

Lesson 43 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 4:11a, Continued

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.

Last week we started looking at four questions about the first half of verse 11, and when we ended we were about halfway through our answer to the second question: what does Paul mean when he says that the sign was received as a **seal**?

What we saw last week was that the word “seal” in the New Testament is used in several ways such as marking something as secure and private, marking something as genuine, and marking something as owned by the one who impresses the seal.

And we determined that, with regard to the sign of circumcision received by Abraham, the seal most likely showed that Abraham’s righteousness from God was genuine and that Abraham was God’s man — that he belonged to God.

When we ended we were just about to look at something very important about circumcision — circumcision was a **gift** from God. Most Jews saw circumcision as a gift they gave to God, but that is not how God viewed circumcision. Paul tells us that right here — he says that Abraham “**received** the sign of circumcision.” And Stephen tells us the same thing in Acts 7:8, where he says that God “**gave** [Abraham] the covenant of circumcision.”

God gave circumcision to Abraham. Why? Two reasons — as a **sign** to confirm his covenant with God, and as a **seal** to confirm the righteousness that he had been given by God because of his faith in God.

That is what the Bible says about the sign and the seal in verse 11. But can we say more? Should we say more? Can we apply this sign and this seal more broadly than does verse 11? Many people throughout history have done just that.

Oceans of ink have been used to explain and extrapolate this sign and this seal to countless people other than Abraham. The denominations tell us that this seal is baptism — but baptism is never called a seal in the Bible. Every verse in the New Testament that contains the word “seal” was shown on the Handout for Lesson 42, and the word “baptism” was nowhere to be found on that Handout.

Many in the church tell us that this seal is the Holy Spirit — and maybe it is. We know that the Holy Spirit is a seal in some sense — last week, we saw three verses on the Handout for Lesson 42 telling us that. But Romans 4:11 is not telling us that. This verse does not mention the Holy Spirit. In fact, the word “spirit” does not appear anywhere in Romans 4.

I am very reluctant to say that this seal in verse 11 is anything other than what verse 11 says that it is. Just look at the verse — verse 11 does not say that this seal is baptism; the verse does not say that this seal is the Holy Spirit; the verse does not say that this seal is even circumcision in general.

Verse 11 tells us that this seal is **Abraham’s** circumcision that was given as a sign of God’s covenant with **Abraham** and as a seal of **Abra-**

ham's righteousness through faith. On what basis does someone insert themselves into that verse in place of Abraham?

Paul's point here is not to tell us something about all of the Jews or all of the Christians or all of mankind. Paul's point here is to tell us something about Abraham.

And, in particular, Paul's point is to convince us that Abraham was the father of all who believe. Just 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." That "he" is Abraham!

Will Paul tell us some things in Romans 4 that apply to us today? He certainly will. Is Paul doing that here in verse 11? I don't think so. I think Paul is talking about Abraham in verse 11.

Question #3: Why does it matter that this happened while Abraham was still **uncircumcised**?

Paul tells us here that Abraham's righteousness by faith was something that Abraham had while he was still uncircumcised. And, of course, Genesis also tells us that.

Abraham's righteousness by faith came at least as early as Genesis 15, which we know was at least 13 years and 9 months earlier than Abraham's circumcision in Genesis 17 given Ishmael's birth in Genesis 16 and Ishmael's age in Genesis 17.

But why does it matter? It matters because Paul's entire argument depends on it! That is why it matters.

The Jews viewed Abraham as their own special possession. And they viewed Abraham's circumcision as just one of the many wonderful things that Abraham had done for God to earn his justification before God.

And how does Paul respond? Paul cuts through all of that with a sharp knife! And that sharp knife is Genesis 15:6.

That one verse confirms that Abraham was righteous — but in doing so that one verse also confirms that almost everything the Jews thought about Abraham was wrong.

