

BIBLE & BAGEL

Romans – Our Common Faith

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One of the problems in the church or rather synagogue in Rome was that the Jews thought they were spiritually better than the Gentiles because they had the Torah and the sign of the covenant; circumcision. Apostle Paul addresses this issue by emphasizing that although circumcision is essential to the Jews to keep their identity, it was not the basis for salvation. This was an issue that the Apostles had to deal with, when Pharisees who came to faith were teaching that Gentiles had to be circumcised to fully follow Yeshua (Jesus). This led to what we call the Jerusalem Council meeting in Acts 15 where the Apostles decided that Gentiles need not be circumcised, so we can imagine that even though the council had made that decision, the issue still lingered for some time.

Romans 4:1-8

4 What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found 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 accounted to him for righteousness." 4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. 5 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, 6 just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: 7 "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; 8 Blessed is the man to whom the LORD SHALL not impute sin."

The Apostle now emphasizes the idea of salvation by faith to the Jews by referring to Abraham and saying that Abraham had nothing to boast about because he was not justified by his works; rather the scripture tells us that it was Abraham's belief or trust in God that made him righteousⁱ. He also uses the example of wages, wages are what is owed to an employee by the employer, but the person who does not earn and is given something it is considered a gift. Likewise salvation is a gift from God, not earned but received by faith. He then quotes King David who wrote in Psalm 32ⁱⁱ who said that the man who is forgiven of sin and upon whom the Lord does not proclaim guilty is blessed or happy.

This is what makes our faith different from all others; in other faiths one has to work their way to salvation, whether we call it Nirvana or paradise or whatever, salvation has to be earned. For us it is a gift that God gives when we believe God, when we trust him for our salvation rather than ourselves. Some people say that this is too simple; God cannot just give us salvation. This is true he did not simply give us salvation, he bought it for us and the price was the life of His own Son, Yeshua. After He purchased it He gave it to those who would trust in the work that Yeshua had done.



Romans 4:9-12

9 Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. 10 How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. 11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, 12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised. NKJV

Now Apostle Paul begins to address the attitude of the Jews to the Gentiles, they thought the Gentiles inferior to them because of their heritage and because they carried on their bodies the sign of the covenant, they believed that by this they had salvation. Again he uses the example of Abraham and points to the fact that Abraham was considered righteous before he was circumcised. The Torah said that Abraham was declared righteous by God in Genesis 15, whereas he was commanded to be circumcised and to circumcise all his male descendants in Genesis 17ⁱⁱⁱ. This throws a spanner in the thinking of the Jews. This meant that circumcision was not necessary for salvation therefore Gentiles could also be saved and they are on equal footing before God. So the Apostle says that Abraham is the father of both the circumcised as well as the uncircumcised and we are both saved by faith.

Religious pride is something we must be very careful of, thinking we are better than someone else, especially when we see those who do not yet know God. I remember in January 1988, I was in YWAM (Youth With A Mission) in Quiapo a district in Manila, and the people were celebrating the festival of the Black Nazarene, a black statue of Jesus. We were on the second floor of a house looking down at the procession and people throwing towels and handkerchiefs for the workers to wipe on the statue because they believe that these towels would have healing power after that. Some young YWAMers were making very nasty remarks; I realized that Jesus would be weeping at this sight. As Christians we too can get caught up in religious pride, we need to remember when we look at such people that except for the grace of God I could be one of those. Beware of pride because it leads to prejudice.

ⁱ Genesis 15:6

ⁱⁱ Psalm 32:1-2

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 17:9-14

