

Abraham's Faith --- Romans 4:1-5

November 19, 2017

Proverbs 4:20-23 *My son, give attention to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. 21Do not let them depart from your sight; keep them in the midst of your heart. 22For they are life to those who find them and health to all their body. 23Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.*

The book of Romans is focused on salvation and being made right with God. Being justified--being reconciled to God--is the deepest issue of the soul and heart of man. All other matters of life spring from the deepest issue of salvation. So for example, addressing trials and hardships of life, which we all have, begins with this subject of faith in Christ. You may counsel someone who is currently struggling with a problem, but if that person has not been made right with God through the Gospel, you ultimately cannot help. So what we have been studying and what we will study lays the foundation for addressing all the issues of life that spring from the heart.

Introduction

Romans 4:1-5 *What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? 2For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. 3For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." 4Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. 5But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.*

Probably one of the most pointed illustrations of faith I have heard is the story of a man who was crossing a desert in the days of the pioneers. He ran into trouble and was dying of thirst when he spotted a water pump near an abandoned shack. He had no water to prime the pump, but he noticed a jug of water near the pump with a note attached. It said this, "There is just enough water in this jug to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. This well has never gone dry even in the worst of times. Pour the water in the top of the pump and pump the handle quickly. After you have had a drink, refill this jug for the next person who comes along."

What would the man dying of thirst do? If he follows the instructions, he runs the risk of pouring out all the water and getting none to drink if the pump fails. So he must trust that the message is right. To follow the instructions and prime the pump without first taking a drink would be an exercise of the kind of faith to which the Bible refers. He utterly commits himself to the truthfulness of the note and then takes action according to the guidelines. Biblical trust requires that you stake your life on the truth of God and what He says and then obey Him.

Faith is central to the whole Bible. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. We have seen in our study of Romans that, because of man's rebellion, he is separated from God. It is only by God's grace demonstrated in the death of Christ on the cross that man can be reconciled back to God. God has established that only by faith one may be saved and be made right with God.

This morning we embark upon a study of a very pivotal man in the entire Bible who was declared righteous by faith and lived by faith; that man is Abraham. By God's grace and enabling, Abraham became an incredible example to believers as one who trusts in God and is declared righteous before Him. Abraham went from being a godless idol worshipper to a great man of faith.

Having explained God's way of salvation by the gift of grace through faith in the last part of chapter three, Paul now supports his teaching in chapter four by an Old Testament powerhouse. This morning, I want to simply introduce to you the person of Abraham. The church today is primarily made up of Gentiles. Unfortunately, we Gentiles do not know our Old Testament the way we should. If we did, Paul's mention of Abraham would cause us to sit up straight and be all ears. James Boice wrote this, "With the exception of Jesus, Abraham is probably the most important person in the Bible."

Review

We considered last week that, in contradiction to the world's ecumenical mindset that declares there are many ways to God, Jesus said, "*I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.*" Jesus plainly said there is only one way to heaven. We saw that reality is such that the truth is narrow. When something is said to be the

one and only truth, then everything that sets itself up against that truth is false.

We saw that Jesus as the one and only way to God is affirmed by the writers of the New Testament.

1 Corinthians 3:11 For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

In Acts 4:12, Peter says, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

1 Timothy 2:5 For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

Furthermore, we saw that Paul was confronting the Jewish idea that God desired to save only the Jews. *Romans 3:29-30 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.*

We saw that the Jewish emphasis on monotheism came with a fierce exclusivism. The Jews thought that God hated the Gentiles and would not save them unless they became Jews. This gives us some insight into why there was debate in the early church concerning whether or not Gentile believers must be circumcised. Some Jews in the church claimed that Gentile converts needed to be circumcised. They were still thinking that Gentiles had to become Jews.

Abraham's Faith

So we come to chapter four as Paul continues to address the wrong Jewish thinking that God was God only to the Jews. He will show that God is the God of the Gentiles also. Part of his argument is that Abraham was made right with God by grace through faith before Abraham was circumcised . . . while he was uncircumcised like a Gentile.

