



ROMANS

ROMANS 4:1-25

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As surely as Abraham is the father of the nation Israel, he is also the 'father of a nation' of people who have come to know and trust the promises of God.

FATHER ABRAHAM

FATHERS OF A NATION

A generation ago in the United States, before political correctness told us we couldn't, we spoke fondly of the "fathers" of our country. That phrase provoked a sense of patriotism, even reverence. George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were the two most often mentioned. Their faces were on postage stamps and in history books. The ideals they embodied were held before young people and not a few read and memorized portions of Washington's Farewell and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. As a young teen, this writer stood in awe before the immense statue of Abraham Lincoln at his memorial in Washington, D.C. I still remember it vividly.

This lesson is about another father of his country, another Abraham. So what comes to mind when you hear "Father Abraham"? A camp song with funny motions? A bearded man standing under the stars? Probably nothing approaching the abiding respect that attaches to our greatest American presidents. If not, reading and pondering Romans 4 may move us in that direction.

The Jews regarded Abraham as the father of Israel with every bit as much respectful awe as we feel toward Washington and Lincoln. They regarded him not only as the first Israelite, but also as the model of obedience. He received the covenant. He left his home for a new land. He obeyed when circumcision was commanded, and later when told to sacrifice his son.



Abraham was righteous, the Jews said, because of his faithfulness in the testing God sent. “Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?” (1 Maccabees 2:52).

Paul selects this man, so revered by Jews, as his Exhibit A of the righteousness that is by faith. A man who lived 2,000 years before Jesus was an example of the faith we are called to imitate! According to Paul, Abraham is much more than a camp song or a Sunday school picture. He has a rightful place of honor in the Old Testament hall of fame and in our hearts as our “Father in the Faith.”

ABRAHAM’S RIGHTEOUSNESS BY FAITH

ROMANS 4:1-8

Paul devotes an entire chapter to Abraham in his letter. It’s a surprising and unexpected choice. If the Jews regarded Abraham as a model of “righteousness by works” (especially obedience), why does Paul choose Abraham as his example of “righteousness by faith”? Why does he call Abraham our “forefather” (v. 1), a word used only here in the New Testament? To understand that choice, we need to review the story of Abraham in Genesis and pay special attention to the timeline of key events in his life.

The Abraham narrative gets going in Genesis 12... literally! “Go” is the command of God to Abram and Sarai, and these senior citizens, he age 75 and she 65, obey. They leave their home in Haran and embark on an epic journey, pulled by the mind-boggling promise God had made that they would become a “great nation” and bless “all the families of the earth.” All of this though Sarai is barren! Obedient they certainly are.

But the years drag by and there is no child. Abram grows restive. In Chapter 15, God appears to him to reassure him and renew the promise. He shows Abram the stars and challenges him to attempt

to count them. “So shall your offspring be.” Then comes the key verse Paul seizes upon: “And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).

Abraham is reckoned righteous. The question is “Why?” Paul now asks his readers if they are paying attention: “For what does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’” (v. 3). So important is this verse in Genesis that Paul quotes it again making a similar argument in Galatians 3:6. The cited verse says nothing about obedience, but much about faith. So is Abraham’s righteousness a “wage” or a “gift”?

To make it plain to the readers, Paul uses the everyday example of a workman and his wages. A worker works, and the boss is obliged to pay a wage, isn’t he? The worker earned it by working. But shall a wage be paid to someone who does NOT work? Immediately, Paul leaves the illustration and returns to the issue at hand. “To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness” (v. 5). That’s Abraham, a man who did not work for his righteousness. That’s Abraham, a man who could have properly been called “ungodly” when God first appeared to him, since he was still an idolater at the time!

Paul here makes his fundamental charge against human thinking about God. Michael Middendorf writes, “Our dominant worldly view generally wants to follow the employment metaphor in desiring to receive what is owed...from God based upon works” (*Romans 1-8*, p. 329). Jesus addressed the same thinking in His parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16), who groused at the employer for giving latecomers the same wage as they received for a whole day’s effort.

