

Lesson 42 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 4:6

Romans 4:6 — Just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

When it comes to the Jews, Paul is really bringing out all of the big guns! First, we saw Abraham, the great forefather, and now we see David, the great king.

Why is Paul telling us about Abraham and David? Because they both show that justification is based on faith rather than works. Abraham shows us that with his life, and David shows us that by telling us that. And so, if anyone disagrees with Paul, that person is also disagreeing with Abraham and with King David.

And Paul is not the only example we have of someone who argued that way. Jesus also argued the same way. In Matthew 22:44, Jesus pointed to what **David said** to prove that the Messiah is not just the son of David but is also the son of God. And in John 8:39, Jesus pointed to what **Abraham did** to prove that the Pharisees were not Abraham's children.

The Jews might have rejected Jesus and Paul, but would they also reject Abraham and David? That was the choice that Paul was giving them.

We have already looked at what Abraham did to show us that justification is based on faith rather than works, but what did King David say on that same subject? Paul tells us that in the next two verses.

Romans 4:7-8

Romans 4:7-8 — “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

There are several Greek words that are used in Romans to describe what happens to the sins of God’s faithful people.

In Romans 3:25, we were told that those sins **prior to the cross** were “passed over,” which means that they were allowed to go unpunished. The Greek word used there was *paresis* (Strong’s # 3929), and we had a great deal to say about why Paul used that very unusual word for that specific purpose.

Here in verse 7, we see two more Greek words: *aphiemi* (Strong’s # 863) translated “forgiven” and *epikalupto* (Strong’s # 1943) translated “covered.” The word translated “forgiven” means to send away, and the word translated “covered” means to conceal or cover over.

While we might come up with various clever ways to explain the difference between sins being sent away and sins being covered, I think the best and simplest way to explain the appearance of those two words here is that they are simply an example of parallelism in Hebrew poetry.

We often read Psalms that say the same thing in two different ways — and here I think that same thing is that these sins are forgiven. God has sent those sins away, and God has covered those sins. I think those are just two ways to say the same thing. Those sins are no longer on the books against us — those sins are not counted against us.

As he so often does, Paul is quoting the Scriptures here as evidence for what he is saying, and this quotation in verses 7 and 8 is from Psalm 32:1-2.

Psalm 32:1-2 — Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

In that Psalm, David describes forgiveness as a blessing, which, of course, it is. But forgiveness was not a blessing that King David would enjoy until much later (at least not in its complete sense).

Why not? Because this blessing of forgiveness in Psalm 32 is a blessing available only in Christ. No one ever in the history of the world has been cleansed of sin apart from the blood of Christ. If they were, then Christ died for no purpose. If they were, then Christ is not the only path to God the Father. And so we know that they weren't cleansed some other way — no sins were ever cleansed apart from the blood of Christ.

As we said when we looked at Romans 3:25, while forgiveness was often given or promised in the Old Testament, that “forgiveness” was a two-step process.

The first step was what we saw in Romans 3:25 — those former sins were allowed to go unpunished.

And the second step happened at the cross when those former sins were cleansed by the blood of Christ. That cleansing, of course, could not happen before that blood was shed, but God knew that it would

be shed — and that is why God allowed those former sins to go unpunished. God knew that they would later be forgiven at the cross.

The words used here in verse 7 are describing that second step — the forgiveness of those former sins by the blood of Christ after that blood was shed. How do we know that? We know that because these sins are no longer on the ledger. These sins are no longer being counted against the one who committed those sins. We see that in verse 8 — “Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity.”

Why does Paul quote Psalm 32 here? Paul answered that question in verse 6: “just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works.” Paul quoted Psalm 32 as additional evidence that God counts righteousness apart from works.

But where is that in Psalm 32? The two verses that Paul quotes, at least on the surface, do not seem to say that the forgiveness happened apart from works. Is Paul’s conclusion in verse 6 stronger than the verses Paul quotes as evidence for that conclusion? How do we explain it?

In answering that question, I think the most important thing to notice is that Paul does not say “as the **Scriptures** also speak” (as he says in verse 3). Instead, Paul in verse 6 says “as **David** also speaks.” Yes, Psalm 32 is Scripture — but Psalm 32 is Scripture from the pen of King David. I think there is a reason why Paul mentions David by name in verse 6.

This is not just *anyone* thanking God for the blessing of forgiveness — this is King David doing that. And I think any Jew, at least when that Jew stopped and thought about it, would agree that, while David was

forgiven, David, the murderer and the adulterer, did not receive that forgiveness by works.

David's forgiveness did not come from all that David did, but came despite all that David did. David's forgiveness must have come from the work of God rather than from the work of David.

