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The Sign of Justification

4: 9-17

The sign of justification DIG: How is circumcision a sign for all believers? Paul goes to some lengths to demonstrate that Abraham was justified in the sight of God long before he was ever circumcised. Why was this an important argument for him to make to his audience in Rome? How is Paul's assertion that Abraham was justified by grace supported by Scripture?

REFLECT: What does it matter to you - practically or emotionally - whether being justified is "a gift to be received," or "a prize to be earned?" Since this right relationship is a gift, how would you use Abraham's example to argue against a presumptuous attitude toward ADONAI? Where are you being stretched in your ability to trust God's promises?

Circumcision is a sign, and a seal, of the Abrahamic Covenant.



Paul has finished destroying the argument that physical **circumcision** is the **Jews'** big advantage (**to see link click [Av](#) - The Religious Jew's Lack of the Spirit). He consistently maintains that the advantage of **Jews** is spiritual (**3:1-2, 9:4-5**, and most explicitly at **15:27**). At the same time, **he** shows that the **righteousness** that comes from **trust in YHVH** is available equally to **Jews** and **Gentiles**, not merely because it predates **the Torah**, but because it predates even the Abrahamic Covenant, when **circumcision** was**

given as a **sign** of **Abraham's** already demonstrated **faith** and as a seal guaranteeing **God's** promises, but not as something to boast about.⁹⁶

Abraham was not justified by circumcision. **Paul** now shows the connection between **circumcision** and **justification**. Because one might say, "Didn't **Avraham** perform the work of **circumcision**? And **circumcision** is most definitely a work. **Now is this blessing for the circumcised only? Or is it also for the uncircumcised? For we say that Avraham's trust was credited to his account as righteousness (4:9); but what state was he in when it was so credited – circumcision or uncircumcision?** Then **Paul** answers **his** own question, saying: **Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision (4:10)!**

Paul could speak to this from personal experience because as a Pharisee, he was taught that anyone who was circumcised would be guaranteed salvation. And other Pharisees would say, although **Abraham** lived before **the Torah** was given and could not have been saved by the deeds of **the Torah**; nevertheless, **he** would have been **justified** by **circumcision**.

It is an interesting progression that **Paul** is building on. The **Abrahamic** Covenant started in **Genesis 12** (see the commentary on **Genesis Dt - I Will Bless Those Who Bless You and Whoever Curses You I Will Curse**), it wasn't until **Genesis 17** that **he** was **circumcised** (see the commentary on **Genesis En - For Generations to Come Every Male Who is Eight Days Old Must be Circumcised**), but **he** was declared righteous in **Genesis 15** (see the commentary on **Genesis Ef - Abram Believed the LORD and He Credited It to Him as Righteousness**). In fact, fourteen years passed between **his** being declared **righteous (justified)** and being **circumcised**. So, **circumcision** had nothing to do with **his** salvation.⁹⁷

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, It is wonderful that our salvation is all about **Your righteousness**. There is no amount of good deeds we could do that would be enough to enter **Your** holy heaven, for heaven's entrance is not based on the amount of good deeds - but entrance is only for those who have perfect holiness. It is with deep gratitude of heart and an immense sense of love that I thank **You** for **Your** offer of **righteousness** to those who choose to love and to follow **You** as their **Lord**. **He made the One who knew no sin to become a sin offering on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (Second Corinthians 5:21).***

*How wonderful that **Yeshua** rose from death and now lives forever so he lives forever to intercede as High Priest - **the One who does remain forever has a permanent priesthood**. Therefore, **He is also able to save completely those who draw near to***

God through Him, always living to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:24b-25). Praise **You** that **Yeshua** was willing to come to earth to suffer shame and pain so that **He** may rescue and redeem sinners. I choose to live my life with my heart set on heaven and pleasing my **Savior**. **Let us run with endurance the race set before us, focusing on Yeshua, the initiator and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross, disregarding its shame; and He has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1c-2).** Only through the holiness of **Yeshua** will anyone enter holy heaven. **For such a Kohen Gadol was fitting for us: holy, guiltless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens (Hebrews 7:26).** How wonderful that **Yeshua** is now in heaven, interceding for those **He** gave **His** life to save (**John 10:15**). I love **You Father, Son and Ruach Ha’Kodesh!** In **Yeshua’s** holy name and power of **His** resurrection! Amen

So, what was **circumcision** to **Abraham**? It was two things: a **sign** and a **seal**. In fact, **he** received **circumcision** as a **sign, and a seal**, or outward evidence, of the **righteousness** he had been credited with on the ground of the **trust** he had while he was still **uncircumcised**. Just as immersion is the outward evidence of **trust**, not the cause of it.

