

Chapter 4

Commentary

Chapter four moves Paul's argument along by presenting primary proof to substantiate 3:27, that all boasting is excluded. In a kind of *kal v'komer* argument, Paul goes to the man who, in Jewish history, should be the one most apt to boast, Abraham himself. If it can be shown that Abraham had no grounds for boasting, then all other boasting is likewise excluded.

After presenting Abraham as the argument *par excellence* in vv. 1-8, Paul continues in five more sections to expound the nature of Abraham's faith. The chapter as a whole may be broken down as follows:

- 1-8 Abraham had no grounds for boasting since his right standing with God was also on the basis of faith
- 9-12 Abraham gained right standing with God before he was circumcised. Therefore, faith precedes covenant membership, and circumcision is a sign of this covenant membership already possessed.
- 13-17a Abraham's right standing with God was not something merited through fulfillment of the Torah, but simply on the basis of the righteousness which is by faith.
- 17b-22 Expounds the text found in Gen 15:6 and draws out the meaning of "Abraham believed God"
- 23-25 shows the relevance of Abraham's faith to all believers, and puts him forward as the paradigm for saving faith.

1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?

Abraham is now brought forward as the example of someone who, if there were a basis for boasting, certainly it would be him. He is referred to as "our forefather (προπάτορα, *propatora*, though a variant exists as πατέρα, *patera*) according to the flesh," an indication that Paul plans to show how Abraham is a "forefather" on an other than fleshly basis as well, cf. v. 16.

The use of the expression "has found" is interesting. While from an English standpoint we might most naturally understand this to mean "what has Abraham found from his investigations into the matter" but in fact the word "found" (εὕρηκεναι, *eurekaenai*) is most reminiscent of the common "find grace" or "find mercy" in the eyes of someone (cf. Lxx Gen 6:8; 18:3; 19:19; 30:27; 32:5[6]; 33:8, 10; 34:11. We might paraphrase it this way: "What shall we conclude then, about how Abraham found grace in the eyes of God?"

2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God.

It seems very probable that by the time of the 1st Century the Rabbinic idea that Abraham

had won favor with God through his willingness to sacrifice Isaac was gaining favor. The later writings reflect this. For instance, *m.Kiddushin* 4.14 indicates that Abraham had performed the whole Torah before it was even given, on the basis of Gen 26:5. So righteous were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the eyes of the Sages that their deeds secured God's favor upon subsequent generations. It was noted, for instance, that Elijah's prayer on Mt. Carmel was not answered until he evoked the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (cf. *Mid. Rab. Exodus*. xlv, §1). In *Mid. Rab. Canticles* 1, §14 we read, "A bundle of myrrh (kofer) is my well-beloved" (*Cant.* 1.14). This refers to Isaac, who was tied up like a bundle upon the altar. Kofer, because he atones for the sins of Israel." Yet the Sages knew that even Abraham needed God's grace: "R. Haggai said in the name of R. Isaac: All need grace, for even Abraham, for whose sake grace came plenteously into the world, himself needed grace" (*Mid. Rab. Genesis* lx.2). Even the phrase "who remembers the pious deeds of the Patriarchs" in the opening prayer of the Amidah could be interpreted to indicate some kind of attributed righteousness.

But Paul simply cannot allow such a thing, for though the covenant with Abraham is surely, in one sense, the reward of his obedience, its blessing comes only to the individual who, like Abraham, places faith in God and thus gains the righteousness which comes via faith. For Paul, Gen 15:6 could only be understood in this sense, namely, that Abraham had savingly believed upon God, and this act of faith in God was the means by which God declared him righteous.

But not before God — Does Paul here actually indicate that Abraham has a valid grounds of boasting before men? Not likely, especially since the subsequent verses indicate that none of Abraham's righteousness was the result of his good deeds. What is more, the conclusion (that he has the right to boast but not before God) is based upon the premise that he was actually justified by works. Since this is false, the conclusion does not stand.

More than likely the meaning is simply that in the eyes of men there may be many who feel that Abraham actually has a proper basis for boasting, but what really counts is God's opinion, and before God none can boast, not even Abraham. The reason is given in the following quote.

3 For what does the Scripture say? "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

This quote from Gen 15:6 is essentially in line with the Lxx, which faithfully renders the Hebrew. This is a crux text both for Paul's argument here, and for his exposition of God's method for making a sinner righteous.

