

The Sign And Seal of Righteousness

Romans 4:9-12

What does blessing look like for you?

When you hear the word “blessing” what comes to mind?

You may think of practical things like having a better home or a car that doesn’t break down.

You may think of health issues like wishing you had the energy or health to enjoy life more fully.

You may think of relationally like having friendships that are meaningful. You may think of your family like having a spouse, or getting along better with the spouse that you have. Or having kids.

Or having kids that love the Lord. You may think of being more holy; being free from wrong thoughts and desires; having more self-control or patience with others. You may think of blessing in terms of work, being able to accomplish what you set out to do. You may think of emotional blessing; like simply not being depressed. You may even think of spiritual things like enjoying true intimacy with God.

Blessing encompasses a lot. All of these things and more.

But life in this world is full of things that we would not usually define as blessing. Many people struggle to make ends meet. Most people live with aches and pains and worse health issues.

Very few people would say that their friendships are all that they hoped they would be.

Family relationships are often strained. Children are frustrated with parents and parents are frustrated with children. Inwardly, we often hate our own thoughts and desires. When it comes to what we have done, we wonder if we have accomplished anything of true value. Instead of joy and peace, we are full of fears and depression. And God seems like a distant fantasy.

Although we would all agree that we have many blessings, far too often, it is the difficulties which fill our hearts. What are we to do? How do we overcome the struggles facing us and experience more of the blessing?

The world is full of answers for you. Do this, and you will live longer. Take this, eat that, and you will be healthier. Invest your money this way and you will be able to retire earlier.

The Bible also gives many practical answers. Surrender your heart to God’s will. Spend more time in prayer. Meditate upon God’s Word and take captive wrong thoughts. I recommend all of these.

But today, I want to give you one solution that may not even seem like a solution. In fact, it may seem very impractical to you at first. I hope that after today that will change. When you are struggling, dealing with fears and frustrations of all sorts, I want you to do one thing above all others. What is that?

Look to your baptism. One of Ginny’s favorite movies is the Sound of Music. One song that Maria sings to the children is called “Favorite Things”. In that song, she has a remedy for “when you are feeling bad”, what is it? “to simply remember your favorite things.” “And then you don’t feel so bad.” Well, maybe so. The song is nice.

But God does not simply give us wishful thinking or a nice song. He has given us the sacrament of Baptism to help us in darkest seasons.

Remember your baptism...

Why do I say this? Because Baptism is a sign and seal of righteousness. The righteousness that is yours by faith alone in Christ alone. And because of this righteousness, all of the blessings of the Covenant of Grace are promised to you. And in their fullness.

When God showed up at Abraham's doorstep, he promised him blessing.

Genesis 12:1-3 Now the LORD said¹ to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."¹

God promised to Abraham blessing.

Abraham's life was in many ways like ours. God did give him degrees of blessing as he went throughout his life. But there were many blessings that Abraham did not experience in this life. Still, they were all promised to him.

We saw last week that these promises could only be given because of the doctrine of Justification by faith alone. I don't think we really get how the doctrine of Justification is connected to blessing. If the doctrine of Justification by faith alone did not exist, blessing would not exist. The trials and difficulties and fears and depression that you are currently experiencing would only get worse and they would never end.

Think about that for a moment. To have no hope of things getting better. Things will only get worse. Not only for this life, but even after death into eternity.

We often say, "Things could be worse." It is absolutely true. And with the righteousness of Christ, they would surely get worse.

Instead, God has provided Jesus Christ – the Righteous One – and because of him, everything in your life that is NOT blessing, will sooner or later, cease to exist. And every partial blessing that you are now experiencing will only get better and will endure eternally. All because of what Jesus has done.

I know that knowing this does not fix the issues with which you are struggling right now. Life will be just as difficult when you walk out of here as when you walked in, it may even get worse, in the short run. God does not promise to fix all of your problems today, or tomorrow, or even in this life. But he does promise to fix them all completely.

Thanks to Jesus Christ every struggle you are experiencing is fleeting. It is blessing that is eternal. And it is this blessing that is signified and sealed to you in your baptism, much like the Old Testament sign of circumcision.

Read Romans 4:9-12.

⁹ Is this blessing then
only for the circumcised,
or
also for the uncircumcised?

We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

What is the blessing?

It is the blessing of Justification by Faith Alone!

Justification is the blessing that unlocks the treasure chest of every other blessing.

Who is justification for? Only those who are circumcised? Is the blessing of Justification by FA only for those who are in the covenant through circumcision? Answer: No
You do not have to be circumcised in order to be justified and receive the blessing promised to Abraham. Why not? Abraham was counted righteous by God when he was still uncircumcised.

10 How then was it counted to him?

Was it before or after he had been circumcised?

It was not after,
but
before he was circumcised.