To the citation of Genesis 15:6 and the example of the workman and wages, Paul now adduces

an additional Scripture. In verses 7–8, he calls one more witness to the way God “counts” people righteous. “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven...blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” No less a person than King David, in Psalm 32, testifies that God’s reckoning is not ours, that sinful people who leave a trail of “lawless deeds” (as David himself had done!) may still wind up forgiven. Works will not bring us there, but faith in the God who forgives sinners will.

We should not miss the point Paul is making about God. He’s a God who “justifies the ungodly” (v. 5)! The sort of God who counts as righteous people who have no track record, no string of accomplishments, but who simply cling to the kind of God He is and to the promise He makes, as did old Father Abraham and sinful King David. What a God we have!

RIGHTEOUS BEFORE CIRCUMCISION

ROMANS 4:9-12

Paul has already dealt earlier with the question of circumcision. But Paul knows it will re-surface with the mention of forgiveness and blessedness. “Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?” (v. 9). Because circumcision remains a very big deal for the readers, he takes it up once more, this time in the Abraham story.

The narrative in Genesis continues in Genesis 16. There we read about the misguided attempt by Sarai (and Abram!) to provide a child in the face of God’s apparent foot-dragging. Hagar bears Ishmael. Abram and Sarai breathe a sigh of relief because now they have at least this one little boy! Thirteen more years pass. Abram and Sarai are 99 and 89 years old, respectively. Ishmael is a budding teenager. Just now, Genesis 17 records, God breaks His silence and appears to Abram.

In unmistakable fashion, God renews the covenant with Abram. First, He bestows on him a new name that bespeaks the promise’s fulfillment. Abram (“exalted father”) will now be Abraham (“father of a

multitude”!). Sarai shall be called Sarah. Next God makes the command that Abraham and his male retinue shall undergo circumcision as a “sign of the covenant” God has made with Abraham. The promise is sharpened as God gives the coming baby a name and sets the promise clock ticking: “I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year” (Gen. 17:21).

Stop right here and ask yourselves, Paul writes, “How then was it [righteousness] counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised?” (v. 10). If you know the story of Abraham, you know the answer! It was “before he was circumcised.” Abraham was reckoned righteous (Chapter 15) years before he was circumcised (Chapter 17). Circumcision was not the pre-requisite of Abraham’s new status, but the “seal” of it.

Now comes the astonishing conclusion. Abraham, the “father” of the Jews, was something else first – the father of all who believe without being circumcised. That makes him the father of the Gentiles who come to faith! Even for those circumcised, the key issue is faith. He is father to both:

Those who “believe without being circumcised” (v. 11), and

Those who are circumcised “who also walk in the footsteps of the faith” (v. 12).

“Father Abraham,” it turns out, is a forefather in the faith not just for Jews, but for believing Gentiles as well. Wow!

RIGHTEOUS BEFORE THE LAW WAS GIVEN

ROMANS 4:13-15

Paul has not yet mentioned the Law in Chapter 4. But now he speaks of it five times in four verses. Once again, the biblical time line is in view. Abraham (who lived about 2,000 BC) is reckoned righteous by God long before the Law is handed down to Moses (about 1,400 BC). Abraham cannot be held up as a “keeper of the law” since there was as yet no Law!

In the previous sections of Chapter 4, Paul has contrasted “wages” and “gift,” then “circumcised” and “uncircumcised.” Here the contrast is between “law” and “faith.” The question in these verses is “How is the promise received?” Especially fascinating is the way the promise is described in verse 13 – that Abraham and his “offspring” would be “heir of the world” (the Greek word is *kosmou*, “the cosmos”!). It’s a more expansive way of saying “the whole world” will be blessed.

What role does the Law play in bringing this blessing? Does the blessing come to the Law’s adherents? No, the role the Law plays, says Paul in verse 15, is that it “brings wrath.” He has already said in 3:20 that the Law brings the knowledge of our sin, so driving us to His grace in Jesus Christ. He continues, “Where there is no law there is no transgression.” The absence of the Law, of course, does not mean the absence of sin! It only means that there is no mechanism for identifying and condemning it. Now that it has come, it serves that excellent purpose. We know who we are and what we’ve done. We know that our righteousness must come another way – by faith, as did Abraham’s.

ABRAHAM: DEAD MAN HOPING!

