

Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2010

The Epistle to the Romans: The Victory of God – Chapter 4:1-25- “Abraham Believed God”

In this chapter Paul draws on the example of Abraham to show that God has always justified his people by faith (Rom. 3:27). Abraham trusted God, that is the essence of faith, and that was counted to him as righteousness. It was nothing Abraham did, not keeping the law or any commandments, which made him acceptable in God's eyes. Abraham received God's grace, his mercy and love, through a promise not through anything he had done. This was the foreshadowing of the faith that has now come into being through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I. “What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh?” – 4:1-15

- a. Paul now has to explain how his teaching on faith accords with the Old Testament and the history of Israel. Even though he is the apostle to the Gentiles (1:5) he is talking about the Messiah, Jesus Christ, and the gospel that was “to the Jew first” (1:16). How then does the gospel relate to the faith that begins with Abraham?
- b. Paul is going to introduce a radical new understanding of Abraham that will conflict with the prevailing view of many of his Jewish contemporaries. This view is stated simply in the book, “The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach (not our Jesus). This book was written in the second century before Christ. According to a hymn in the latter section of the book (Sirach 44:19-21):
 - i. Abraham was the father of Israel because he kept God's Law. He entered into a covenant with God and when tested (the sacrifice of Isaac, Gen. 22) he proved he was faithful.
 - ii. Therefore God made an oath with him that he would be the father of a great people and all nations of the world would be blessed in him.
 - iii. In a book from roughly the same period the statement is made that God has made his promises “through the law” (II Maccabees 2:17-18).

The basic view here then is that Abraham embraced God's law and showed his commitment to that law by being circumcised. When tested, his faith remained firm. Therefore God blessed him. This idea would not have been alien to Paul's Gentile audience who certainly would have identified with his earlier statement that God would repay everyone according to their deeds (Rom. 2:6). Paul's view of justification by faith however has thrown a new and distinctive light on the conventional understanding of these views.

- c. For Paul the view of Abraham found in later Jewish literature does not accord with the Genesis account. Abraham according to Paul was not justified by works. He earned nothing and had no basis for boasting (Paul's continuing concern with his own Pharisee contemporaries, Luke 18:11).
- d. Before Abraham was circumcised, tested or agreed to follow any commandments (the law) he was given a promise by God (Gen. 12:1-3). This promise was that his descendents would be like the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5). Then we read what for Paul is the critical phrase, "And he believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).
- e. Abraham had not earned this. He had performed no work for which this could be considered a reward (4:4-5). He trusted in God's promise. This is what resulted in his righteousness. God received him ("reckoned him") as though he were righteous. Paul proceeds to draw the conclusion that our righteousness has nothing to do with our works. He quotes from David in Psalm 32:1-2 (Rom. 4:7-8). The sign of circumcision was a result of the gift of righteousness, not a condition for it (4:11-12). The issue then is not circumcision, much less doing the works of the law. It all comes down to belief which fundamentally is trusting in God's promise.
- f. Paul makes an even bolder statement. He says that God "justifies the ungodly" (4:5). This is a shocking statement on two counts.
 - i. It suggests that Abraham was "ungodly." This conflicts with the exalted view of Abraham found in Jewish writings (Wisdom 44:19) but fits Paul's view of the entire human condition (3:10-18).
 - ii. The prevailing view is that God justifies the righteous, the godly. He will not acquit the guilty (Ex. 23:7; Prov. 17:15; 24:24; Isa. 5:22-23). Yet for Paul this is the righteousness of the law, not the gospel. It is the very nature of the gospel to justify the ungodly (Rom. 5:8; John 3:17; Matt. 9:10-13).
- g. Paul concludes this section with the affirmation that the promise to Abraham did not come through the law (in contradiction to II Maccabees 2:18) but through "the righteousness of faith" (4:13). For Paul the law and the promise of faith are ultimately opposites. If we hold to the law "faith is null and the promise is void" (4:14). Finally, "the law brings wrath" (4:15). It defines sin (3:20). Paul would have included here even the provision of atonement in the law or the Torah itself (Lev. 16). God's wrath must be satisfied for there to be any forgiveness for sin (cf. 1:18 and hence, II Cor. 5: 21).

II. The Promise of Grace – 4:16-24

- a. Paul now brings grace into the discussion of Abraham (3:24). Grace is an essential theme for Paul. Grace is God's underserved favor. Grace can only be expressed as an unconditional promise, never as a reward for anything we've done (Gen. 15:1-5). In the passage of Gen. 15 God himself makes a covenant on behalf of Abraham. God alone is the maker of this covenant (Gen. 15:7-21).

- b. To underscore the radical nature of grace Paul describes God as the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (4:17; Eph. 2:4-5). Paul could not be more explicit that there is no human counterpart to God’s promise of righteousness. This is salvation (Matt. 19:26). It is important here that we follow the advice that goes back to Augustine that we are to hope well of all and never rashly regard anyone as cut off from God’s grace.
- c. This is made even more explicit when Paul describes Abraham “as good as dead” and Sarah as barren (4:19). The promise of descendants, especially being like the stars in the heavens, is humanly impossible. This is made even more clear in the virgin birth of Jesus (Luke 1:37).
- d. Abraham’s response to God’s promise is his faith, his trust in God. This clearly is a result, not a cause of, the promise. Yet the response is critically important. Abraham becomes the father of faith through his faith which is described as “hoping against hope” (4:18). Abraham was convinced “that God was able to do what he had promised” (4:21).
- e. Paul concludes with the great affirmation that Abraham is our model. Just as his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness so the same promise applies to us as well (4:22-25). We too are made righteous by faith apart from the works prescribed by the law (3:28).

Question for Us –

1. Why do you think the idea of our winning favor from God is so appealing? What does this say about our view of God and our view of ourselves?
2. Why do you think Paul says that the law brings wrath (4:15)? Can you think of any examples of this in your own life?
3. How does depending on God’s promise, apart from any human assurance or guarantee, help us grow strong in our faith (20)?

Next study – Sept. 15 – Chapter 5 – “Much More!”