MT	Lxx	Paul
וַיִּחְשַׁבְהָ לוֹ צְדָקָה And he believed in Adonai and He reckoned it to him righteousness	καὶ ἐπίστευσεν Ἀβραμ τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιο- σύνην And Abram believed in God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness.	ἐπίστευσεν δὲ Ἀβραὰμ τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιο- σύνην. And Abraham believed in God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness.

It is easy to see that Paul quotes the Lxx almost exactly, only substituting δε for και and using "Abraham" rather than the Lxx "Abram." The Lxx differs from the MT in translating ויחשבה with the passive ἐλογίσθη. Other than these minor differences the Lxx and Paul's quote substantially represent the original Hebrew text.

In the Mekilta, an early midrash on Exodus, R. Shemaiah (who lived around 50 BCE) on Exodus 14:15 enters the discussion on whose merits God divided the Red Sea. He suggests "the faith with which their father Abraham believed in Me is deserving that I should divide the

sea for them. For it is said: And he believed in the Lord." (Gen 15:6)⁴²

Further on in the same midrash (on 14:31) we read:

"And so also you find that our father Abraham inherited both this world and the world beyond only as a reward for the faith with which he believed, as it is said: 'And he believed in the Lord, etc.'"⁴³

A similar use of our text is to be found in Mid. Rab. *Exodus* 33.5:

"in the time to come the Israelites will sing a fresh song, as it is said, 'Sing unto the Lord a new song' (Ps 98:1). By whose merit (זכות) will they do so? By the merit of Abraham, because he trusted in God, as it is said, 'And Abraham trusted in God' (Gen xv. 6)."

The crux question is whether the Rabbis saw faith as meriting something, that is, whether or not faith is a work deserving a reward. Did the contemporaries of Paul see Abraham's faith in God as a good work deserving a reward? Cranfield categorically answers this question "yes" after surveying a few rabbinic quotes:

Thus it is apparent that, in appealing to Gen 15:6 in support of his contention that Abraham was not justified on the ground of works and has no right to glory before God, Paul was deliberately appealing to a verse of Scripture which his fellow Jews generally assumed to be clear support for the diametrically opposite view. That he did so is highly significant, but in no way surprising.⁴⁴

But I'm not sure Cranfield has correctly interpreted the few rabbinic texts he lists. In the first place, he follows Strack and Billerback in saying that the rabbinic phrase used to describe the "merit of faith" is זכות אַמְנָה, *zachut 'emunah*, but in the texts he quotes from Mekilta, this is not the phrase used, but rather שְׂכָר אַמְנָה, *sachar 'emunah*, "reward of faith." Secondly, that faith is rewarded (a scriptural concept for certain) does not necessarily lead, in the rabbinic writings, to the notion that faith is therefore a "work." No one will argue with the fact that, at least in some measure, the Jewish communities of faith in the 1st Century and even up until the present hold to some form of works-righteousness. But to say that the rabbis universally held that faith was something that each individual accomplished on his own is perhaps to say too much.

What did the early interpreters of the Torah, the Sages, understand Gen 15:6 to mean? Two possibilities present themselves for the interpretation of this text in all ages: (1) faith is a righteous act, and the attended action of God in relationship to one's faith is a reward for it, or (2) faith is a gift from God, the means by which the sinner comes to know and enjoy the infinite goodness and mercy of God in the forgiveness of his sins and a "not guilty" verdict.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to categorically state that the rabbis had one or the other view of faith, for the rabbis themselves are multifaceted in their understanding of Scripture and of specific texts. But the strong teaching on the rewards of faith found in the rabbinic literature does not necessarily mean that they saw faith as a righteous deed. In fact, one of the issues which arises in such a discussion as this is whether one should translate the verb הֶאֱמִין *ha'amin* "to exercise faith" or "to be faithful." God rewards the faithful (Ps 31:23; 101:6) and often faithfulness and obedience are considered synonymous (Ps 119:30). In fact, the Scriptures seem clear on the fact that one who has faith acts faithfully, and this acting faithfully is the only sure guarantee the one possesses faith.

