

# THE GOSPEL, THE PROMISE, AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

## ROMANS 4:9–17

### INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered, **what is the point of God's gospel plan?**

**Why is God doing all that He does to save sinners?**

The answer to that question spans the whole Bible—from Genesis to Revelation.

The message of the Bible, in essence, is that **God is at work to bring into being a people under His rule.**<sup>1</sup>

This is the people of God.

This work of God begins with His creation of Adam and Eve in the image of God.<sup>2</sup>

As **D. A. Carson** put it, to be made in God's image means, among other wonderful realities, that *"there is implanted within us a profound capacity for knowing God intimately."*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. G. Millar, "People of God," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 684.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin L. Gladd, *From Adam and Israel to the Church: A Biblical Theology of the People of God*, Essential Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 5.

<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, *Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 205.

In other words, God created Adam and Eve in His image so that there would be people who would **know Him and enjoy a relationship with Him**.

Tragically, as Adam and Eve fell into sin and its curse, we learn that **not everyone will be included** in the people of God.

**There are those like Cain** who reject God and turn in rebellion from Him so that they are **excluded by their sin** from knowing and enjoying God.

As we read the early chapters of Genesis, it seems as if sin has ruined the plan of God.

As the **chaos of humanity's rebellion** that reaches new heights in the **tower of Babel** incident in **Genesis 11**, God begins to reveal His plan to **create a new people for Himself**.

God announces this plan to the one He chose to be **the father and founder of this new people**—He announces it to Abraham in **Genesis 12**.<sup>4</sup>

This idea of a new people of God is found in **Genesis 12:1-3**—

**1 And Yahweh said to Abram, “Go forth from your land, And from your kin And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you;**

**2 And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing;**

**3 And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”**

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<sup>4</sup> Millar, *NDBT*, 684.

The **concept of the people of God** continues to be **explained and clarified** through the progress of revelation.

In **Genesis 15:5-6**, as Yahweh's covenant with Abraham is formalised, He says to Abraham—

**5 “Now look toward the heavens, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” And He said to him, “So shall your seed be.”**

**6 Then he believed in Yahweh; and He counted it to him as righteousness.**

As this promise is repeated again to Abraham's son, Isaac, and to his son, Jacob, we soon recognise that **the people of God includes the people of Israel.**

By the time of the Exodus, Jacob's family has grown in size so that they are a nation and it seems that this nation is the people of God that He is gathering to Himself.

That is indeed what Yahweh refers to as He addresses the nation through Moses in **Exodus 19:3-6**—

**3 Now Moses went up to God, and Yahweh called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel:**

**4 ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself.**

**5 So now then, if you will indeed listen to My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My treasured possession among all the 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 sons of Israel.”**

However, we soon learn that being part of the nation of Israel and a physical descendent of Abraham **does not automatically mean** that one is part of God's chosen people.

To be part of the people of God, **you cannot remain in the rebellion of sin that rejects God.**

Moses explained this in his sermon to Israel that is recorded in **Deuteronomy 10:14-16**—

**14 Behold, to Yahweh your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it.**

**15 Yet on your fathers did Yahweh set His affection to love them, and He chose their seed after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day.**

**16 So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer.**

In other words, it is not enough to be part of the family of Abraham to whom God gave the promise to create a people for Himself through Abraham's seed.

There also needs to be **a change of heart towards God**— a turning away from sinful rebellion and its rejection of relationship with God.

Moses uses the **language of circumcision** to describe this **change of heart**.

Later in **Deuteronomy**, Moses clarifies that this change cannot come about **apart from the work of God.**

God has to intervene in order to save people from their sin and **give them the new heart** that is required to be part of His chosen people.

**Deuteronomy 30:6**—

**6 Moreover Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your seed, to love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.**

In fact, we've learnt that very same lesson from Paul in his letter to the Romans.

That is the very reality that Paul was referring to when he wrote in **Romans 2:28-29**—

**28 He is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh.**

**29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.**

Later in his letter he will explain in great detail that God's choice of Abraham to be **the father and founder of the people of God** does not mean that every one of his descendants will be included in the promise.

That is what he means in **Romans 9:6-8**—

**6 It is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel;**

**7 nor are they all children because they are Abraham's seed, but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR SEED WILL BE NAMED."**

**8 That is, the children of the flesh are not the children of God, but the children of the promise are considered as seed.**

Nevertheless, as we move from the Old Testament and its **focus on the nation of Israel**, we come to the New Testament which **reveals a great mystery** that was only hinted at in the Old.

