

06. Romans 4



Introduction to Romans Chapter Four

Chapter four is the climax of Paul's argument. He has said that our being in the right relationship with God is not the result of our obedience. It is a grace given us by God, an unmerited gift. We are simply to open our hearts to receive it in wonder and gratitude. Of course, if our faith is genuine, the grace given us by God will bear fruit in obedience. It will enable us to do God's will. Paul has already spoken about this as the 'obedience of faith' (1:5) and he will have more to say about it later. For the moment, the essential point is that obedience is the fruit of grace that is welcomed in faith; it is not the cause of our being in communion with God. Paul has just said that this teaching, far from overthrowing the law, actually upholds it (see 3:31). He now demonstrates the truth of this by going to the law – to the book of Genesis – and what it reveals about Abraham.

Paul's contemporaries tended to stress Abraham's obedience. He was told to be circumcised and he obeyed (Genesis 17). He was told – or so he thought – to sacrifice his only son Isaac, and he was willing to do so (Genesis 22). He is praised for this:

‘Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations, and no one has been found like him in glory. He kept the law of the Most High, and entered into a covenant with him; he certified the covenant in his flesh, and when he was tested he proved faithful’ (Sirach 44:19-20).

‘Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?’ (1 Maccabees 2:52).

We find the same idea in the New Testament: ‘Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?’ (James 2:21).

Paul does not deny the importance of obedience. He does, however, insist that the obedience that is important is the ‘**obedience of faith**’ (1:5) – the obedience that is the fruit of God’s justifying grace that has been received by faith. It is God’s gift of righteousness that enables obedience. It is not obedience that earns or brings about righteousness. Paul’s teaching is consistent with traditional Judaism. He did not have to convince a Jew of the necessity of faith. What he did have to do was show that while there is an unbreakable link between faith and obedience, **Gentiles can be both faithful and obedient apart from the Jewish law.** It was understandably hard for a Jew to see how a person could obey God without obeying the law given by God. This meant in effect that faith for them was linked with justification, with obedience and with the law, thus inextricably linking justification with the law. It is this link which Paul wishes to break, and he does so now by demonstrating that the Torah itself speaks of Abraham being righteous before, not after, he faithfully obeys the will of God.

In doing this, Paul's intention is not to suggest that Jews should stop observing the law and so cease to be Jews. This is exactly what he does not want to see happen, just as he does not want to see Gentiles thinking they have to begin observing the law. The gospel does not overthrow the law. It upholds it (3:31). He has already stated that the gospel is something which God 'promised beforehand through the prophets in the holy scriptures' (1:2), and that God's way of revealing his righteousness in Jesus is something to which '**the law and the prophets bore witness**' (3:21). His thesis is that the gospel is the fulfilment, not only of the promises, but also of the law.

Here he wishes to establish the point that the ‘obedience of faith’ (1:5) is not to be identified with obedience to the law. In accepting Jesus with the same faith which Abraham their father showed, Jews will receive a power, a presence, a love and a Spirit that will enable them to obey – something the law could not enable them to do. This faith can be shared by Gentiles, too, who can also obey and be judged to be true children of Abraham’s faith.

The gospel includes the truth that love is the fulfilment of the law. Not any kind of love, but God’s love, the love seen in Jesus’ self-offering, the love which is the gift of the Spirit and which is experienced in the Christian community in which Jew and Gentile are drawn together. It is in the mutual acceptance, respect and love that is experienced when Jews and Gentiles recognise each other as brothers and sisters that the purpose of the law is achieved, that God’s will is done and that God’s eternal design is revealed.

Paul wants to demonstrate clearly to a faithful Jew that he or she can be truly obedient and faithful now by belonging to the Lord, by looking to him, by learning from him the way to God who loves all people without distinction.

Many of these points are yet to be made in later sections of the letter. Here Paul wishes to establish a firm foundation. He wants to establish that justification – being brought into the right relationship with God – is a matter of faith, for them as it was for Abraham, and that the promises in which Abraham believed are wider than the law and can be experienced by those who share Abraham's faith, whether they be Jew or Gentile.

Let us now follow Paul as he develops his argument point by point.

Romans 4:1-8

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about. But not before God. For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was **reckoned** to him as righteousness' (Genesis 15:6). Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin' (Psalm 32:1-2).

The word '**reckoned**'(4:3,8) is found in both quotations. This was one of the ways in which Jewish scholarship of the day sought to penetrate to a deeper understanding of God's intention in inspiring scripture.

Paul wishes to argue against an understanding of Abraham that would hold that he gained justification because of his obedience to God; in other words because of something that he did. After saying that if there is any boasting to be done it had better not be done in God's presence, Paul argues against linking justification with what we do, by quoting from Genesis 15:6 in which Abraham's justification is linked, not with works, but with faith. Abraham was wonderfully obedient, but it was not his obedience that put him in a right relationship with God, it was his welcoming God's justifying grace in faith. His obedience witnessed to the reality of his faith

Romans 4:9-12

Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised? or also on the uncircumcised? We say 'faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness' (Genesis 15:6). How then was it reckoned 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 ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

God gifted Abraham with divine communion before he was circumcised (while he was still a Gentile) in order to demonstrate that Abraham was to be the father of the uncircumcised as well as the circumcised, and that both were to be children of his faith.

Romans 4:13-15

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation .

Paul is not blaming the law for the failure of people to keep it. The fault lies with people's hardness of heart. In fact, therefore, knowing God's will and refusing to obey it brings its own self-inflicted punishment, which, as we have seen (1:18) Paul refers to in traditional language as 'wrath'.