Thus, to see that God rewards the exercise of faith does not mean that the existence of faith in our souls is first and foremost a result of our own efforts. What it does mean is that the renewed soul, now in possession of faith, is enabled to say "yes" to the Lord and His commands,

and is therefore in a place to receive the accompanying blessings of obedience. The unregenerate soul is unable to please the Lord, for apart from faith it is impossible to please Him (Heb 11:6).

We must now turn our attention to the next important term in our verse, namely, the word translated "reckoned": "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." "Reckoned" translates the Greek term λογίζομαι, *logizomai* which means "to think, consider, reckon." The corresponding Hebrew term in Gen 15:6 is חשב, *chashav* "to think, consider." Actually, as we attempt to understand Paul's use of this term, it will be helpful for us to consider verses 4 and 5, for here he uses the term again with further explanation.

4-5 Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness,

Here we have a clear antithesis set up by Paul: one who works for a wage has his wages counted out to him as what is owed because of the work, while in contrast one who believes does not work, and therefore whatever is counted out to him must be the result of grace, not works.

We see from this verse that the concept of "reckon" (λογίζομαι, *logizomai*) is used by Paul as something entirely appropriate for faith as well as for good works that accompany faith, for the one who works has wages reckoned to him as what is owed him. Thus, λογίζομαι must simply mean to accredit to someone what is rightfully his.

It is understandable how one's wages are owed on the basis of contracted work, but how are we to understand that righteousness is the rightful possession of each one who believes? Here is the wonderful reality of true, saving faith—faith appropriates to the believer the very righteousness of Messiah, so that by faith one may honestly claim that he possesses it. It is not as though God all along knows that the child of faith is really evil but "doctors" the account so that he appears righteous. No, when God ascribes His verdict of "not guilty," He does so on the basis of reality, not as a "let-us-pretend" scenario. The work of Messiah has made our practical righteousness inevitable, a truth which allows the just and timeless God to treat us on the basis of that inevitability.

Thus, the accusation of some, that God does what is forbidden to human judges ("Who justifies the ungodly"), entirely misses the mark. For human judges are forbidden from declaring the guilty just or taking bribes from the guilty in order to change the verdict (Ex 23:7; Prov 17:15; 24:24). When God declares the guilty just, He does so on the basis that the debt owed by the guilty has been fully paid by them through their substitute, Yeshua, and that He intends, through the act of recreating them, to actually make them live in righteousness.

So, if by faith we lay hold, as it were, of the righteousness of Yeshua, then God, Who is just, must certainly reckon it to us as our rightful possession. But it is rightfully ours because, through faith in Yeshua, we receive from Him the fruit of His labors in His death, resurrection, session and intercession. Righteousness is not ours because we earned it, but because Yeshua has "earned it" on our behalf. Faith is the God-given ability to receive what Yeshua has prepared, to stand before Him clothed in the righteousness of the Messiah.

For other places in the Apostolic scriptures where the term λογίζομαι is used, cf. Lk 22:37; Acts 19:27; Rom 2:26; 8:36; 9:8; 2Co 5:19; 2Co 12:6; 2Ti 4:16.

6-8 just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, And whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account.

Let us first take into account the quote. It is from Psalm 32:1-2

MT	Lxx	Paul
<p>אֲשֶׁר־יֵאָדָם לֹא יִחְשַׁב יְהוָה לוֹ עוֹן וְאֵין בְּרוּחוֹ רָמְיָהּ כִּי־הִחְרַשְׁתִּי בְּלוֹ עֲצָמַי בְּשֹׁאֲנָתִי כָּל־הַיּוֹם</p> <p>Happy the one whose transgression is carried away, whose sin is covered, Happy is the man to whom Adonai does not reckon iniquity, and in his spirit there is no deceit.</p>	<p>μακάριοι ὧν ἀφέθησαν αἱ ἀνομίαι καὶ ὧν ἐπεκαλύφθησαν αἱ ἀμαρτίαι μακάριος ἀνὴρ οὗ οὐ μὴ λογίσηται κύριος ἀμαρτίαν οὐδὲ ἔστιν ἐν τῷ στόματι αὐτοῦ δόλος</p> <p>Happy is the one whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered, Happy is the man to whom the Lord does not reckon sin neither is there in his mouth deceit.</p>	<p>μακάριοι ὧν ἀφέθησαν αἱ ἀνομίαι καὶ ὧν ἐπεκαλύφθησαν αἱ ἀμαρτίαι· μακάριος ἀνὴρ οὗ οὐ μὴ λογίσηται κύριος ἀμαρτίαν</p> <p>Happy is the one whose lawless deeds are forgiven and whose sins are covered, Happy is the man to whom the Lord does not reckon sin.</p>

