

“For This Reason It Depends on Faith...”

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25

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Today we are going to do a deep dive on the topic of *faith*. Faith, or belief, or trust – all three words really are interchangeable, at least as far as the New Testament is concerned. We’re going to do this by way of Paul’s rich discussion of faith in Romans 4, and through the story of Abraham in the book of Genesis. Abraham was the *biological* ancestor of the Jews. He is also the *spiritual* ancestor of all of us Christians. Why? Well, Paul explains this. The passage is complicated – almost as complicated as a similar passage over in Galatians 3. It’s not the easiest to follow. But it’s one of the most important passages for Christians to understand. For everything we do here rests upon the premise of *faith*. And if we don’t have a proper understanding of what faith is, and what it is *not*, well then, what’s the point?

To set the stage, let’s take a moment to briefly review the key points of Abraham’s life. Abraham lived the first 75 years of his life in Mesopotamia, in what is now the country of Iraq. It was a pretty unremarkable life, as far as we know. But when Abraham was 75 years old, Abraham heard God speaking to him: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1) Abraham left, obeying the will of the Lord, taking with him his wife Sarah, their nephew Lot, a bunch of animals, and various people who worked for him. They settled in the land of Canaan, modern Israel, a journey of many hundreds of miles – by foot, of course.

Abraham and Sarah did not have any children. It hadn’t been for lack of trying. Infertility happens to many couples, then and now. But one night, some years after Abraham arrived in Canaan, God spoke to him again. Abraham had appointed an heir, one of the men who worked for him, but God said to Abraham: “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” God invited Abraham to look at the night sky – a sky filled with many, *many* more stars than we can typically see today – and God said to Abraham: “Count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.” And Abraham “believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:4-6) Remember that line – we’re going to come back to that!

Well, nothing happened. Abraham and Sarah continued trying, but Sarah did not get pregnant. In desperation, Sarah suggests to Abraham that he sleep with her serving girl, named Hagar. He does so. Hagar conceives, and bears a son, Ishmael. At the time of Ishmael’s birth, Abraham was 86 years old.

Thirteen years later, when Abraham is 99, God speaks to him again: “You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.” (Genesis 17:4) God makes a covenant with Abraham, instituting the rite of circumcision for all the males in Abraham’s household. God also tells Abraham that he will have a son by his wife, Sarah. “I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” (Genesis 17:16) Abraham thinks that’s funny. Sarah does too, when she hears about it.

But God is as good as God's word. Sarah conceives and gives birth to a son, Isaac. Abraham is 100 years old; Sarah is 90. Isaac grows up, gets married, and fathers a son, Jacob. God gives Jacob the name "Israel." So Abraham becomes the biological ancestor of all twelve tribes of Israel.

This was a foundational story for the Jewish people in the time of the New Testament; it remains a foundational story for them today. This story is retold in Jewish synagogues every single year.

So the apostle Paul, who was a Jew, knew this story well. So did all the Christians who had come from Jewish stock, and indeed many of the Christians who weren't Jews but who were familiar with Jewish history and tradition. Today, when we approach Romans 4, folks like me have to remind people of the basic story; back then, most readers of Paul's audience would have known the story very well.

It's important to note Abraham's different reactions to God, when he hears God say that he will have a son. The first time, when Abraham was 86 years old, he "believed God." The second time, when Abraham was 99 years old, he "fell on his face and laughed." That laugh was not one of Abraham's finer moments. Paul focuses Abraham's *better* response, his *more faithful* response, when God told him he would have descendants as many as the stars in the sky, and Abraham simply *believed*.

It's that act of *belief*, that act of *trust* in God's word, that act of *faith* that matters to Paul. Or, rather, I should say, it's that act of *belief*, and God's *response* to that belief, that matters to Paul. In Genesis we read: Abraham "believed" God, and God "*reckoned it to him as righteousness.*" What does that mean, "reckoned it to him as righteousness?" Some translations say God "*credited it to him as righteousness,*" or God "*accounted it to him for righteousness.*" That's still murky. Don't trust the CEB here – they say that God "recognized Abram's high moral character." That's just flat-out wrong; this isn't about Abraham's *moral character* in the slightest. It's about his *faith and trust in God*. A better paraphrase would be that of the Living Bible: "Abram believed God; then God *considered him righteous on account of his faith.*" That's much more accurate. It's also much more clear. Abraham simply *believed* God's word. He *trusted* what God had to say. He didn't mock, or scoff, or laugh, or in any way think to himself, "Yeah, right." He just simply *accepted* what God was telling him. *He didn't have to do that.* And, in fact, he *wouldn't* do that, 13 years later, when God would tell him something similar. This time, Abraham simply *accepted*, simply *believed*, and God was *impressed* by that. So impressed, that God "reckoned it to him as righteousness." God gave Abraham high marks; God credited it to Abraham's account, so to speak. God considered Abraham *righteous*. Paul puts it like this: "Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations,' according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.'" (Romans 4:18-22)