As I said, I want to simply introduce Abraham to you. I cannot say enough concerning how important this man is to the whole flow of Scripture. We will consider Abraham in two steps. First we will look at an Overview of

Abraham; and then we will consider Abraham as Our Example.

The Bible tells us that Abraham was commanded by God to leave all that was familiar to him and to go to a place that was remote, unknown, and maybe even undesirable. Remember, they did not have photos of vacation spots on the Mediterranean close to Tel Aviv. They did not have GPS so that Abraham's path was totally mapped out. God told Abraham to go east, and he obeyed. Abraham did not have other people as examples to follow like we do in the Bible and in history. He had no pattern before him for guidance and encouragement. His obedience was an expression of faith, and by faith, he was made right with God.

When Abraham was old, God promised him that he would have a son and that God would make Abraham a great nation through that son. That promise took 25 years to be fulfilled, but Abraham never stopped believing. Romans 4:19-21 *Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; 20yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, 21and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.*

Abraham encountered a supreme challenge to his faith. This challenge was greater than the call to leave his homeland and even the promise of a son so late in life; namely, the command to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to God. Abraham was not only about to slaughter his son but also destroy the promise that he would be a great nation. Abraham passed the test. He believed God even at the expense of despair and destruction. He believed that if Isaac died, God would bring him back to life again.

Abraham is a real person with various lapses of faith in difficult circumstances. Nonetheless, Abraham was made a promise that was ultimately fulfilled in the coming of Christ. Abraham's life is a study of faith: believing God's promises even when they seem impossible.

Overview of Abraham

*What then shall we say that Abraham,
our forefather according to the flesh, has found?*

Romans 4:1

Abraham is not just some simple Old Testament illustration of a point that Paul is attempting to make. Abraham is the point! Apart from Jesus, Abraham is the most important person in Scripture. While we Gentiles may miss that point, the Jews do not. If Paul can show that Abraham was made right with God by faith and not by any amount of human good works, the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith is fully supported by the most important man in the Old Testament.

For example, Abraham is the first person in the Bible who is directly referred to as counted righteous before God by faith. He was a man who lived by faith. Biblical faith is more closely associated with our modern concept of trust. In Scripture, faith produces action. Hebrews 11, the great faith chapter of the Bible, describes what people did by faith. *By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household By faith Joseph . . . By faith Moses* By faith all these people did something. They believed God and, based on that trust, they acted.

Abraham was just such a man. The most common word used in the Old Testament referring to faith means “to be established, steadfast.” It can carry the idea of regarding something as true, “to believe.” Another word translated “faith” means “to lean upon, to trust.” It does not emphasize the element of the intellectual assent but rather that of confident reliance.

In both the Old and New Testaments, faith is a radical self-commitment to God. Abraham is presented to us as one who commits himself to God with unwavering trust in His promises and is justified by faith. His actions were evidence of his faith.

The study of the Old Testament is vital to our growth as believers. In fact, we cannot begin to understand the New Testament without a good grasp of the Old Testament. Abraham is mentioned 230 times in the Bible, 64 times in the New Testament. He is referred to in all four of the gospels and the major portions of the epistles that focus on salvation by grace through faith alone. Many times when God is mentioned in the Old and New Testaments, He is described as the “God of Abraham.”

Consider for a moment the amount of space given to Abraham in the book of Genesis where he is first mentioned. The first eleven chapters of

Genesis is devoted to 2,000 years of the world's history (which involved 19 generations of mankind), including the creation, the origin and fall of man, the flood and the dispersion of mankind from the tower of Babel. Eleven chapters are dedicated to 2,000 years, but 14 chapters are used to convey the life of this one man.

As I said, Abraham is a giant in the pages of Scripture. Moses was a great lawgiver and deliverer of the nation of Israel. Joshua was a great military man giving possession of the Promised Land to the Jews. David was a brilliant king who brought great power to the nation. Daniel was a great prophet and statesman. Elijah was a man of God who did not know death.

