



MAIN COMMENTARIES ON 'ROMANS'

Chapter 4

In chapter four St. Paul continues the approach he used in chapter three, addressing objections he imagines his Jewish readers might raise. In this chapter he addresses whether circumcision justified our Righteous Forefather Abraham.

Many first century Jews believed they were exempt from God's judgment because they were descended from Abraham (see Matthew 3:7-10). The high opinion the Jews had of Abraham can be seen in Sirach 44:19-20:

Abraham was a 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 was taken into covenant with him; he established the covenant in his flesh, and when he was tested he was found faithful.

Modern readers might wonder how Abraham could keep the Law, when the Law was not given until the time of Moses. A first century Jewish writing answers, "At that time the unwritten law was named amongst them, and the works of the commandments were then fulfilled" (2 Baruch 57:2).

St. Paul, holding an equally high opinion of Abraham, responds that if Abraham were in fact justified by his works, then Abraham would be able to boast about his righteousness; at the same, however, even Abraham would not be able to boast before God (Romans 4:2). Why could Abraham not boast before God (and, ultimately, also not boast before other people)? Because, St. Paul answers - quoting Genesis 15:6 - Abraham's righteousness was accounted to him because he believed in God (4:3).

This answer is at first very complicated and confusing: what does it mean to say that Abraham's righteousness was *accounted* to him, and what does that mean for his relationship with God? St. Paul spends most of chapter four answering this question.

St. Paul starts with the example of paid employment. A worker who engages in a full day of work, and then is paid for that work, is not given a gift: he or she is simply receiving what is owed for the work (Romans 4:4). In other words, the money is not *accounted* or *credited* to the worker. In contrast, however, a person who does not work to earn salvation, but instead faithfully believes in the God Who justifies sinners, that faith is *accounted* or *credited* as righteousness: the righteousness was not earned, but was given as a gift by God (4:5).

St. Paul further explains this by quoting Psalm 32:1-2, attributed to King David (Romans 4:6-8). This quotation shows that blessedness is God's forgiveness of sin and accounting of righteousness to the individual. Since this is the case, St. Paul asks, did God account righteousness to Abraham before or after Abraham was circumcised? He answers, "Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised" (4:10). Abraham's circumcision was therefore a symbol of his faith, rather than a substitute for it (4:11).

This is important for St. Paul's argument in the Epistle to the Romans, because it shows that God saves people who are not Jews. Abraham, by being counted as righteous by God before he was circumcised, demonstrates that God counts as righteous faithful people who are not Jews (Romans 4:11-12).

This point is carried on in verses 13-22. The promise God made to Abraham that the Righteous Forefather would be the father of many nations was not dependent upon fidelity to the law by either Abraham or his descendents. Instead, the promise was "through the righteousness of faith" (Romans 4:13). If only "those who are of the law" - the Jews - are heirs to God's promise, then faith matters less than law-keeping (4:14). The promise is "therefore of faith that it might be according to grace" so that all people, and not exclusively the children of Israel, can receive God's gift of salvation (4:16-17). St. John Chrysostom makes an important point: the gift is "given to all Abraham's descendents, including the Gentiles who believe and excluding the Jews who do not."

St. Paul's Jewish readers might have objected, "How can you say that Gentiles are descendents of Abraham? Even if they have the same faith as the Patriarch, they are not his biological heirs." St. Paul responds that God has the power to make Gentiles heirs to Abraham's promise, because He "gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did" (Romans 4:17). Just as God worked through Abraham's unwavering belief to give him a son (Isaac), so God can work through the faith of Gentiles to make them spiritual descendents of the Righteous Forefather Abraham.

These verses are more than just evidence that God saves Gentiles as well as Jews: by focusing on Abraham's faith, they also demonstrate the difference between the faithful who are saved by God, and the unfaithful who are judged and condemned. The Gentiles in Romans chapter one completely rejected God and His judgment, and thus faced condemnation. The Jews in Romans chapters two and three believed in God, but also believed that their ethnicity and/or nominal religious observance exempted them from God's judgment. Abraham, however, "was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform" (Romans 4:20-21). This is the faith that was accounted to Abraham as righteousness (4:22).

St. Paul concludes by linking the Righteous Forefather Abraham's faith to the faith each Christian must have. Just as Abraham believed in God's promise that Abraham would be a father to many nations, so Christians must believe in the same God (Romans 4:23-24). More than simply a belief in God - as important as that is - faithful Christians also believe that Jesus was crucified and resurrected for our justification (4:24-25).