
Prayers

To God

Almighty God; You are our Creator and our Redeemer, and Your care for us extends far beyond our understanding or our reach. Give us the humility to accept that ultimately, we do not know all things, and that we may explore but never compete with Your supreme creative and saving power. May we honour You as the One from whom everything comes, and live as if we truly believe it. AMEN

For Self

Confess your faith to the Lord; speak as if to Jesus personally
Confess what you believe about God and the Holy Spirit; speak to the One who is Your Maker
Confess your sins to God, and tell Him whether you are sincerely intent on repentance
Confess those habitual sins which prevent you from spending time with God.

For others

Pray for those who work in the field of immigration
Pray for politicians who decide on immigration law
Pray for immigrants who need love and a home, in desperate circumstances
Pray for those who are working for justice within nations in turmoil

Meditation

It is a great day when the Spirit of God
Moves in the heart of a man or a woman,
Everything changes, for the Spirit comes:

Eyes are opened, bodies and souls are healed,
The spirit comes alive and the heart is motivated
Colours are fresh, the sky brighter, and the world good.,
The Bible comes alive with meaning and purpose and love,
The face of one who knows the Saviour shows radiance and joy,
And prayer becomes as natural as breathing in the clear fresh air,
All who hear His voice are filled with potential, just waiting to be tapped,
And the world is full of opportunity, through the Lord and God who made it.

To those who do not know it ... know this is your right!
To those who know, but don't remember it ... what has happened?
To those who want to know it ... just ask the Lord of all!
To those who glory in it ... pray for those who need to know!

Bible Passage

Romans 4:1-12

¹ What then do we say was found by Abraham, the natural forefather of our race? ² For if Abraham was made right with God by what he did, then he has something to be proud of, but not before God! ³ So what does Scripture say?

'Abraham believed God, and it was regarded as putting him right with God.'

⁴ Now for someone who works, wages are not regarded as a gift, but as money earned, ⁵ whereas to one who does no 'work' but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, it is faith that is *'regarded as putting him right with God'*! ⁶ In this same way, David also pronounces a blessing upon those whom God *'regards as being right'* with Himself, separate from 'work'.

⁷ *'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;*

⁸ *blessed are those for whom
the Lord has no regard for their sin.'*

⁹ So is this great blessing pronounced on the circumcised alone, or on the uncircumcised as well? For we say that for Abraham, *'faith was regarded as putting him right with God.'* ¹⁰ So when did this happen? Was it before or after he was circumcised? It was before he was circumcised! ¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness he obtained by faith, while he was still uncircumcised.

In this way, even before he was circumcised, Abraham became the ancestor of all who believe, and their faith be regarded as putting them in a right relationship with God; ¹² moreover he is also the ancestor of the circumcised, who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of faith, as demonstrated by our ancestor Abraham even before he was circumcised.

Bible study Review

Today's text may seem rather tedious and repetitive, but this is a crucial scriptural text. Romans chapter 4 is Paul's famous argument about the origins of a right relationship with God, in which he uses the stories of Abraham in Genesis to argue that faith is more basic to our relationship with God than the Law (given several generations later to Moses).

Some omit Romans 4 from their reading of the letter because they do not feel its intricate arguments relate to their experience, but to do this would be ignorant if not disrespectful. If we ignore this passage, we lose the opportunity to learn what it says about the unity and reliability of the Gospel message. Paul's great vision here is of a God who is consistent over the centuries and who acts faithfully. So his driving argument is that if faith in Christ is at the heart of God's 'Good News', as he has just argued in chapter 3, then this must always have been God's intention. Moreover, we must be able to justify this by what we read in God's word, the Old Testament.

If Paul is right, then he pits himself against the entire Jewish establishment and the self identity of his own people in the first century AD; but he is not afraid to do that! His point here is that the story of Abraham proves that faith lies closer to the heart of a relationship with God than the mere practice of religion (4:1-8). The true people of God are defined by faith, not by circumcision (4:9-12).

The first point here is that a relationship with God is always a gift (4:1-5), it cannot be earned. Paul describes the traditional Jewish practice of 'keeping the Law' as like working for wages, but in contrast, he points out that the nation's founder, Abraham, received his relationship with God as a gift (Gen 15:1-6). The conclusion is obvious; however important it is to live according to God's just and moral law, a relationship with God is only possible as a gift of God's grace.

To strengthen his point, Paul then quotes from Psalm 32:1,2 (4:7,8), written by David after his adultery with Bathsheba, and reflecting his gratitude for God's gracious forgiveness. Crucially for this passage, the text explains that God did not '*regard*' David's sin, and the word used here is the same used in Genesis 15:6 to describe Abraham's relationship with God (see '*regarded as ...*' 4:5,8 above). Paul therefore argues that scripture defines a right relationship with God as a matter of His judgement alone, so both Abraham and David are accepted on the basis of their faith, not whether they have done what is right or not according to the Law. Now the stories of Abraham and David have many twists and turns, but their relationship with God is not in dispute. So Paul's point is now clear, and no one can claim a relationship with God through the practice of their religion.

