

In The Footsteps of Faith

Romans 4:1-12

Call: Ps 32:1-2, 11 (NIV)

Scripture: Eph 2:8-10 (NIV)

I. Introduction

A. Introduction

Good morning! We enter back into Romans this morning in chapter 4 where Paul spends the chapter discussing mostly Abraham, but also David. Mostly, he keeps Abraham in view throughout the chapter, and encourages all people, both Jew and Gentile, to follow in the footsteps of his faith.

Back in Genesis 12, God called Abraham and Sarah to follow Him. But, God's goal in the call of these two ancient people is universal. He wants to bless the entire world through them. It's the Abraham-&-Sarah-for-the-sake-of-the-world program that begins, which means our stories are actually bound up with those two ancient people. And, that's one of the reasons Paul begins talking about Abraham in chapter 4 of Romans. His story applies to both the diverse story of the Roman church in Paul's time and to all Jews and Gentiles for all time.

B. Review

Last week, Paul shared the good news of the Gospel in that most important of paragraphs, the Good News that is for all people. Through the cross and the shedding of Jesus' blood, God's righteousness, His right-relatedness, has been revealed. It's revealed through the saving activity of Jesus apart from the Old Testament law. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith... so that no one can boast"* (Eph 2:8-9). *"God is one,"* Paul said in 3:30, meaning God is the God of both Jews and Gentiles. Therefore, the situation is the same for all people, and Paul now goes to the Old Testament to support this claim.

So, I invite you into our text this morning, beginning in chapter 4, verse 1.

II. The "Righteous-ification" of Abraham (v 1-5)

1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? 2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. 3 What does Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." 4 Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. 5 However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

A. Introduction

Paul now brings in evidence that his Gospel is in continuity with the entire Biblical record beginning with the example of Abraham.

B. Abraham

Today, Abraham is a revered figure by three faiths, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. In the first century, Abraham was a revered figure in Jewish thought, for he was considered the forefather of the Jewish faith. He was even called “a friend of God” by both Old Testament and New Testament writers! But, how did he become a friend of God? That’s the question. Was it through works or was it through faith? Paul wants to show that it was through faith, essentially that his Gospel aligns even with Abraham, the forefather of the Jews.

C. Abraham’s Story

At the center of Paul’s argument is Genesis 15:6, which Paul quotes in verse 3, and later in verse 9. *“Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.”* In this chapter, Paul assumes you know the Abraham story. You may not, so let me do a quick summary.

As I already said, in Genesis 12, God called Abraham and Sarah to follow Him. Abraham and Sarah were pagan moon-worshippers from Ur, a city near Babylon. Abraham and Sarah were ungodly gentiles. God then promised them that if they do follow Him, their offspring would be a blessing to the entire world. There was one major problem with this calling though. Sarah was barren. She couldn’t have children. Isn’t that amazing? God calls a barren couple so that their offspring would bless the world. We might look at that today and think God was crazy. But, the point was that if this plan works, it can only be of God! Humans will not be able to make the Abraham-&-Sarah-for-the-sake-of-the-world program work. Humans will not be able to design a technological solution to solve humanity’s problems. Humans will not be able to fix themselves. If this is going to work, God will have to do it.

See, that’s the point of the entire Bible. God is the subject of the verbs. God is the point. God is the hero, not us. God will make it work, so that none of us can boast.

So, God calls a barren, ungodly couple to bless the world. By the time we get to Genesis 15, Abraham is in his early 80s and Sarah is in her early 70s. And he and Sarah have been living through crisis after crisis after crisis: a famine, a crisis with a Pharaoh and a crisis with his nephew Lot. And, all the while, he’s trying to follow this God who’s called him out of Ur. I can imagine he was full of anxiety. He’s doing everything he can to follow this God, but it seems like it’s been a total disaster. And, there has been no movement on God’s promises for offspring. And, he and Sarah are not getting any younger.

Then, one night, in the middle of his rising anxiety, God shows up. After Abraham shares his frustration with God, God takes him outside to count the stars. God then clarifies his promise and tells Abraham to count the stars. *“So shall your offspring be,”* God says (Gen 15:5). Essentially, God was asking Abraham to have faith in Him, to trust Him at His word.

