establishing it. As the letter progresses, Paul will demonstrate how he can make this surprising claim. He first turns to the scriptural story of Abraham. Since the “Law” was not merely the regulations of Moses but the first five books of the Bible, if Paul can show that these books teach that we are saved through faith, then he can claim that salvation through faith upholds the “Law.”

**Questions for reflection**

If there is only one God, does it follow that there is only one path to salvation? Why or why not? Must this path include faith (obedient trust) in God? Do you know people who keep all the rules and act as if God owes them something and as if others are inferior? If so, how does this conviction affect their relationship with God? How does it affect their relationship to other people?

---

15. Romans 4:1–25

So, what will we say that Abraham, our ancestor by blood, obtained? For if Abraham was justified by deeds, he could brag—but not against God. For what does scripture say? “Abraham trusted God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” [Gen. 15:6]. Now for those who work, wages are not considered a gift but an obligation, but for those who do not work but trust in him who makes the wicked righteous, their faith is considered as righteousness. Similarly, David also tells of the blessedness of the person to whom God credits righteousness without deeds, “Blessed are those whose misdeeds are forgiven and whose sins are disregarded. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count” [Ps. 32:1–2]. So is this blessing on the circumcised and not also on the uncircumcised? For we say, “Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.” Now how was it credited? Was he circumcised or uncircumcised? Not circumcised but uncircumcised, and he received the sign of circumcision as a mark of the
righteousness which was through his faith when he was uncircumcised, so that he might be a father of all who believe and are uncircumcised so that righteousness may be credited to them and a father of those who are circumcised—but not merely circumcised but also follow in the footsteps of the faith which our father Abraham had when he was uncircumcised. (4:1–12)

The promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would inherit the world did not come through the Law but through the righteousness which is by faith. For if those who rely on the Law are heirs, faith is useless and the promise void. For law leads to punishment, but where there is no law, there is no violation either. The reason that the promise comes by faith as a gift is so it may be assured to all his descendants, not only to those who have the Law but also to those who share Abraham’s trust. He is the father of us all, just as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations” [Gen. 17:5]. In the presence of the God he trusted, the God who gives life to the dead and summons things which do not exist as if they did, when it was hopeless, so he might have hope, he trusted that he would become the “father of many nations” in accordance with what he had been told, “This is how your descendants will be” [Gen. 15:5]. He did not weaken in his trust when he considered his own body which was impotent, since he was around a hundred years old, nor when he considered the sterility of Sarah’s womb. He did not doubt God’s promise through disbelief but became strong in faith after he gave glory to God and was totally convinced that what God promised God was also able to accomplish. Consequently, “it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now it was not on account of him only that it was written “it was credited to him” but also on account of us, to whom it would be credited—to us who trust in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over for our misdeeds and raised to set us right. (4:13–25)

For Paul’s efforts to unify the church by showing that there is only one salvation for both Jews and Gentiles, Abraham was helpful because both groups could claim him. Thus, on the
one hand, clearly Abraham was the father of the Jews. The Jewish scriptures insist that all Jews descended from him. In addition, he was the first person in the Bible to receive the physical sign of being Jewish, namely circumcision. Nevertheless, as Paul reminds us, according to the same scriptures, Abraham was the father not only of the Jews but of several other nations as well. Abraham also received God’s call and obediently trusted in it long before he received circumcision. Hence, Paul can use the faith of Abraham as an example for both Jews and Gentiles.

Paul uses the example of Abraham to show that salvation must begin with some merciful act on God’s part, for otherwise God would not remain God. Salvation cannot begin with some righteous human deed. If humans on their own somehow were to become righteous, then they would earn salvation. But an earned salvation would in reality not be salvation at all, because salvation consists of a relationship of loving trust in God. Paul insists that once we have earned something then we have a hold over God. We are entitled to salvation and, hence, God must give it to us. Of course, such power over God leads both to pride and, paradoxically, to separation from God. Since there is only one God, the only possible relationship to him must be one of loving trust. Hence, salvation cannot begin with some action on our part.