But all of these men would confess that Abraham is foremost and is the father of all who live by faith. This is true in the New Testament as well. Paul looked back to Abraham as the greatest of all examples of how God's people are to be justified by faith alone and to live by faith. The history of redemption begins in earnest with the person of Abraham. The covenant God made with this man began the wheels rolling in providing the Messiah.

Jesus' lineage is traced back to Abraham in Matthew 1 as the beginning of the salvific line. Luke 1:68, 72-73 records that Jesus' birth occurred in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. *"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, 72To show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant, 73the oath which He swore to Abraham our father."*

Great sections of the New Testament explain the significance of Abraham. Our chapter four of Romans is an example. Two chapters of Galatians refer to Abraham's life to prove that salvation is given apart from good works. One of the longest paragraphs in Hebrews 11 is devoted to the growth of faith in the life of Abraham.

Abraham is called "the friend of God" three times in Scripture. One of those passages is James 2:23 *The Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God.*

Read Galatians 3:6-11, 22-29. *6Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. 7Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. 8The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to*

Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." 9So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. 10For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM." 11Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

22 But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. . . . 24

Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. . . . 26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. . . . 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.

We learn from Scripture that God did not choose Abraham because he was a great man. Abraham found grace in the sight of God. In fact, before God called him, he was a pagan like everyone else. We learn from Genesis that Abraham descended from the line of Shem, one of three sons of Noah, the line through which the promised Messiah would come. His family settled in the land of Ur, a very pagan area.

We do not know for sure about Abraham's religious background. More than likely, Abraham came from a family that worshipped idols rather than the One True God. This means that Abraham was probably an idol worshipper himself before God called him. However, it may have been that some of Abraham's ancestors held onto a right view of God in that Abraham came through the line of Shem. In fact, Shem's life overlapped the life of Abraham (that means that Shem was still living when Abraham lived), so Abraham probably knew firsthand about the flood and Noah's righteousness before God by grace.

So it may be that Abraham followed the God of Noah, but the scriptural evidence leans more toward Abraham coming from a pagan, idolatrous background. Consider what Joshua wrote to the nation of Israel before his death, when the nation had become captivated to idol worship. Joshua 24:1-2, 14 *Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and called for the elders of Israel and for their heads and their judges and their officers; and they presented themselves before God. 2Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham*

and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods. . . . 14Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.’ ”

So more than likely Abraham was an idol worshipper. It was this Abraham who had nothing to commend himself to God (just as we have nothing to commend ourselves to God) that God chose to be the Father of the Jewish nation.

As I said, God took a major stride in providing salvation for mankind when he chose Abraham. So I want to focus your attention for a moment on the beginning of God dealing with Abraham. Read Genesis 12:1-3. *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; 2and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; 3and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."*

As we consider this introduction of Abraham, I want to consider for a moment some of the parallels between the faith that Abraham exercised in response to God's call and the faith that we must exercise in obeying God's call in salvation and sanctification.

Abraham as Our Example

One important parallel concerning the call of God to Abraham is that there was a command to make a decisive break with his past and with his idolatry. Abraham had to leave all that was familiar: *Go forth from your country.* He had to leave behind the worldly goals that he pursued. He was to trust and follow the One True God and obey Him. This is true of those who would be saved today. We also must make a decisive break with our past. We no longer run with the worldly crowd with which we used to be involved in worldly pursuits.

1 Peter 4:2-4 So as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. 3For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and

abominable idolatries. 4In all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign you.

Jesus put it another way in Matthew 16:24-25. *Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."*

Consider that God called Abraham to leave his country and his people. In that day, being among one's own people meant acceptance and security. Abraham was being asked to leave this and go out into a world filled with adversity, and yet God told him, *"Go forth from your country, and from your relatives."*

But not only that, God told him to leave his family; that is, his immediate household. Abraham would no longer be with his father and extended household. Now he must leave his siblings, uncles, aunts, and so on. Why did God call him to leave his people? It was not that God was being harsh, demanding a tremendous sacrifice on Abraham's part without any purpose.

