paul does the unthinkable. He unlinks these events. He unlinks Abraham's entrance into the covenant, his justification, his being declared righteous – he unhitches that from the circumcision covenant seal. Paul will quote the Abraham story, in order to show that circumcision isn't required in order to be declared righteous. That's what makes this so fun to read. Because Paul does the unthinkable and will actually quote the Old Testament story of Abraham to show why circumcision isn't required to be declared righteous. It's fascinating. Again, this is the opposite of what many Jews did. Just as we saw in 1 Maccabees. Just as we read in Sirach. They would never have done what Paul does. It's just fascinating. So the take away is, the Abrahamic covenant could not be easily separated from the circumcision commandment. Let me repeat that. For Second Temple Jews, the Abrahamic covenant could not be easily separated from the circumcision commandment. For Second Temple Jews, those things would be absolutely unthinkable.

21:40 This brings us to Romans chapter 4. Let's read verses 1-5.

1 What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? 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 one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. 5 But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

So here the language is similar to Sirach and Maccabees, although in the new Revised Standard Version it doesn't quite come through. When Paul says, "what then are we to say was gained by Abraham?" you could translate that as "what then shall we say was found by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh." I just point that out because it seems evident that Paul was quite aware of the traditional way of speaking about Abraham. Just like we saw in Maccabees and Sirach, Abraham was found faithful. And

Paul starts off here in Romans 4 by saying, “what then shall we say was found by Abraham?” So he picks up that train of thought, that similar vernacular, or that similar way of constructing the Abraham story.

So he starts off by framing all of that in terms of boasting. He says that Abraham had nothing to boast about. His calling was grace based, not works based. And here I think by works, Paul means to imply the works of circumcision. That’s the works that are mentioned later on, so I think that’s what we need to go with. He’s not talking about works in general, I would say. Although, Paul would never ever claim that by doing good works, you could pull yourself up by your boot straps and earn God’s grace. No! He was a Jew, I don’t think he would think like that. He wasn’t a legalist in the way that we think of legalism. Here I think he is talking about those works of Torah, circumcision and things like that. And by the way, with respect to boasting, as we have already seen here, Paul has already chided his dialog partner for boasting in their covenant relation to God.

Remember in Romans 2 verse 17, he says, “But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God”. Now again, it would be unfair to say what Paul is talking about is the legalistic Jew. You know, boasting about how righteous they were and how many good works they do. There is an element of that, I think, but I think what we are seeing here is slightly different. This is the boast of someone who forgets that their election is for the sake of other people. These are those, when you show them their sin, they turn around and boast. They say, “yeah, but we have Abraham as our father. We are the elect of God.”, right? In other words, they are boasting about their national identity. They are boasting about their ethnicity and their exclusiveness. I think there is a strong emphasis on that because again in Romans 2:17, “You call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God”. These are people who put their hope in the temple – “We have the temple, it protects us. And we are the special people of God.” They boast about those things and all the while they forget their responsibilities to act with grace and goodness. Read the gospels – you really do see this - that we have Abraham as our father and all of that sort of thing.

And it’s important to note here that Paul in Romans chapter 2 does not dismiss the fact that Israel is called to be a light to the nations, to guide them. He knows that Israel has a special place in the divine economy. He is just upset that they have taken their election and they have made it about themselves. So I think what Paul is doing here is saying, “Okay, guys, let’s take this back to square one. Let’s talk about having Abraham as our father. Who was Abraham?” I mean, technically, Abraham was a former pagan. He was an ungodly person. He was graciously called into the covenant. He didn’t do anything to get elected into this vocation. It was pure grace. And this fact applies to anyone who lacks works of Torah, such as the gentiles. They don’t have works of Torah because they weren’t born under the Torah. They have no Torah, they have nothing. So, if God can call somebody like Abraham into the covenant who previously had was not born into the Torah. I mean, my goodness. he was born well before the Torah was given. So if God can call that person, then he can call a gentile. So essentially what Paul is doing, if we can take the big view – the 50,000 foot view of the scene is that Abraham was called by grace. He had nothing to boast about. He wasn’t anybody before God elected him. I hope that really rings in our ears as we are reading this. And so Paul is trying to make a point which is, of course gentiles can come into the covenant, Abraham did after all. So he is leveling the playing field, you could say. Even gentiles who trust solely on Jesus – it doesn’t matter what their ethnicity is, they can come into the covenant. So for Paul, covenant membership is based on grace, not race.

