

*Romans 4, Pt. 2*

One of the reasons that we study history is to find examples and inspiration for living our lives right now. It was once accepted in our country that history was, in fact, full of such profitable lessons in courage, strategy, virtue, and the like. I accept that there are limits to this approach, but I still think that it is a healthy venture which should be encouraged. We need to know about someone like Augustine's mother Monica. She never stopped praying for her wayward son, and so she teaches us not to give up in our prayers. It is healthy to think about John Wycliffe and Jan Hus, men who stood up for the truth of Scripture in the face of ecclesiastical powers who wished them to be silent. Even this week, I read of the Episcopal Bishop of Albany, New York, who agreed to resign from his post because his church could not tolerate his commitment to biblical views of marriage and human sexuality. But he prized fidelity to Christ as a higher value than conformity to a wayward hierarchy. We should learn about Abraham Lincoln; whose body of speeches include honest wrestling with questions of theological and philosophical significance. Political leaders today would do well to follow in such footsteps. **We learn from the past.** We find ways of approaching our own challenges by studying the lives of those who have gone before.

Last week, we stood at the cross and looked back in history to **the life of Abraham**. We considered the nature of Abraham's faith. His faith excluded works as a ground for boasting. His faith came before circumcision or the giving of the Mosaic law. His faith was focused on the power of God. I concluded that study by suggesting that **we should also pursue the kind of meaningful, personal relationship with the Lord which Abraham cultivated throughout his life**. His life speaks to us. His demonstration of faith in history helps us to understand something of the role of faith in our own lives.

We continue our study of Romans 4 today by standing at the cross and **looking forward from that point to all that would follow**. The gospel call to faith echoes forth from the cross to men and women of every time,

location, and language. Romans 4 presents us with the idea that we can all be Abraham's children. I guess the old children's song is exactly right. Father Abraham had many sons, and I am one of them, and so are you. This morning, I want us to see how faith plays out in our lives in three crucial ways.

**Faith brings us forgiveness.** When you and I follow in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham, we receive forgiveness of our sins. We saw in our last sermon that Abraham had no ground for boasting of his work before God. He could not boast of his work because (1) obeying God is only our basic duty; and (2) he had sinned against God. Note what Paul says in v. 5 of our passage - "And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." Our God justifies the ungodly through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. This is the way of mercy. This experience of forgiveness was understood, however, even before the incarnation. Abraham knew what it meant to be forgiven. And according to Psalm 32 which is quoted in our chapter, David also knew what it meant to be forgiven - "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered." This is the forgiveness which is on offer to all who believe right now. Notice how everything in v. 5 is happening in **the present tense**. "The one who *believes*.... his faith *is* counted as righteousness." Paul has been discussing Abraham, but he here clearly speaks in a more general manner in order to include all people who hear the message of the gospel and believe. **The offer of forgiveness is still available** for men and women in 2020.

**Can you say with certainty that you know what it means to be forgiven by God?** Do you experientially understand the words of Psalm 32 as quoted by Paul? If the answer is no. Then, there are two possibilities. The first is that you do not yet know Jesus. My prayer for you is that you would come to know him. The second possibility is that you are indeed a follower of Christ, but some cloud of doubt has darkened your experience of God's mercy. There are many such sources of doubt. For some the experience of forgiveness is limited by experiences with family. For others the problem is bad teaching in the past. Whatever the source, I want you to know that you can start talking with God directly about this experience, asking him to let you feel in new ways the rays of forgiveness pouring forth in Jesus. Share your burden with another Christian, and ask them to pray for you as well.

**Faith makes us a part of the people of God.** When you and I follow in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham, we become a part of God's multinational, multilingual, all-times, all-places people. The church is not just a nice idea that was cooked up by a secretive society dressed in big hats or fancy robes.

**The church - the corporate body of God's people - is God's creation.**

Notice in the passage that this people includes both circumcised and uncircumcised - Jew and Gentile. Abraham is the father of the faithful in either group. The promise given to Abraham in Genesis 17 is that he would be the father of many nations. The more immediate promise is that he and Sarah would have a son. But the remarkable outcome would be that he would stand at the headwaters of a global people. The early Christians understood that this promise was fulfilled in the church, as people of all nations and backgrounds were adopted into the family of God through faith in Jesus. Somewhere along the way, many of us got mixed up in our reading of the Bible. We accepted the idea that the Old Testament is only about God's plan for Israel, with only secondary value for Christians. But this misses the reality that **from the beginning God had intended the Abrahamic blessing to go out to everyone, everywhere.** Israel had a vocation to testify to God's existence to all people, that they too might come to know God.

**Do you love and value the church like God loves and values the church?**

The idea of the "solo" Christian who doesn't need the fellowship of the body is a fiction. It is not only a fiction, but also a lie. To be a Christian is to be a member of the church who must express that membership in local fellowship. Now undoubtedly, there are believers who are not part of churches, but it is important to state that this is an abnormality and not the way that it is supposed to be. We are to love and value the body. We are to assemble if at all possible. We are to claim our inheritance as members of God's people.

**Faith gives us confidence.** When you and I follow in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham, we feel confidence in God's promises to us. Abraham did not take confidence in his own flesh. His focus - even if imperfect - was on God's power. According to v. 20 - "No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God." I prefer the translation of this verse found in the NASB - "yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith,

giving glory to God.” There is a description of Christian growth encapsulated in this single verse. First, Abraham looked at the promise of God and his faith was strengthened. Then, his strengthened faith caused him to praise and honor God. Finally, his worship of God reciprocally strengthened his faith and confidence in the promise. So too, **when we look at God’s promises and not our own strength, then we grow in faith.** Faith leads to worship. Worship leads to faith looking at the promises. Our confidence and assurance thereby grow.

Looking forward from the cross, we find an invitation to faith that goes out and is still going out to the nations of the world. This faith brings forgiveness, membership in God’s people, and confidence in God’s promises to us. Abraham stands at the headwaters of a people of faith, a people still growing across the world. The greatest way to build our faith is to meditate on the last two verses of the chapter - we must trust the one who raised Jesus from the dead, the very Jesus who was delivered for our trespasses and raised for our justification. **The cross reminds us of the power of God’s love,** a power which will work for the rest of history and for all eternity.