As Paul writes in **Ephesians 3:4-6**—

**4 When you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,**  
**5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it was now revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit:**  
**6 that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.**

So it is that the New Testament reveals God's plan for the people of God to **expand to include Gentiles alongside believing Israel**.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the church, **composed of believing Jews and Gentiles**, is included in the people of God.

In order to gather His chosen individuals into the people of God, God had to intervene to save them from their sin and the judgement that their rebellion demanded.

Therefore, God the Father sent His Son to redeem all those He had chosen from among both the nation of Israel and the Gentiles.

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<sup>5</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 857.

MacArthur and Mayhue describe the people of God as including “the church for the New Testament [and] Israel for the Old Testament” (Ibid., 120).

With an **intentional allusion** to the language of **Exodus 19**, we read in **Revelation 5:9-10** of the song in heaven that celebrates the Son's accomplishment of this saving work—

<sup>9</sup> **They sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the scroll and to open its seals, because You were slain and purchased for God with Your blood people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.**

<sup>10</sup> **And You made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign upon the earth.”**

So as we look at the whole Bible, we see that **God is at work to bring into being a people under His rule.**

**This theme spans the entire Bible** so that just as the theme of a special people of God was introduced in Genesis with Adam and Even and then again with Abraham, we find the theme again in Revelation reaching its climactic fulfillment in **Revelation 21:3**—

<sup>3</sup> **I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.”**

## PROPOSITION

Now, as we consider the text before us today in **Romans 4:9–17** we will find that Paul addresses this **grand theme of a people of God.**

In doing so, we learn that **this is the point of God's gospel plan.**

God is doing all that He does to save sinners **in order to create a people of God** who will know Him and enjoy Him forever in a redeemed relationship.

In fact, **this is the greatest part of the the greatest message of the greatest plan of salvation.**

**The best part of the gospel** is not the judgement of God that we are **saved from**, but the relationship with God that we are **saved to.**

As we study **Romans 4:9–17**, we will learn that what makes justification by faith alone so important is that it is the **foundation of our inclusion in the people of God.**

We'll learn that as Paul explains the importance of faith alone to **three element of God's plan**—

1. **The gospel (9–12)**
2. **The promise (13–15)**
3. **The people of God (16–17)**

## 1. THE GOSPEL (9–12)

If you remember from this past Sunday, Paul wrote the **most important chapter** in the whole Bible in **Romans 3:21–26**.

There he described the **heart of the gospel** as the doctrine of **justification by faith alone**.

Justification by faith, without our religious efforts or accomplishments, is **the righteous way that the righteous God makes unrighteous sinners right with Himself**.

After explaining the heart of the gospel message, Paul draws **two inferences** at the end of **chapter three**.

In **verses 27–28**, Paul points out that the good news of how God saves us means that **we cannot boast** in our own religious efforts or accomplishments.

As he continued his argument into **chapter four**, that is the implication that he picked up on and that we studied last week in **verses 1–8**.

But there was a **second implication** that Paul drew out at the end of **chapter three**.

In **verses 29–30**, Paul points out that that the gospel message means that both **Jews and Gentiles have equal access to God through justification**.

God's plan **does not discriminate** between Jew and Gentile, but only between those who **respond to the gospel** with faith in God and those who **reject the gospel** in hardened unbelief.

Since God makes both Jews and Gentiles right with Him through faith alone, **they all enjoy an equal access** and right relationship with Him.

**God accepts us as we are** when we rest from our efforts to save ourselves and rely on all that God has accomplished in Jesus Christ for our salvation.

**Now this is the implication** that Paul develops in more detail as we pick up his argument in **verses 9–17 of chapter four**.

Naturally, there is some overlap between the two implications since they are **both founded upon the good news of justification by faith alone**.

So having just quoted David in **Psalm 32**, Paul asks whether the **happiness and blessing of forgiveness** is available for Jews only, or if the Gentiles are equal recipients of this grace—

**<sup>9</sup> Therefore, is this blessing on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS COUNTED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS."**

Here Paul begins to explain the **importance of faith alone to the first element of God's plan—the gospel**.

**In order to follow his argument** throughout his letter to Rome, we need to recognise that when he uses the language of “**circumcised**” and “**uncircumcised**,” he is referring to the **physical mark of circumcision** that distinguished the Jews from the Gentiles.

It was a unique marker of God’s covenant with the nation of Israel.