Romans 4:16-17

For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations' (Genesis 17:5) – in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Receiving the promise or not receiving the promise depends on whether a person shares or does not share the faith with which Abraham responded. This is because the promise is based solely on grace. It is an outpouring of the largesse of a gracious God. It is an expression of God's righteousness. All we can do is what Abraham did, welcome the grace in faith. All who do so, all the nations of the earth for whom the promise was made who welcome God's grace in faith, will experience the blessing.

Romans 4:18-22

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' (Genesis 15:5). 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 unbelief 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' (Genesis 15:6).

Both Abraham and his wife were beyond having children. His being a father, therefore, was pure grace, and Abraham put his faith in God and in God's word. It was this response and no other that enabled him to be in the right relationship with God.

Romans 4:23-25

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.

Finally, Paul identifies those who are children of Abraham's faith and so inheritors of the promise. They are those Jews and Gentiles who believe in the God who raised Isaac from Abraham and Sarah who were 'as good as dead', and now has 'raised from the dead Jesus Christ our Lord', and fulfilled his promises in him.

In these early chapters, Paul has not yet described the life of those 'who believe in him that raised Jesus our Lord from the dead'. His focus has been on what human existence is like without such faith.

Reflection on Romans 1:16 - 4:25

There is much material for reflection in this first section, whether we be a Jew or a Gentile, a Christian or a non-Christian. We are all drawn to attend to our deepest religious experiences, and to recognise the areas of futility and sin in our life. A Jew is invited to read on to discover in what way Christianity is consistent with Abraham's faith and with the faith of every religious Jew since, and in what way it transcends the law while fulfilling it by making possible an end to the dominion of sin. A Gentile is invited to read on to discover in what way Paul sees faith in Christ as the flowering of Judaism, not as its rejection. Paul is inviting us all to read on, for he believes that God is calling us to a way of life that will give meaning to our deepest yearnings.

Paul was writing to people who were first generation Christians, who had experienced a personal conversion to faith in Christ. If it was possible for them to fall away from faith, how much more is it possible today to be baptised but to be without faith in Christ? Paul would say to us who are in this situation: 'A person is not a real Christian who is one outwardly, nor is true baptism something external and physical. A person is a Christian who is one inwardly, and real baptism is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal' (adapting Romans 2:28-29).

Childhood baptism is a practice whereby an adult believing community draws a child into its own consecration. It is meant to nurture faith, not to be a substitute for it. The baptism of a child highlights the truth that everything is grace, and, like life itself, unearned. Nurtured by this gift and surrounded by love, the child is drawn by the Spirit to his or her own personal commitment to Jesus the Lord. If some of us are baptised, but have never experienced or have lost a personal faith, Paul is inviting us to reflect upon our lives and upon our need for the liberation offered by God and experienced in the community of those who believe.

Let us pray for ourselves, for each other and for the world which longs for communion and for love but is easily distracted, where there is much frustration, futility and infidelity, where there are many broken promises, broken hearts and broken lives. Let us pray to see what Jesus reveals about God and about ourselves, about our present possibilities and our future hope. The promise of the gospel is that God gives life to all who are **'of the faith of Jesus'** (3:26).

Introduction to Romans 5:1 - 8:39

Having established that ‘**all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin**’ (3:9), and having argued that the fulfilment of the promises and the goal of the law is to be found in faith in God as revealed in Jesus, Paul is now ready to present positively the message of the gospel.

He has prepared his readers for this in the introduction to the letter (1:1-17) in which he continually speaks of the gospel, and he has already expressed the essence of the gospel in 3:21-26. However, there has been as yet no explicit mention of Jesus apart from a brief mention in relation to the judgment (2:16) and in the final words of chapter four. Now Paul is ready to focus full attention on the gospel, ‘**the power of God for salvation**’ (1:16), the life that is possible because ‘**Jesus our Lord was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification**’ (4:25).

Introduction to Romans 5:1-11

The passage which we are about to read stands in sharp contrast to Romans 1:18 - 2:8. We are dealing with the same people – the ‘**ungodly**’ (5:6; see 1:18), the sinner who is not righteous (5:6; see 1:18,29; 2:8), the enemy of God (5:10; see 1:30), who is experiencing now, and is destined to experience later, the ‘**wrath of God**’ (5:9; see 1:18; 2:5,8). In the earlier passage such people were living in a state of total disorder and futility. In the present passage, they are enjoying ‘**peace with God**’ (5:1), having been ‘**reconciled to God**’ (5:10,11), having been ‘**made righteous**’ (‘justified’, 5:1,9). In the earlier passage, having abandoned ‘**the glory of the immortal God**’ (1:23), they were living in ways that can lead only to death (1:32). In the present passage, they live in ‘**grace**’ (5:2) and ‘**boast in the hope of sharing the glory of God**’ (5:2), confident of being ‘**saved**’ (5:10).

To whom was Paul referring in Romans 1-4? In some way, and to varying degrees, he was referring to everyone, for **'all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin'** (3:9).

To whom is Paul referring in Romans 5:1-11? He is referring to all, whether Jew or Greek, **'who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord'** (4:24).

There is no suggestion that Paul regarded Christians as being beyond committing sin. Quite the contrary: the exhortations that are still to come in this letter, make it abundantly obvious that a Christian is quite capable of ‘falling away from grace’ (Galatians 5:4; see 1Corinthians 10:1-13 and 11:27-32).

But it is clear from this passage that essential to Paul’s gospel is the fact that domination by sin has now been broken; it is now possible not to sin – something that was not possible before. Paul will have much more to say on this in the following chapters. Who has effected this marvellous change, and how? The answer to these questions is the precise content of the gospel: God himself has effected the change, and through Jesus. Let us look more closely at the text.