It is clear that Paul employs the rabbinic *גְּזֵרָה שְׁוָה* (*geserah shavah*) whereby two passages both sharing a common term may be linked together. The shared term in this case is “to reckon” (חָשַׁב, λογίζομαι). It is likewise clear that Paul quotes our present recension of the Lxx without changes, and that the Lxx accurately represents the MT. The Hebrew text is very poetic, and the assonance of the terms נִשְׂוִי, *n’sui* (“carried away, forgiven”) and כִּסִּוִי, *k’sui* (“covered”) most probably entered into the psalmists choice of words.

What is of initial interest to us as we attempt to understand Paul’s words here is the commentary Paul gives by way of introduction to the quote from Psalm 32. Paul writes “just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works.” Yet David says nothing about reckoning righteousness, only about sins being forgiven and transgressions covered. The point is obvious: for Paul the one inevitably secures the other. To have one’s sins forgiven means that one has the righteousness of Messiah accredited to his account—there simply is no neutral ground where one is forgiven but not declared righteous! Thus, it is entirely wrong-headed to interpret, as some do, a verse like 2Co 5:19 as though it teaches that God forgave everyone of their sins and now He awaits their choice to live righteously. For when Paul teaches that “God was in Messiah reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their transgressions against them,” we must understand that “reconciling the world” and “not counting their transgressions” means that God was likewise imputing righteousness to each one as well. With this in mind, the term “world” simply cannot mean all people everywhere, unless one holds to a theology which has no room for the biblical teaching that some will reject God’s offer and therefore be punished eternally.

Cranfield agrees:

The validity of his appeal to Ps. 32:1f as helping to interpret Gen 15:6 is not just a matter of the presence of a common term (λογίζομαι/חשב) in both places: his appeal to the psalm-passage has an inward and substantial validity, for God’s reckoning righteousness to a man χωρὶς ἔργων [apart from works] is, in fact, equivalent to His forgiving of sin.⁴⁵

Psalm 32:1-2 is commented on several times in the Bavli, at b.*Berchot* 34b:

R. Kahana said: I consider a man impertinent who prays in a valley. R. Kahana also said: I consider a man impertinent who openly recounts his sins, since it is said, Happy is he

whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

And in b. *Yoma* 86b:

It was taught: R Meir used to say, Great is repentance. For on account of an individual who repents, the sins of all the world are forgiven, as it is said: I will heal their backsliding. I will love them freely, for mine anger is turned away from him. 'From them' it is not said, but 'from him,.' How is one proved a repentant sinner? — Rab Judah said: If the object which caused his original transgression comes before him on two occasions, and he keeps away from it. Rab Judah indicated: With the same woman, at the same time, in the same place. Rab Judah said: Rab pointed out the following contradictions. It is written: Happy is he whose transgression is covered, whose sin is pardoned; and it is also written: He that covereth his 'transgression shall not prosper? This is no difficulty, one speaks of sins that have become known [to the public], the other of such as did not become known. R. Zutra b. Tobiah in the name of R. Nahman said: Here we speak of sins committed by a man against his fellow, there of sins committed by man against the Omnipresent.

What is interesting in the second of the two quotes is that the Sages considered it a problem to be resolved, that the Scriptures should speak of sins covered on the one hand, and yet reprove one who covers his sins. While this might simply be explained as the result of a "wooden" hermeneutic, it also may emphasize that there was some debate over the matter of how a person's sins were forgiven.

The words used in the Psalm quote are also worthy of our investigation. In the first verse of Psalm 32, the term translated "transgressions" (פְּשָׁעִים, *pesha'*) has its root meaning in "rebellion," and the Lxx translation ἀνομίαι, *anomia*i, "lawless deeds" is right on the mark. Rebellion against God is seen first and foremost in a disregard for and breaking of God's Torah. Also, as mentioned above, two of the Hebrew terms of Ps 32:1 have similar sound, namely, נָשִׂי, *nasui* and כָּסִי, *k'sui*, both qal passive participles. נָשָׂא, *nasa'* is the common verb "to lift" or "to carry," but is used of "lifting away a debt" and thus came to be used for the concept of "forgive." The second verb, "to cover," is the Hebrew root כָּסָה, *kasah*, and is used in a negative sense (of someone covering one's sins, i.e., trying to hide them) in Jb 31:33 and Prov. 28:13, but in a good sense in Prov 10:12 and 17:9. The same verb is used of God covering sin in Ps 85:2.