And, what was Abraham’s response? Genesis 15:6 which is Romans 4:3: *“Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.”* This is the first time the word for faith or belief is used in the Bible. Abraham believed, he trusted God. He took God at his word. And, what does God do? God counts it to Abraham as righteousness. God counts it to Abraham as

right-relatedness, as being in a right relationship with Him. God evaluates Abraham as being in a right relationship simply because Abraham trusts Him. In other words, to enter into a right relationship with the living God is a matter of faith, of belief, of trust. God righteous-ized a pagan man through faith. Abraham became a friend of God through faith.

D. Romans

And, this is exactly what Paul is trying to show. From the very beginning, God has required only one thing to be His friend: Trust, have faith in Him and His Word. And, that goes for all people, Jew and Gentile. Faith, not *“flesh,”* as Paul says in verse 1 is what matters. The Jews do come from the body of Abraham naturally, by the flesh, but they do not enter into relationship with God through that flesh. It is by grace alone through faith alone.

If relationship with God was based on works, then the Jews could boast over the Gentiles, and God would be the God of the Jews only. But, the call of Abraham was for the sake of the world, not just the Jews, and his story proves that *“righteous-ification,”* justification, has always been a matter of grace through faith.

E. Credited / Counted

The other key word in these verses is *“credited”* or *“counted,”* which means to reckon or to put on one’s account. This word group is used 3 times in these verses and five more times in the next set of verses (v 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11). Paul loves this word. The root word is an objective word that comes from the financial world. As we know, numbers don’t lie. Math doesn’t lie. It’s pretty objective and logical. This word actually comes into English as *“logical.”*

And, it is the basis for Paul’s commercial metaphor in verses 4-5. Workers get the wages which are due them. That is the obligation of the employer, to pay workers for their work. The wage is not a gift, not grace. The word for gift in verse 4 is the same word for grace. But, God’s economy is quite different. Relationship with Him, being his friend, is not based on earning, but on His great grace through faith.

F. View of Abraham in 1st Century

It’s interesting that in Paul’s time, there were several contemporary views contrary to Paul’s argument here.

- Some contemporaries believed that Abraham had been proclaimed righteous by God as a reward for his character and conduct.
- Others believed that Abraham was already righteous when God called him.
- Still others believed that Abraham was already keeping the Mosaic law when God called him, even though it would be another 400+ years before the Mosaic law was given.

We might say that Paul’s contemporaries saw righteous-ification working this way:

Abraham -> works -> righteous-ification -> boasting over the Gentiles (Bird, 145)

But Paul’s Gospel says this:

Abraham -> faith -> righteous-ification -> obedience (Bird, 145)

“[Over against those] Jewish interpretations of Abraham, Paul declares that Abraham’s faith was credited as righteousness without Torah obedience; while he was uncircumcised and numbered among the “ungodly,” it was given by sheer grace” (Bird, 144). In other words, by grace through faith. And, it’s always been that way!

Paul now turns to the example of David, verse 6.

III. The Righteous-ification of David (v 6-8)

6 David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

7 “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

8 Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.” (NIV)

A. Introduction

Note that in using two witnesses, Abraham and David, Paul is also endorsing the Jewish principle of the calling of two or three witnesses to establish any claim (Deut 17:6; 19:15; 2 Cor 13:1).

B. David

So, here, Paul calls David to the stand, along with his poem, Psalm 32. Recognize right away David’s situation versus Abraham. Abraham was a pagan Gentile from Babylon. But, David was living within the covenant as an Israelite, circumcised, and the anointed king over Israel. Abraham is an outsider; David an insider.

Once again, Paul is assuming you know David’s story. Here’s a synopsis. There is more written about David in the Bible than any other figure, except for Jesus of course. Sixty-six chapters are devoted to David in the Old Testament, and he is referred to 59 times in the New Testament.

David was an extremely talented man. Someone has said that “he had the literary skill of Shakespeare, the musical ability of Beethoven, the military skill of Alexander the Great, the political savvy of Abraham Lincoln” and the hand-eye coordination of Steph Curry. David was indeed a Biblical heavyweight!

But, perhaps what David was most known for, was being *“a man after God’s own heart”* (1 Sam 13:14). How did David get into such an intimate relationship with God? Was it through a lifetime of good works? No. David was actually a deeply flawed man, seemingly controlled by pride, ambition and lust. And, he actually writes Psalm 32, the Psalm Paul quotes here, after committing adultery and murder.