Then, **Paul** answers the next logical question. “Why did **God** choose to **justify Avraham** when **he** was not **circumcised**?” This happened so that he could be the father of every **uncircumcised person** (a Gentile) who trusts and thus has **righteousness** credited to him, and at the same time be the father of every **circumcised person** who not only has had a **b’rit-milah**, but also follows in the footsteps of the trust which **Avraham avinu** had when he was still **uncircumcised (4:11-12)**. So, **ADONAI** had already anticipated the time when salvation would go out to **uncircumcised** Gentiles. **He** deliberately declared **Abraham justified** when **he** was **uncircumcised**, and **his righteousness** was maintained when **he** was **circumcised**. In this sense, **Avraham** was **the father** of all who **believed**. We are **justified** by walking in the steps of **Abraham**, by exercising **Abraham’s faith**.

Abraham was not justified by the Torah: For the promise to **Avraham** and his seed that he would inherit the world (Greek: *kosmos*, meaning *the inhabited world*) did not come through legalism but through the **righteousness that trust produces (4:13)**. In the present context **Paul** uses the word **seed** in its ordinary figurative sense to mean **Abraham’s** descendants - not only **his** physical **seed**, but also **his** spiritual **seed**. So, **Abraham** was not going to obtain the promises of **God** through **legalism**; **he** was going to obtain the promises of **God** the same way **he** was **justified**. And that was by means of **faith/trust/belief**. Therefore, not only are good works worthless for salvation, they are also

worthless to obtain the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. **For if the heirs are produced by legalism, then trust is pointless and the promise worthless** because the **Torah** was never meant as a means to salvation, but as our blueprint for living **(4:14)**.

Then to prove **his** point, **Paul** says: **For what Torah brings is punishment. But where there is no Torah, there is also no violation** because mankind is born with a **sin** nature **(4:15)**. **Paul** points out that before **Torah**, **sin** was already present in the world. Therefore, even though a person might be **sinning**, there is no mitzvah prohibiting his **sin**. But once **the Torah** was given, he had something to violate. So, when **the Torah** said: **Do not . . .** the flesh said, "Oh, yes I will." In fact, one of the purposes of **the Torah** was to make people **sin more** (see the commentary on **Exodus Ay - Moshe and the Torah**).

Abraham was justified by God's grace: The reason the promise is based on trusting is so that it may come as God's free gift because obtaining them by deeds is impossible. However, salvation by faith is a **promise that can be relied on by all the seed, Jews and Gentiles** alike, **not only those who live within the framework of the Torah, but also those with the kind of trust Avraham had - Avraham avinu for all of us (4:16)**. Thus, **Avraham avinu**, or "Abraham, our father," is a common phrase in rabbinic writing. In today's Siddur "our father" is not only to **Jews** but also to **faithful, trusting Gentiles** as well (also see **Galatians 3:6-18**).

The following , condensed from the medieval philosopher Maimonides' (the Rambam) well-known "Letter to Ovadyah the Proselyte," is quoted at length because the sentiments are so precisely appropriate, provided one imagines it as written to a **Gentile** follower of **Yeshua** instead of a convert to **Judaism**.

You ask me if you are permitted to say in the prayers, "God of our fathers," and "You who worked miracles for our fathers." Yes; you may say your blessing and prayer in the same way as every born Jew. This is because Avraham avinu revealed the true faith and the unity of God, rejected idol-worship, and brought many children under the wings of the Sh'khinah (Genesis 18:19). Ever since then whoever adopts Judaism and confesses the unity of the Divine Name, as written in the Torah, is counted among the disciples of Avraham avinu, peace unto Him. In the same way as Avraham converted his contemporaries through his words and teaching, he converts later generations through the testament he left his children and household after him. Thus, Avraham avinu is the father of his pious posterity who keeps his ways, and the father of his disciples and of all proselytes who adopt Judaism.