- Yes, Abraham was righteous — but not based on any of his own wonderful works, despite what the Jews believed.
- Yes, Abraham was righteous — but not because he had been circumcised, despite what the Jews believed.
- Yes, Abraham was righteous — but that did not mean that the Jews had exclusive rights to claim Abraham as their father.

All of those wrong views by the Jews went away with the simple observation that Genesis 15:6 happened over a decade **before** Genesis 17:24. That is why Paul uses that evidence here.

Question #4: 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 telling us something about baptism?

I think we have already answered this question, but let's take a closer look. If you look at the Handout for Lesson 43, you will see many of the passages in the New Testament that mention circumcision or bap-

tism. If you are looking for the passages in the Bible that discuss **both** circumcision and baptism, you will find exactly one — Colossians 2:11-14, which is shown in the large box that straddles both subjects. That passage is the only such passage. Let's remind ourselves what Paul says in Colossians 2.

Colossians 2:11-14 — In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

In those verses, Paul points to a similarity between circumcision and baptism — they both involve putting off the body of the flesh. Circumcision put off the body of the flesh both literally and figuratively.

Deuteronomy 10:16 — Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

And baptism puts off the body of the flesh when, as Paul tells us in Colossians 2, we are buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God.

Paul in Romans tells us the same thing about circumcision and the same thing about baptism.

Romans 2:28-29 — For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physi-

cal. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Romans 6:4 — We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

And so, yes, circumcision and baptism have at least one thing in common — they both involve putting off the body of the flesh.

And so, I guess if they have one thing in common, then they must have everything in common, right? Isn't that the way it works? No, of course not — but many people have fallen into that logical trap when it comes to this verse.

In fact, that logical trap is so common there is a name for it — the fallacy of false analogy. It is the false view that if A resembles B in some respect, then A must resemble B in every respect.

But that is not how analogies work. An analogy is a flashlight, not a floodlight. An analogy illuminates only the specific thing at which it is aimed. In fact, that is why we have analogies. They point out something that is similar about two different things. If those two different things were alike in every way, then why would we need an analogy to compare them?

Yes, there is a similarity between circumcision and baptism — Paul tells us that in Colossians 2. But no, that one similarity does not mean that circumcision and baptism are similar in every respect. Common sense tells us that, as does the Bible — repeatedly. Just look at the Handout for Lesson 43.

Anyone who reads Romans 4:11 and tells you that baptism must precede salvation because Abraham's circumcision preceded his justification by faith is not just not thinking clearly. They are falling for the logical fallacy of false analogy.

Look again at the Handout. Can anyone who honestly reads those passages come away thinking that baptism and circumcision are treated the same in the New Testament?

What do we see when we read the verses about circumcision?

- Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but keeping the commandments of God (1 Corinthians 7:19).
- Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love (Galatians 5:6).
- Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but a new creation (Galatians 6:15).

And then what do we see when we read the verses about baptism?

- We see that baptism is a commandment of God (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38).
- We see that baptism is how we enter into Christ (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27).
- We see that baptism is when we are cleansed from sin (Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Ephesians 5:26).
- We see that baptism is when we bury the old man to be raised a new creation (Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12).

- We see that baptism is a work of God rather than a work of man (Titus 3:5; Colossians 2:12).

And yet the denominations tell us that baptism in the New Testament is just like circumcision in the Old Testament.

Just two verses from the Handout should be enough to disprove that false and ridiculous notion. Here is what Paul says about circumcision and baptism in the same letter:

Galatians 5:6 — For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Galatians 3:27 — For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

Those verses are not telling us that baptism and circumcision are alike. Instead, those two verses are telling us that baptism and circumcision are different. One of them (circumcision) is **not** required for salvation, but the other one (baptism) is required for salvation. That is what those two verses tell us. And many other verses tell us that same thing. Just look at the Handout.

And, if there is, in fact, some issue here in Romans 4 about whether some action is essential to salvation, what action would that be? Circumcision is mentioned over and over again in Romans 4, while baptism is never mentioned.