While it may seem that Paul is against the practice of circumcision entirely, he was **actually quite happy** for Jews to continue circumcising their male children as long as they **understood that it was of no saving value in itself**.

Paul had **two objections**, however, to the way in which the Jews were practicing circumcision.

**First**, he objected to the Jewish belief that they were right with God simply because they bore this distinguishing mark.

The Jews believed that there was saving value in physical circumcision since it was required by the Law of Moses and **signified their righteousness with God** according to their obedience to the Law.

So as much as the physical act represented the Jewish efforts in a **works-based righteousness**, Paul vehemently opposed it as **anti-gospel**—contrary to God’s saving work in the gospel.

He makes this point most passionately in his letter to the **Galatians** where he **summarises his argument** to them at the end of the letter, in **5:2-4**—

**2 Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.**

**3 And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law.**

**4 You have been severed from Christ, you who are being justified by law; you have fallen from grace!**

However, Paul actually had no objection to the act of circumcision itself so that he **welcomed its practice** among the Jews who were **justified through faith in Christ** and were circumcised to remember Yahweh's covenant with them.

We read of this perpetual sign of the Abrahamic covenant in **Genesis 17:9-12**—

**9 God said further to Abraham, “Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your seed after you throughout their generations.**

**10 This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your seed after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.**

**11 And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.**

**12 And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations...**

**The second thing** that Paul objected to was the Jewish insistence that Gentiles be circumcised in order to be right with God through Jesus Christ.

**That is the very point** that Paul makes now in **Romans 4**—that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised in order to receive all that is promised in the gospel.

As you see here in **verse 9**, Paul argues that justification by faith alone is **foundational to the good news** of sins forgiven and righteousness imputed—foundational equally to both Jews and Gentiles who believe—

**9 Therefore, is this blessing on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, “FAITH WAS COUNTED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.”**

By quoting **Genesis 15:6** again, Paul is basing his argument on everything that he has just argued earlier in **Romans 4**.

God’s saving plan has always been, in both Old and New Testaments, to give the gift of a righteous status to those who believe.

**Abraham is once again used as the example** that establishes the principle because he is universally accepted, even by Paul’s Jewish opponents, as the **supreme example of faith and righteousness in the OT**.

Look at **verse 10** and you’ll see that **Paul is a careful observer** when he reads the Scriptures and makes a profound point to those who relied on their circumcision for their righteousness—

**10 How then was it counted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised**

As Paul argues, the **timing** of Abraham's circumcision matters.

As we know, Yahweh justified Abraham in **Genesis 15** when He **imputed righteousness** to him through faith alone.

It was only later, as recorded in **Genesis 17**, that Yahweh gave Abraham the **perpetual sign of circumcision** for him and his physical descendants forever.

Therefore, as Paul writes here in **Romans 4:10**, Abraham was justified **BEFORE** he was circumcised, not **AFTER** and certainly not **BECAUSE** he was circumcised.

If Abraham was not circumcised in order to be declared righteous by God, then what was the purpose of circumcision?

Paul explains—

**<sup>11</sup> and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be counted to them,**

Paul refers to what we read earlier in **Genesis 17:11** where Yahweh declares—

**<sup>11</sup> You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you.**

So then, it was well established that **circumcision was a sign of God's covenant** with Abraham and his offspring,

**But Paul goes further** in declaring circumcision to be a "**seal.**"

In his day, a seal served to **confirm and authenticate** something.

Therefore, Paul explains that circumcision did not not make Abraham righteous—as many Jews supposed—but **confirmed and authenticated** the righteousness that he had by faith alone.

As Paul said, it was “**a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised.**”

Circumcision, therefore, has no value in itself.

It cannot incorporate anyone into the people of God.

In fact, by itself it does it even “mark” a person as belonging to God’s people **apart from their prior justification by faith.**

By contrast, **faith is essential to the gospel message** as it declares God’s plan to save sinners from among both Jews and Gentiles.

As you look at **verses 11–12**, Paul uses a long sentence to explain that the **timing of Abraham’s justification** meant that he could become the **spiritual father of both the Jews and the Gentiles.**

But not just any from among them—**the spiritual father only of those who believe.**

That is why **verse 12** argues that a Jew cannot rely on their physical descent from Abraham alone—they must **follow in the footsteps of his faith** by believing in God for righteousness too—

**12 and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.**

Therefore, Abraham is **the father and founder of the people of God** that He is calling to Himself in order to enjoy a redeemed relationship with Him eternally.

