

The Epistle to the Romans **The necessity of faith (Romans ch. 4)**

Today we continue our series of studies in this wonderful book of the Bible, Paul's letter to the Romans, and we look in detail at chapter 4. I'm going to anchor this talk on three things that we find in this chapter: a FOUNDATION, a FATHERHOOD and a FAITH. The Foundation, in the first 8 verses of the chapter, is a glorious and unshakeable Foundation. The Fatherhood, in verses 9 to 17, is a great and far reaching Fatherhood, and in the final 8 verses we find a simply towering example of FAITH.

A glorious foundation - justification by faith

First of all then – let's look at what I've called a glorious and unshakeable foundation. It is one of the great rock solid truths of the Christian Gospel. It is a truth that turned the world upside down. Let's read verses 1 to 8 of Romans chapter 4:

“What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:”

“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

When Ernie Brown presented the initial outline of this book, in talk number 1079, one of the things he said was that the first 8 chapters of Romans were concerned with Doctrine. And the tremendous truth taught in these verses is certainly that. It is Doctrine with a capital D! It is one of the great, central, doctrinal foundations of the Christian gospel. It's what theologians call the doctrine of justification by faith. This is the doctrine that set Europe ablaze in the sixteenth century. It was the glorious light which burst upon the soul of a devout, God fearing monk named Martin Luther, as he laboured under an immense burden, the sense of guilt which he had on account of his sins, and as he struggled year after year because he believed that he was required somehow by his own efforts to settle his account with God and work his way into God's favour.

As Martin Luther studied the Bible, and in particular this book of the Bible, Paul's letter to the Romans, at last his eyes were opened and he saw that being justified, or declared to be righteous, in God's sight was something that could never be achieved by any amount of keeping God's law and doing good deeds, but only by believing in the finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ who died in our place on the cross.

This doctrine, which was the subject of the talk just before this one, is introduced by one of the great BUTs of scripture, the “But now” of Chapter 3 verse 21. Here in chapter 4 Paul continues his presentation of it, but now in connection with the patriarch Abraham. The entire chapter is really taken up with Abraham’s remarkable life, and Paul is concerned first of all, in verses 1 to 8, to show that Justification by Faith goes right back to him. The chapter begins with a question. Essentially Paul asks ‘What about Abraham then?’ ‘Where does he fit in?’ As often in Paul’s letters, he is anticipating and dealing with objections, in this case from Jewish readers, who held Abraham in such high regard.

I think he is imagining an objector, listening to what he has just been saying about this great foundational truth of Justification by Faith, and saying ‘OK Paul,’ here you are preaching this revolutionary idea that if we want to be justified, declared to be righteous in God’s sight, then we’ve got to give up any hope of achieving that by keeping God’s commandments. We have to recognise that we’ll never make it, and that all our efforts to keep God’s law will only do one thing for us, and that is to convince us that we cannot keep it! So how does what the scriptures say about our father Abraham stack up with what you’re saying? Does Abraham’s history support what you say?

And Paul, quoting from Genesis chapter 15 verse 6, shows that the answer is emphatically yes. In answer to Abram’s lament (by the way, in Genesis 15 his name is still Abram, not Abraham – more on that later) his lament, that is, that he has no child and he’s getting pretty old, God takes him outside, shows him the night sky, and asks him to count the stars if he can, and then tells him that his descendants are going to be just as numerous as they. The scripture says that Abraham simply believed what God told him, and that God counted that as righteousness. It’s believing God that counts.

In verses 4 and 5, Paul makes a very stark and powerful contrast. He compares Justification by Faith with working for wages. If you work for wages then what you receive is not a gift or favour from your employer. It’s simply what you are entitled to. But, says Paul, I’m talking about someone who does not work, but who instead puts their faith in – and this is the bit that really gets to me – “Him who justifies the ungodly.” What an expression! He who justifies the ungodly! People said about Jesus that He was a friend of sinners. They couldn’t get their heads around it. Surely, if He was the Holy One sent from God, He should have distanced Himself from sinners, not befriended them, people thought. And until we really grasp the meaning of the grace of God it will, I think, always be a mystery to us how the holy and righteous God can act like this.

