

When in Rome

Paul's Letter to the Romans



Session 6

Abraham, Model of Faith (Romans 4:1-25)

1. Why Paul's Appeal to Abraham?

- Abraham was (and is) regarded by Jews as the founder of both their race and their religion, honored for his being a righteous man. Paul must obviously take this on if his teaching on the righteousness of faith is to be received.
- Paul wants to show that his teachings on the righteousness of faith and justification through faith are not new but foundational. So he goes back to the beginning.
- Paul is a skilled teacher. He knows an idea or concept must be shown, modeled, and personified. He's saying, "Want to know what this looks like? Look at Father Abraham!"

2. Abraham and Justification by Works (Vss. 1-8)

- Jewish rabbis taught that Abram was called by God because he was a righteous man, that is, righteous before God because of his righteous works.
- Paul is saying, "No, Abraham was called and affirmed by God because of his faith, not his good actions." His righteousness is a gift, not an obligation for services rendered.
- Crucial to understanding Paul's argument here are Genesis 12:1-7, Hebrews 11:8, and Genesis 15:6, all revealing Abraham's faith rather than his works as making him righteous.
- Also crucial is the realization that "the law," (that is, the Ten Commandments) was not yet given at the time of Abraham. That came 500+ years later with Moses.
- What's more, Abraham can be shown to be a sinner in his claiming Sarah was his sister rather than his wife and in his taking Hagar as a concubine to have a son. He was not righteous, morally speaking.
- Paul continues to make the point that God justifies the wicked, citing another hero/sinner, King David, and using David's own words in Psalm 32:1-2.

3. Circumcision, Un-circumcision, and the Righteousness of Faith (vss. 9-12)

- The argument moves to another level. Jewish rabbis taught that to be right with God, one had to be circumcised. Certainly Abraham was circumcised (Genesis 17),

a righteous act in keeping with God's command. Wasn't his circumcision there before his faith?

- Paul answers strongly, "No, faith came first!" Abraham's faith can be seen already in Genesis 12 and 15. His circumcision comes in Chapter 17. Abraham was not circumcised until 14 years after his call!
- So Abraham is not the father of a righteousness of circumcision but the father of a righteousness of faith.
- Two startling truths emerge here for the 1st Century Jew reading Paul's letter: 1) one may be uncircumcised and still be righteous through faith and 2) one may be circumcised, but if lacking faith, be unrighteous before God.

4. Two Answers to the Question, "How Do I Get Right With God?" (vss. 13-18)

Paul characterizes the two perspectives of getting right with God as follows:

By My Own Efforts

Law
Transgression
Wrath

Through Christ

Promise
Faith/Trust
Grace

5. Faith in the God Who Makes the Impossible Possible

- Abraham was 100 years old when he was told that Sarah (at 90!) would bear him a son. He was as good as dead, yet he trusted in the promise (Hebrews 11:11-12).
- Abraham's faith was in God, who could accomplish the impossible.
- Faith sees God and the difference God can make for the future. Faith in God leads to hope in God.
- What was true of Abraham is true of us: our faith in God is credited to us as righteousness.
- Our faith is not simply in God's promises but in His promises fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

6. Summary Truths

- Abraham is a model, a cherished example, of the righteousness of faith.
- Circumcision does not make one righteous before God, as seen in Abraham's pre-circumcision righteousness of faith.
- Seeking righteousness through good works results in God's judgment and wrath.
- The righteousness of faith results in God's grace.
- Hope = faith + vision.
- The Christian faith is primarily faith in what only God can accomplish, faith in what is humanly impossible.

7. For Discussion

- If good works don't count for righteousness before God, why do Christians even bother with good works?
- Isn't faith itself a good work, something we do?
- Who are your heroes of faith?
- What is the relationship between faith and good works?