

ABRAHAM

Gerald Bray

Romans 4:1–25

Having introduced and developed his thesis about the Jewish people and the law, Paul now goes on to speak about Abraham, the ancestor of the nation, to whom God had given his covenant, with all the promises, and whom the Jews continued to revere and to appeal to in order to justify their special position. Abraham lived nearly two thousand years before the coming of Christ, which is about the same amount of time which separates us from Jesus. Every Jewish child knew his story, and most of the boys, at least, would have learned it by heart. It may sound surprising, but Abraham is one of the great background characters of the Old Testament. He does appear in it directly, of course, but his life and example are also frequently quoted to make some point or other. In this respect, only Moses and Elijah, of all the Old Testament characters, can really be compared with him. The fact that Paul turns to him here gives us some idea, both of how important he

was, and of how valuable his example must have been to the early Christians.

Paul begins by calling Abraham our father according to the flesh. The 'our' must obviously refer to the Jews, but it may also include the Gentiles, for whom God would be the spiritual father. In this case, the interpretation would be that the man Abraham is the father of all believers. Either interpretation is possible, and both may be correct, though from the context it seems more likely that Paul is addressing himself here to the Jews. He has just been talking about boasting, which in his opinion was a typically Jewish habit. If Abraham had been made righteous by his actions, says Paul, he would have been able to boast, but he could hardly have boasted about having a special relationship with God. For Abraham did not inherit that relationship, as his descendants has done. If he had earned his own righteousness therefore, he would have had nobody to thank but

himself, and neither Paul nor his readers could accept that conclusion!

If Abraham was going to be justified by God, it would have to be by some other means, and Paul explains this in verse 3. Quoting Genesis 15:6, he says that Abraham had faith in God, and that God accepted that faith as sufficient ground for considering him to be righteous. Notice that Abraham did not *become* righteous; he was only counted as righteous because of his faith. The real righteousness remained in God, who allowed Abraham to share in it by faith. This line of thinking was applied by Paul to the Christian as well. Christ is both the source and the object of our faith, so that there is no way that we can boast of anything. We are righteous because we have been given the righteousness of Christ, who dwells in us by faith (Galatians 2:20).

Notice that in clinching his argument, Paul makes a direct appeal to Scripture, which settles the matter once and for all. This is not the first time he has relied on the Old Testament for support, of course, but it is the first verse in this Epistle where he makes specific reference to it as the final authority in questions about faith. It is important for us to recognise this, for two main reasons. First, it shows that Paul regarded the Bible as a book of very special importance. If it could be used to settle an argument about God, this could only be because it came from God and bore the stamp of his approval. Second, it shows that Paul was not afraid to turn to it to discover specific answers to particular questions. Today there are some people who like to tell us that the Bible has many contradictions and obscurities, which make it almost impossible to know what it is really saying. Of course, it is true that there are difficult parts of Scripture, and these

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need careful attention. We must not take verses out of context and use them in situations to which they do not apply. But to go to the point of saying that we cannot find answers to our problems in the Bible is taking things much too far! Furthermore, to look elsewhere for a solution, specially if it means ignoring what Scripture says, means dividing the Church, because those in dispute will not be recognising the same authority for their actions and beliefs.

After making his first point, Paul goes on to develop his concept of grace. No worker would ever regard his salary as a free gift—it is something owed to him in return for the work he has done. But God's grace is a free gift, given to those who have not worked for it, but who have believed that God makes the wicked righteous. It is precisely this belief which God reckons as righteousness, because it is a true

assessment of the kind of God he is. Such a true assessment can only come when we meet God face to face, when we recognise him for who and what he is. The word which Paul uses to describe the state of man to whom God has given his righteousness is blessedness, which means a kind of contentment which can only come from God himself. Once again, he insists that this is not his own idea, but that it comes straight out of the Old Testament, this time from a psalm of David. David knew as well as anyone the inner torment which comes from unforgiven sin, and his sense of relief is echoed in the heart of every believer who has ever been convicted of his own sinful state before God. *Blessed is the man whose sins the Lord will not take account of!* (Psalm 32:2). Here is true and lasting freedom, peace of mind which no other power on earth can give.