27:20 After this, Paul launches into the Psalms for further scriptural support of his thesis, his ideas. So let’s read Romans 4 verses 6-8.

6 *So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:*

7 *“Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;*

8 *blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.”*

This is a quotation from the Greek's Old Testament Psalm 31. In our English Bible, it's Psalm 32, but in the Greek Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, it's Psalm 31. So, we have to ask here, what was Paul thinking? Clearly, he is sighting this passage to show that forgiveness and the not reckoning of sins is the same thing. Which would link the whole conversation back to the Abraham story where Abraham was reckoned as righteous by his faith. And this something that James Dunn in his Romans commentary talks about. Page 229, go look it up – it has some interesting discussion there. Okay, so we get that. I think that's fair to say, but Paul is also sighting this passage to support his idea that God reckons righteousness apart from works of Torah. That's how he introduces the citation or the quotation. Verse 6 – let me read it again. "So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works." And then he quotes a Psalm, "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven." All of this is kind of interesting because if we are going to be careful readers we are going to have to ask a question. We have to say, let's go back and read Psalm 31 in the Septuagint and see if it supports what Paul is trying to say. But here's the thing. When you do go back and read Psalm 31 you notice something pretty peculiar. It doesn't really say that. It doesn't say that you are forgiven apart from your works. So let me just read all of Psalm 31 from the Lexham English Septuagint.

- 1** Blessed are those whose lawless acts are forgiven,
and whose sins were covered up.
- 2** Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD will never reckon,
nor is there guile in his mouth.
- 3** Because I was silent, my bones were worn out
from my crying aloud the whole day.
- 4** For day and night your hand was weighed down upon me;
I was turned into misery when a thorn was planted.
- 5** I made known my sin,
and my lawlessness I did not cover up;
I said, "I will make known to the Lord my sin against myself,"
and you forgave the ungodliness of my heart.
- 6** Because of this every holy person will pray to you at the suitable time;
surely in the flood of many water they will not come near to him;
- 7** You are my place of refuge;
from the affliction of that which is surrounding me;
you are my great joy to deliver me from the ones who are encircling me;
- 8** I will instruct you and I will teach you in this way that you should go;
I will strengthen my eye upon you.
- 9** Do not become as the horse and the mule, for which there is no understanding,
with bridle and muzzle one compresses their jaws,
which do not come near to you.
- 10** Many are the scourges of the sinner,
but the one who hopes in the LORD.
will be encircled in mercy
- 11** Be gladdened in the LORD and rejoice exceedingly, O righteous ones,
and boast, all the upright with respect to the heart.

Now, it's hard to see how Paul's quoting this passage would have been convincing to his non-Christian Jewish friends. After all, nowhere in this Psalm does it say that God reckons righteousness and forgiveness apart from works of Torah. It just says that God reckons righteousness and forgiveness. But Paul sites this as a testimony that God does so apart from works. Now in his Romans commentary, I've mentioned James Dunn multiple times already, but in his Romans commentary he makes some similar observations. So I want to read a little bit from that with respect to that quotation. So James Dunn says this. This comes from page 229, volume 1 of his Romans commentary. Dunn says this,

“Would Paul’s Jewish interlocutor find this argument as just stated wholly convincing? Probably not. It is not that he would have had difficulty with the near equation of righteousness and forgiveness, the idea of God’s righteousness as his action to rescue and sustain his underserving people was too well established and psalmist and prophet for that. It is rather Paul slipping in once again the words, “apart from works”, which would cause the problem. For the typical Jew would not see forgiveness as happening apart from works. On the contrary, the whole point of sacrifice for sin and the Day of Atonement was to provide the means of forgiveness. The cultic works of the law which expressed the sinner’s repentance and provided expiation.”