Being part of the nation of **Israel** **doesn't guarantee** inclusion in this people of God anymore than being part of the **Gentile** nations **doesn't necessarily exclude** anyone.

**What matters is faith in God** through which He grants the righteousness that is **foundational to a relationship with Him** as part of His people.

Understanding that this righteousness—**and the relationship with God it enables**—is found through faith alone, not circumcision or any other religious effort, is **foundational to the gospel**.

As Paul says in **verse 11**, the **result** of becoming Abraham's spiritual child is **“that righteousness might be counted to them [all—Jews and Gentiles].”**

**This is the heart of the good news message**, and it depends on faith alone—not circumcision.

Faith is foundational to the gospel element of God's plan.

In other words, God's justifying work in Christ is the best and most effective remedy against our **natural inclination to rely on ourselves and our efforts** to be right with God and enjoy a relationship with Him.

In our idolatry of self, we believe that it is **what we do** that **identifies and establishes** us before God.

However, as Paul has just explained, it is our faith in **what God has done in Christ** that establishes our right standing with God and identifies us with His chosen people.

Therefore, as we'll see, **the story of Abraham, and our story**, is not just about being saved from our sins,  
**but also about becoming the people of God.**<sup>6</sup>

Paul explains that faith is foundational not only for the gospel, but for a **second element of God's plan—the promise**.

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<sup>6</sup> Brian Vickers, *Justification by Grace through Faith: Finding Freedom from Legalism, Lawlessness, Pride, and Despair*, Explorations in Biblical Theology (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 72.

## 2. THE PROMISE (13–15)

Closely related to the gospel is the promise of God to Abraham.

**This promise, too, depends on faith alone**—it is not fulfilled through works; it is not fulfilled through the religious efforts and accomplishments of those who receive its benefits.

**<sup>13</sup> For the promise to Abraham or to his seed that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.**

We will **search the Scriptures in vain** for the explicit promise that Abraham and his descendants would be the “[heirs] of the world.”

What is Paul referring to then?

He is **summarising an entire theology** of the Abrahamic covenant in one simple sentence that would have been clearly understood by his original readers.

**Through progressive revelation**, God **explains and expands** His promise to Abraham as it relates to inheriting the world.

As first, Yahweh promises Abraham in **Genesis 12:3** that, **“In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”**

There are **global implications** to this covenant for every people group and nation.

This is seen as Yahweh explains further in **Genesis 17:4-5**—

**4 “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, And you will be the father of a multitude of nations.**

**5 And no longer shall your name be called Abram, But your name shall be Abraham; For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.”**

At first, all the people and nations would be blessed because of Abraham, but God later says that this blessing will come through Abraham becoming **“the father of a multitude of nations.”**

**The most important OT text**, though, comes in the context of Abraham’s willingness to obey Yahweh in sacrificing Isaac.

We read in **Genesis 22:16-18** that Yahweh said—

**16 “By Myself I have sworn [i.e. promised], declares Yahweh, because you have done this thing and have not spared your son, your only one,**

**17 indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies.**

**18 In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have listened to My voice.”**

If Paul is referring to any one text in particular, it is surely this one here.

The promise here that **“Abraham or [...] his seed [...] would be [heirs] of the world”** includes **two aspects**—

**First**, Yahweh promised Abraham in **Genesis 22:17** that **“your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies.”**

This means that Abraham’s descendants would **reign over their enemies**.

The idea of Abraham’s seed **reigning as kingly rulers** is explicitly stated in the important promise of **Exodus 19:6** that a faithful Israel would **“be to [Yahweh] a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”**

**Second**, Yahweh promised **Genesis 22:18** that **“in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”**

This aspect of the promise is **later clarified by Paul** not to be the **“seed”** as a **plural** referring to all the descendants, but to be the **singular “seed”** referring to the **most important descendent—Jesus Christ**.

As Paul clarifies in **Galatians 3:16**—

**16 Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as referring to many, but rather to one, “AND TO YOUR SEED,” that is, Christ.**

It is through Christ then that the promise comes to include Gentiles as the spiritual children of Abraham and the people of God.

That is what Paul said himself in **Galatians 3:8**—

**8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, proclaimed the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.”**

**These two aspects** Paul keeps in mind as he writes in **Romans 4:13**—

**<sup>13</sup> For the promise to Abraham or to his seed that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.**

Here, again, Paul's explains that the promise **depends on faith alone**.

**It could be** that Paul is reasoning in the same way he did in **Galatians 3** that since Abraham lived before the Mosaic Law that the promise to him could not be based on his obedience to the Law.