If our sense of justice is offended when we hear of God, who hates sin, seemingly just letting sinners go scot free, then the reality is that we haven’t really grasped that we ourselves have absolutely no hope unless He acts in just the same way towards us, “that **all** have sinned and fall short of [His glory],” as chapter 3 verse 23 says. It should be the cause of the deepest and most heartfelt gratitude that we have the opportunity to believe in the God who justifies the ungodly.

A great and far reaching fatherhood

Secondly, let us look at what I have called a great and far reaching fatherhood.

As is common in Paul’s writings, the argument flows smoothly from one point to another, so dividing the chapter up into three sections as I have done may be a little arbitrary, but it does seem to me that, after verses 6 to 8 in which Paul quotes from David’s wonderful experience of God not counting his sin against him, recorded in Psalm 32, he then moves into new territory. So let’s read verses 9 to 17:

“Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. 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. 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, 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.”

“For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.”

“That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring - not only to the adherents of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, I have made you the father of many nations - in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

From verse 9 through to verse 17, the key thought, I suggest, is that of Abraham’s fatherhood. And what seems to me outstanding in these verses is the way in which God’s promises turn out to have a far wider application than we might have imagined from the original context in which they were made.

What God promised Abraham, as we have just read, was that, from the starting point that he was 86 and childless, he would go on to become the father of a multitude of nations (Genesis chapter 17 verse 4). What is brought to light in verses 9 to 17 of Romans 4 however is that God was not only going to keep that promise literally, but in two other ways as well. These verses teach us that Abraham was also to be the father of all who share his faith (verse 11) and the father of circumcision (verse 12). We’ll come back to what it means to say that he is the father of circumcision in a moment.

In verse 10 Paul asks whether or not Abraham had received the sign of circumcision prior to the events recorded in Genesis chapter 15. No, says Paul, the divine requirement that all males in Abraham’s family must undergo this rite was something that came later, in chapter 17 in fact, by which time Abraham had reached the age of 99.

So, the argument runs, this principle of justification by faith is something which predates the introduction of circumcision, the God-given symbol of the covenant between God and the descendants of Abraham. Not only did Abraham’s justification come first, before the outward symbol, but, according to verse 11, the latter (the symbol) was actually given as a seal of the former (the justification by faith). It follows then that God reckoning faith as righteousness (justification by faith) is not just something for the actual descendants of Abraham. It applies to everyone, and is in fact the only basis on which God now offers salvation to all, as the Gospel is preached to the whole world.

After making that point, Paul goes on to say, in the second half of verse 11, that God’s purpose in this was to make Abraham the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well. Abraham is therefore the father of all who believe, whether descended from him physically or not. We are all his children in the sense that we have inherited from him this great principle of being justified by faith.

Furthermore, Paul says that God had another purpose, and that was to make Abraham the father of circumcision, not just of those who are literally circumcised but also of those who follow Abraham's faith. I know that most translations (including the one I read from) say that Abraham is the father of the circumcised, but that's not literally what the Greek says. It says he is the father of circumcision, and what I think that means is that the physical act of circumcision is a symbol of something spiritual. Circumcision literally involves the cutting off of flesh, and *the flesh* is a term used in scripture to describe the sinful nature we all have inside, the nature we inherited from Adam, which for the Christian is one of the three great enemies (along with the world and the devil) with which we are locked in a lifelong conflict.

Now, if we were to turn to Colossians chapter 2 verses 6 to 15, we would find there that by receiving Christ as our Lord and Saviour, and by identifying ourselves through baptism with His death, burial and resurrection, we are said to have put off the body of the flesh. And these verses actually describe this momentous step as a "circumcision made without hands." So when we read here in verse 12 that God's purpose was for Abraham not only to be the father of the faithful but also to be the father of circumcision, the meaning I believe is that we (even though we may not be descended from him physically) are viewed by God as Abraham's children not only because we have inherited his faith but also because we have inherited, that is, taken on board and applied for ourselves, the principle of circumcision, that is to say its spiritual meaning, namely the repudiation of the sinful nature. How amazing it is then to see that when God made that promise to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations, what is clear from these verses in Romans 4 is that the literal fulfilment of that promise, astonishing as it was, was only a small part of all that God had in mind when the promise was made.

