

June 23, 2019
A Friend of God
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Romans 4:1-15

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? 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 reckoned to him as righteousness." ⁴Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. ⁶So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

*⁷"Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;*

⁸blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin."

⁹Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." ¹⁰How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ¹¹He 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, ¹²and 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's Promise Realized through Faith]

¹³For 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. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

I had imagined bringing you some impressions from the CBF meetings in Birmingham, but I am going to hold them for our church council meeting next weekend, add some video to show you, and hopefully include Jodi and Laura Beth. For now, thanks for your generosity in helping Jodi and Laura Beth to travel as well. We enjoyed the trip and met some really lovely Baptist friends. For now, I want to take just a few minutes' reflection on Paul's conversation with the Romans on the nature of faith.

Would you pray with me? *We'd rather be good than be patient, O God. We'd rather prove ourselves than believe you love us in our unworthiness. Give us the courage to ease up and let go, and simply trust you when you say you love us as we are. In your name, we pray.*

If always and consistently keeping the law of God were a real possibility for the lovers of God, there would be no need for faith, Paul says. God might have passed out the homework at Mt. Sinai and then just walked away, trusting Moses and his wagon train of refugees with the whole future of humanity. But God didn't. God is not naïve, any more than humanity is trustworthy.

In Eden humans had just one rule. They broke it. Moses was given ten. They failed at all those too. The Jewish scholars added 613, a hedge around the law to help them not break the bigger ones. Do you know why Jesus was sentenced to 39 lashes? It was because the law calls for 40 lashes and the hedge helps us not break the law. But if you are going to break it, it is better to break the law by doing less (39 lashes) than by doing more than the law calls for (41 or more).

When Jesus summed up the 624 rules (Eden's one plus Moses' ten plus the 613 in "the hedge") into just two rules – the ones he told us to remember – *Do you remember? Love God with all your heart . . .* – we still come up short more often than not. Amen?

Interestingly though, in his discussion of the law, Paul doesn't speak of Moses. Why, do you suppose, Moses is not ever presented in the text as the father of us all? That title is Abraham's. Father of us all, a blessing, a light to all the nations back in Genesis chapters 12 and 17. Abraham had neither law nor Torah. All he had was – what? A promise. A promise of another homeland. He had a perfectly good homeland already, the land of Ur sitting on oil reserves to last a thousand years. The land of Ur in Abraham's time is modern day Iraq.

God promised and by faith Abraham obeyed. Picked up and moved everything he owned to the only scrap of land in all the Middle East with not a drop of oil below the dirt. Can you imagine how modern history would be different, if the Jewish promised land had been the land of Ur? Another rabbit for another day.

The promise to Abraham was two-part: a homeland for his people, and people to become his people. *As many as there are stars in the sky*, God told Abraham. Children? Yes. And *nations* too. Remember *nations – ethnee? Ethnicities, races, foreigners, gentiles*. At the time the promise was given – here we come round again to Paul – Abraham himself was a gentile, uncircumcised. His name wasn't even Abraham. Just *Abram*.

Why all this explanation of Abraham, the one the early church called a *friend of God* (we know that from the apostle James)? Because the best rule followers among us can't keep all the rules. We just can't. And Paul knows the church needs to take this in, that faith always, always comes before law. Just as Abraham comes before Moses.

Those of us who love the rules for the order and the structure and clarity we believe the rules convey not only cannot keep the rules; we can't make rules fast enough to keep up with the chaos humanity is constantly conceiving.

And yet, for some of us, our love of the rules is not swayed. Their presence comforts us: on paper; on stone in courthouse lawns; in the voices preaching their necessity and promising their enforcement. Amen? Paul does not say, Amen. Paul says, *Faith*.

Whatever comfort and security, whatever hope and peace this world allows, whatever justice (also called righteousness) is available to God's people is gained not by our success at keeping or enforcing rules, but by our acceptance of the same faith he offered Abram. Accepted not as wages paid to a worker, but as a gift given to the one who God has decided deserves it, whom God has called righteous. For no other reason than God wanted to.

And see, there is the reason against which there is no argument. God wanted to. God can't give us faith and walk away, of course. Faith is to our believing as air is to our breathing. Faith comes daily from God, if not every hour or moment. And faith has no other source, much as we might wish it so. We can't earn it. We can't buy it ahead, like groceries every Saturday. Faith comes new each day and only ever to the ones who show up to receive it, of course, willing to treat whatever is given as if it is enough. Because it is enough. It is enough, because God has deemed it *enough*.

Actually, on their first date, it wasn't Abram who showed up, but God. Dressed up like angels, just to emphasize the point that Abram truly did nothing to earn this gift of God. He was just home, watching Netflix, or whatever one did in the land of Ur 4000 years ago.

I personally still like my plan better. Do you remember green stamps? My mother collected them, when she bought groceries and gas and things. She let me lick and stick them in those little books. We'd get about 100 filled and then go get a free toaster.

It would be awesome to fill up little books of faith stickers to turn in for something useful – a healing maybe. Or some extra courage. Then we'd always know how much faith we had in the bank.

But there is no faith bank. That's not how God wants it, apparently. Not with Abraham, *the friend of God*. Or Jacob. Or Moses. Or Naomi or David or Daniel. Or all those prophets. Or Mary or John or Jesus or Paul. Or any of the thousands of other friends of God, who discovered what is always true between good friends: the very friendship itself is made of the faith God gives and the friends gratefully receive, day by day by day.

Would you pray with me?