And doesn't David write the same thing in Psalm 32? "Blessed is the man against whom **the LORD counts** no iniquity." That counting is the work of God. That counting is the same divine reckoning that we see all throughout Romans 4. And that counting by God rather than by man is how King David wrote about forgiveness apart from works in Psalm 32.

Romans 4:9-10

Romans 4:9-10 — Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. 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.

Back in Romans 3:30, Paul stopped talking about the Jews and the Gentiles and started talking about the circumcised and the uncircumcised. When that change happened, we asked why. And our answer was that the change happened for the purpose of foreshadowing. Here in verses 9-10 we can see what Paul was foreshadowing back in chapter 3.

Earlier we asked whether Abraham was a Jew, and what we said was that Abraham was not a Jew for the simple reason that he predated the

Jews. The Jewish people were the descendants of Abraham's grandson Jacob, and they got their name "Jew" from Abraham's great grandson Judah. And so Abraham was not a Jew.

But does that mean Abraham was a Gentile? I think we can say no for the same reason. If by Gentile we mean "non-Jew," then Abraham also pre-dated the Gentiles. Abraham predated the division between Jew and Gentile.

But what about circumcision? The Jews usually treated circumcised and uncircumcised as synonyms for Jew and Gentile. So let's re-ask our two questions using those two terms instead. Was Abraham circumcised? Was Abraham uncircumcised?

And, of course, the answer is yes and no. Abraham lived the first 99 years of his life uncircumcised (Genesis 17:24). And that length of time is nearly 99 years longer than the 8 days that God required in Genesis 17:12 for Abraham's descendants. After those 99 years uncircumcised, Abraham lived the final 76 years of his life circumcised (Genesis 25:7).

And so why then did Paul switch from discussing Jew and Gentile to instead discussing circumcised and uncircumcised? Because while it wouldn't make sense to talk about Abraham as being a Gentile who became a Jew, it makes perfect sense to talk about Abraham going from uncircumcised to circumcised — because that is precisely what happened to Abraham over halfway through his very long life.

And what are the Jews going to say in response? Are they going to argue that Abraham's circumcision was not a turning point in his life? Are they going to argue that Abraham was the same before and after

his circumcision? No Jew would ever argue that, which is a fact upon which Paul is depending here.

Paul's Jewish readers will all agree with Paul's premise that, when we look at an event in Abraham's life, we should ask whether that event happened before or after his circumcision. Why? Because the Jews all thought it mattered. Does Paul think it mattered? We will see.

But before we get to that question about Abraham, Paul starts in verse 9 with a question about David — "Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?" The blessing in that question is the blessing of forgiveness that David described in Psalm 32.

For whom was that blessing? It was certainly a blessing for the circumcised because King David was circumcised.

But is that all? Anybody else? That is Paul's question: "Is this blessing then **only** for the circumcised, or **also** for the uncircumcised?"

Paul's answer is both the circumcised and the uncircumcised. David is the evidence for the former, and Abraham will be the evidence for the latter. Let's read that answer in verses 9-10 again.

"We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. 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."

Earlier we said that Abraham's justification by faith was a life-long process rather than a single event. Here we find conclusive evidence of that statement.

Paul's entire argument here depends on Abraham's faith being counted as righteousness **prior** to his circumcision. And, in fact, that is what we see in Genesis. God's statement about Abraham's faith being counted as righteousness is found in Genesis 15, but Abraham is not circumcised until Genesis 17.

But what did James tell us? James quoted the same verse that Paul quotes — but James says that verse was fulfilled, not before Abraham was circumcised, but after!

James 2:21-23 — Was not Abraham our father justified by works **when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar**? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; **and the Scripture was fulfilled** that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" – and he was called a friend of God.

How do we explain that? The answer is that we have already explained it. Abraham's justification by faith was a process rather than a single event.

Yes, we see that justification in Genesis 15 **prior** to his circumcision as Paul tells us, but we also see that justification in Genesis 22 **after** his circumcision as James tells us. Abraham walked in faith his entire life after he was called by God.

And so Abraham was justified by faith before his circumcision and after his circumcision. But the important fact for Paul's argument here is that Abraham was justified by faith **before** his circumcision.

And it is only the “**before**” part that Paul’s Jewish readers needed to hear about here. I don’t think any of them would have been surprised to hear that Abraham was justified by faith **after** his circumcision.

But why is this distinction important? Why does it matter **when** Abraham was justified by faith? Paul answers that question next.

Romans 4:11a

Romans 4:11a — He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.

Abraham was justified by faith **prior** to his circumcision, and the reason why the timing is important is that the timing of Abraham’s justification tells us something about the timing of Abraham’s circumcision. Specifically, Paul tells us here that Abraham “received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.”

And we have many questions!