However, **since Paul includes Abraham's descendants** here, that argument would not hold with them, so Paul is probably **making a theological more than a chronological argument**.

Paul unfolds his logic in the **next two verses**—

**<sup>14</sup> For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith has been made empty and the promise has been abolished;**

Here the phrase "**those who are of the Law**" could refer to the Jews as the ones who were entrusted with the Law of God.

Paul used the distinction of those who had the Law and those who did not to refer to Jews and Gentiles in **chapter two**.

In **Romans 3:2** we refers to the advantage of the Jews in being "**entrusted with the oracles of God.**"

However, the context of **Romans 4** makes it clear that Paul is **using the phrase differently**.

Here, **“those who are of the Law”** refers to those who **rely on their obedience to the Law** to earn a righteousness with God.

Paul argues, though, that the **fulfilment of the promise is dependent upon faith, not works**—not the Law.

If the promise is fulfilled only for those who rely on their religious efforts and accomplishments, then, as Paul states, **“faith has been made empty and the promise has been abolished.”**

He means that **faith would be reduced to nothing** and so **fail to bring about the result** that was promised.

Therefore, without faith, the promise could never be fulfilled and in that sense it would be **“made powerless” or “set aside”** and, thus, **“abolished.”**

This is all clarified by **verse 15**—

**<sup>15</sup> for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no trespass.**

We can now clearly understand Paul's argument.

If the fulfilment of the promise depends on obedience to the Law, **it will never happen**, because **people can never obey the Law adequately**.

Therefore, **disobedience to the Law** demands **God's just punishment** in the form of His “**wrath.**”

**The Mosaic Law cannot make anyone righteous**, as we have thoroughly established in our study of Romans.

**The Law can only reveal** whether or not someone is righteous, and since all have sinned then the Law will reveal that all deserve to be punished under the wrath of God.

Paul ends his sentence with a **daring statement** that,  
“**where there is no law, there also is no trespass.**”

**The New Living Translation** tries to bring across the sense of this statement by paraphrasing it as,

“The only way to avoid breaking the law is to have no law to break!”

Paul is not saying that without the standard of the Mosaic Law there is no sin.

That is why he uses a **specific word**—“**trespass**” or “**transgression**” as some translate it.

**Transgression** refers to a direct violation of a commandment God has given us.

“Transgression” refers to a specific kind of sin, **the “passing beyond”** the limits set by a **definite, positive law** or command.

**Transgression, therefore, is a sin,  
but not all sin is transgression.**

Anytime we fall short of conformity to God’s image, we sin.

But only when we **directly violate a commandment** God has given us do we commit a transgression.

For this reason, transgression is **also a more serious form of sin** that demands a **greater judgment**.<sup>7</sup>

As **John Calvin** puts it—“*He who is not instructed by the written law, when he sins, is not guilty of so great a transgression as he is who knowingly breaks and transgresses the law of God.*”<sup>8</sup>

All of this, taken together from **verses 13–15**, shows us the **importance of faith to inheriting the promise** along with Abraham as the people of God.

Faith alone is the only way to **receive the benefits** of the **gospel**—forgiveness of sin and righteousness and acceptance before God.

Faith alone is also the only way to **receive the benefits** of the **promise**—all that God offers us by uniting us to Christ as the promised “seed,” including reigning alongside Him in the coming kingdom of God as the chosen and royal people of God.

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<sup>7</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 158.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Second Edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 302.

### 3. THE PEOPLE OF GOD (16–17)

In these **last two verses**, Paul ties this section together with an **explicit emphasis on the people of God** whose **father and founder is Abraham**.

Here, again, Paul will explain the **importance of faith** to this element of God's plan—

**16 For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be according to grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the seed, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all—**

The blessings of the gospel depend on faith alone.

The fulfilment of the covenant promises depend on faith alone.

Belonging to the people of God depends on faith alone.

That is what Paul is explaining here.

God's plan unfolds in every element through faith alone, apart from religious accomplishment.

The reason it is all by faith alone is **so that it would be based on God's grace alone**, not on human effort or achievement.

Since we are all sinners, we could never relate to God on the basis of our merit—**the only thing we deserve is God's wrath** in judgement for our sin.

If we are to have a relationship with God—knowing Him and enjoying Him as part of the people of God—then we need to relate to Him **on the basis of what we do not deserve**—we need to relate to Him **on the basis of grace alone**.