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Now Paul moves on to tackle the next issue. Is the blessedness which David speaks of something which only the circumcised can experience, or is it available for the uncircumcised as well? By now I think we can guess what the answer will be, but we still have to figure out how Paul works out his logic. He does it by going back once more to Abraham. We have already agreed that Abraham's faith was reckoned as righteousness by God. But how did this happen? Was he circumcised at the time or not? Of course, the answer is that he was still uncircumcised. In other words, circumcision was only the symbol of a righteousness which had been given by God for quite a different reason. Anybody who tried to use it as a basis for boasting about his faith or his position in God's eyes was therefore guilty of misunderstanding its whole significance!

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Next, Paul explains what the real purpose of all this was. Abraham was reckoned righteous even before he was circumcised in order to make it possible for him to be the ancestor and example for all those who would later be justified in the same way. Thus Gentiles could claim to be Abraham's descendants if

they had had the same spiritual experience as Abraham's. Of course, Abraham was also the ancestor of the circumcised, because they too were inheritors of God's promises. In other words, both Jews and Gentiles are children of Abraham, because of the Covenant of promise sealed in him by faith.

The end result of all this, as Paul goes on to say, is that the whole nature of God's covenant has now changed, at least as far as outward rituals are concerned. Circumcision had never been any more than an outward symbol of faith anyway, but now it no longer had any further role to play. Once Christ had come, the old rules were no longer valid, and a whole new way of thinking had to be put in their place. This was not easy to accept, especially for those who had found the law both a comfort and a convenience in their attempt to earn their own salvation, but it was a fact, and one for which God could be heartily praised.

Paul now moves on one stage farther, to discuss the whole question of the law once more. For most Jews, circumcision and the law went together, the former being the sign that one was subject to the requirements of the latter. And yet in Abraham's day that had not been the case at all, since he had had no idea about the law, and his circumcision had been given for quite a different reason. In Abraham's case,

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circumcision had been linked not to the law, but to the promise that his descendants would inherit the earth. This promise was quite unconnected with the law, and was given to Abraham because of the righteousness which he had obtained by faith. To say that the promise somehow depended on the law, of which the patriarchs had never heard, would not only be silly, it would inevitably rob faith of any meaning and completely invalidate the promise. In fact, the law was intended for something quite different, which is what Paul proceeds to explain now.

The purpose of the law is to bring out God's anger! This sounds strange, until we put it in its proper context. Paul's reasoning goes like this. Where there is no law, there can be no transgression, or crime. Notice that Paul does not say that there can be no *sin*; sin is a broken relationship with God which is there whether we have the law or not. But without the law, man's sin cannot be measured; it cannot be defined or punished in any clear or coherent way. The law gives a focal point to God's anger because it points out where the sin in man is to be found. This has the great merit of being clear and precise, but it is hardly

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good news for us, since it puts the spotlight on everything we have done wrong in our lives! Paul will return to this theme a little later on, but for the moment he goes back to the subject of faith and takes up the thread of his earlier argument.

Since the law is out of place here, it is clear that the basis of our righteousness must be faith. This is a free gift of God, who never lies or goes back on his promises, and so it is quite certain to come about. If we depended on our own efforts, everything would be very *uncertain*, since who could trust himself to maintain his high standards all the time? We all get tired and slip up; most of us go through periodic bouts of depression when it is all just too much. But not God! He does not suffer from our weaknesses and limitations, so he can be relied on all the time! This is an important point to remember, because there is a certain school of thought which says that if God does not share our weaknesses he cannot really understand us, and so we cannot have a real relationship with him! It is a clever argument, but basically it is false. After all, God made us, and he knows perfectly well what our weaknesses and problems are. He is like a doctor who comes to cure us, not to demonstrate that he is just as weak as we are!