The term אֲשֵׁרֵי, *'ashrei*, is usually translated "blessed," though its primary meaning is "to be happy" or "to make one happy." Obviously, to be "blessed" is, in fact, to "be happy." There is a very real sense, then, that our happiness, our joy, ought to be based upon the pronouncement of our sins being covered and our transgressions removed rather than upon the circumstances of our lives. Can we honestly say that our souls are happy with the position we have in Yeshua? If so, then there ought to be a sort of "continual happiness" (or perhaps more rightly "joy") that pervades our thinking and acting, for nothing in all of the universe can ever reverse the "not-guilty" pronouncement made over us by the Father on the basis of our faith in Yeshua, the chosen Messiah. I do not, of course, intend this to mean that those forgiven walk about with a plastic, forced smile, all the while failing to acknowledge the sorrow and pain which is an inevitability in this world. What I do mean is that the knowledge of our forgiveness in Yeshua ought always and finally to set us upon a course of "happiness" or "blessedness," even in the midst of sorrow.

In these three verses (vs. 6-8) we have a number of terms and phrases used to denote "sin" and "forgiveness."

lawless deeds (ἀνομίαι)	—	forgiven (ἀφίημι)
sin (ἁμαρτία)	—	covered (ἐπικαλύπτω)
sin (ἁμαρτία)	—	not taken into account (οὐ λογίζομαι)

As noted above, "lawless deeds" translates *עֲשָׂוֹן*, *pesha'* of the original Psalm quote, and stresses the idea of "rebellion." "Forgiven" (ἀφίημι, *aphiemi*) means literally "to send away" and answers well to the underlying Hebrew of the Psalm which uses the verb *נָסָה*, *nasa'*, "to bear up" or "carry away." Here is a wonderful reality, a reality which the Psalmist rejoices in, namely, that God has carried away the rebellious sin of those He has forgiven.

"Sin" (ἁμαρτία, *hamartia*) denotes any departure from the straight path of righteousness, and its remedy is to be "covered," once again the Greek term fitting the Hebrew verb of the quote. The idea of "covered" reminds of Yom Kippur and the place where the blood was poured, "covering," as it were, the transgressions of the people from the sight of the cherubim who guard the sanctity of God's holiness from the intrusion of any uncleanness.

The significant word, however, by which Paul links Gen 15:6 with Psalm 32:1-2 is the word "reckon" or "take into account" (λογίζομαι, *logizomai*) as noted above. Here the legal sense is in view, as a judge or king officially noting the crime or trespass, marking it, as it were, upon the ledger of the offender. This word indicates the results of the "covering," for if the sin is covered or out of the sight of the Almighty, then He does not consider it in a legal sense, and does not charge it against the individual. As such, the individual stands innocent before Him.

One additional point can be made from the tenses of the verbs found in our text: each of the verbs ("forgiven," "covered," "not taken into account") is in the aorist tense, indicating a finality to the action. A sinner who has been forgiven, and whose sins are covered, and whose sins the Lord does not take into account never stands the risk of losing this "forgiven status" before the Lord. The incisive, once-for-all action of God in His atoning work renders the sinner eternally forgiven. It is for this reason the forgiven sinner is labelled "blessed" (אַשְׁרֵי, *'ashrei*).