Next, Paul asks whether having a right relationship with God (called 'righteousness') is available for Gentiles as well as Jews (4:9), and again, he goes back to the story of Abraham. He does not dispute that Abraham was given the sign of circumcision late on in life, but this happened after God accepted his faith. Abraham was proved righteous by faith in Gen 15:1-6, which was before he was circumcised, in Gen 17. Paul therefore argues that God can accept faith in whomsoever he pleases, circumcised or not (4:12); God is gracious towards Jew and Gentile alike.

Paul sets this out to show that the Gospel message does not vary. In his day, some Gentile Christians wanted nothing to do with the Jews, because their insistence on keeping the Law compromised freedom in Christ. Jewish Christians felt that their heritage should be honoured and circumcision should be retained. Also, traditional non-Christian Jews strongly opposed the Christian faith because it threatened all they held dear, especially the purity of their religion and the laws of Moses. Romans 4 stands as an argument against all such division amongst God's people. All are accepted by God on the basis of their faith, as argued in Romans 3.

Some think that such a passage of scripture does little for us today. However, God's people are hardly any better now, though the issues over which we are divided are different, and they look to outsiders as like squabbling! Surely, we must always seek the truth of the Gospel within God's Word, as Paul did, if we are ever to put our divisions aside? Whatever the merits of Paul's detailed arguments here, he presents a clear and right conclusion that God counts as righteous those who have faith in Him and confess their sins. We need to be reminded that this is God's Gospel, not ours.

Going Deeper

Attacking Jewish identity

It is probably true to say that the Jewish people regard two things as basic to their existence. First, they are God's chosen people through physical descent from Abraham, by his first son Isaac (the only son of Sarah), and his grandson Jacob (Gen 32:28), and this ancestry is proved by the physical sign of circumcision in Jewish men. Secondly, the Jews are people of the Law, and live in obedience to the commands of God as given to Moses (Exodus 20 f.). Of course, the 'law' was changed and interpreted by generations of Jews so that at the time of Jesus, the 'Law' was a very different thing to what is written in Scripture. Indeed, Pharisees were instigating wholesale reforms within Judaism based on their own interpretation of the Law, built up through the generations.

So if Paul is to argue that all are under the same authority of God, he must dismantle these same pillars of Jewish identity; the law and circumcision. Moreover, if he was to persuade people that the Christian faith was consistent with its Old Testament past, then he had to deal conclusively with these two issues. He had to show that God's intent was always to 'chase' not only the descendants of Abraham but also Gentiles; and this meant that he had to break the perceived connection between circumcision and God's favour. He also had to show that in order to 'count' people as righteous in His eyes, God required faith and not right religion according to the Law.

The experience of Abraham

We will understand this text best if we recall that God appears to Abraham at least three times, on each occasion telling him he was chosen and giving him divine promises. On the first occasion in Genesis 12, God promises to 'bless' Abraham and 'all the families of the earth' (Gen 12:1-3), but there is no recorded response from Abraham. Later, when Abraham is worried about being childless and having no heir, he brings the matter to the Lord. God then promises Abraham that he will have a son and 'many descendants' (15:1-5), and it is at this point that Abraham 'believes God ...' and his faith is rewarded by God (Gen 15:6 – Romans 4:3). The third appearance comes as Sarah becomes pregnant and Abraham is given the practice of circumcision (Gen 17) as a mark of the covenant for his only son and heir, Isaac.

Paul simply makes the point that Abraham's basic response to God has nothing to do with either circumcision or the Law. He is not put right with God by doing any 'work' or for that matter being obedient. He is justified through his faith. During his life, Abraham was responsible for many things, and he even had other sons and daughters outside the line of Isaac and Jacob (through his second wife Keturah - see Gen 25:1-11). However, no one can read the story of Abraham and not agree he was indeed a man of faith, and this was the key to His relationship with God. Paul's point held valid in the first century and it is true today.

The quote from David and the Psalms (4:6-8)

It may seem odd that Paul chose this next text, in which the psalm declares a blessing on those 'whose lawless sins are forgiven and whose sins are covered'. The psalm goes on to describe the forgiveness of sins in terms of being 'counted' as right before God (4:8), which seems very different from the subjects of faith and the law under discussion here. It is only when we recognise the connection between this psalm and the quote from Genesis found in the word 'count' that it makes sense, as I have explained above. However, we are still left wondering why Paul chose this text, for Abraham was counted as righteous due to his faith, but David (the assumed author of this psalm) was counted as righteous despite his sins, and on the surface, this seems less than fair.

It is likely that Paul chose the example of David for a number of reasons. First, it emphasises the fact that people's acceptance in God's eyes cannot be earned. Now, David had clearly sinned by committing both adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11). It is interesting that this is the first mention of forgiveness in the whole letter of Romans, and the first indication that God will forgive sins according to His will and pleasure. Now, we should not think that David escaped the consequences of his sin. His repentance and confession brought with it God's judgement, and he was forgiven after he accepted the punishment, and was then able to move on in his life. He was then able to write a psalm, some time later, about the forgiveness of God.