Furthermore, says Paul, God guarantees his promise to everyone, to those subject to the law as well as to those who have come to him by way of faith, outside the law. Paul now says openly that Abraham is the father of us all, whether we are Jews or Gentiles. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations, because Abraham had believed that God could raise the dead to life and call into being things which had not previously existed. Here we have reached the heart of the Gospel promise. Resurrection from the dead, for Christ in the first instance, and then for all those who followed him, is the central belief of the Christian faith. Without it we are no better than dead ourselves, without any hope for our life in this world. In Abraham's case, it must have been obvious that the promise that he would become the father of many nations could not possibly have materialised during his lifetime. If he were to inherit the promise therefore, he would have to be brought back to life from the dead. This simple, but

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miraculous, fact Abraham accepted, and it formed the basis for his confidence in what would happen in the future.

Parallel to the idea of resurrection is that of creation, which Paul mentions in the last part of this verse. In the New Testament the Christian life is portrayed as a new creation, and so it is fitting that there should be some allusion to that idea here. Making something out of nothing is a miracle which only God can perform. Even the most brilliant scientist or technician can do no more than work with the matter which he already had—it is a favourite scientific axiom that matter can neither be created or destroyed. For this reason, creation is, strictly speaking, unprovable by scientific means, since science cannot go back beyond the matter which has been created. But of course, God can do this, and his creative acts are the pledge that he can take us and remake us, not just by a little remolding here and there, but by a new creation, so that we will be fit and ready to serve him. This promise is our best guarantee against fatalism, which is the idea that since there is nothing we can do to change our present state, there is no point trying.

Like many such beliefs, fatalism is a half-truth. Of course, *we* can do nothing to change our present state, but God can do everything. The chasm which we perceive between being and non-being is nothing to him—one word from his mouth and the creation is accomplished. This is why Paul stresses that God has *called* the creation into being; it is not the fruit of an activity but the response to his command. Fatalism of one kind or another is widespread in today's world, just as it was in ancient times. Paul's language here has a certain philosophical tone which suggests that he may have been arguing against the Platonists of his day, who could not accept creation out of nothing, or the sovereignty of God over the material world.

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Moving on from this, Paul takes us deeper into the nature of Abraham's faith, before bringing this chapter to a close. He tells us that Abraham believed in hope against hope, that the promise would be fulfilled as God had said. What does this mean? Paul goes on to explain that Abraham's faith was so great that he paid no attention to the fact that he was already rotting away and that his wife Sarah's womb had long since dried up. In purely human terms, it was unreasonable to expect that a couple who were nearly a hundred years old could have a child—to hope for that was really carrying things beyond the bounds of the possible. And yet it is so often just

when things get to that point that God's power intervenes to rescue us from whatever predicament we happen to be in, and to show his power at work in the world once more. One of the biggest mistakes we can make as Christians is to believe that our problems are too big for God to solve.

Miracles are one of those things which sort out believing sheep from unbelieving goats faster than almost anything else. There has never been any shortage of sceptics who claim that all miracles are an illusion, that gullible people have been taken in by charlatans or else been deceived by their own wits, that although Christianity might be all right as a

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moral code it is made useless and unbelievable on account of its insistence on things like the virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ. The worst of it is that not all these sceptics are outside the visible Church—some can even be found holding high office within it! Yet although we may agree that there have often been false claims to miracles and that some people have been taken in by them, we cannot go to the point of denying the possibility of miracles altogether. For a believer, miracles can quite easily happen, and in varying degrees they may even be fairly common in our lives. We may note extraordinary coincidences, unexplained healings and accurate predictions of events by some kind of unearthly intuition. Belief in, and an awareness of, the supernatural in our lives is growing, not decreasing, as science rolls back the frontiers of human knowledge, and in the process tells us more clearly just what those frontiers are!

However, we have to admit to the sceptic that most of the time we are dealing with improbabilities when we talk about miracles, not with total impossibilities. These are much rarer, and the sceptic is accordingly much readier to ridicule them and to condemn us for being so foolish as to believe in them without any proper investigation! We cannot now go back and reproduce the cardinal events of Christ's life; still less can we retrace the steps of Abraham nearly four thousand years ago. But in the face of the sceptics, we need to remember that these miracles were well attested at the time, that in the case of Sarah especially, there would have been no hiding it, and that the consequences of the event, which in this case included the separation of Ishmael from the nation of Israel, would hardly have taken place if the miracle had never happened. There are too many things which are dependent on it for us to take it lightly, as no more than an embellishment to an otherwise self-contained and logical narrative.

