

Genesis 15:6 in the New Testament

Taken from Lesson #149 in the **Basic Exegesis Series** ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#))

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Gen. 15:6 is a pivotal point in Scripture, and so important that it is quoted or referred to 5 times in the New Testament.

Genesis 15:6 in the New Testament	
Scripture	Commentary
Paul's first point: we are saved by faith alone in Christ alone.	
<p>What then shall we say that our father Abraham has found, according to flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has a [reason to] boast; but not before God (Rom. 4:1–2).</p>	<p>In Rom. 3, Paul made several arguments, starting with the importance of being a Jew, but this is not a reason to boast. God is a God of the Jews and Gentiles, and keeping the Law is not a reason to boast because it is not a system of salvation.</p> <p>If Abraham here was justified by works, then he has a reason to boast—however, Abraham has no reason to boast before God.</p>

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Scripture

Commentary

For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness." (Rom. 4:3–4; Gen. 15:6).

Notice that Paul takes the Old Testament as authoritative. When he writes, *what does the Scripture say*, he is quoting from the Old Testament, and what it says will settle the matter of justification. Paul's first point that he makes in Rom. 4 is, we are justified by faith alone, and he backs this up with Scripture.

The Jews see themselves as superior—after all, God gave to them the Scriptures and His promises. They work hard at keeping the Law (the Gentiles don't even try to keep the Law). So Paul points back to the father of the Jewish race, Abraham, and says, *here is what your Scriptures tell you: Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness.*

But to him working, the reward is not calculated according to grace, but according to debt. But to him not working, but believing on Him, Who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness (Rom. 4:5).

This is the point that Paul is making. If you work to impress God, you are paying him from a position of debt. Furthermore, no matter how much you work, you will never be able to work enough to cancel out your debt to God. God credits righteousness to us, not based upon works, but based upon faith. Abraham is proof of this.

Paul's second point: the Bible teaches us clearly that righteousness was imputed to Abram apart from being circumcised. By application, this means that God justifies us based upon our faith in Jesus, apart from receiving the Law, apart from sabbath keeping, and apart from any other aspect of the Law of God.

Even as David also says of the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness without works, saying, "Blessed are those whose lawless acts are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the Lord will in no way impute sin." (Rom. 4:6–8; Psalm 32:1–2).

The term *blessedness* refers to happiness; and David says that there is a happiness associated with have one's lawless acts forgiven (literally, in the Hebrew, *lifted up and taken away*). There is a happiness association with God covering one's sins. Finally, there is a happiness to the person that God does not impute sin to. Note how this contrasts with Gen. 15:6, where God imputes righteousness to the person exercising faith in Him.

At birth, Adam's original sin is imputed to us, which is the basis of our condemnation. We are born condemned before God. However, the imputation of righteousness will trump the imputation of sin.

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Is this blessedness then on the circumcision only, or on the uncircumcision also? For we say that **faith was imputed to Abraham for righteousness** (Rom. 4:9; Gen. 15:6).

Here, Paul is making a fairly simple argument: righteousness is imputed apart from works and apart from circumcision. His evidence is quite simple: at the time that the Bible tells us that Abraham's faith was imputed to him for righteousness, Abraham was uncircumcised. Later on, God would have Abraham become circumcised along with all the males with him, but this came long **after *his faith was imputed to him for righteousness***.

Part of the Mosaic Law is to circumcise a child soon after birth, which is understood by the Jews to be the first act of obedience to the Law for every Jewish child. This is the first step in the keeping of the Law, which Jews consider to be one of many ways in which they are superior to Gentiles. But Paul tells them here, *you're wrong to think that. Even Abraham was declared righteous before he was circumcised.*

Circumcision is not a part of the attainment of salvation and salvation is not simply obedience to the law of God. Circumcision has a meaning, which will be examined later on in our study.

How then was it [righteousness] imputed? Being in circumcision or in uncircumcision? **Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision** (Rom. 4:10).

Paul continues his line of reasoning. At what point in time was Abraham declared righteous? How does this match up with the rite of circumcision, which was practiced by the Jews, at God's command?