9-10 Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised;

Some of the Rabbinic literature suggests that the opinion among leading teachers was that God's forgiveness extended only to the nation of Israel and no further. Consider, for instance, the statement in *Pesikta Rabba* 45 (185b):

On the Day of Atonement God cleanses Israel and atones for its guilt, as it is written, 'For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you,' Lev 16:30. And, if you would say, 'Another nation too [he cleanses,] know that] it is not so, but it is only Israel; for so spake the prophet Micah (7:18): 'Who is a God like unto You, that pardons iniquity, and passes by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage?' It is only Israel that He forgives. When David saw how God forgives the sins of the Israelites and has mercy upon them, he began to pronounce them blessed and to glorify them: 'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, etc., Ps. 32:1⁴⁶

Yet there are indications in the later rabbinic writings (Mishnah, Talmud) that the Sages did acknowledge the fact that God provided atonement for the nations as well as for Israel. For instance, the question of the seventy bullocks sacrificed at Sukkot and their meaning yields this:

R. Eleazar stated, To what do those seventy bullocks [that were offered during the seven days of the Festival] correspond? To the seventy nations. To what does the single bullock [of the Eighth Day] correspond? To the unique nation. This may be compared to a mortal king who said to his servants, 'Prepare for me a great banquet'; but on the last day he said to his beloved friend, 'Prepare for me a simple meal that I may derive benefit from you'.

R. Johanan observed, Woe to the idolaters, for they had a loss and do not know what they have lost. When the Temple was in existence the altar atoned for them, but now who shall

atone for them?⁴⁷

If this later Talmudic text gives an accurate description of R. Eleazar's and R. Yohanan's positions (though it is not absolutely clear which Sages these names denote), then it seems clear that they believed the Gentile nations would receive forgiveness from HaShem in the eschaton, and that this forgiveness would be the result of sacrifice. Even more telling is the addition of R. Yohanan, that the altar of the temple atoned for the sins of the nations as well.

Yet it may well be that while some of the Sages taught that God would make atonement for the Gentile nations, they believed that this would occur only when the Gentiles became proselytes. In fact, we perhaps should understand R. Yohanan's remarks regarding the fact that the altar of the Temple atoned for the Gentiles to refer to those Gentiles who came to the Temple as observing the Torah with a view to eventually becoming proselytes.

Whatever the case, Paul is clear about this fact, that Gentiles have no need to become Jews in order to receive forgiveness of sins. This he intends to prove by showing that Abraham was forgiven of his sins before he bore the sign of the covenant, i.e., circumcision. In this regard we should remember that Paul sometimes uses the term "circumcision" to mean "Jewish" and "uncircumcision" to mean "Gentile" (cf. 2:25, 26 and the comments on these verses above, pgs. 76-77).

According to *Seder Olam* 48, Abraham's circumcision was twenty-nine years after the promise of Gen. 15:6. Some of the Sages put the day of Abraham's circumcision as Tishri 10 (Yom Kippur) while others put it on Nissan 13 (day to search for *chametz* at Pesach). The exact day is obviously speculative, but the important thing to see is that there was a significant span between the time that Abraham was accorded righteousness on the basis of his faith (Gen 15:6) and the time that he was circumcised (Gen 17). Paul's point is obvious: if circumcision actually secured a place in the covenant, then one would expect Abraham to have been circumcised in advance of or at least at the time of his stated faith. To have been declared righteous on the basis of his faith well in advance of being circumcised shows conclusively that circumcision has nothing to do with obtaining right standing before God. And the next logical statement is that the blessing pronounced by David in Psalm 32 cannot be limited to those who are circumcised.

11 and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them,

Here circumcision (περιτομῆς, *peritomes*) is called a "sign" (σημεῖον, *semeion*) and a "seal" (σφραγίς, *sphragis*), unfolding for us in these two descriptive terms the divine purpose of the ceremony itself. As a "sign," circumcision pointed to the essence of the covenant, for circumcision itself is said to be the covenant "in your flesh." To refer to circumcision as "the covenant in your flesh" (וְהַיְתָה בְּרִיתִי בְּבָשָׂרְכֶם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם) (Gen 17:13) shows that it bears in its significance the essence of the covenant.

What then is the essence of the covenant to which circumcision pointed as a sign? Since circumcision is performed upon the organ of procreation, it can only relate to that element of the covenant reiterated a number of times: "in your seed all the nations (families) of the earth shall be blessed" (cf. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14), for this relates to the promised Son, and is the zenith of the covenant itself. Thus, circumcision first and foremost is a sign pointing to the promised Son, first in Isaac, and then in the Messiah. The cutting of the flesh, though a ceremony known in the ancient world as a rite of passage to marriage, was to be done on an infant male to stress the impossibility of bringing the promised Son by human efforts. No eight-day old son could ever father offspring. The act of circumcision on the infant reinforced the picture that the promised One would have to come by above-human means.