Know that our fathers, when they came out of Egypt, were mostly idolaters; they had mingled with the pagans in Egypt and imitated their way of life, until the Holy One, blessed be He, sent *Moshe Rabbenu* [Moses our teacher], who separated us from the nations, brought us under the wings of the Sh'khinah, us and all proselytes, and gave all of us one Torah. Therefore, do not consider your origin inferior. While we are the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak [Isaac] and Ya'akov [Jacob], you derive from Him through whose word the world was created. As Isaiah writes, "One will say, 'I belong to ADONAI.'" Another will be called by the name of Ya'akov' (Isaiah 44:5a)."⁹⁸



Paul then supports his conclusion in verse 16 with scriptural authority. This is consistent with the TaNaKh, where it says, "I have appointed you to be a father to many nations" (see the commentary on [Genesis Em - Your Name Will Be Abraham, For I Have Made You a Father of Many Nations](#)) Avraham is our father in God's sight because he trusted God as the one who gives life to the dead and calls nonexistent things into existence (4:17).

The Pharisees believed in the resurrection, but the Sadducees did not (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Ja - Whose Wife Will She Be at the Resurrection?](#)). Today, it distinguishes Orthodox **Judaism (who believe in **the resurrection**) from liberal elements in other branches of **Judaism** (who don't). **Abraham's resurrection** was both literal and figurative (see [Bf - The Means of Justification](#)), and both senses can be seen in **Chapter 4**.**

That God raises the dead is a major tenet of Judaism. The Rambam includes it as one of his 13 principles of the Jewish faith, and the Oral Law (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Ei - The Oral Law](#)) states that those who don't believe in the resurrection, "have no share in the world to come" (Sanhedrin 10:1). The second benediction of *the Amidah*, the prayer recited three times every day in the

synagogue, reads, “You are mighty forever, ADONAI. You cause the dead to live, You are great to save. With loving-kindness You sustain the living; with great mercy You cause the dead to live, supporting the falling, heal the sick, free the bound and keep faith with those who sleep in the dust. Who is like You, Master of mighty deeds? Who resembles You, O King? You cause death, You cause life, and You cause salvation to sprout forth, so You can be trusted to cause the dead to live. Blessed are You, ADONAI, Who cause the dead to live.”⁹⁹

Nevertheless, many **Jews** today have never believed in **the resurrection**. Yet, **the Talmud says faith in resurrection is one of the three core ideas of Judaism**. Look at **Chapter 37** of the book of **Ezeki’el**. In it the prophet **Ezeki’el** envisions a **valley full of dry bones**. **He** speaks to **the bones**. **He** tells **them God** will breathe life into **them**. **They** will have **skin and flesh** and become a great army. **The bones** symbolize **the people of Isra’el**, who will rise again and return to **their Promised Land**. The text is not purely a symbolic vision of rebirth. It is physical, with the spirit giving life to **the bones** of the dead. The text is traditionally read during the week of Passover. Passover was the time when **the Jewish people** expected **the Messiah** to arrive. (For believers, the Passover is fulfilled by the death of **Yeshua Messiah**).

Intriguingly, **God** constantly refers to **Ezeki’el** as **Son of Man**, a phrase connected to the arrival of **the Messiah**. **Ezeki’el** is predicting the rebirth of **the Jewish people** after their defeat, and exile by the Babylonians (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule**). **Their** rebirth heralds the arrival of **the Messiah**. (The rebirth of the state of **Isra’el** in 1948 also led many traditional **Jews** to foresee the arrival of **the Messiah**. A reference to this belief includes the official prayer for the state of **Isra’el**).

Why did many modern **Jews** give up belief in **resurrection**? Because it isn’t “rational.” Nobody can prove that our bodies and souls will be reunited. And science proves our bodies simply decompose. **Resurrection** is one of the parts of religion resting purely on **faith**. However, **resurrection** is not a form of self-delusion or magical thinking, as some writers and critics have called it. Rather, it is a way of lifting ourselves above our physical selves and recognizing we are something much larger and more enduring. It’s to believe our bodies are more than a collection of chemicals limited by nature. Yes, we are part of the natural world, but also part of eternity. We are **justified** by **trusting** in **Yeshua Messiah**. Or, as **the Psalmist** puts it more poetically: **We are little lower than angels (Psalm 8:5)**.