Of course, David was one of the other great pillars of Jewish self identity, and Paul was keen to demonstrate that he was made right with God by grace and not by his own obedience to the law. David was the great leader of God's people, and it was believed that the Messiah would be a 'Son of David'. In a subtle way, Paul used an example from the life of David to add to his point about faith. For if God had not forgiven David these sins, then he would never have proved worthy of the honours God placed on him, especially the great promise that someone of his own line would 'sit on the throne of Israel for ever (2 Samuel 7:13).

What comes first, faith or obedience, and who may receive God's grace? (4:9-12)

Verses 9 to 12 are often referred to as the place in Romans where Paul makes the case that faith comes before circumcision, so the grace of God is more important than the old covenant of Judaism symbolised by the law and circumcision. We should be very careful with this text, however, because if we follow through what Paul is saying, his aim not to dismiss the Jews but to include the Gentiles.

Yes, in verse 10, Paul argues that Abraham's faith comes before his circumcision, and Paul uses circumcision here to represent all it means to be a Jew, including keeping the Law. It is only by looking back at his previous point about being counted as right before God (4:1-5) that we can now draw the conclusion that faith is basic to any relationship with God, rather than the Law. Here, at the point where Paul draws out the timeline of Abraham's life, he is illustrating a different point. When he says, '*how then was it counted? Was it before or after he was circumcised?*' (4:10), it is to conclude later on that Abraham is '*the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised*' (4:11). In other words, Abraham's story proves that Gentiles can be saved!

The remainder of this part of the text is devoted to an explanation that God saves people and counts them righteous on the basis of their faith whether they are Jew or Gentile (4:12), so it is clear that Paul's point is inclusive not exclusive. We must be very clear about this because it still causes confusion amongst Christians even to this day. In everything Paul says about the Law, circumcision, grace and faith, he never says that the Law is replaced by grace or that it is superseded by grace. He says that Faith and the grace of God are fundamental, and that they are the way God saves people, and not the law, but he does not reject what the law stands for of itself. As he wrote at the end of chapter 3, '*do we throw out the law because of faith? ... No ... we uphold the law!*' (3:31).

Application

Discipleship issues

Law and grace

I have heard many preachers attempt to simplify the Gospel by saying that the old law of 'works' has been replaced by the new law of 'grace'. This is often preached as the true message of Galatians chapter 3, for example. I strongly suggest that you read both Romans 4 and Galatians 3 very carefully, for to say such a thing is a presumption. Every time Paul writes about this he emphasises that God saves people by grace alone and not by the law, but he never dismisses the law as irrelevant. He explains that God's grace is all sufficient, but where the law cannot deliver salvation, grace does. The law has a place in God's plan which is to reveal sin, and woe betide us if we forget it! The preacher must remember these matters to avoid misinterpreting the Gospel, even today.

Maintaining the balance

You may have heard sermons about grace and law, and you may not have thought about this matter before, but it is a very important. This is a scriptural argument, and it would be wrong to dismiss any part of God's Word. Those who turn past this part of Scripture lay themselves open to problems; the difference between proclaiming grace and abandoning the law, and proclaiming grace and putting the law in its proper place may seem to be only a matter of emphasis to some. However, the church has an enemy that specialises in altering the truth just a little, so that it is diluted. Certainly, if we forget God's law we will never understand the full weight of human sin, but thank God we have a Saviour!

Today, the Christian must proclaim that God saves by grace, and he saves all sinners, Jews and Gentiles and people of all races, cultures and religions. If we are to explain God's grace to people then we need to demonstrate the truth of God's moral law so that others can see the difference between what is right and wrong. We therefore need to know the Law, live it and be willing to explain it. However, we do this to go one stage further, which is to testify to the grace of God found in Jesus Christ, and show that He is the answer to the quest of every human heart, and the one who does indeed forgive sins. Today's text goes to the heart of all this, and we should not think otherwise.

Ideas for what to do

- Think through all that you have received from God, as a free gift of His grace. Then read through the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1f.) and confess your sins. Give thanks for God's grace, and give thanks for God's law.
- Pray for preachers who carry the great burden of proclaiming the Gospel. Pray that they will be willing to use God's Word and preach from it. Pray that they will be blessed by the Holy Spirit and given insight into God's eternal truth, for the benefit of all and the Kingdom of God

Questions for groups

1. Look back at the previous verses in chapter 3 (27-31) and check that you understand how this leads into our passage today. What does it say to help us interpret this passage?
2. Look up the passages in the Old Testament quoted by Paul and discuss what you think they mean.
3. Do you believe that people understand the difference between the Gospel of grace and the importance of the law today? If not, why not?

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, may I be like a tree planted by a stream drawing water from the eternal springs and growing stronger every day, fed by Your warmth, light, and water. May I so grow that in due season I bear the fruit I have been created to produce, and contribute to Your harvest; an offering of thanksgiving dedicated to You. AMEN