

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
Paul's Letter to the Romans – Chapter 4, Verses 1-8
Notes from Tuesday August 31, 2010
Last Revised on September 5, 2010

(n.b. On this night the class began at Verse 27 of Chapter 3)

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 4, Verses 1-3

Will someone please read the first three verses of Chapter 4 in Japanese

Thank you. Now will someone please read those verses in English.

- 1 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?**

- 2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.**

- 3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."**

Thank you.

Paul has just (at the end of Chapter 3) advanced the notion that the gospel upholds the law.

To reinforce this he now reaches back into the law (i.e. OT Scripture) for what might have been the supreme counterexample.

Surely many Jews regarded Abraham as intrinsically righteous and the supreme example of how one could be justified before God through his own actions.

So Paul goes ahead and raises the issue

Verse 1 reads:

(Verse 1)

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?

Paul will elsewhere, and later in this letter, make the point that Abraham is a spiritual father to many who are not descended from Abraham according to the flesh --- that is to gentiles as well as to Jews.

But here wishes to begin with the Jews, or perhaps the somewhat larger group of people who

can claim Abraham as a forefather according to the flesh.”

And Paul includes himself among them, saying “our forefather...”

Abraham was for them the ultimate man, nearly superhuman, in word and deed

“Didn’t Abraham, at least, earn God’s respect through his acts of obedience?”

Paul proceeds to examine this question.

(Verse 2)

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

Clearly Abraham said and did many admirable things.

He also did some things that were despicable by our standards.

But then again he lived before Moses and therefore before our standards were applicable.

So someone might argue that Abraham was indeed justified by works --- his willingness to sacrifice Isaac being perhaps the most prominent work of all.

And surely for Abraham’s sake, God will preserve all of Israel.

Many of Paul’s contemporaries reasoned along these lines.

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It seems very unlikely that Paul himself held such a view, but he is aware that others think this way so he considers this hypothetical argument,

He says, OK, if Abraham was justified by works, then he has something to boast about before men (i.e. Abraham is admirable before men) but not before God.

There are two reasons for this.

First it is logically impossible for anyone to have a reason to boast before God because of their works, because the best we could ever do, is exactly what God asked of us, and that would still not be a basis for boasting in our works.

Suppose Abraham had followed through and sacrificed Isaac, as it seems likely he would have done, had God not stopped him.

Even so, he would only have obeyed the command of his sovereign lord, and that is no ground for boasting, merely doing one’s job.

There's just no way to do anything that warrants boasting before God.

But the second point is the one Paul states here, in Verse 3.

He asks:

(Verse 3)

For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

This is a quote from Genesis 15:6.

In this passage, Abraham had already been a servant of God for a long time and has already done many noteworthy acts. Yet he has still not been circumcised.

At this point in the narrative, God promises the aged and Childless Abram that he shall have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, a seemingly impossible thing, and Abraham believed God.

It nothing that Abraham did, but simply the fact that he believed God, that was counted to him as righteousness.

It is also true, I think, that every noteworthy deed of Abraham, including his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, proceeded from his belief --- his trust in the faithfulness and the ability of God.

Which is yet another reason why faith rather than works may be said to be the thing that justifies us.

And mind you, these proofs are being offered from the law (OT) and not from the gospel (NT)

Wherever we look, it is the inward reality that matters to God, never that which is merely external, not even the greatest of good works, which can never be greater than the standard God has set.

The argument is further extended in what follows.

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 4, Verses 4-5

Will someone please read verses 4 and 5 in Japanese

Thank you. Now will someone please read those verses in English.

4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his

due.

5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,

Thank you.

Still looking at the passage cited from Genesis, Paul seizes on the the specific language and says in Verse 4:

(Verse 4)

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.

Here the point is simply that if Abraham had earned something from God through his works for God, then the author of Genesis would not have said that what Abraham received was accounted for as a gift.

Verse 5 continues...

(Verse 5)

And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,

The point here is not that Abraham was thoroughly lazy or disobedient; he was nothing of the sort, nor should we be.

However Abraham did not suppose that he could justify himself before God, neither did he think that he could achieve much through his own efforts.

The main thing about Abraham was that he trusted in God's faithfulness to do what he had said he would do.

It was for this, his faith, that Abraham was counted as righteous.

The Old Testament is, as we are beginning to see, a Law of faith and not a law of works.

The same thing appears on the life of David.

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 4, Verses 6-8

Will someone please read verses 6-8 in Japanese

Thank you. Now will someone please read those verses in English.

6 just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

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

8 blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."

Thank you.

It is hard to say who, Abraham or David, was more loved and admired by the Jews, or which of them was the more or less morally upright.

Yet upon reflection we can only admit that what was by far the most remarkable about both of these men was the extent to which they trusted God.

These are men of faith, like all of the other heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11 and elsewhere.

Surely David knew that salvation was a matter of grace and not a matter of works.

Verse 6 reads...

(Verse 6)

just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

This is Paul's commentary on Psalm 32, Verses 1 and 2, which follow as verses 7 and 8 of Romans Chapter 4:

(Verse 7 and 8)

"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."

This is the heart of David and the heart of the gospel.

We have got to get here and recognize that we are lawless, and sinful, and there is nothing that we can do to change this.

We can only go to God and ask him to cover our sin, and not to count it.

Our only hope lies in believing that God will do this.

Now we know how God does this.

In Christ crucified.

Abraham, David, and all the rest can go there, and only there, for salvation.

The gospel is the power of God until salvation to everyone who believes,

To the Jew first

but also to the Gentile.

That is where Paul goes next.

(n. b. this is where we ran out of time on August 31)

Closing Prayer