

Of Christ the Mediator (Part 6)

Rom 4:1-25; WCF 8.6

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 30 June 2019, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Picture that moment when our Lord Jesus ascended back into heaven...

In a way, someone standing there and watching Him go up into heaven could, at that moment, clap his hands, rejoice and say, "Mission accomplished!"

And would that not be right? I mean, is it not so that, at that point in time, our Lord's mediator's work on earth was done, i.e. 1) He had lived a life in perfect obedience to God's Law, and 2) through His cross-death, He had paid for all the sins of all God's loved ones! So, "Mission accomplished!"

Well, here's a question:

Would it then be right to say that Jesus' mediator's work became effective only from that point forward – yes, that Jesus saves only people who lived *after* His mediator's work on earth?

Let's ask it in another way: What about the people who lived *before* Jesus finished His earthly ministry? Were also *they* made right with God through Jesus' perfect life and death, or is it only the people who came *after* Christ who are saved by Him?

And the right answer is: No, it's not just the people who lived after Jesus' earthly ministry, but also those who lived before His earthly ministry that are saved by what He has done!

Well, let's see what the Bible says on this matter.

Our sermon has only one point...

Christ Saves People of Both Covenants – Old & New

My brother & sister, it's sad that, in some Christian circles, people have taught that God saved His Old-Testament people differently to how He saves His New-Testament people! We call this error, "dispensationalism," which means that, in the Old *dispensation* God saved people through their obedience to the laws, rituals and ceremonies of the Old Testament, but that, in the New *dispensation*, God graciously saves people through their faith in Jesus!

Now, that's wrong, for Paul clearly teaches us (in our NT passage (Rm 4)) that Abraham, who lived nearly 2,000 years before Christ, was justified in the same way in which you & I are justified!

Look, is that not why Paul says (in Rm 4:3, quoting Gn 15:6)² that, "***Abraham believed God, and it*** (i.e. that belief/faith) ***was credited to him as righteousness***"!?

See? Justification was by faith alone *then*, just as much as it is *now*!

You might ask, "But *how* was Abraham saved by faith, if Jesus had not even been born?"

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. I (chapters 1-8 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 279p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

² Gn 15:6 ***And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.***

And the answer is that God worked the Old-Covenant on *promises*, and the New Covenant on the *fulfilment* of those promises! And whether these promises and fulfilment point forward or back in time, that makes no difference to the power of Jesus' mediator's work, for God is not time-bound like human beings!

You see, the Old-Testament saints, who lived before Jesus came, believed in all God's promises – promises that included the coming of a Saviour!

Of course, at first, God's Old-Testament saints only had the promise of Gn 3:15 – that promise of Someone who would be born out the offspring of Eve; yes, Someone who would come crush the serpent's head! Initially they only had *that* promise. However, over time, God's promises became more and more in number as He revealed more and more of the content of His savings-plan!

And, again, we look at these Old-Testament promises and rituals as *foreshadowings*!

And let's face it, a shadow is not as clear as its "owner" (or the person/thing to whom/which it belongs)! In other words, if you sit with your back towards the setting sun, and I come from behind you, then, at one point, even before I reach you, you will see my shadow falling in front of you – a shadow that might give you some idea (yet not a clear picture) of who the person is who is coming from behind! Yet, the closer I come to you from behind (so that more of my shadow you see), the more your chances increase of getting an idea that it's *me* coming to you! The same is true for the Old-Testament promises and rituals pointing ahead toward Jesus.

My brother & sister, I can only praise God for – even with foreshadowings – He worked faith in the hearts of the Old-Testament saints!

And yes, their God-given faith is well-described by the Apostle Peter when he says (1 Pt 1:10), ***Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, ¹¹ trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.***³

Indeed, how wonderful! The Old-Testament saints who trusted in God's promises were trusting in the *promise* of Christ who was still to come! And, yet, they were justified by that faith!

Now let's be careful! When we say they were justified *by* their faith, we mean *through* their faith, not on the *grounds/basis* of their faith!

Why so?