- First, why is Paul explaining how Abraham received the sign of **circumcision**? How does that information about Abraham’s circumcision fit in with his argument about Abraham’s faith?
- Second, what does Paul mean when he says that the sign was received as a **seal**?
- Third, why does it matter that this happened while Abraham was still **uncircumcised**?

- Fourth, in Colossians 2:11, Paul describes baptism as “a circumcision made without hands.” Does that mean that Paul’s discussion of circumcision in Romans 4 is also telling us something about baptism?

Let’s take those questions in order.

Question #1: Why is Paul explaining how Abraham received the sign of **circumcision**?

We know that the Jews considered Abraham to be **their** father — we frequently see them making that claim in the New Testament. But we also know that Abraham was not just the father of the Jews — Abraham was physically just as much the father of the Edomites, the Ishmaelites, and the Midianites.

But that is physical. Those other nations are just Abraham’s physical descendants. What about his spiritual descendants? Surely they are just the Jews, right? Surely they are just the line of promise through Isaac and Jacob, right? When we look at the descendants of Abraham that way, then the Jews are correct to claim that Abraham is only their father, right? Wrong.

And that is why Paul has started talking about circumcision. As evidence of their special relationship with Abraham, the Jews always pointed first to the sign of circumcision.

As we have seen, circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign of God’s special covenant with Abraham. And, as we know, the great blessing promised in that covenant came through the line of promise — Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and David from the tribe of Judah. And, as we

also know, that sign of circumcision later became a part of the law of Moses given to the Jews. And so, the Jews saw Abraham's circumcision as an exclusively Jewish thing.

So, back to our question: why is Paul explaining how Abraham received the sign of circumcision?

The answer is that Paul wants the Jews to understand that what was true about Abraham **physically** was also true about Abraham **spiritually** — Abraham was both physically and spiritually the father of people who were **not** Jews.

We know that is true physically — and Paul is about to tell us it is also true spiritually. In fact, Paul will tell us that before we leave verse 11 — “the purpose was to make him the father of all who believe.”

And that statement by Paul in the second half of verse 11 tells us something very important about the first half of verse 11 — it tells us that the first half of verse 11 applies **only** to Abraham.

What Paul is telling us here about Abraham is something that is uniquely true about Abraham. For example, what Paul tells us here about Abraham was not true about Isaac or Jacob. Why not? Because Isaac was justified **after** his circumcision, and so was Jacob. Paul is telling us something here about Abraham that was unique to Abraham. Only Abraham received this sign and this seal in this way and at this time. No one else. Only Abraham occupied this unique position as to Jew and Gentile.

And why is that fact important? It is important because if we start trying to make everyone today fit the mold that we find in the first half of verse 11, then we have to explain why everyone today is not

also the father of all who believe without being circumcised. We can't have one without the other. Paul is telling us things about Abraham and then making conclusions based on those things.

But, saying that Abraham was unique with regard to this sign and this seal does not mean that Abraham was unique with regard to his faith being counted as righteousness. That was not unique to Abraham. Instead, that is the path to righteousness for everyone. In fact, as Paul is telling us, that is the only path to righteousness.

But can we prove that? Can we prove that the great statement in Genesis 15:6 about Abraham's faith being counted as righteousness was not unique to Abraham? Yes, we can.

Do you remember Phinehas? In Numbers 25, Phinehas put an end to a very public act of rebellion by taking a spear and driving it through both a Jewish man and the Midianite woman that man had brought into the camp. That decisive action by Phinehas ended the plague that God had sent upon Israel to punish them for their idolatry and their sexual immorality. And how does the Bible describe that action by Phinehas?

Psalm 106:30-31 — Then Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was stayed. **And that was counted to him as righteousness** from generation to generation forever.

That is the same phrase we find here in Genesis 15:6 about Abraham. What is true of Abraham and what is true of Phinehas is also true of us. Our faith is counted as righteousness — and we know that a saving faith is always an active and obedient faith. Neither Abraham nor Phinehas would have been counted as righteous had they kept their

seats — and neither will we. The very first thing Psalm 106 tells us about Phinehas is that he “stood up!”

A faith that lives only in our heads is a dead faith. James tells us that. Someone once described a man as having a religion that was so private he didn’t even impose upon himself! We need to make sure that can never be said about us. Yes, the world wants to keep our faith private and out of the public square — but God wants just the opposite. The world wants us to keep our seat, but God wants us to stand up. And a saving faith will never be some private faith unseen by the world. A saving faith is always a doing faith for all to see.

So should we pick up our spear like Phinehas did? No. Our weapons are not carnal (2 Corinthians 10:4). But we do have weapons (2 Corinthians 10:4). Maybe we should pick up our *spiritual* spears and use them to “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Question #2: What does Paul mean when he says that the sign was received as a **seal**?

