

Romans 4, Pt. 1

One of my favorite non-Presbyterian writers and preachers is R. T. Kendall. Kendall was born and raised in Kentucky in the Nazarene Church. He was eventually called into ministry. During his first pastorate, he found himself transformed, through a surprising set of events, into a Reformed, or Calvinist, follower of Jesus. Eventually, his theology and pursuit of ministry would lead him to Oxford University and to the pastorate of Westminster Chapel in London, a position he retired from after twenty-five years of ministry.

Following many of his evangelical predecessors, such as Jonathan Edwards, Kendall often articulates the view that a great revival will come in the last days, and the gospel will be preached with great clarity and conviction before the second coming of Jesus. According to Kendall's view of such things, the message of Romans 4 will be front and center during this time of revival.

What is it about Romans 4 that Kendall and other Christians through the years have found so compelling?

In our journey through Romans, we have spoken much of the way of judgement and the way of mercy. Both ways demonstrate **the good news of the righteousness of God**. Paul laid out the way of judgement in 1:18 through 3:20. God will judge all people and thereby manifest his righteousness. The bad news that tags along with the good news is that all people actually sin and therefore deserve the judgement of God - "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). Beginning with 3:21 he began articulating the way of mercy. Righteousness is manifested through the work of Jesus. "This righteousness is given through faith in Christ [or through the faithfulness of Christ] to all who believe" (3:22). God's justice and God's mercy meet in harmony at the cross. But, of course, such a teaching raises questions, and Paul decides to jump into these further questions in chapter four. Chapter four is all about **the nature of faith**. As we consider this chapter, we will stand at the cross, and we will look both ways in time. Today **we will look back from the cross and see how faith functioned in the life of Abraham**. Next week, we will look forward from

the cross to see how faith manifests itself in our lives. But our focus this morning is **the backwards glance to the life of Abraham.**

Paul knows that the person of Jewish background had many questions concerning the relationship of law, works, and faith. And to address these concerns he looks back at Abraham as the great patriarch of the Israelites. If Paul can make his case for faith in Jesus from the example of Abraham, then he knows that he has a persuasive base to speak of Jesus as heir of David and savior of his people. Paul's summary statement comes with his quotation of Genesis 15:6 in v. 3 - "**Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.**" These words bear a great resemblance to the summary statement of 1:17 - The just shall live by faith. In a similar manner, we see that Abraham's righteousness was not tied to his works but to his faith. What else can we say about Abraham's faith?

1. **Faith excluded works as a ground for boasting** (vv. 4-8). This follows the idea that Paul advances at the end of the third chapter. Righteousness from God was not Abraham's due for his work. This is true for at least two reasons. First, even if Abraham had done everything right, he would have simply been doing his duty before his Creator and so would deserve nothing special. Second, he did not, in fact, do everything right. Abraham made mistakes. Abraham failed in his obedience. God, in declaring Abraham righteous, did not count up Abraham's works. Boasting is excluded. Paul shows that this idea also can be found in Psalm 32. Blessed is the person who has been forgiven. If someone has been forgiven for their errors, then they know that they have no reason to boast before God of what they have done.
2. **Faith came before circumcision** (vv. 9-12). Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness before he received the seal of circumcision. So, a simple study of chronology shows us that faith was more fundamental - even for the Israelite - than circumcision. Paul had already made a similar point at the end of chapter two. If someone actually sins - and everyone actually sins - then circumcision will count as uncircumcision at the day of God's wrath. The simple external reality of circumcision cannot atone for a human being's sin.

3. **Faith came before the Mosaic law** (vv. 13-17). This is a very similar point to what was just mentioned. Just as the necessity of faith predated the sign of circumcision, so faith predated the giving of the law of Moses. The Mosaic law was good. It guided the people and reflected the character of God. But the Mosaic law - in and of itself - was not a ground for righteousness at the day of judgment. Remember v. 15. The law cannot save people from judgment because no one in fact keeps the law. The law, therefore, brings wrath. The law reveals transgression because people who have the law do, in fact, break the law. None of this suggests that the Mosaic law was less than God's good will for his people during the time before Jesus. But faith is more fundamental than obedience to the Mosaic law.

4. **Faith was focused on the power of God** (vv. 18-22). Abraham was not focused on his behavior; nor did he have any concept that he somehow would get things from God on the basis of his actions. At his best Abraham was not self-reliant. When he did try and do things on his own - as he did in the matter with Hagar and Ishmael - then many problems developed. He learned that if there was any hope of an heir coming from Sarah and himself that God would have to be the one to make it happen, freely through his own power. This was Abraham's hope.

Next week, we will stand at the cross and look forward in time to observe how Abraham's faith relates to our faith in the God who extends mercy to sinners in Jesus. For the moment, it is enough to note that **Abraham yet stands as an example for us of the life of faith**. To be clear, Abraham is an example and not our savior, but we all need examples to imitate in our pursuit of a godly, disciplined life. Like Abraham, you and I must also give ourselves over wholly to faith in a righteous God who has made glorious promises to us and has done everything necessary to bring about his purposes and plans. Our standing with God and our hope for the future cannot be based on what we do. It cannot be based on our morality or our wisdom. It must instead be firmly founded on the basis of the righteous life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection of Jesus. But there is one point that I think is most important for us this morning. Faith trusts in God's power and provision. Too often we become too focused on external actions and procedures and

processes in the life of faith. We want programs and steps and plans. Now I am a firm believer in the usefulness of discipline and order in our pursuit of God. But we can never let ourselves slip into the thought that life with God is built only on the foundation of our actions and plans. **Abraham teaches us that faith is personal trust, and at the end of the day, what is most important is not our process but our meaningful, intimate relationship with the God who made the heavens and the earth and who has given us life in Jesus.**

There is a saying that goes something like, “Christianity is not a religion; it is a relationship.” I think this saying gets something wrong and something right. The mistake is that Christianity is, in fact, a religion. Religion is a part of human life, and Jesus asserts his lordship over religion just as he asserts his lordship over all other areas of our lives. Christians are religious people. It is silly to deny this. However, the saying does get something right. **The personal relationship with God is crucial.** The religion without the relationship cannot save us; it cannot commend us to God on the day of judgment. Each of us must imitate Abraham in seeking a meaningful, personal relationship with the Lord.