

Romans 4:1-25
(Genesis 15:1-6; Matthew 1:1)
“Abraham, the Father of Us All”

Introduction

The apostle Paul has been contending in this letter – written to both Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome – that the religious things we tend to trust to make us right with God cannot in fact do what they advertize. Only God’s grace and mercy, received by faith, can make us right with God. But Paul knows that both Gentiles who once looked to pagan religions, and his Jewish brethren who once looked to various aspects of the religion of Israel to make them right with God, might think that Paul is introducing a new religion. So he reminds them of Abraham’s story in order to make the point that the gospel is not something new, but is the great theme of the Hebrew Scriptures and the culmination of the very same message of grace that saved the patriarch Abraham – and he also alludes in passing to King David as one who also understood salvation as being by grace alone through faith alone.

[Read the text.]

In the Hebrew Scriptures, Abraham’s life serves as the supreme illustration of what it means to live on the critical edge of complete and utter trust in God. This was Abraham’s unique calling and ministry: to follow God radically, wherever that might lead, and so to become the spiritual father – not only of Israel – but of all who believe in God’s promises (4:11f). God’s promise to Abraham was staggering: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2f). Who else, but our Lord Jesus, through whom that tremendous promise is fulfilled, could possibly claim such a high calling from God?

And yet, in the deepest sense, we who hear the gospel calling us to follow Jesus are entrusted with that same calling as Father Abraham, and are invited into the same pilgrimage of faith, although we have been granted the privilege of seeing more clearly than Abraham could see how God is accomplishing salvation, and we have been entrusted with the Holy Spirit in the resurrection power of the New Covenant. So, what does that mean? How are we to relate to this magisterial figure, Abraham, the Father of all who believe God’s promises? How am I, living in the technological twenty-first century West to emulate in any meaningful way the life of an ancient Middle-eastern sheik?

It has been frequently noted that when we read the ancient myths and legends, even the greatest poetry of ancient Greece and Rome, we feel the distance and the strangeness of the past, and a certain lack of depth in the development of character. But when we read the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the stories of the patriarchs, we

see ourselves, and those we know – in different dress, perhaps, but there we are – in all our complexity, brokenness and beauty.

Two things I want us to do together this morning: First, simply note briefly the four-fold structure of Paul’s argument from the life of Abraham, so that we are clear as to why Paul appeals to Abraham’s life, and then note the two key events in Abraham’s story, the two great challenges to his faith in God, that make his life such a compelling illustration of the gospel of grace.

Body

1. Note, first, the fourfold structure of Paul’s argument.

First, Abraham was not saved by his good works, nor are we (4:1-8).

Every religion appeals to good works, fulfilling a *mizvah*, and clearly, God delights in his children doing good, showing compassion and trying to fulfill his commandments. However, Paul has been reminding us that because we cannot keep God’s commandments perfectly, good works cannot save us. For this reason, God gave Israel not only the law, but the Temple sacrifices to make atonement for sin. Here, Paul reminds his readers that Moses never claimed in Genesis that Abraham was saved by his good works, but rather that Abraham “believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). In other words, Abraham was not saved by good works, but faith in God’s gracious promise.

Secondly, Abraham was not saved by the covenant sign, nor are we (4:9-12).

Paul knew that some of his fellow countrymen trusted circumcision to make them right with God, just as in our context, many Christians trust baptism to make them right with God. So Paul reminds his readers that Abraham was declared righteous by God long before God gave him the sign of circumcision – a sign that did not save Abraham or his family, but that signified the faith by which they were saved.

Thirdly, Abraham was not saved by the law, nor are we (4:13-15).

Closely related to the first point about good works, Paul knew that many of the Jewish Christians still believed that they were saved from judgment by keeping the law. So he simply reminds them that the law was given to Moses hundreds of years after Abraham and the patriarchs had died and gone to their reward. If salvation were through the law, then Abraham and all those would have been lost and without hope who were living before God gave the law to Moses on Sinai.

Fourthly, Abraham was saved by grace through faith in God's promise, and so are we (4:16-25).

Finally, he turns to the positive point: Moses is quite clear in describing the cutting of the covenant in Genesis 15 that Abraham was saved by God's grace alone received through faith alone: "And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

2. Note, secondly, the two greatest challenges of Abraham's life.

First, God called Abraham to sacrifice his past: the first lech lecha (Genesis 12:1).

There is a peculiar linguistic implication in this strange Hebrew construction, pointing to an issue of core personal identity. Abraham is confronting the most basic issues: Who am I, and how am I to discover myself? Why am I here? This Hebrew phrase, *lech lecha*, used only in these two places (Genesis 12 & 22), at these two crisis points in Abraham's life, carries an ambiguity of meaning: Go *from* yourself, or go *by* yourself, or go *to yourself*. Abraham is being called to leave everything that has furnished his context for understanding himself and his place in the world.