God counted Abraham righteous, BEFORE Abraham was circumcised.
Whatever God's purpose for telling Abraham to be circumcised it was not the instrument by which Abraham was justified.
Circumcision is not the means by which we gain the blessing.

Paul tells us explicitly the meaning of circumcision for Abraham.

11 He received the sign of circumcision
as a seal of the righteousness
that he had by faith
while he was still uncircumcised.

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,

12 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.

Abraham was a model to Gentiles in that he was counted righteous before he was circumcised. But he is also a model to Jews, in that even though he was circumcised, it was faith alone, and not circumcision that brought about that justification.

Jews must be saved by faith alone, just as Gentiles are saved by faith alone. God considered this one truth to be so important that he gave him a sign to remember it.

Look closely at verse 11.

Circumcision is a sign and seal of the righteousness that he had by faith.

Circumcision was not a sign of Abraham's obedience, or even his commitment to obey.

Circumcision was a sign and seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith.

Paul's statement would have appeared strange to Jews.

They believed that circumcision was a sign of their commitment to receive and obey the Mosaic Law.

Why did the Jews think this way? One reason: because a person could not partake of the Passover Meal unless he was circumcised. No uncircumcised person would partake of the Passover.

The Passover, among other things, was a sign of God's not judging his people. The angel of death passed over the firstborn of Israel because of the blood on the doorposts.

The Passover meal was an ongoing celebration of God's bringing his people out of sin and into fellowship with himself.

If you cannot celebrate this unless you are circumcised then circumcision must be necessary to be right with God.

But God never says that circumcision is the condition for being right with him.

Second reason, just before Moses received the Law on Mt. Sinai, God gives Moses these words to speak to Israel.

Exodus 19:5-8 ⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel." ⁷ So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. ⁸ All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do." And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD.

Moses made clear to the Israelites what we all know to be true: Actions matter. It matters how we live. Obedience is not really an option in our relationship with God. But herein lies our dilemma. We all fail to obey God on some level. We feel the sense of failing God and falling short of how we ought to live. And it sure does look like the blessing is contingent upon our obedience.

That phrase in Ex. 19:5 - "keep my covenant" was known to the Jews. It was the phrase that God used when He commanded Abraham to be circumcised and to circumcise his children.

Genesis 17:7-10 ⁷ And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." ⁹ And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

So, when God speaks the 10 Commandments, the people naturally connect the giving of the Law with the Covenant. And the covenant sign is circumcision.

So, they think that circumcision is a sign of their true obedience to God's Law.

At a minimum, it is a sign of their commitment to obey God's Law. Later, after the initial giving of the Law, Moses confirms the Covenant with all the people through a ceremony.

Exodus 24:5-8 ⁵ And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. ⁶ And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." ⁸ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

The Jews would not have thought that there were two covenants – One with Abraham and one with Moses.

So, to speak in such covenantal language made clear to the Jews that the Sign of the Covenant must symbolize the terms of the Covenant. And the terms of the Covenant now clearly included an obligation of the people of God to obey the Law of God. Therefore, the covenant sign of circumcision obligated God's people to obey the Law of God.

It did not take long for the Israelites to begin breaking the Law of God. Even before Moses gets down off the Mountain, they make a golden calf and begin worshipping the calf. Remember how Paul said in chapter 2 that the disobedience of God's people makes their circumcision like uncircumcision. It makes sense when you see circumcision as a sign of the covenant obligation to obey God's law.

Later, when Moses calls the people to repentance and new obedience, he uses the language of the covenant sign:

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 10:16** Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

The cutting of the foreskin was then associated with the cutting away of sin from the heart. Hopefully, you can see why Jews would associate circumcision primarily with their obedience. But Paul, having meditated long on the truth of the doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone, understands that the prior significance of the sign of circumcision still stands.

Circumcision is a sign and seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith alone. And even though circumcision might also be a sign of our duty to obey God's law, it does not follow that obedience to God's law is the condition upon which God's people would experience blessing. Circumcision is a sign and seal of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith. Faith would always be the means by which the blessing would be given. God commanded his people to practice the covenant sign throughout their generations. It must have been pretty important to God for his people to not forget that His blessing is received by faith alone and not by our obedience to the Law.

Let's take a step back and think about the meaning of "sign and seal". What is the purpose of a sign? A sign points to something else. The sign is not itself the reality, but points to the reality. Circumcision was not itself the righteousness of God. But it pointed to the righteousness of God received by faith.

So, every circumcised person should not conclude: Circumcision makes me righteous. Circumcision is not the reality of righteousness. It is the sign that points me to the reality. The declaration of God is the reality and it is received by faith alone.

Circumcision functioned like preaching - declaring to the one circumcised: Believe in me and I will surely count you righteous. The sign of circumcision continually called the Jew to follow in the footsteps of Abraham – which was a life of faith.

What is the purpose of a seal? A seal authenticates, confirms, or ratifies.

