

Romans 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 4 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. 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.

[1 : 44] 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 adherent 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, 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 trespassers, and raised for our justification.

[3 : 04] In Romans chapter 4, Paul turns to the example and the character of Abraham. There has been some debate in the last couple of decades about the translation and meaning of the opening statement of Romans chapter 4.

Richard Hayes, N.T. Wright, Stanley Stowers, Douglas Campbell, and a number of others have argued for translations along the lines of, What then shall we say? Have we found Abraham to be our forefather, or to become our forefather, according to the flesh?

And there are various suggestions, which are all slightly different. They have in common, though, their emphasis upon the character of Abraham's paternity, whether that be considered as his paternity of the Jews, that the Jews have discovered Abraham to be their forefather according to the flesh, or have not, as the case may be, or of believing Gentiles, or some have considered it as a reference to the way in which he obtained paternity.

Did Abraham become our forefather, through the flesh, through works, and this sort of thing?

Typically, the verse has been taken along the lines in which it is interpreted in the ESV.

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather, according to the flesh? Or maybe, What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, according to the flesh, has found in this

matter?

[4 : 19] In this way of phrasing it, there may be an allusion to the Old Testament expression, so-and-so found favour in the eyes of the Lord. The strength of the more recently proposed readings is found in the way that they frame the chapter less as principally an exploration of the question of how individuals are saved, with Abraham as a selected example from the Old Testament, and much more as an investigation of the character of the family of Abraham.

Abraham isn't just a typical believer, but he is the father of the family of the people of God. Romans 4, then, is much more concerned with the question of the shape and the constitution of this family than it is with questions of personal salvation abstracted from that.

Abraham is indeed an example of faith, but for Paul he is a very great deal more than this. However, there is no need to play these things off against each other. For Paul's argument, Abraham is both father of the faithful and an example of faith, and he is the latter precisely because he is the former.

As exemplar of faith, he is especially significant because he is the father of the faithful, and the principle of like father like son applies. I am not persuaded of the more recently proposed readings, although I do appreciate the way that they make the reader more attentive to the fact that Abraham's importance to Paul's argument is not as a random example of a man of faith in the Old Testament, but as the father of the family of the people of God.

The works of the law are things that chiefly mark out Jews from Gentiles, things like circumcision and the dietary requirements. However, Paul's concern is not restricted to things like circumcision. [5 : 57] He is concerned about anything that would suggest that Abraham or anyone else receives the gifts of God's grace on the basis of something about them. Although it would come under the same strictures and condemnation, Paul's concern probably is not about people trying to earn their salvation.

What he is challenging seems to be more subtle than that. It may be instructive to reflect upon Paul's enumeration of the things that marked him out as a Jew in Philippians chapter 3 verses 4 to 6.

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law, blameless. We should observe that many of the things that Paul lists here aren't about anything that Paul himself did. Rather, they concerned Paul's Jewish status and ancestry. These are things that he once believed set him apart from Gentiles as an especially fitting recipient of God's grace. The pre-conversion Paul, like Jews of that time more generally, could have spoken at length about the greatness of God's grace. It wasn't that they lacked a theology of divine grace, believing that salvation was to be earned or merited.

[7 : 16] Rather, it was because they believed that God's grace was somehow more appropriately given to certain persons. God is indeed profoundly gracious, but there was something about Abraham that made him a fitting recipient of grace.

Being an observant Jew does not earn you God's grace, but it does mark you out from Gentiles, tax collectors, sinners, and the rest, as someone to whom God's grace will more appropriately come. We should also note, looking at ourselves, that most of our claims about our superiority and worth, our beliefs that we are somehow greater than or marked out from others, are based as much upon unearned factors of identity, rather than things that we have done.

It may be our family, it may be our class, our nationality, our wealthy background, our race, our neighbourhood, our physical appearance, or something else like that. All of these things can sustain a sense of entitlement, even to things that we would readily acknowledge to be gracious gifts. Such things can also lead to some sense of greater entitlement to God's grace than others, to a belief that we are set apart from others by virtue of some factor of our identity.