Abraham's departure was necessary for his spiritual growth. The context of his family was not beneficial to his growth in God. His family would not help him on this pilgrimage. So he had to leave his country, his people and his father's household if he was to obey God's command. Christians are called to leave all if they are to follow Christ even their families if necessary.

In Luke 9:59-62, Jesus was calling people to follow Him. He said, *"Follow Me." But [one man] said, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father."* ⁶⁰*But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God."* ⁶¹*Another also said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home."* ⁶²*But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."*

We tend to so water down the Gospel and the call that God makes upon one who would be a follower of Christ. Jesus did not make the way easy but told people to count the costs. If you are to follow Christ as Savior and Lord, it will affect even your family relations.

Jesus said in Mark 10:29-30, *"Truly I say to you, there is no one who has*

left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, 30but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life."

This does not mean that one cannot be a Christian unless he utterly divorces his family. But it does mean that you cannot serve God and an ungodly family at the same time. So God called Abraham to make a decisive break with his former life and follow Him no matter what the cost. Abraham responded in faith and obeyed God.

Hebrews 11:8-10 By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; 10for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Later in Abraham's life, as he grew in his trust in the Lord, he had to exercise a greater amount of faith. In Hebrews 11:17-19, it says, *"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; 18it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." 19He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead."*

So Abraham is an example to believers in his trust and obedience to do what God has commanded to do. He made a decisive break with his past in order to follow God.

Another parallel that we see in Abraham's life and our lives as Christians is that, although there are times of great faith, there are times of failure. We see that, although Abraham believed God and obeyed God, he also demonstrated weak faith at times. For example, in Genesis 12:10 and following, Abraham asked his wife to lie about being his wife in order to save his own neck. He did not trust that God would provide safety and bring to fulfillment His promise to make Abraham a great nation.

Later on, Abraham demonstrated weak faith by listening to his wife and impregnating Sarah's maidservant. That was an act of doubt and not

trusting God to fulfill His promises. There are times that we too respond selfishly and faithlessly in the midst of difficult circumstances.

And yet, just because we fail, we do not stop. Abraham pushed through his faithless times and became known for all times as “the friend of God.” He trusted God. He believed God and acted on His commands and directives.

So Abraham is a pivotal man in Scripture. He is the first to be reckoned as righteous before God by faith. His walk of faith is immediately applicable to our own lives. We see ourselves in both Abraham's triumphs and failures.

Conclusion

As we study chapter four, Paul points to Abraham as the pivotal example of salvation by faith apart from trying to live a good life in order to be made right with God. Faith is critical. Hebrews 11:6 *Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*

He who comes to God must believe that He is.

Sadly, atheists do not realize that in their supposed success in shaking free from God, they gain their “freedom” at the expense of personal worth and meaning. If there is no God, then there is no meaning either. There is no meaning to one’s origin; it was chance. There is no meaning to one’s present existence; it is vain. There is no meaning to one’s future. Life is one big, colossal accident.

The good news starts with God. It tells us that there is a God and that He, not chance, is the origin of all things. Because God is there, there is meaning to life. God is active in history. We have a beginning and an end. History is going someplace along the path of God’s predetermined will. For this reason, what I do has meaning.

Abraham had faith in God, but that trust did not stop at mental assent. He acted on his faith. He had to venture out in trust in God’s sovereignty and providence. He had to trust in God’s timing. Abraham knew the promise but he did not know the specific details. He had to trust God.

You and I are called like Abraham to have a decisive break with our pasts, our familiar surroundings, even, if need be, our families. You must deny

yourself, pick up your cross, and follow Him. You must lose your life for His sake before you can find it.

There was a burning apartment building in New York City where a blind girl was stranded in a fourth floor window. The firemen had become desperate. They couldn't fit the ladder truck between the buildings and they couldn't get her to jump into a net which, of course, she could not see.

Finally her father arrived on the scene and shouted through the bullhorn that there was a net and that she was to jump on his command. The girl jumped without hesitation and was so completely relaxed that she did not break a bone or even strain a muscle jumping from four stories up. Because she trusted her father completely, when she heard his voice, she did what he commanded her to do. That is the life of faith and trust in God.