To any Jew who knows a smattering of the Old Testament and knows even a small amount of Scripture can hear this argument and be turned around. In fact, it is hard to argue against Paul's logic here. If Abraham, the father of the Jewish race, is clearly proclaimed righteous before being circumcised, then man is saved and made righteous apart from circumcision.

The father of the Jewish race was made righteous in uncircumcision. Being circumcised or uncircumcised had nothing to do with God making him righteous.

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And he received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while still uncircumcised. This was to make him the father of all who believe but are not circumcised, so that righteousness may be credited to them (Rom. 4:11).

You will note that circumcision is seen as a sign and as a seal of those who have been made righteous by faith.

Circumcision was not needed in order for Abram to be righteous. Circumcision was a sign of the righteousness of his faith. He was uncircumcised, he exercised faith in Jehovah Elohim, and was made righteous. Then he was circumcised, years later.

And he became the father of the circumcised, not only to those who are circumcised, but also to those who follow in the footsteps of the faith our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised (Rom. 4:12).

So Abraham, who is known as the father of the Jews, here is called the father of all who believe. The play on words in v. 12 is really something. Abraham became the father of the circumcised, but to the circumcised *and* to those who follow him in faith, which faith he exercised in uncircumcision.

Most important of all is, Abraham is the spiritual father of all those who believe, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, whether Jew or gentile, whether under the Law or not.

For the promise that he should be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed by means of the Law, but by means of the righteousness of faith (Rom. 4:13).

Being heir to the world was not a matter physical birth according to the Law, but this is all based upon the righteousness which is by faith. The promises which God made to Abraham are based upon imputed righteousness which comes by faith.

Now, take this exact same reasoning and apply it to the Law of God or to Sabbath-day keeping, and what comes first? Abram believed in Jehovah and his faith was credited to him as righteousness. All of this other stuff that Jews cling to came 400 years later. The Law of God and the Sabbath are all important and they have great meaning, but they have nothing to do with being made righteous. God made Abraham righteous while uncircumcised, apart from the Law, apart from Sabbath keeping, and apart from any other ritual or mandate found within the Mosaic Law.

Paul's 3rd point: Gen. 16:5 is recorded for all time as a lesson to all mankind, whether Jew or gentile.

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And not being weak in faith, he [Abraham] did not consider his own body already dead (being about a hundred years old) or the deadening of Sarah's womb [with regards to making from Abraham many nations] (Rom. 4:19).

One point which Paul is making here is, the passage in the Bible was not just written about Abram, but it was written so that we have Abram as an example. The example for us is that, our faith in Jesus Christ results in imputed righteousness.

However, there is a more complex explanation for this passage. It involves understanding that, when an Old Testament was quoted in the New, it was not always used as a *proof text*. Sometimes the Old Testament could be used as an illustration or by way of analogy.

He did not stagger at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in **faith**, giving glory to God, and being fully persuaded that what God had promised, He was also able to perform (Rom. 4:19–21).

Paul is not using this Old Testament to prove, once again, that we are saved by faith alone in Christ alone; but that this faith glorifies God, and therefore, gives us righteousness in a different way than the righteousness imputed to us at salvation.

At salvation, we are made righteous in God's sight by exercising faith in Him. However, after salvation, there are times when we will exercise faith in Him and this faith will glorify God. This tells all generations which follow that, whatever God promises us, He is able to bring it to pass.

And therefore [because Abraham did not stagger at the promises of God, but was strong in faith] **it was imputed to him for righteousness**. Now [this passage] was not written for him alone that it [righteousness] was imputed to him, but for us also to whom it is about to be imputed, to the ones believing on Him Who has raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; Who was delivered because of our offenses and was raised for our justification (Rom. 4:22–25).

There are 3 stages of righteousness in a person's life—righteousness imputed to him as he has faith in Jesus Christ; righteousness which is a part of normal spiritual growth; and ultimate righteousness, when our bodies are raised again without a sin nature.

Here, we are actually looking at Abraham's faith in the promises of God with the result of imputed righteousness to him. That is experiential righteousness. Paul uses verbiage to indicate experiential righteousness will be imputed to us, the ones believing in the One Raising Jesus from the dead. The way that this is worded means that we are not talking about salvation righteousness here, but a righteousness which *is to be imputed*.