ROMANS 4:16–25

Abraham is the “Father of the faithful.” That’s a powerful message in the face of our sin. But it’s also a powerful message in the face of the “last enemy,” death (1 Cor. 15:26). The keynote verse of this final section is sounded in verse 17, where God is described as one who “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

In verse 19, the word “dead” is used of Abraham himself. By the time he and Sarah conceive Isaac, he is physically a “dead man walking.” Humanly speaking, there’s little hope that this old couple can manage to produce a child. Abraham’s a centenarian and Sarah’s post-menopausal! No wonder she had a good laugh when she heard the promise repeated (Gen. 18:12). Nevertheless, Abraham “believed

against hope, that he should become the father of many nations” (v. 18). It wasn’t his virility that mattered, but the promise of God. That’s why, though he was ancient, his faith made him a “dead man hoping,” and that hope was rewarded with the birth of Isaac, whose very name means “laughter.”

All of this, Paul sums up, was not for Abraham’s sake alone, but “for ours also” (v. 24). We know what it’s like to have aging bodies that make us feel “as good as dead.” We have seen hopes dashed and dreams crumbled into dust, congregations whose doors close, children who say, “I don’t believe that any more,” and loved ones withering away with terminal illnesses.

In the face of all those deaths, we hear another promise. That promise is made in the very face of death through Jesus Christ, “who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (v. 25). Think of it! God brought little Isaac to a couple “as good as dead.” He raised Jesus, who was in fact dead and buried. When we trust the promises made to us through Jesus, we too become “dead men hoping” and finding a laughter that will never be quenched.

A SONG FOR FATHER ABRAHAM

There’s no monument to him in Washington, D.C. You won’t see him on any postage stamps. But as surely as Abraham is the father of the nation Israel, he is also the “father of a nation” of people who have come to know and trust the promises of God. That’s you and me. Don’t you think he’s worth a song? Maybe not “Father Abraham” this time. Here’s a better one:

*The God of Abr’ham praise, Who reigns
enthroned above;*

Ancient of everlasting days and God of love.

*Jehovah, great I AM! By earth and heav’n
confessed;*

I bow and bless the sacred name forever blest!
(LSB #798)

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 5:1-21

Gracious God, Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. As I open Your Word now, let it shine on me and deep inside me. Show me my “old Adam” and the gift of grace You’ve given me in Christ. Help me uncover the hope that does not disappoint. This I ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.

For review:

1. For what reason did Paul choose Abraham to illustrate the righteousness that comes by faith?

2. Share something new you learned about Abraham.

3. Are you taking the memory verse challenge? If so, SHARE what you remember with your small group.

Romans 5:1-5

4. What does the world mean by “peace”?

What does Paul mean by “peace” in 5:1?

What more do we learn about this in John 14:27?

5. In God’s hands, suffering inaugurates a sequence of things. List in sequence three things that can be produced by suffering (see vv. 3-4).

Romans 5:6-11

6. What words describe our condition when Christ died for us in:

Verse 6? _____

Verse 8? _____

Verse 10? _____

7. According to vv. 7-8, how does God’s love differ from human love?

8. What do you understand by the term “reconciled”? What word is its opposite?

With whom are we reconciled?

9. Recall and describe a situation in which you and another person were reconciled.

Romans 5:12–21

10. This section considers the consequences of the fall into sin (see Gen. 3). How is the story of Adam’s sin here similar to the mythological story of Pandora’s box (if this is unfamiliar to you, try “googling” it)?

11. For you to puzzle over: according to verse 12, do people die because Adam sinned or because they sin?

12. Why does Paul demarcate the era from Adam to Moses? (v. 14)

13. Adam and Christ are compared and contrasted in vv. 12–21. Find as many similarities and differences as you can between Adam and Christ in these verses.

ADAM

CHRIST

14. How does this chapter illustrate why “grace and peace to you” (1:7 NIV) is such an appropriate greeting between Christians?

15. How have the last two chapters helped you to appreciate the importance of the Old Testament in understanding the New Testament?

Memory Verse Challenge for Chapter 5 – choose ONE of the following:

Romans 5:3–5 *We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame.*

Romans 5:8 *God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Romans 5:18 *As one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.*