Here's the story. One spring while he was king, his army went off to battle, but David stayed back. In that time, kings would usually travel with their armies, but David didn't this time. And, one night when he was alone, he took a walk on his rooftop. He just happened to notice that Uriah's wife, Bath-sheba was bathing. Now, Uriah was one of David's best friends, but David's

lust was controlling him, so he didn't care. He called for Bath-sheba and laid with her. She ends up pregnant and to cover up his adultery, he has Uriah murdered in battle. Then, he took Bath-sheba as his wife, thinking he had covered up everything.

That is until Nathan, the prophet, stopped by about a year later. God had told Nathan the truth. So, Nathan told David a story to catch him in his coverup. He said he was traveling through the countryside and ran into a situation that required David's judgment. He said he ran into two men, a wealthy one and a poor one. The wealthy man had herds of sheep and cows, while the poor man had only one ewe lamb, which meant so much to the man, it was like a "daughter" to him. The rich man stole the poor man's lamb and served it for dinner. David stopped Nathan at that point and in red hot anger, told Nathan that the rich man deserved to die! Nathan then looked at David and said, "You are the man!"

David then repented of his sin saying, "*I have sinned against the LORD*" (2 Sam 12:13). And, soon after, he wrote Psalm 32, which Paul quotes here, verses 7-8:

7 *"Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.*

8 *Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them*

David repented and was forgiven, he was righteous-ized. His sin was not counted against him. Now, note it wasn't without consequences. Sin always has consequences. There was much pain and turmoil in David's life from that point forward. But, the point Paul is making is that God credited righteousness to David apart from works. God righteous-ized the sinful, Jewish David.

C. Conclusion

The conclusion from these two Old Testament examples then is that Paul's Gospel of Grace is in continuity with the entire Biblical record, for both Jew and Gentile.

D. Transition

Paul now returns to the great Jewish identity marker circumcision to continue his argument, verse 9.

IV. Following in the Footsteps of Abraham (v 9-12)

9 *Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. 10 Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! 11 And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. 12 And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (NIV)*

A. Introduction

Paul returns to his diatribe format bringing in the circumcision topic again. Once again Paul assumes his audience knows the background to it. We've talked about it quite a bit in our series, but here is another refresher.

B. Circumcision

From the very beginning, circumcision was to be an external mark of being set apart to God. It was done to the organ of procreation to symbolize that all offspring are set apart to God as well. It is done at 8 days old to give babies their identity, their mark, as part of the covenant community. Circumcision was also the rite of entry into the covenant for Gentiles. And ladies were considered a member of the covenant by their connection to their father or through marriage.

But, as we have said all along, it was always tied to the heart. It was only supposed to be a symbol of what was happening inside the heart, like baptism today.

But, by the first century, it had grown in importance in many Jew's minds to include salvation and deliverance from God's wrath (Bird, 146). In many ways, it had taken on a life of its own, even understood as a triumph of Judaism over paganism (there's that boasting theme again)!

C. Genesis 17

But, here in Romans 4 and elsewhere in his letters, Paul is saying that circumcision is no longer significant within the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Salvation by grace through faith is what is significant. And, Paul can go there because circumcision was given by God in Genesis 17, obviously after Genesis 15. The rite of circumcision was given around 14 years after Abraham believed and was righteoused. That's why Paul can say that circumcision was simply a "*sign of the righteousness,*" verse 11. Therefore, circumcision has no significance related to becoming a friend of God. Or to put it another way, circumcision has nothing to do with the blessings of forgiveness, righteous-ification or membership in God's family.

D. In the Footsteps of Faith

Ultimately, what this means is that Abraham becomes paradigmatic for *all* people who believe, regardless if they are circumcised or uncircumcised, if they are a Jew or a Gentile. He becomes Father Abraham to *all* who have faith. Faith is what matters for all people, faith like that showed by Father Abraham when he trusted God's word and became a friend of God. That's the point. Go and follow in those footsteps, the footsteps of faith, and become a friend of God like Abraham when he trusted God and took God at His word.

V. Implications

A. Introduction

That's our text for today. And, what I want to do to close today is to summarize our last two weeks. These are some of the most important words ever written. So, how can we summarize them? Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to ask, then answer 5 questions to walk us through this amazing of good news.