A non-Christian Jew could respond to Paul with something like this, “Hey Paul, look – yes, David clearly received free forgiveness all by grace. But you cannot forget, Paul, that David was circumcised.” So this is an interesting point to make. When David wrote this Psalm, no doubt David was circumcised. And this is something that Dunn mentions in his commentary too, this fact. So does Psalm support the idea that God reckons righteousness apart from works of Torah? Well, no, not like that. Not in that sense for sure. So just like James Dunn says later on his commentary that Paul does not rest his entire argument on Psalm 31. And I agree, that is certainly true. What Paul will do and what Paul will go on to quote the Abraham story and we will get into that in a moment. And it is that combination of this Psalm with the Abraham story that provides the support for his overall claims that righteousness comes without any reference to works of Torah. But here’s the thing. Here’s the thing – as we will see in a moment, the way Paul quotes the Abraham story probably would not be convincing of his fellow Jewish friends either. And I think that is an important point to make.

Let me just recap everything we’ve just said here. Paul quotes Psalm 31, and he says, “Davis says this blessing comes apart from the Torah.” But, when you go back and read Psalm 31, that’s really not what David says. He says forgiveness comes, and God forgives us, and what not. But nowhere does it say, “Hey guys, this comes without circumcision.” In fact, the assumption is the opposite. David was circumcised. He was in covenant which means he had access to the forgiveness of God. But, it’s also fair to say when you take Romans 4 as a whole, Paul is not resting the entirety of his argument on just that Psalm 31. And this again is something that Dunn has said in his commentary – that Paul will rest the crux of his argument on the Abraham story which we will get to in a moment. But, here is my point. I do think that Psalm 31 carries more weight than what Dunn is giving it credit for. And, even if not, when Paul goes on to quote the Abraham story in just a moment, the way he quotes it and frames that discussion, probably would be convincing to his Jewish friends anyway.

35:25 But none of this means that Paul was wrong. Hang with me here. I am not suggesting that Paul was wrong. I am just suggesting that the way we are tempted to read Paul might be wrong. So hold all of that aside for a moment and let’s just dive into the rest of the chapter 4. I’m going to read Romans 4:9-12

9 Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” 10 How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. 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 ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, 12 and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Okay, so let me unpack what Paul has just done here. He is asking the question, was Abraham reckoned as righteous before or after he was circumcised? Well, clearly it was before because you can read

Genesis and you read Genesis 15:6 which was a verse that Paul quotes in this text. It clearly says that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. Genesis 15:6 tells us that. It wasn't until Genesis 17 that Abraham receives the sign and the seal of circumcision. That's Genesis 17. So, here's what Paul is doing. It's pretty ingenious actually. He's just simply saying, "Okay guys, is it possible for God to give someone a declaration of righteousness without being circumcised? Of course it is! Look at Abraham! See, in Genesis 15 he was declared righteous and he wasn't circumcised yet, therefore even gentiles can be declared righteous without being circumcised and without performing works of Torah." Okay, that's what Paul is here. And on the surface it makes sense. I mean, go read Genesis. He's right. You can find his quotations, you can find the logic of it. Historically speaking it is true that Abraham was declared righteous before receiving the right of circumcision.

Remember 1 Maccabees. Remember Sirach. Is this the way they read the Abraham story? No, not really is it? Because Sirach connected Abraham's entrance into the covenant, his declaration of righteousness with Abraham's circumcision and later on with Abraham's being tested with the sacrifice of Isaac. He connects, in other words, Genesis 15 with Genesis 17 with Genesis 22. Paul is separating all that. He is isolating Genesis 15 from all those other texts.

So let's stop here for a moment and let's ask the question...and you guys know me...I am all for asking questions. So let's ask a big question here. Does Paul's argument work? Well, if his argument is what I just said, then no it doesn't. If his argument is, "Hey guys, Abraham was justified in Genesis 15 and he wasn't even circumcised. He's not circumcised until much later. Therefore, gentiles can be accepted freely into the covenant without being circumcised, without performing works of Torah. Righteousness comes apart from works of Torah." If that's Paul's argument, it really doesn't work guys. It does not.