Well, because, just as a garden hose is a mere *instrument* by which the gardener brings water to a plant, so, too, is your/my faith just the God-provided *instrument through which* God applies salvation to our hearts.⁴ And *instrument* is not the same as *grounds* or *basis*!

³ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version*](#). (1984). (1 Pt 1:10–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ That's why the New Testament always says that we are saved by grace *through* (dia = διά) faith! Cf. e.g. Eph 2:8 ***For by grace you have been saved through (dia) faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...***

Also cf. 1 Pt 1:3-5 (especially v.5) ***Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through (dia) faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.***

Also cf. Rm 4:16 where ek (ἐκ – "through/by" indicating again the *instrument* through/by which we're saved) is used, which the NIV84 translates as "by," i.e. ***Therefore, the promise comes by (ἐκ – "through/by") faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.***

You see, although the *instrument by means of which* God saves His loved ones is faith, what is the *ground/basis* of their faith? Well, is it not the righteousness of our Lord Jesus!? So, what WCF 8.6 explains is that, through a God-worked faith in their hearts, the benefits of Christ's righteousness extend not only to those who believe in them after they were accomplished, but these benefits also extend to those who believed in them before they were accomplished.

Indeed, God sees the value of the work of our Lord Jesus *as having everlasting significance – both into the future and into the past!*⁵

My brother & sister, think about this: Sometimes you & I will say to an older person whom we evangelise, “Man (or Woman), it’s never too late to find salvation!” Yet, look, our New-Testament passage (Rm 4) reminds us that there was also no time in history when it was too early to believe!⁶

You say, “But on what basis were the Old-Testament saints then forgiven when their sacrifices were offered?”

Answer: Their sacrifices were only types of the true and ultimate Sacrifice (Jesus Christ) who was to come! And so, these Old-Testament sacrifices only found their atoning power in Jesus’ sacrifice – a sacrifice that was sure to come – and sure to be effective into past and into the future!

After all, look what happened in God-Triune’s eternal planning long before the world began: He not only predestined *those He would save*, but He also predestined the *ground/basis of their salvation* – yes, God also predestined Christ and His atoning sacrifice! Indeed, is that not why Rv 13:8 says about the saints that their names have “...***been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world***”?⁷ See? The slaying of the Lamb did not just suddenly (and “out of the blue”) happen in around 30 A.D.! No, it was predestined from the creation of the world – and so were God’s chosen ones – also you & I (insofar as we are indeed in Him).

Look, is that not why also Paul said to Timothy (in 2 Tim 1:9b), “...***This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time***...”?⁸

Louw & Nida’s dictionary says about *ek* (ἐκ) that “it’s a marker of means as constituting a source—‘by means of, from’ (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 787). New York: United Bible Societies).

And also of *dia* (διά) it says that it is a marker “of the means by which one event makes another event possible— ‘by means of, through, by’” (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 785). New York: United Bible Societies).

⁵ Well-said by Sproul (ibid:267)

⁶ My adaptation of the point made by Van Dixhoorn (ibid:123)

⁷ I realise that the Greek text can be read in two different ways, i.e. 1) with the adverbial clause “before the creation of the world” describing the time when Christ slaying was in the making (as the NIV84 did), or 2) with the same adverbial clause describing the time when the elects’ names were written in the book of life (as the ESV has rendered it). But whatever way this adverbial clause is taken, it still means that before the creation of the world, when the names of the elect were written in the book of life, at that same time also the slaying of the Lamb was in the making.

For the sake of clarity, here are the two ways in which to translate Rv 13:8

- 1) *All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world* (NIV84).
- 2) *All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written from the creation of the world in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain* (NIV84 footnote).

⁸ [The Holy Bible: New International Version](#). (1984). (2 Ti 1:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Now here is something beautiful: If Jesus' savings-work is not time-bound – which we have just seen – then what does this mean regarding the sign of God's Old Covenant – yes, the sign of circumcision!? After all, this was a sign that – just like the Old-Testament sacrifices – involved blood – blood that pointed forward to the blood sacrifice of Christ!