B. What does it mean to be righteous-ized, to be a friend of God like Abraham?

Well, to be a friend of God, to be righteous-ized, is to be in a right relationship with the living God. The more common word might be salvation. To be righteous-ized is to be saved. To be righteous-ized is also to be justified. To be righteous-ized is also to be redeemed. To be righteous-ized is also to be forgiven of all our sins. To be righteous-ized is also to be free from the power of Sin! To be righteous-ized is to be a friend of the living God! And, we could go on and on, using metaphors for this good news.

C. Who makes it happen?

Who makes all of this happen? Who does the righteous-ification? Well, we do don't we? We fix ourselves don't we? We put ourselves into a right-relationship with God, don't we?

NO! But, we sure act like it, don't we? That's why we have so much fear and anxiety and exhaustion in life. We think we have to make this happen through our own effort, through our own works.

Of course we don't make this happen! God does. God does the righteous-ification around here. God does all the "crediting" around here. God does all the reckoning and counting and accounting around here. He credits the righteousness, not us! He came up with the plan of righteous-ification. He thought it up, planned it out and set it in motion. And, *"He who began the good work in you [will not give up on you. He] will bring it to completion!"* (Phil 1:6). That's a promise!

D. Why does He do it?

Because we deserve it, right? Because we have done so many good things, right? Or maybe it's because we are such good people? No. A thousand times no.

So, a man had two sons. The younger son took his father's money and went away. The older son stayed at home, working and working and doing and doing, trying to earn his father's favor. The younger son returns home to grace. And, what does the older son do? He becomes angry, then he boasts. "Look at what I've done to earn your favor. Look at what I've slaved away doing all this time!" And, he looks down on his younger brother.

God righteous-izes because of his great love and grace, so that none of us can boast. *By grace we are saved through faith.* None of us deserves it! Remember those two chapters of sin? None of us deserves anything! God righteous-izes us by unmerited favor, by undeserved kindness, by unearned blessing. Grace. Grace. Grace.

The Gospel is all grace. To Abraham, being God's friend was grace. To David, being forgiven was grace. Grace upon grace, like waves of the ocean, crashing over us again and again and again. Or to use a different metaphor, God's grace outruns the avalanche of our sin. Paul will say that later in Romans.

E. What is our role?

So, what do we do? We have faith. We believe. We trust God and His promises! Grace alone by faith alone. Nothing else! We bank it all on God's grace! We accept the gift of grace given to us. It's the only way to honor the giver of a gift, right? Accept it through faith.

What is faith? I like Luther's definition: Faith is throwing the weight of our entire lives upon God and his grace. Or if "throwing" sounds too much like a work, maybe we could say, faith is "falling" onto God and his grace. Maybe even better – faith is "collapsing" into the arms of God (Johnson, 145).

Our role is to entrust my whole life to God and his grace.

F. How Then Shall We Live?

We follow. God does not righteous-ize us to simply sit around and breathe and wait for Jesus to come back again. He righteous-izes us for action, to follow in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham. We are not righteous-ized *by* good works, but we are righteous-ized *for* good works. As Darrell Johnson says, righteous-ification is "not a vacation, it's a vocation" (Johnson, 146). His grace puts us to work.

What are these good works? Well, I think primarily they flow from the gifts, talents and wirings with which God has uniquely equipped each of us. None of us can do all the good works that are possible in life. But, God has equipped each one of us for a few good ones in which to walk. So, jump in and go to work using your gifts. If you don't know your gifts, jump in and go to work to discover them!

But, I will say this, one of the key ones for all of us to walk is this – to extend God's great grace to others. God has forgiven us a mountain full of sin, we can extend that forgiveness to others. God has given us a mountain of grace, we can extend that grace to others. God has extended a mountain full of mercy to us, we can extend mercy to others.

And, that's the Gospel in a nutshell! Isn't that such great news! Amen.

Benediction

And God is able to make all [of His Great] grace abound to you, [in you and through you], so that ... you may abound in every good work" (2 Cor 9:8).

This week, go and put His grace to work!

Resources

Achtemeier, Paul, *Romans: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*

Bird, Michael, *Romans (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 6)*

Gorman, Michael J, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*

Johnson, Darrell, *Ephesians: The Wonder and Walk of Being Alive*

Stott, John, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*

Thielman, Frank, *Romans (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*