Now let me tease this out just a bit. If that's Paul's argument – which hint...I don't think that's all of Paul's argument. And we'll get to that in a moment. But if that was Paul's argument, let's do a thought experiment on it. What if Paul were to go back in time. Okay, this is a thought experiment. It's stupid, it can't happen, but let's just pretend because the principal is the same. If Paul discovered a time machine, or built a time machine, and got in it and went back to the days of Moses, and he says, "Moses, dude, I've been reading the Bible and I want to talk to you about something. You know how you are saying that everybody should be circumcised and how your law says that? Well, get this. If you read your book closely, if you read Genesis really closely, then you should not require circumcision of even the pagans. Because, dude Moses, check this out. In Genesis 15, Abraham is justified and he's not circumcised. Therefore, let's let the Canaanites in without being circumcised. Let's just do that." What do you think Moses would say to that? He would not like Paul. He would not like Paul at all. But, Paul's logic would work, right? Because if it's true in the first century AD... If it's true that historically speaking, it's a historical fact that Abraham was justified before his circumcision, if it's true in the first century AD then it was true in Moses's day. Right? And Moses would have to concede, right? But Moses would not. That's why I say that if that's what Paul is doing, if Paul's argument is that, it fails. It wouldn't work. Because it would, again, think of what Moses would say to him. It just would not work at all.

So we're left here with kind of a conundrum. Is Paul wrong? The answer to that is no, he is not wrong. The problem is the way we are understanding Paul's argument. So let me say this: Paul's argument fails. But it only fails if it's purely an exegetical argument. Now what do I mean by that? If all Paul is saying is, "Hey guys, read the Bible carefully and then let's exegete the text." Exegete means to pull out meaning from the text. And if that's all Paul is doing, then his argument is just terrible. So, let me repeat this. Paul's argument fails only if it's purely an exegetical argument. But as it turns out, Paul's argument does not fail because it is not purely exegetical.

41:20 Let me unpack this just a little bit more. When I say that Paul's exegesis is not purely exegetical, what I'm saying is that there is something more complex going on with Paul's hermeneutic approach. So I imagine that many of you out there grew up in church traditions that taught you historical, grammatical exegetical hermeneutic. That you interpret Scripture according to the history and the grammar of the text

and, voila! you get the meaning. I think that's a very flat way of understanding hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is a much more complicated thing than that. It's a much more beautiful thing than that, in fact. And besides, if that's true, if hermeneutics is nothing more than historical, grammatical exegesis, then Paul fails. We see that here. He would absolutely fail. But fortunately, hermeneutics is not something that can be reduced down to historical, grammatical exegesis.

So, as I said on the very first episode of this podcast, I said something like "Hermeneutics or interpretation of Scripture is like a dialog where the text contributes something to the conversation and the reader or the interpreter contributes something to the conversation as well. And the result of those two contributions is meaning." That's where we get meaning. And if you want a more comprehensive, philosophical perspective on this, go read my book, *Paul and the Meaning of Scripture*. The whole first part is the philosophy of understanding, or what we would call hermeneutics or philosophical hermeneutics. And I'm not trying to give a shameless plug – I'm not trying to plug my own book here. I just think that what I've written really explains this in a comprehensive way with respect to Paul, specifically.

I think that's what's happening here with the Abraham story. So again, Paul's reading of the Abraham story cannot be historical, grammatical exegesis. It's just not purely exegetical. What he is doing, which I will show in just a moment, Paul is interpreting this Abraham story in light of his Christological convictions; in light of his Christological pre-judgements. And Christ is the lens through which he reads the story. I'm going to prove it to you.

44:50 To see what I mean lets read chapter 4 verses 13-25. It's a pretty long passage, but let's do it. Verse 13,

13 *For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14* *If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15* *For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.*

16 *For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, 17 as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18* *Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." 19* *He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. 20* *No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21* *being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22* *Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." 23* *Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, 24* *but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25* *who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.*

So, let me make some comments about this. First, it's obvious, but I will say it anyway. Paul is not talking just about faith as mere belief in monotheism. For Paul, faith is always Christological. In other words, he's clearly not saying that we can all be part of the Abrahamic family just by believing in God, but what he's saying is that we can be a part of the covenant by believing in what God has done through Jesus Christ. So in that sense, Paul is not sampling telling the Abraham story. He's re-telling the Abraham story in light of Christ. Let me unpack this a bit. Because I don't think it's quite evident. And sometimes I don't think translations can bring out the full force of the text as much as it could.