As we said, circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham — that Abraham would possess the land, that he would be the father of many nation and kings, and that God would bless the world through his seed. Circumcision was a visible sign of that covenant.

But circumcision was not just a sign. Paul tells us here that circumcision was also a seal — “a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.” What does that mean?

This is the only verse in Romans where we find the English word “seal.” The Handout for Lesson 42 shows all of the occurrences of the English word “seal” in its various forms in the ESV translation of the New Testament.

The Greek word translated “seal” in the New Testament is either the noun *sphragis* (Strong’s # 4973) or the verb *sphragizo* (Strong’s # 4972). The *noun* “seal” refers to a signet or a stamp that is impressed on something, and the *verb* “seal” means the act of impressing that stamp or, more generally, the act of keeping something secret, secure, or preserved.

Why would such a seal be used? There are several possible reasons.

- This seal could be used to keep something private or secret or secure or protected as with, for example, a seal on a tomb. We find the word used that way, for example, in Matthew 27:66 — they “made the tomb secure by **sealing** the stone.”
- Or this seal could be used to denote that something is genuine as with, for example, a seal on a letter or on a legal document. We see that, for example, with the seven seals in Revelation. Those seals were genuine — they were from God the Father (Revelation 5:1). And they were also private and secure — they could be opened only by God the Son (Revelation 5:5).
- Or this seal could be used to denote ownership as, for example, by affixing a seal bearing your name to something that you own. I think that we also see that usage in Revelation — not with the seven seals on the scroll but with the seals on the foreheads of God’s people in Revelation 7:3.

But how does Paul use the word? Paul uses the word in several different ways.

Earlier I said that Romans 4:11 is the only verse in Romans where we find the *English* word “seal” — and that is true. But verse 11 is not the only verse in Romans where we find the *Greek* word translated “seal.” We also find that same Greek word later in Romans 15:28, where it is translated “delivered” to describe the monetary collection for the church in Jerusalem. That collection was sealed — why? To protect it and preserve it.

Paul also uses that same Greek word to denote genuineness in 1 Corinthians 9:2 — “For you are the **seal** of my apostleship in the Lord.” They were evidence that Paul was a genuine apostle.

And Paul uses that same Greek word to denote **ownership** in 2 Timothy 2:19 — “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this **seal**: ‘The Lord knows those **who are his...**’” I think this use of the word “seal” is similar to what we saw in Revelation 7. And it is a beautiful image — God writes his name on his special possession (1 Peter 2:9).

Paul uses that same Greek word three times to describe the work or the role of the Holy Spirit.

- **2 Corinthians 1:22** — And who has also put his **seal** on us and given us his **Spirit** in our hearts as a guarantee.
- **Ephesians 1:13** — In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were **sealed** with the promised **Holy Spirit**.

- **Ephesians 4:30** — And do not grieve the **Holy Spirit** of God, by whom you were **sealed** for the day of redemption.

And what does the word “seal” mean in those verses? That’s a good question, with several possible answers. My personal opinion is that being “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” and being “sealed for the day of redemption” by the Holy Spirit is how God writes his name on his people — as we see God doing in Revelation 7 and 2 Timothy 2:19. If that view is correct, then these verses would be another example of Paul using the word “seal” to denote ownership.

So, with that background in mind, let’s look again at our question about verse 11: what does Paul mean when he says that Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a **seal**?

What is meant by that seal? That something or someone is private? Secret? Secure? Protected? Genuine? Owned? Maybe something else? Which is it?

I think verse 11 answers that question — let’s read it again:

“He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.”

We know that this seal of circumcision did not make Abraham righteous, but I think we can say that it confirmed that Abraham’s righteousness was genuine. I think we can say that this seal confirmed that Abraham’s righteousness was from God and that Abraham was God’s servant. So, while I don’t think we can say for sure all that was involved with this seal, I think perhaps we can say that it at least showed genuineness and ownership.

And why did Abraham need such a seal? Remember, unlike the Jews who would come later, Abraham and his family were not marked out to the world as the special people of God. To the world, Abraham was just another tourist from Mesopotamia!

We know that God had spoken to Abraham, and Abraham knew that God had spoken to him — but did anyone else in the world know that? We are told in Genesis 15:6 that Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness, but how did Abraham know that? That statement in Genesis 15:6 was made about Abraham; it was not made to Abraham

What was needed was a sign of Abraham's covenant with God and a seal from God that Abraham's righteousness by faith was genuine and that Abraham really was God's man. And God gave Abraham circumcision to serve both purposes — it was a sign of his covenant with God, and it was a seal of the righteousness that he had from God.