And we know that Paul elsewhere dealt with some who falsely believed that circumcision was essential to salvation. We see that in Acts 15:1, for example, where “some men came down from Judea and

were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’”

If Romans 4 is (as the denominations claim) telling us that something is not required for salvation, it must be circumcision that is not required — which would make sense given that “circumcision” is the word that Paul uses here!

Another problem with that false view comes from the simple observation that Paul knew how to use the word “baptism” when he wanted to discuss baptism. In fact, we will see Paul doing just that two chapters from now. And so, anyone who bases their view of baptism on Romans 4 needs to explain why Paul would discuss “baptism” in Romans 4 by using the word “circumcision” — and further, they need to explain why Paul would use **Abraham’s** circumcision to discuss **your** baptism!

And if Paul’s comparison of baptism and circumcision gives us the timing, then wouldn’t that timing require all of us (or rather half of us!) to be baptized on our eighth day of life? And if someone rejects that view of the 8-day timing while eagerly adopting another view of the timing, isn’t that just an example of analogical cherry-picking?

I have a better idea — let’s just leave Paul’s analogy in Colossians 2 right where Paul left it. Circumcision and baptism are similar in that they both in some way put off the old body of flesh.

And, by the way, for those denominations that use Paul’s analogy in Colossians 2 to argue that we are saved prior to baptism, I don’t think Colossians 2 gives them any support for that view! No one is saved without having put off the old man of sin — and Colossians 2 tells us

that event happens at our baptism. Paul will tell us the same thing in Romans 6 where (unlike here) Paul actually uses the word “baptism.”

We have mentioned the second half of verse 11 several times in our study of the first half of that verse, and so now let’s look at the second half of verse 11 along with verse 12.

Romans 4:11b-12

Romans 4:11b-12 — The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

We spent a lot of time on the first half of verse 11 where Paul said that Abraham “received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness.”

What was the purpose of that gift from God? We don’t have to speculate about the answer to that question because that is what the second half of verse 11 tells us — “the **purpose** was to make him the father of all who believe,” and the explanation of that purpose continues through verse 12. Paul tells us the purpose of that sign and that seal, and if anyone thinks there was some different purpose, then they need to go back and study it again. Paul tells us the purpose right here.

And what was the purpose? Paul tells us that the purpose was to make Abraham the father of all who believe, and Paul divides that group of

believers into two smaller groups — the circumcised believers and the uncircumcised believers.

Who are the uncircumcised believers?

Paul describes them simply as “all who believe without being circumcised,” and, of course, that would include Abraham himself if not for the fact it would make Abraham his own father! Paul’s entire point here is that Abraham was justified by faith *before* his circumcision, which means that Abraham was an uncircumcised believer.

But who else does that group include? Does it include anyone before Abraham? Who is included after Abraham? Does it include anyone today?

Given that word “all,” I don’t see any reason to further limit this group of “all who believe without being circumcised.” We know that no one has ever been justified by works. We also know that everyone who has ever been justified has been justified by faith. And we know that no sin has ever been cleansed except by the blood of Christ.

We know that Abraham was justified by faith while he was uncircumcised, but he was not the only such person. Noah, for example, found grace in the eyes of God (Genesis 6:8), and we could point to others as well. Noah predated Abraham, but, nevertheless, I think these verses are telling us that Abraham was Noah’s father in the faith.

And the same is true for the uncircumcised believers who came **after** Abraham and who, like Abraham, were justified by faith while uncircumcised.

And, of course, that would include Gentiles who were saved through faith in Christ. Abraham is their father. Paul tells us that here, and Paul makes that same point in Galatians 3:7 — “it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.”

Who are the circumcised believers?

Paul gives us more detail about this group, and the first thing we should note is likely the first thing that Paul’s Jewish readers also noted — Paul does **not** say that Abraham is the father of **all** the circumcised.

Instead, Paul says that Abraham is “the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.”