**Grace alone through faith alone** is what, according to Paul here, “**guarantees**” the fulfilment of God’s promise and the accomplishment of all that God has planned.

As Paul repeats and emphasises here again, **Abraham is the father and founder of the people of God** that He is calling to Himself in order to enjoy a redeemed relationship with Him eternally.

**These are distinguished** not by their ethnic heritage or their religious works, but **by their faith**.

**The people of God are the people of faith**—just like Abraham.

As Paul continues, he now makes it clear that this is the promise he was referring to since those with the faith of Abraham become part of the spiritual family of Abraham in order to be included in the people of God—

<sup>17</sup> **as it is written, “A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU”—in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.**

Paul’s quote of **Genesis 17:5** ties it all together.

The promise that Abraham believed was that God would grant him descendants as “**A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS.**”

But what does Paul mean by the last part of the verse—

**...in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.**

Abraham believed in **the power of God** and **the faithfulness of God.**

Consistent throughout the OT and NT, God’s ability to resurrect the dead is seen as **the apex of His power** which He demonstrates toward mankind.

As an example, we read in **Ephesians 1:19-20** of—

<sup>19</sup> **...the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe according to the working of the might of His strength,**

<sup>20</sup> **which He worked in Christ, by raising Him from the dead...**

Not only is this the **greatest demonstration of God’s power** towards us, but it was particularly at the **forefront on Abraham’s mind** when he offered Isaac in **Genesis 22.**

As the author tells us in **Hebrews 11:17-19**—

<sup>17</sup> **By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only son,**

<sup>18</sup> **to whom it was said, “IN ISAAC YOUR SEED SHALL BE CALLED.”**

[PTO]

<sup>19</sup> **He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he also received him back.**

So Abraham **trusted in the power of God**, as Paul put it, that He is the One **“who gives life to the dead.”**

But he also **trusted in the faithfulness of God** to fulfil His promise to **grant him descendants.**

Abraham trusted that God could **effectively call these descendants into existence**, even though they did not yet exist, which is what Paul means by saying that God, **“calls into being that which does not exist.”**<sup>9</sup>

These **spiritual descendants of Abraham** are not the physical descendants of the Jews, but the spiritual children who follow **the example of faith** that they have in their father Abraham.

**These are the true people of God**, and because their identity is established by faith alone, not circumcision or Law-keeping, God calls to Himself a chosen people from both the nation of Israel and from **“every tribe and tongue and people and nation,”** as **Revelation 5:9** proclaims.

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp, Second Edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 244–245.

## CONCLUSION

Friends, **God is at work to bring into being a people under His rule.**

This is the point of God's gospel plan.

This is what God is doing in saving sinners.

**He is creating a people of God from among all the peoples**, Jews and Gentiles, and making it possible not through ethnic heritage or religious accomplishment, but by His **grace alone which is received through faith alone.**

That is why **faith is important to every element of God's plan—the gospel, the promise, and the people of God.**

To be part of the people of God is to know God and enjoy Him forever in a redeemed relationship, which is **the greatest part of the the greatest message of the greatest plan of salvation.**

**The best part of the gospel** is not the judgement of God that we are saved from, but the relationship with God that we are saved to.

As happy as what you may be in the forgiveness of your sins, **the greatest part of your happiness** should be in the relationship with God that your forgiveness enables.

**God is the gospel**—knowing and enjoying God is what makes the good news the best news.

To know God and enjoy Him is **the sweet and special privilege of the people of God alone.**

Friend, **my prayer is that you are among the people of God,** but to do so you must recognise that **it is not what you do that identifies and establishes you before God.**

To be part of the people of God who have the sweetest and most satisfying privilege of knowing and enjoying Him,  
**you must look to Him by faith alone.**

**It is what God has done in Christ**—it is the grace of God alone—that **identifies and establishes you before God.**

Therefore, to be part of the people of God **you must be part of the people of faith.**

**Like Abraham, you must believe God.**

The very best part of the gospel is being brought into a redeemed relationship with God to know Him and enjoy Him forever.

**This you will receive through faith alone,**  
so believe God in order to enjoy God,  
along with all the people of God.

## BENEDICTION

### Romans 11:33-36

33 **Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom  
and knowledge of God!**

**How unsearchable are His judgments  
and unfathomable His ways!**

34 **For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD,  
OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELLOR?**

35 **Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM  
THAT IT MIGHT BE REPAYED TO HIM?**

36 **For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.  
To Him be the glory forever.  
Amen.**