Now, the timing of this matters. That act of faith on Abraham's part took place *before* God established the covenant with Abraham, *before* God instituted the rite of circumcision, which was the first "law" that God established for Abraham and his descendants. The *righteousness* that God credited Abraham with came about as a result of Abraham's *faith*, *not* as a result of Abraham following God's commandments – because those commandments didn't exist yet. There is a sequence of events here. *First* comes the promise of God: "so shall your descendants be." *Second* comes the faith of Abraham: "Abraham believed God." *Third* comes the righteousness that God credits Abraham with: "the Lord

reckoned it to him as righteousness.” *Fourth* come the *laws* that God wants Abraham and his offspring to follow: the rite of circumcision, and all the rest that will come later on. So *the Jewish law* was, in Paul’s mind, not *nearly* as important as simple *faith and trust in God*. The Jewish laws, as God instituted them, were obligatory on all the biological offspring of Abraham. But *faith and trust in God* – well, that’s something *anybody* can have – anybody who, like Abraham, is simply willing to *trust God at God’s word*.

So who is God willing to credit with *righteousness*? Not just those who *scrupulously observe the Jewish law*. Paul was one of those; Paul had been trained as a Pharisee, the strictest of the strict among the Jews when it came to following every little jot and tittle of the Jewish law. What Paul is saying here *goes against everything he was trained*. He’s saying that righteousness *does not come from following the Jewish law*. Righteousness, in the eyes of God, comes simply through *faith and trust in God*.

This was a radical thing for a Jew to say. It’s one of the reasons why Paul’s letter to the Romans is so important. Many of us have been taught to *obey the law*. Obey the laws of our country, obey the laws of God; I remember having to memorize the Ten Commandments in Sunday School. Those are all good things, and I’m not saying we shouldn’t do them. But there’s something *more important* than following the law, something *far* more important than subscribing to a legalistic understanding of Christianity, something *far more significant* for our spiritual lives than simply *doing what we are told*.

It’s *believing God*. It’s having *faith* that *God is as good as God’s word*. It’s *trusting God*.

What Paul is saying here is that *what really matters* – what really matters, more than *anything* else – is *faith*. Faith, belief, trust; the words are all interchangeable in the New Testament, as I said earlier. In Greek, they are all variations of the same word, *pistis*, the noun, or *pisteuo*, the verb. In English, we render the noun as “faith” or “belief” or “trust,” and the verb as “believe,” but it’s all the same in Greek. If I’ve counted correctly, those words *pistis* and *pisteuo* occur 17 times here in Romans 4. It’s the fundamental concept underlying that whole chapter. *Faith*, which leads to *righteousness*.

So Paul concludes: “Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him,’ were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.” *Faith* is what matters. Paul insists that people who are not Jews do not have to follow the Jewish law. Why not? *Because that’s not what really matters*. What really matters is *faith*. Faith, belief, trust – in God.

When we believe, we become *spiritual descendants* of Abraham. He is our *ancestor in the faith*.

We make a mistake if we teach people – adults or children – that Christianity is all about following God’s *rules*. It is certainly true that God wants certain things from us, certain kinds of behaviors, and not others. But our *obedience* to God comes as a result – as a *byproduct* – of our faith. We have a desire to please God *because* we have faith and trust *in* God. The belief *has* to come first. *That* is what is most essential. *That* is what gives us the credit of righteousness in God’s eyes. That simple, basic belief that *God is who he says he is*, and that *God will do what he says he will do*.

There is nothing we can do to *make* somebody else have faith. We simply have to plant seeds. *Tell people who God is*. *Tell people what God will do for them*. Then pray that the seeds will blossom.

For it all depends on faith. Everything we do here depends on faith. Faith, belief, trust – *in God*.

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