Let's comb through that passage I just read. I won't re-read the whole thing, but let me just read some key parts. Notice how Paul re-tells the Abraham story. He tells it in a way that is slightly augmented, but not viscously augmented or unfaithfully augmented. No. He primes the story for the Jesus story. Let me give you an example. If you go back to verses 16 and 17, it talks about how Abraham in the presence of God, he believed God and believed that God was someone who gives life to the dead. And, this is probably a hint at the Genesis 22 story about Abraham's faithfulness in that respect. So that's a good side note really. Maybe Paul here is much closer to Second Temple Judaism and connecting all these pieces of the Abraham story. Paul says, these are Paul's words, he says, Abraham believed that God could give life to the dead. That was the substance of his faith. And when it came to his own body – him and Sarah, it says in verse 19, "Abraham did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead." **Nekróō (νεκρώω)** – that's the word, Nekróō. Abraham's considered his body already as good as dead. Because he was a 100 years old. And, when he considered the bareness of Sarah's womb...what's interesting there is the word bareness here in the NRSV is actually **nekrōsis (νέκρωσιν)**, which is actually the word for deadness. So in other words, not only did Abraham think his own body was dead, but Sarah's womb too. And so he goes on. The idea here is that for Paul, Abraham believes that God raises the dead. A dead womb, a dead body, a dead son. And so what he's doing is telling the story imaginatively but very faithfully no doubt. He's telling the story in such a way that he's saying, "Look guys, Abraham clearly believes in the God who resurrects." And that's why Paul can come out and say, "Those words, that it was reckoned to him as righteousness, they were not written for Abraham's sake alone. But also for us. For those of us who believe in him who raised Jesus, our Lord from the dead." **Nekros (νεκρός)**. And I think that's a very important point to make.

And my point here – and this is the main point – is that Paul's argument works, his retelling of the Abraham story, works, if and only if Jesus is truly the Messiah. If Jesus is Messiah, if Jesus is Isaiah's servant who re-enacted the story of Israel perfectly and righteously, then Torah has been fulfilled completely in him. And for everyone who is in the Messiah, they too have fulfilled the Torah. And that's why works of Torah such as circumcision are no longer necessary for marking out the people of God as covenant keepers. After all, covenant keepers are marked out as covenant keepers because they are in Christ who has kept covenant. So Paul's exegesis of Genesis 15 and 17 is Christological. It's not merely exegesis – not just getting meaning from the text. He's not just reading it as a historical artifact. No, no, no. He's reading the Abraham story with the pre-judgement that Jesus is the Messiah. That Jesus is the one who was raised from the dead. And he's telling that Abraham story in light of that pre-judgment. In light of the Jesus story. And that is evident from the way that Paul has retold the Abraham story. He can speak of Abraham's body as being as good as dead. He can speak of Sarah's womb as being dead. And both of those things are resurrected. And Abraham believes that God is able to resurrect his dead body and his wife's dead womb and bring about the promise. So that is what I mean by saying that Paul is retelling the story from a Jesus Christ crucified and risen perspective. Or from a Christological perspective, or Christological hermeneutic. Again, Paul's exegesis fails if Jesus is not the Messiah. But his exegesis successfully stands if Jesus is the Messiah.

The reason a non-Christian Jew would not find this convincing is because they wouldn't believe Jesus has fulfilled Torah. Because by definition a non-Christian Jew doesn't think Jesus is the Messiah. But because Paul knows Jesus is the Messiah, he can re-tell this Abraham story in light of that fact. And he can use Abraham as this typological figure who himself believes in resurrection. And if he was accredited as righteous as believing in resurrection, then you and I too can believe. Every gentile and Jews can believe in Christ and be a part of the covenant family and hence be a part of the family of God.