In addition, we cannot earn salvation because our awareness of this need presupposes a sense of sin, and that sense itself undermines our efforts to become righteous. Later Paul will dwell on this point in detail. Here he merely notes that we cannot earn salvation without having a sense of law, of a set of regulations that provide for rewards and penalties. If there is no law, we cannot be punished for not keeping it. Once we have the Law, we can concentrate on keeping it. Then, however, we realize that in many respects we have failed to live up to the law and deserve to be punished. If we assume that the law is the final expression of God’s will, we must further assume that God has an obligation to punish us. Of course, as we shall see in more detail, a sense that we are worthless and that God must punish us will undermine our ability to live more righteously.
Consequently, salvation begins with God’s promise that he will disregard our sins and allow us to receive his empowering love. In this section of the epistle Paul appeals to the promise to Abraham in Genesis, a promise that Paul felt was being fulfilled in the present. After the human race as a whole became more and more depraved, God took the initiative to bring salvation to the world. He promised Abraham that he would be the beginning of a new era of blessedness. Indeed, Paul sees this as an era of blessedness for humanity as a whole. According to Paul and to some Jewish tradition, the promise was that Abraham would inherit the world (e.g., Sirach 44:21). As he makes clear in the letter to the Galatians, Paul believed that this promise was now being fulfilled through his own preaching to the Gentiles, since by believing in Jesus they were becoming Abraham’s children and heirs (Gal. 3:16–29).

Of course, to benefit from the promise, Abraham had to believe in God’s faithfulness. To receive the promise, Abraham had to follow the leading of God. According to the story in Genesis, Abraham has to leave his family, go to a foreign land, wait for the birth of a child in his old age, and so forth. Such obedience was only possible because Abraham trusted in the promise of a trustworthy God.

In accordance with his overall theology, Paul stresses that praising God strengthened Abraham’s faith. It was only as Abraham glorified God that he became fully convinced that God would fulfill the promise. Earlier Paul argued that sin began when people refused to praise and thank God (1:21). Now he contends that the first step toward salvation occurred when Abraham responded to God’s initiative by glorifying him. For Paul, praising God is an indispensable foundation for salvation.

Paul emphasizes that Abraham’s faith led to something like resurrection. Paul stresses that Abraham and Sarah were “dead.” Abraham was old and impotent; Sarah was sterile. Significantly, Paul literally says that Abraham’s body was “dead,” and Sarah’s womb was “dead.” Hence, Paul invites us to see the birth of Isaac as a resurrection.
Of course, Paul's discussion of Abraham is primarily a basis to remind his Christian readers that they can only receive resurrection by believing in the God who raised Jesus. Paul's discussion of Abraham is a reminder that Christians cannot earn salvation by their own power. Instead, salvation must begin with the merciful action of the God who sent his Son to be crucified and then raised him from the dead.

It is noteworthy that Paul sees salvation as resurrection. For him, salvation is primarily freedom from death in all its dimensions, whether physical, psychological, or spiritual.

Because salvation is freedom from death, salvation is primarily in the future. In this present era Christians, like Abraham and everyone else, face spiritual temptation, physical weakness, and bodily mortality.

What we have now is unconquerable hope inspired by God's promise. Paul stresses that even when things were hopeless Abraham believed that he might have hope. By implication, Christians must do the same. Inspired by the resurrection, Christians must have hope that despite the presence of suffering and death and evil all around us and even within us, God will give new life both to us and to all creation.

Questions for reflection:

Is Abraham important for Christians today? Why? Must salvation begin with trusting in God's undeserved promises? Is salvation primarily escaping physical, psychological, and spiritual death and rising to a new life in God? Does praise strengthen faith? How?

16. Romans 5:1–11

Therefore, since we have been set right by trust, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have access by our trust to this gift. By it we can stand tall and boast in our