So is Abraham the father of all the Jews? Most Jews would have quickly answered yes — but that is not Paul’s answer. And, of course, that was not Jesus’ answer either.

John 8:39-40 — They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.”

Yes, those Pharisees were circumcised, but those Pharisees were “merely circumcised.” That is the phrase that Paul uses here. They were physically circumcised, but they were not spiritually circumcised. Instead, their hearts were hardened.

So if mere circumcision is not enough for a Jew to call Abraham his father, what else is needed? Paul answers that question right here:

that Jew must “also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had **before he was circumcised.**”

Ouch! Paul does not just tell the Jews that they should have followed Abraham’s example, but Paul says that the Jews should have followed Abraham’s example before he was circumcised! When it comes to circumcision, Paul is really hitting them below the belt!

Most Jews spent their entire lives trying **not** to walk like the uncircumcised — and yet Paul says that they should have been doing the opposite all along! They should have been walking like Abraham walked while he was uncircumcised.

And how did Abraham walk? He walked by faith. He walked in obedience. He walked in trust and reliance upon God.

God said go, and Abraham went. God told Abraham that, despite being old and childless, he would be the father of many nations, and Abraham believed him. God said sacrifice your son, and Abraham raised the knife.

That is how Abraham walked — and many, but not all, of those steps of faith by Abraham happened while he was still uncircumcised. As we have seen, Abraham was justified by faith prior to his circumcision as Paul tells us, and Abraham was justified by faith after his circumcision as James tells us.

Romans 4:13

Romans 4:13 — For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

What does it mean to be “heir of the world?” I think we should just see that phrase as an idiom that means having great blessings. We see a very similar idiom in Matthew 5:5 — “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” — meaning only that they will be greatly blessed.

In verse 13, it is Abraham and his offspring who were promised those great blessings. And so we have two questions: who are these offspring, and what are these great blessings?

As for the identity of the offspring, I think Paul just answered that question for us in the previous two verses. Abraham was the father of all who believe without being circumcised, and Abraham was the father of the circumcised who walk in the footsteps of Abraham’s faith. Those are the faithful Gentiles and the faithful Jews, and I think that is the offspring we see here in verse 13.

And, if that is the offspring, then what are the great blessings? Again, I think that question answers itself — the great blessings enjoyed by the faithful people of God are the great blessings that we enjoy in Christ.

Ephesians 1:3 — Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 3:8 — To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Romans 8:32 — He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

And when did Abraham receive those promised blessings? We know that he did not receive them prior to his own death.

Hebrews 11:39-40 — And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

Instead, Abraham received those promised blessings after the death of Christ.

Hebrews 9:15 — Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.

And how did that promise come? Paul tells us right here: that promise “did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.”

What does Paul mean when he says “the law” in verse 13? The first thing we should note is that Paul does not say “the law” in verse 13 — instead, he just says “law.” Paul says that the promise did not come “through law”. The definite article is absent in the Greek text.

Usually, when Paul says “the law” he means the law of Moses. And, usually, when Paul just says “law” he means something broader and more general than just the law of Moses. That is not always the case, but it is usually the case — and I think it must be the case here in verse 13. Why? Because the law of Moses was not given until four centuries after the promise to Abraham. There was no law of Moses in Abraham’s day.

So what then does Paul mean when he says “law” here in verse 13? Let’s answer that question by looking at the context. What has been Paul’s main point of contrast so far in the book of Romans?

- It has been justification by works versus justification by faith.
- It has been justification that we earn versus justification that we are given.
- It has been justification that causes us to boast in what we have done versus justification that causes us to boast in what God has done.
- It has been justification by flawless conduct versus justification by faith.

I think Paul is making that same contrast here in verse 13. And, if that is correct, then Paul is using the word “law” here to mean any system of justification that requires flawless conduct.

God gave me a law, I followed that law perfectly, and so God owes me my reward. I earned it. I can demand it. I can boast about all that I did to obtain it. That is how justification by law would work. My jus-

tification would come through what I did rather than through what God did.