52:50 Again, all of this works simply because Jesus is Messiah. All of this works because Jesus has fulfilled Torah. And so Paul is severing Abraham's entrance into the covenant from Abrahams being circumcised. His severing of those two things works only if Jesus himself has fulfilled Torah. And if he has fulfilled Torah, then that severing the two parts of the Abraham story actually makes sense. Paul is not violently playing with the text. No, he respects Scripture. He has a high view of Scripture. I truly believe that. But at the same time, his reading of Scripture is not simply exegetical. No, it's Christological. The logic of his

hermeneutic is a Christo-logic. And I think that's how it works. I'm convinced of that. And if you want a fuller exposition of all this, you can read my book. I have a whole section on the Abraham story and I think it's just a good illustration of how Paul can creatively tell Jewish stories such as the Abraham and yet do so in a way faithfully. So there is a creative element, but there is always a faithful element because of the Christological pre-judgment that he brings to the text. And again, it's that dialog... he is drawing from the text so it is exegesis, but he's also reading into the text the assumption that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah.

So, there is even more to it than that. Paul gets his Christology, his messianism from the Old Testament Scripture too. So it's not that he is just inventing his Christology. I don't think that at all. He has categories of messianism in his heart, in his mind that he is drawing from. So if you are interested in that conversation, you need to go to the Naked Bible Podcast and listen to my discussion with Dr. Heiser. It spanned twelve episodes and we talked about messianic expectations in the Old Testament and how the Old Testament built up a messianic profile and categories for how Paul would think of Messiah later on. And that's important. So again, Paul is bringing his Christology to the text, no doubt, we've seen that, but he's gotten his Christology, his messianism from the text as well. Because he is a faithful Jew and I'm convinced he remained a faithful Jew until the day he died. So that's an important piece.

And yet, there is something else to say. Paul is convinced that Jesus is the Messiah because he had a Damascus Road experience. That Damascus Road experience changed his entire life. It changed, quite literally the direction of his life. He was off to kill people and God had different plans and commissioned him to save people. How cool is that? It's just such a cool story. That Jesus is the Christ...that Jesus is the Messiah, came to Paul via an extraordinary experience, a supernatural, religious experience on the Damascus Road. It's fascinating...fascinating that experience just changed his life. But we cannot miss another fact – that experience also changed his hermeneutic. And as I've said before, hermeneutics is not something you do when you read your Bible only. Hermeneutics is who you are because you are a person who interprets everything. Everything you've listened to. You are interpreting this podcast. You are bringing your assumptions to this podcast. Maybe your assumptions are being affirmed, or re-affirmed, or critiqued even. There is always this dialog, this back and forthness when it comes to interpretation. You interpret everything. You interpret books, movies, plays, theaters, texts (like the Bible). And same for Paul. Paul's entire worldview changed. His hermeneutics changed. He began to interpret texts differently. He began to interpret his life situation differently. I mean, my goodness, how could he be someone who spends time in prison and write letters that were full of joy while he's in prison. The answer to that is quite simple. Paul's hermeneutic changed. He interpreted his prison experience from his Christological hermeneutic. And my goodness, is there not something there for us to learn today?

Here's the thing. I have a passion for helping people read Scripture and to interpret it. I don't have all the answers of course. I am still a student of the Master, so much so. I have so much to learn. But that is my passion. I just want to help people learn Scripture and what not, but I also want us all to grow in how we interpret life. How we interpret our trials, how we interpret bad situations and circumstances because I think that's what we are called to do as Christians. Everything we see, everything we read, everything we do, should be interpreted in light of our Messiah, Jesus. Jesus offers us a new perspective on life. And we see that here in the life of Paul. And we see that here in Paul's reading of Scripture. I say, this is my opinion, if we want to learn to read Scripture faithfully, we should read those faithful Christians in ages past who read Scripture. We can learn from Paul by reading Scripture the way he read Scripture. And this really brings us full circle. At the beginning I was talking about reading the fathers and the mothers of the faith. We need their instruction. And I think one father we can read is this early apostle, this guy named Paul who had a dramatic life change on the road to Damascus. I think he can teach us something quite extraordinary. He can teach us that Jesus can be the center of all that we do and all that we are.

59:05 That's the end of today's episode. And thanks again for listening to The Bible Unmuted. If you like this podcast, consider rating it on your podcast platform, subscribing to it, and sharing with your friends. You can also support the podcast by becoming a patreon member. Go to:

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