Paul tells us that when Abraham heard the promise of God he did not lapse into immediate unbelief—which is surely what most of us would have done—but that he was strengthened in his faith. Here is another little detail which tells us such a lot about

God and the relationship which we are called to have with him. This is simply that when the obstacles are great, God's power is more fully revealed in us. Faith is not something we work up in ourselves; it is a gift of God. Abraham did not swallow his common sense and plunge blindly into the dark. On the contrary, God gave him a strength to believe which he did himself possess, and the power to believe the impossible. Abraham's faith, by which he was justified and which we are called to share, was not just a series of pious platitudes mouthed whenever the occasion arose. His faith was a practical commitment inspired and confirmed by his personal relationship with God.

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In the strength of this new faith, Abraham first gave glory to God. He did not rush in with a lot of requests, nor did he sit back on the confident assumption that it was all in the bag and there was now no reason for him to do any more. If his relationship to God was really at the heart of his faith, then it is appropriate that it should be seen first in worship to God, since that is the visible expression of our relationship to him. Too often we treat worship in a cavalier fashion, ignoring the fact that it is the supreme expression of our relationship with God.

The next thing is that Abraham was assured that God was able to do what he had promised, and that he would actually do it. Once more, we are talking about an attitude of faith more than anything else. The assurance was an inward conviction which came to him before the event, rather like the assurance which comes to the christian that he has been saved by grace and will go to live with Christ in eternity. It has not happened yet, but it is on the way, and we know it! This is the faith which put Abraham right with God, and of which we read here. It was not meant only for him, but also for us, who would be justified in the future. But our faith, and our justification, are different from those of Abraham, because they are based on a *past* event. In a sense therefore, we are called to be less believing than he was, though at the end of the day we know that our reward will be even greater than his!

We are called to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which has already happened. Notice that Paul insists that Jesus was raised from the dead. He makes this point in order to say that Jesus actually died. Notice too that this is one of the rare examples in this Epistle of the use of the title Lord, instead of Christ, to describe Jesus. There is no doubt that this is particularly appropriate here, because the Lordship of Christ stresses his heavenly reign over death, and seals his union with the Father who raised him. For

Paul, as for any Jew, the use of the word 'Lord' in this context can mean only one thing—in Jesus we are dealing with God! Furthermore, we learn that his death and resurrection was for a specific purpose, which Paul introduces here and then develops in the next chapter.

Jesus, says Paul, was given over to death, a term which implies the definite action of God in the matter. The reason for this was that we have fallen down in our relationship with God. Paul uses a word here which suggests—and certainly includes—trespasses, or crimes against the law, but which is not confined to them. It also includes the idea of the Fall, which takes us back beyond Abraham to Adam and the beginnings of human history. Paul adds that Jesus was raised for our justification, which suggests that the righteousness which Abraham attained by faith in a future event of which he had no precise knowledge, we obtain by faith in a past event of which we know a very great deal. Abraham's faith was a trust without evidence, and it changed his life for ever. Why is it that so many people today see the evidence but are still unable to trust in God? It is to this mystery and to its cause that we must now turn.

Disobedience here is something much more basic than this. It is nothing less than ignoring the wisdom passed on to us as part of a normal, moral upbringing. Our parents may have taught us the moral law, and even set an example for us, but we have preferred to ignore all that and go our own way. By choosing to ignore their teaching, we demonstrate that we are without understanding, and that we are prepared to break whatever ties might bind us to other human beings. The result is that all our relationships are tainted with the same hardness, the same lack of love, the same inability to make allowances or to forgive.

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The worst of all is that we know all this in our hearts, but it makes no difference to us. Because we are cut off from God, we are not shocked by this kind of behaviour. On the contrary, we derive a perverse kind of satisfaction from it and even think highly of people who show themselves to be experts at it. Ever wonder why soap operas like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* have been so popular? Here you have the answer—the sinful heart rejoices at the sight of successful sin. It is the ultimate degradation, and the ultimate condemnation, of the man who has turned away from the law and the love of God.

Dr. Bray is one of the editors of *Evangel*. This article concludes his series of expositions on *Romans 1-4*.