Was that true of justification under the law of Moses? Yes, it was. Paul has already told us that.

Romans 2:13 — For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

And so what Paul is telling us here in verse 13 was true about the law of Moses. But was it true about **only** the law of Moses? Not at all.

Again, one reason we know that is because the law of Moses did not come until long after Abraham's death. But we also know that because the contrast here in verse 13 applies to **any** system of justification that requires flawless conduct, including the law from God under which Abraham was living.

Abraham did not have the law of Moses, but Abraham certainly had a law from God. Like everyone created by God, I think we can say that the work of the law was written on his heart (Romans 2:15), but Abraham had much more than that. Abraham had been given specific commands from God. Abraham lived under a law from God — but did Abraham flawlessly obey that law? We know that he did not. The Bible gives us examples of Abraham's sin. Abraham, like everyone else, was a sinner in need of the grace of God.

And so how then did that promise come? We know it did not come through Abraham's flawless conduct. Instead, the promise came through Abraham's faith.

Yes, Abraham was righteous before God, but that was only because God had counted his faith as righteousness. That is what Paul means here when he says the “righteousness **of faith**” — not the righteousness of flawless conduct, but the righteousness of faith.

Paul will later tell us that we are not living under a system that demands flawless conduct.

Romans 6:14 — For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

And that, of course, is a very good thing to hear given that none of us has flawless conduct! We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

What we need is some way to be justified apart from flawless conduct — and that is the gospel of Christ. With Christ, our justification comes from God as a free gift rather than from our own flawless conduct.

Romans 4:14

Romans 4:14 — For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

Again, in the Greek text there is no definite article before the word “law” in this verse. Paul was not talking just about the law of Moses in verse 13, and he is not doing that here in verse 14 either.

Again, I think Paul is talking more generally about any system that demands flawless conduct. That is the key contrast — justification I earn myself versus justification I am given by God.

We have looked at the system of faith, so let's also take a look at the system of law. What if we lived under such a system? What if we lived under a system in which "it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs?" Do you want to inherit these great blessings? Then just adhere to the law. Don't break the law; keep the law.

What could we say if we lived under a system like that? Paul gives us two consequences to living under such a system — faith is null and the promise is void. What does that mean?

Let me answer that question with an example. What if someone showed up here today and promised to give a million dollars to anyone here who could fly all around this room today just by flapping their arms?

What can we say about such a promise? What we can say is that it is void. That promise is of no effect. That promise is useless. Why? Because the condition to obtain the promise is impossible. We know that no one will ever receive that promise.

But what if I had faith? What if I had faith that the person really would give me a million dollars if I could fly all around this room just by flapping my arms? And what if I had faith that I could in fact do that? So much faith that I started flapping my arms, fully expecting to take off? What then?

Sorry. The promise was for those who actually took off, not for those who had faith that they could take off. I could have all the faith in the world, but that faith would be void. That faith would be of no effect. That faith would be useless. Why? Because the promise was not premised on my faith but on my performance.

Faith is not going to help us if we are living under a system of law. Even Abraham would have been left out under a system of law. Abraham's great faith in God would have been void, as would have been the great promises Abraham had from God.

What would Genesis 15:6 have looked like under a system of law? Would it have looked like this?

- God: "Abraham, I will make you the father of many nations if you will just be completely flawless in your conduct throughout your entire life."
- Abraham: "But I have already sinned! I have twice told people a lie about my wife."
- God: "I am filing that under Not My Problem!"

That is where Abraham would have been under a system of law. And we are no different. Paul makes this same point elsewhere.

Galatians 5:2-4 — Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

What Paul is saying is that if you choose to seek justification by flawless conduct, then you are severed from Christ. You have fallen away from grace. A system of flawless conduct demands flawless conduct! You are obligated to keep the whole law! And on that path, the promise is void and faith is void. We should thank God every day that we do not live under a system of justification like that!