Well might we exclaim, in words taken from chapter 11 verse 33 of this book,

"Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements, and how inscrutable His ways!"

Now before we leave this section and move on to consider what I've called a towering example of faith, let's look at the important teaching in verses 13 to 17. We have to remember how great was the revolution in thinking which was required of Jewish believers entering the Christian church, coming as they did with the deeply ingrained awareness of their nation's unique position in the purposes of God. They had of course formed the original nucleus of the church, but now, the door having been opened initially by Peter in Acts 10, the Gospel was being carried the length and breadth of the Roman world through the pioneering missionary work of Paul and his associates, as well as by others beyond the frontiers of Rome, and Jews and non-Jews were now found side by side, and accepted by God on exactly the same basis.

Paul has already shown, in the verses we have just been considering, that God's willingness to justify the ungodly is not restricted to those who are descended from Abraham, but extends to the whole world. In other words, the applicability of the Christian Gospel owes nothing whatsoever to your ancestry. Now he adds as it were another supporting pillar to the argument and points out that Abraham's justification on the basis of his faith owed nothing to the Law either, that is the law which God gave through Moses centuries later.

It is faith, and only faith, that counts. Neither ancestry nor adherence to the Law have any part to play. It is by faith, and faith alone, that we are justified.

A towering example of faith – the faith of Abraham

We've looked a little then at the Foundation and the Fatherhood. What now of what I described as a towering example of Faith? Let's now read the final 8 verses of the chapter:

“In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, So shall your offspring be. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. That is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness. But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in Him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

These verses spell out just how great is the example of faith which Abraham provides. The idea that this one hundred year old man and his ninety year old wife were going to have a child was, on the basis of any commonsense human judgment, pure fantasy. Yet Abraham didn’t just cherish this as a private dream in his innermost heart. It was his public testimony! One of the greatest tests of Abraham’s faith must surely have been that day recorded in Genesis chapter 17, the day on which God instructs him to introduce circumcision. Before doing that, God reiterates his earlier promise about how numerous his offspring would be, only this time God goes much further. This is the point at which God doesn’t just say that he is going to be the father of a great nation, but that he is going to be the father of many nations.

Remarkably, on that day God also changed his name from Abram to Abraham, and when we learn what those names mean, we cannot help but wonder how he announced this change, and how it went down with his retinue of household servants and herdsman. Picture the scene. From now on we can imagine him announcing to the assembled company, you are no longer to call me ‘Abram but Abraham.’ Whilst Abram means ‘exalted father, Abraham means ‘father of a multitude.’ Can you imagine it? Did some of the servants have to hide a smile? Did they perhaps wonder if the old man would ever wake up to reality? Yet the scripture says that he did not weaken in his faith. “No unbelief made him waver” it says. He was “fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised.”

This truly is a towering example of faith, yet there is in a sense nothing remarkable about faith. If we but understand and appreciate who God is, then in fact there is nothing particularly wonderful about believing that He means what He says and can do whatever He has promised to do.

We often hear people talk about faith, particularly if we listen to or watch religious broadcasts. They talk either about their own faith or that of someone else. They say things like ‘My faith is an essential part of my life and I couldn’t get by without my faith’ as though it was the faith itself, rather than the object of the faith, that had intrinsic value.

The title of this talk is *the* ‘necessity of faith’ but the message of Romans 4 is not ‘you need to have faith - full stop.’ What you need to have is faith, as we thought at the beginning, in Him who justifies the ungodly.

The concluding verses of the chapter, verses 23 to 25, sum this up. Paul takes up the words “it was counted to him,” referring to Abraham’s faith being counted as righteousness, and says that this was written for our sakes as well as for his. For us, the object of our faith is Him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised again for our justification.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on the necessity of faith in our series on Paul’s letter to the Romans, talk T1116.

Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version

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