[8 : 25] However, Paul rules out the possibility of any such boast before God. God's grace is not received according to anything that marks us out from others. On the contrary, it is received entirely apart from any worth in the recipient.

We all stand on the same level ground of utter unworthiness before God. Paul turns to the scripture itself to substantiate his point. He goes back to Genesis chapter 15, where God makes a covenant with Abraham and promises him a multitude of offspring.

In verse 6 of that chapter, we are told that Abraham believed God and was considered to be in good standing with God on that basis, as one who believed God's promise. He then proceeds to unpack a term that introduces Genesis chapter 15, where God announces that Abraham's reward shall be very great.

Now, the term reward can be used in the sense of pay, but Paul shows that such a meaning cannot be sustained in this instance. Such pay is received as the earned recompense for the work that someone has undertaken.

It is not a gift, but something to which the worker has a claim. Yet the person who has done nothing to earn pay through labour, but simply believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, by the very faith by which he believes the promise of God, he is reckoned to be in right standing with God.

[9 : 44] The whole logic of work and reward breaks down. God simply does not operate on such a basis when considering or declaring people to be in good standing with him. The expression, him who justifies the ungodly, here is an astonishing one.

We should recall texts like Exodus chapter 23 verse 7, I will not acquit the wicked. The claim that God justifies the ungodly, that he vindicates unrighteous persons, or declares them to be in good standing with himself, is nothing short of scandalous.

Although part of the meaning of the term ungodly might be a reference to those outside of the covenant of Israel, that simply cannot be the entire meaning, as we see from what follows.

Paul now brings forward another witness, King David. In Psalm 32 verses 1 to 2, David writes as one whose lawless deeds are forgiven. The law does not count David's genuine lawlessness against him, but graciously considers him to be someone in good standing with himself.

David had violated the law. The law gave him no standing for an appeal before God, because the law clearly stood in condemnation over him. He acknowledged himself that his deeds were lawless.

[10 : 57] David's standing before God boiled down to the sheer grace of God in not counting his sin against him. He was justified apart from works, declared to be in good standing with God, apart from any worth on his part.

Paul looks more closely at the example of Abraham, paying a special attention to the chronology. The reckoning righteous of Abraham that Paul has referenced, God's reckoning Abraham to be in good standing with himself, occurred back in Genesis chapter 15.

However, Abraham did not receive the sign of circumcision until chapter 17. This suggests that circumcision was never the basis of Abraham's good standing with God. Rather, circumcision referenced something more basic.

Abraham already had good standing with God, by the faith through which he received the gracious promise of God given to him apart from worth. Circumcision functioned as a seal of that standing, a standing that he already enjoyed by faith.

It was like the ring that symbolises and seals a couple's loving union. It isn't the basis for the loving union, but it's a sign and a seal of it. This foundational narrative of Israel actually undercuts supposed Jewish exceptionalism in relationship to God.

[12 : 09] The Abraham of Genesis 15 is actually the paradigm of the Gentile believer, more than the Jewish believer. Although the Abraham of Genesis 17, who is a man of faith marked out by circumcision, is the paradigm of the Jewish believer.

And so Abraham stands for both the Jewish and the Gentile parts of his family. Paul now develops this point. Abraham was promised that all peoples would be blessed through him, that he would be the heir of the world.

However, this could never be fulfilled within the Jewish exclusivism of the bounds of the law. Indeed, if things had happened that way, it would have nullified the promise originally given to Abraham.

It would have made the blessing exclusive to one people, confining the riches of God intended for the entire world to a single nation. It would also have given Jews a ground for boasting in their worth over other peoples.

What is more, the law is powerless to bring about the promise. Even worse, the law in many respects exacerbates the problem. By placing a lot of commandments before Israel, commandments which they broke, it served to multiply transgressions of which other peoples outside of the law weren't guilty.

[13 : 18] Rather than granting Israel a special good standing with the Lord, the law actually had the opposite effect. It singled them out for particular judgment on account of their closeness to him.