Circumcision sealed to the circumcised the truth of Justification by faith alone.

Most people do not understand how a covenant sign seals.

Some people won't even accept that the NT covenant sign of baptism also seals.

So, how does the sign seal? The wedding ring is a good example of a sign and a seal. As a sign, the wedding ring points to the marriage union. It is made of gold to symbolize the importance and purity of the marriage union. Gold also speaks to the enduring nature of the marriage relationship. I know that the husband and wife exchange rings, but I will only focus on the ring that I am wearing. In addition to what I have just said, my ring is a symbol of love – but whose love?

It is not a symbol of my love to Robin, the ring I gave her is a symbol of that. It is a symbol of her love to me. In fact, she even spoke to me as she put the ring on my hand: I pledge thee my troth. OK maybe not those exact words. But she promised me her love. The ring is a permanent sign to me of Robin's love. How is it then a seal of that love? Many people think that it makes Robin's commitment stronger. It is not a seal to her. It is a seal to me. As I receive and wear the ring and consider its meaning, the truth of that meaning is sealed into my heart. The ring confirms to me that Robin really has committed to love me all the days of my life. And as such, when I consider the sign, I am strengthened in my confidence that Robin does truly love me. All of this functioned the same way with the sign of circumcision.

God pledges to Abraham his undying love. Abraham receives that love by FA. By believing God's promise to bless him. But Abraham's life was one trial after another. And truth be told, even when he died, he had not received all of the promised blessings.

So, the failure to immediately receive the promised blessing would have surely challenged Abraham's confidence that those blessings were truly his.

Maybe he had somehow lost them through his own disobedience.

Maybe he had done something wrong that was interrupting the blessing.

Maybe God's promise would prove unfaithful.

Maybe God just wasn't powerful enough to bring it about.

So, God gave to Abraham a token of the truth of Justification by faith alone.

Circumcision was a sign that God had counted Abraham righteous.

And every time that Abraham looked at the sign, the imprint of that truth would be sealed on his heart. Can you see how important it would be for Abraham to remember his circumcision?

To forget his circumcision would have disastrous effects.

He might quit believing in the promise of blessing altogether.

Or, he might begin thinking that bringing about the blessing was something that he had to make happen.

The blessing is NOT dependent upon your obedience, but on faith alone.

But what about the connection of circumcision to the Mosaic Law?

The Mosaic Law does make clear the importance of obedience to the covenant relationship with God.

Where does obedience fit into the covenant? First, the Mosaic Law was perfectly kept by Jesus Christ. Jesus fulfilled all of its demands. Second, Jesus died on the cross to cleanse us from the guilt of our sins. Jesus' blood truly cleanses us from all of our sins. Third, for those who look to the promise, look to Jesus Christ, God will transform them such that they will become lawkeepers, but not of their own doing, but freely of grace.

Deuteronomy 30:6 ⁶ And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

So, circumcision does symbolize our commitment to obey, but not in such a way that the blessing is dependent upon me. Rather, my obedience is part of the blessing that I have received by faith. My obedience is worked in me by the Holy Spirit, as a fruit of the blessing. Not a means of my earning the blessing. All of this relates to the covenant sign of baptism? Baptism too is a sign and seal of the righteousness that is yours through faith in Jesus Christ.

Like circumcision before, baptism is not the reality. It is a sign pointing you to the reality. And when you look to the sign, it can seal the truth of the reality to your soul. Your baptism is a constant reminder to you that God has pledged his blessing to you. Along with the other covenant sign of Communion...The covenant signs increase and strengthen your faith in those promises. They seal them to you. "they are seals by which the promises of God are in a manner imprinted on our hearts...though by themselves they profit nothing, yet God has designed them to be the instruments of his grace;" Calvin

You will walk out of here with the same problems as when you came in. But you do not have to leave here with the same mindset. You can leave here confident that God loves you down to the last molecule of your being. You can leave here confident that God is forever working to bring about the fullness of blessing in your life. And when your mindset begins to revert back to what I call "orphan thinking"...

The thinking that lives in fear because you can never be sure if you will do something that will finally cause God to say, "I really don't want to love you anymore."

"I cannot depend upon God to bring about blessing in my life."

"I live in a dog eat dog world, and I have to do everything I can to get my own."

What do you do when you start falling back into "orphan thinking"?

I know it sounds simple. But there is nothing better you could possibly do than to remember your baptism. Don't remember the experience. Remember what it signifies.

Believe again the truth that every blessing is now yours because of faith alone in Christ alone. Experience afresh the sealing of this wonderful truth deep down into the depths of your soul.

And may it give patience to endure the trials... hope to endure...

And may it give strength to continue fighting against sin...

And may it give power to give of yourself to others, knowing that your heavenly Father will care for all the things that cause you stress and fear.

Christian, remember your baptism!

Amen.