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Paul makes a different argument with the legalists in Galatia. Your spiritual life began in faith; you believe in Jesus, and that initiated your spiritual life. So, now, do you perfect yourself by following the Law? Is that logical? If you begin the spiritual life in faith, then you continue the spiritual life in faith.

Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, do you now perfect yourself in the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain, if indeed it is even in vain? Then He supplying the Spirit to you and working powerful works in you, is it by works of the law, or by hearing of faith? Even as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness. Therefore know that those of faith, these are the sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:3–7; Gen. 15:6).

There were believers in the city of Galatia who thought that keeping the Mosaic Law was a part of their spiritual walk. Paul tells them, that they began the spiritual life through faith, they received the Holy Spirit through faith, God worked powerful works in them through faith. And then Paul goes back to Abraham, who predated the Mosaic Law, and cited Gen. 15:6 to show that we are the sons of Abraham if we follow him in faith in Jesus Christ. The rest of the passage, which I did not quote, contrasts faith with following the Law.

Salvation is based upon the grace of God and faith in Jesus Christ. Our spiritual lives are based upon God's grace as well. We did not become saved through keeping the Law; therefore, our spiritual walk is not based upon keeping the Law.

James takes a different approach. Salvation and your life do not begin and end with salvation. You do not just believe in Jesus Christ and then, you just hang around waiting to die. God has a plan and purpose for your life; you have works which God intends for you to do. These works do not complete your salvation, make you any more saved, nor do they keep your salvation; these works are a part of a natural response to God making you righteous (ideally speaking).

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You believe that there is one God, you do well; even the demons believe and tremble. But will you know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead [non-operational]? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Do you see how faith cooperated with his works, and from the works faith was made complete [brought to a fulfillment]? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness, and he was called the friend of God." You see then how a man is justified by works, and not by faith only (James 2:19–24; Gen. 15:6 Ex. 33:11 Isa. 41:8).

Commentary

First of all, James is speaking of the spiritual life after salvation. He is not focused on salvation in this passage. James is explaining the importance of works in the life of the believing Christian. A believer without works in his life is operationally dead. Faith and works are 2 sides of the same coin. The works that we do complete our faith.

Then James gives an example of Abraham's works, where he offers up Isaac on the altar (representing for centuries, God the Father offering up God the Son on the cross—we have not gotten to that passage yet). In other words, there was more to Abraham's life than simply believing in Jesus Christ (Jehovah Elohim in the Old Testament); and what he did later in life made him *the Friend of God* (which is experiential righteousness).

As has been mentioned before, every believer experiences 3 stages of sanctification in the Christian life; and we could call these 3 stages of justification as well. We are justified by faith in Jesus Christ; we are justified in our life on this earth; and we receive ultimate justification after we die.

Let me use the illustration of marriage. You choose to get married and then you stand married, ideally, forever. Now, maybe you choose to make good or bad decisions while married, but that does not make you unmarried. Your marriage is an accomplished state. However, you can do things in your marriage to make it better. The state of marriage is not the end-all and be-all. Other things must happen after you get married.

In other words, there are works in marriage. The fact that you work at your marriage and do things as a part of your marriage, does not make you more married or less married; but it does improve your life as a married person.

The same is true of believing in Jesus Christ. You believe, you are saved and made righteous; however, that is not the entire Christian life. What do you want? You want to be called *the friend of God*.

Gen. 15:6 is one of the most important verses in all the Bible, and we know this because Paul, in one very long passage, refers back to it 3 times (in Rom. 4); he uses it again when reasoning with the Galatians; and even James quotes this verse.

You will note that, each time this verse is quoted, a different emphasis is in view, even though this is clearly a salvation verse.

The way Gen. 15:6 is referenced also helps us to understand portions of the New Testament. We are so often oriented to thinking in terms of *proof texts*—we believe this or that and here is the text which proves it to be true. That approach was used by the Apostles, but it was not the only way that the Apostles used Old Testament Scripture. If you examine the number of times that Gen. 15:6 is quoted, you will note that there is a different use of the verse each time; and a different approach. If we understand how the Apostles used the Old Testament, this helps us in our study of both testaments.