

Sermon Notes

➤ God's Righteousness: Received through Faith

Having explained that God's righteousness has been revealed on the cross (3:21-26), where God reconciled us with himself, Paul continues to describe the faith that receives this gift. In 3:31 he seems to quote one of the accusations aimed against his teaching. The entire chapter 4 is dedicated to proof Paul's claim that his teaching is not overthrowing the Old Testament, rather—to the contrary—is entirely in line with it.

➤ The Faith of Abraham

Throughout chapter 4 Paul uses Abraham's story (see note 2 on the brief reference to David) to show that the faith he proclaims is identical with the faith of Abraham and the way he "found grace" (4:1; see Genesis 18:3):

- Already Abraham received God's righteousness by grace and through faith (4:1-8). Hence, faith is *not the result or a reward* for living a good life.

- Abraham received God's righteousness before being circumcised (4:9-12). Hence, faith is *not the consequence of fulfilling certain criteria* in order to be accepted into God's family.

- Abraham received all the promises before the law was given to Moses (4:13-17). Already in Galatians 3:15-18 (written before Romans) mentioned that the promise given to Abraham predates the law given to Moses on Mount Sinai by 430 years. Hence, the promises of faith *cannot be earned* by "works of the law".

➤ What is Faith?

Most remarkably, there is a final, forth similarity between the faith of Abraham and us: Paul claims that already Abraham believed in God as the one who is able to bring back to life what is dead. (4:17-25) Paul echoes the Jewish conviction, that the only explanation for Abraham's audacious obedience in Genesis 22 is that he had faith in God's ability to resurrect Isaac, the carrier of the very promise he had received (see Hebrews 11:17-20). Hence, faith is *listening* to God's promises and *believing* in his ability, even against the reality we are facing.

Questions for Discussion

- 1 Share your experiences of being accepted (or not accepted) into membership of an organisation or institution. What do you think is the purpose of conditions for entry?
- 2 Why is Paul discussing Abraham at such length in Romans 4?
- 3 If you have time, you might want to read together the following passages to remember the pivotal moments in Abraham's faith journey: Genesis 12:1-3 The calling and three promises (land, descendants, blessing) — 15:1-6 The covenant between God and Abraham — 17:1-14 Abraham's circumcision — 18:1-15 Abraham visited by God — Genesis 22:1-19 Abraham's faith tested
- 4 In what sense is Abraham our father?
- 5 What is at the core of Abraham's faith? Is that what you understand faith to be like? Or is this definition and nature of faith a surprise?

- 6 Read Romans 4:19-21 again. What would it mean for you, in your situation, to have such faith?
- 7 End praying, perhaps in groups of 2-3, for one another.

Notes

- 1 Paul speaks frequently of the law. In accordance with how people would understand this term at the time of the New Testament, “law” (sometimes as “law and the prophets”) most often is a reference to the entire Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament (as in 3:31). Aside from that, it can mean the first five books of the Bible. Finally, it may point to the law given to Moses on mount Sinai (as in 6:14). Expressions like “the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2) or “law of faith” could be translated as “principles of Christ or Faith” and have nothing to do with any of the first three meanings.
- 2 For Paul the connection between Abraham and David has to do with the expression “it was counted to someone”, which appears in both Genesis 15:6 and Psalm 32:2. Applying a rabbinic method, this allows him to connect these two passages and interpret one through the other. Aside from that, it enables him to back his claim that faith cannot be earned with accounts from the first part of the Hebrew Bible (the “Law”) and the second part of it (the “Prophets”)—and it proves he is not “overthrowing the law” (i.e., the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament).