

Romans – Justified through faith

Week 9 – Romans 4 (God’s righteousness illustrated)

Introduction

Why did Paul choose Abraham as his illustration?

Because...

- ① He was the father of Israel
- ② He was held in high esteem as their most illustrious patriarch.

1. Abraham was not justified by works. (v1-8)

If he had been justified by works then Abraham would have had something to boast about. However it was his belief in God that credited him with righteousness.

2. Abraham was not justified by circumcision. (v9-12)

He was accounted righteous by his belief at least 14 years (some scholars think as long as 29 years) before he was circumcised. God declares him righteous in Genesis 15; he isn’t circumcised until Genesis 17. Abraham received two distinct gifts from God, justification and circumcision, and in that order. Firstly he received justification by faith while he was still uncircumcised; secondly he received circumcision as a visible sign and seal of that justification. Therefore justification is for all, not just the circumcised. Abraham is equally the father of gentile believers.

3. Abraham was not justified by law. (v13-17a)

God’s word came to Abraham as a promise not as a law. Abraham simply believed God’s word – he didn’t follow a set of laws.

So far Romans 4 has been all negatives about Abraham’s justification. His faith came first; works, circumcision and the law all came later. Now Paul reaches his positive conclusion...

“Law and promise belong to different categories of thought, which are incompatible. Law-language (‘you shall’) demands our obedience, but promise language (‘I will’) demands our faith.”

– John R. W. Stott

4. Abraham was justified by faith. (v17b-22)

Although faith goes beyond reason it always has a firmly rational basis. In particular faith is about believing or trusting a person, and its reasonableness depends on the reliability of the person being trusted. Before we are in a position to believe God’s promises, we need to be sure both of his power (that he is able to keep them) and of his faithfulness (that he can be relied on to do so). It’s these two attributes of God that were the foundation of Abraham’s faith. This firm conviction about the power of God was what enabled Abraham to believe, both *against all hope* and *in hope* (v18) at the same time. Faith always looks at the problems in the light of the promises.

5. Abraham's faith and ours. (v23-25)

In this chapter of his letter Paul gives us instructions about the nature of faith. He indicates that there are degrees in faith. Faith can be weak (v19) or strong (v20). How does it grow? Above all through the use of our minds; faith is not burying our heads in the sand or screwing ourselves up to believe what we know isn't true, or even whistling in the dark to keep our spirits up. On the contrary faith is a reasoning trust.

There can be no believing without thinking. We have to think about the problems facing us; faith isn't closing our eyes to them. "...he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead" (v19) but we do this in the light of the promises of God and on the character of the God who made them, especially that he is "the god who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were" (v17). As Abraham's mind dwelt on the promises the problems shrank accordingly, for he was "fully persuaded that God has power to do what he had promised" (v21).

We are much more fortunate than Abraham; we have little or no excuse for unbelief. We live on this side of the death and resurrection of Jesus and we have a complete Bible to instruct us. It is therefore much more reasonable for us to believe than it was for Abraham. Of course we need to make sure the promises we are seeking to inherit are neither wrenched out of their biblical context nor the product of our own fancy, but that they truly apply to us. Then we can lay hold of them in confidence of God's faithfulness and power.

In hope, against all human hope,
Self-desperate, I believe...

Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees,
And looks to that alone;
Laughs at impossibilities
And cries: It shall be done!

– Charles Wesley

Q1. Do you think faith is as simple as deciding to trust God? How rationality based do you think your faith is?

Q2. What situations in your life look impossible? Is there a promise from God you can hold on to?

Memory Verse:

"God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were" – Romans 4: 17