The emotional intensity of the moment is reflected in the very word order: "Go from your *country* and your *kindred* and your *father's house*." This is the reverse of the normal word order. When you leave, you first leave the house, then the kindred, and finally the country. But the word order here is intentional to show the intensity of emotion. It is hard enough to leave one's country, but more painful to leave one's kin; and it is hardest of all to leave one's home. Yet this was required of Abraham, as in a deep and troubling sense it is required of each of us who hear God's voice saying, "Come, follow me. Trust me alone to give your life meaning. Choose my blessing over the vain promises of this present age that cannot deliver what you truly need."

We see also the temptation to insecurity: "Go ... to the land that I will show you." Where are we going? What will it look like when we arrive? We want to plan, to know ahead of time, to have our food and lodging secured in advance. But God says, "Set out on your journey, and trust me to get you where I want you to go, and to provide for you when you get there." This is the essence of the life of faith. It acts on God's promises. And here the promise is incredible: "In you, all the families of the earth will be blessed."

Abraham was already getting on in years when God called him. He had lived in one of the greatest cities of the ancient world, and had, by now, figured out who he was and what his life was all about. Or so he thought. But God now speaks into his life, and nothing will ever be the same, for Abraham or for the

world. All of human history hinges on Abraham's trust in God, and on his obedience.

Then, God called Abraham to sacrifice his future: the last lech lecha (Genesis 22:2).

After following God to the land of promise, after walking with God for twenty-five years as the promise of a son is repeated over and over again until it must have seemed a cruel joke, at last Abraham and Sarah receive the promised son, and name him Isaac, "Laughter." When Isaac is old enough to travel with his father, old enough to climb a mountain and carry wood for a burnt offering, when he is old enough for his father to know his ways, his unique and wonderful personality, old enough for his father to think of him not merely as his son, but as his dearest friend, the Lord again calls to Abraham, using again this strange phrase *lech lecha*: *Go from yourself, by yourself, to yourself.*

And once again the very order of the words gives emphasis to the intensity of the emotion: "Take *your son*, your *only son Isaac*, *whom you love.*" Abraham has trusted God when things seemed physically impossible to fulfill his promise of an heir through whom blessing would come to all the peoples of the world. Here he is, the apple of his eye, the incarnation of God's love and salvation, of God's power to fulfill what he has promised. If Abraham is certain of one thing, it is this: Isaac is the living proof that Abraham's life has meaning, and that his years of obedience have not been in vain. And now this God whom he has trusted is asking of him the unthinkable. Abraham, who pled for God to spare Sodom and Gomorra, is now being told to sacrifice his only son.

God again refuses to divulge exactly where Abraham is to go. He is simply told to set out for the land of Moriah, and he will be shown the particular mountain when God decides to reveal it. The style here is minimalist and elegant, a shroud of silence protecting the privacy of Abraham's anguished perplexity.

All that we need to know is this: He arose early in the morning, took his son and set out for the land of Moriah. In extremis, asked to do the most awful thing that could be required of a parent, Abraham trusted that somehow God would work all things together for his good and for the good of his son, that he would resolve the crisis and bring all things to their appointed end. Once again, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."

There is a phrase used here twice by Abraham that seems to me to summarize the life of faith: When God calls to him, Abraham responds, "Here am I" (22:1). And in agony of heart, as he climbs the mountain with his son,

and his beloved Isaac, perplexed that there is wood and fire, but no lamb to offer in sacrifice turns to him and says, "My father!" Abraham responds, "Here am I, my son" (22:7). When we are well past understanding God's ways, when we feel that our hearts will break, our minds shatter, our wills collapse in the face of what is asked of us, we have only to answer, "Here am I. I do not understand you, my great God and King, but I trust you." And Abraham points his son, Isaac, to God: "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

Conclusion

We can see from our perspective what Abraham could not see from his: God has provided the lamb, and it turned out to be another son of Abraham, the distant promised seed through whom all nations would be blessed: God's Son, his only Son Jesus, whom he loves. As John the Baptist said, pointing at Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

The life of faith begins for you and me as it did for Father Abraham, with a first *lecha lecha*: Go from yourself, let go of your past, of those things that have defined you and determined you and given you your sense of meaning and significance, of your life somehow mattering. Let all that go, counting it, in the apostle Paul's words, mere "rubbish" (Philippians 3:7,8) compared to knowing God by sharing in the life of his Son, Jesus.

But know this: The time will come for most of us when we will hear another *lecha lecha*, "Go to yourself," and realize that God is now calling us to trust him more than we trust any visible manifestation of his love for us, even if it calls us to offer him the most precious person or thing in our life. God alone will be our God, because he alone *is* God. What is required of us is simply to say, whatever comes, "Here am I."

We say it in response to God, and we say it to those who look to us for answers and for comfort, wanting us to explain to them the meaning of what they are going through. With Abraham, we simply say, "Here am I." I may not understand what is happening, and my heart is breaking, too, but I will not leave you alone on this mountain, because I know that God is with us and that "he who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all [will] also with him graciously give us all things. ... For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:32, 38,39).