Well, is it not correct to say that, when God told Abraham to circumcise himself and all males in his household – yes, even little baby boys – God did not mean for circumcision to be just a *covenant* sign, but also a *trust* sign!?⁹

Indeed, circumcision was a sign whose content was linked to trust/faith!

You say, "Trust/faith in what?" Well, trusting (having faith) in all God's promises to Abraham – even in that far-off promise of Someone from Abraham's offspring in whom all nations would be blessed – i.e. Christ!

Well, here is a further beauty, i.e. that God commanded this trust-sign of circumcision not only to adult Abraham, but God commanded this trust-sign to be performed even on baby boys of eight days old – babies who could not yet show whether or not they already had faith/trust in God's promises!¹⁰

Indeed, Abraham was circumcised as an adult *after* faith was present, but his son Isaac was circumcised as a child *before* faith was present!

So, what do we see?

Well, we see that there's a distinction between the *receiving* of the covenant sign (or the trust sign) and the time when the person *shows* faith/trust! *Abraham first had the faith, and then the sign, but Isaac first had the sign, and later the faith!*¹¹

My brother & sister, I know that I'm going now slightly on an aside here (nevertheless a good aside), but can you now see why John Calvin, in drawing a parallel between circumcision and baptism, said as much as, "The *sign* of faith is not tied to the *time* of faith."

After all, as we said earlier, God is not time-bound!

That's why Calvin would say two things about infant baptism: *Firstly*, the giving of the sign does not produce faith! (Yes, the outward sign of the water [just as the outward sign of circumcision] does not make a person right with God). *Secondly*, someone does not have to wait until faith is actualised before he receives the sign!¹²

Back to the point that Christ saves people from both covenants – old & new...

On the strength of passages like Rm 4:1-15, the WCF 8.6 says, *Although the work of redemption was not actually accomplished by Christ until after his incarnation, yet the power, efficacy, and benefits of it were applied to the elect in all ages successively from the beginning of the world...*

⁹ Sproul (ibid:267) uses the theological term "fiduciary sign," which basically means "trust sign" (from Latin *fiducia* = "trust").

¹⁰ Remember: Isaac was born some years after God gave the sign of circumcision to Abraham and his household. But, here are God's words to Abraham at the time when He gave Abraham that sign (Gn 17:9-14), **"As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. ¹⁰ This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. ¹² For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. ¹³ Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."**

¹¹ Well-said by Sproul (ibid:267)

¹² Calvin's thinking (apud Sproul, ibid:267-268)

Indeed, everything our Lord Jesus accomplished for New-Testament believers, He, at the same time, also accomplished for Old-Testament believers.

Yes, all the benefits that you & I receive from the work of our Lord Jesus – all these benefits were given also to Abraham! Look, is this not what Jesus referred to in a hidden way when He said (in Jn 8:56), “*Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.*”¹³

Well, you may ask, “Preacher, what does all this theology mean for us – how does it apply to our lives?” “After all, we’re not Old-Testament people!”

My brother & sister, does not the knowledge that our Lord’s savings-work is effective *not only forward in time* but also *back in time* – does this not create in you & me an absolute awe of our God: firstly, because it reminds us that He is *not time-bound*; and secondly, that He is *filled with grace*? Yes, that His grace even worked faith in the hearts of those saints who lived before Christ – saints who, although they longed to see their Saviour clearly – nevertheless believed God’s promises and trusted Him to fulfil them!

Yes, are all these things not prompting you and me to rejoice as we see the absolute goodness & faithfulness of God Triune in how His plan enfolds over thousands of years?

Words that come to mind are those words that are often repeated in Ephesians chapter 1 – “...to the praise of His glorious grace!”¹⁴ And, shortly, we will sing that hymn (hymn 179 from Sing to the Lord), “To the praise of His glorious grace...”

AMEN (1987 words excluding footnotes)

¹³ Jn 8:56 (NIV84)

¹⁴ Also cf. Sing-to-the-Lord, hymn no.179 “To the Praise of His Glorious Grace!”