

Prayer

Almighty God; You are our Creator and our Redeemer, and Your care for us extends far beyond our understanding or our reach. Give us the humility to accept that ultimately, we do not know all things, and that we may explore but never compete with Your supreme creative and saving power. May we honour You as the One from whom everything comes, and live as if we truly believe it. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Discuss with others in your family who might like to do this, whether you can find time to pray together and read the Bible at home

On-going prayers

- **Confess your sins to God.** Read the 'works of the flesh' (Galatians 5:19-21) and repent of similar sins you may have committed
- Pray for those who work in border controls in your country
- Praise God for the joy of His love and the friendship of others

Meditation

It is a great day when the Spirit of God
Moves in the heart of a man or a woman,
Everything changes, for the Spirit comes:

Eyes are opened, bodies and souls are healed,
The spirit comes alive and the heart is motivated
Colours are fresh, the sky brighter, and the world good.,
The Bible comes alive with meaning and purpose and love,
The face of one who knows the Saviour shows radiance and joy,
And prayer becomes as natural as breathing in the clear fresh air,
All who hear His voice are filled with potential, just waiting to be tapped,
And the world is full of opportunity, through the Lord and God who made it.

To those who do not know it ... know this is your right!
To those who know, but don't remember it ... what has happened?
To those who want to know it ... just ask the Lord of all!
To those who glory in it ... pray for those who need to know!

Bible passage – Romans 4:1-12

¹ What then do we say was found by Abraham, the natural forefather of our race? ² For if Abraham was made right with God by what he did, then he has something to be proud of, but not before God!

³ What does Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted for him as being right with God.' ⁴ Now for someone who works, wages are not counted as a gift, but as money earned. ⁵ But to one who does no 'work' but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is 'counted for him as being right with God'.

⁶ In this same way, David also pronounces a blessing upon those whom God 'counts as being right' with Himself, separate from 'work'.

⁷ 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;

⁸ blessed are those for whom
the Lord will not count their sin.'

⁹ Is this great blessing pronounced then on the circumcised alone, or on the uncircumcised as well? For we say that 'faith was counted to Abraham as being made right with God.'¹⁰ How then was it 'counted'? Was it before or after he was circumcised? It was before he was circumcised.¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness by faith which he had while he was still uncircumcised. In this way, he became the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised, so that being right with God could be 'counted' to them.¹² And in the same way, he is the ancestor of the circumcised, who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith possessed by our ancestor Abraham before he was circumcised.

Bible Study

Review

The text for today is rather long, because we need to read it all in order to understand what Paul is saying here about the importance of faith. Some do not feel that Paul's comments about the Law and circumcision are relevant to them; but if they ignore this passage, then they lose the opportunity to learn from what it says about the unity and reliability of the Gospel message. Paul's first point here is that faith defines a deeper relationship with God than can be found through the mere practice of religion (4:1-8), and secondly, he proves from the Old Testament that the true people of God are defined by faith, not circumcision (4:9-12).

To begin with, Paul makes the case that a relationship with God is always a gift (4:1-5), and it cannot be earned. He describes traditional Jewish practice of 'keeping the Law' as like working for wages, and then in contrast, he points out that Abraham, the nation's founder, received his relationship with God as a gift (Gen 15:1-6). The conclusion is obvious; however important it is to live according to God's law, people only have a relationship with God as a gift of grace.

To strengthen his point, Paul then quotes from Psalm 32:1,2 (4:7,8). This psalm was believed to have been written by David after his adultery with Bathsheba, and it reflects his gratitude for God's gracious forgiveness. Crucially for what Paul is wanting to say here, the text explains that God did not 'count' David's sin against him, and the word 'count' is the same word used in Genesis to describe Abraham's relationship with God (he was 'counted as righteous ...' see 4:5,8). Paul wants us to see that scripture describes a right relationship with God as a matter of His judgement alone, so Abraham is 'counted' as righteous on the basis of his faith, and David is restored to favour when God does not 'count' his sin. Now each story of Abraham and David contains great twists and turns including good and bad within the life of each, but their relationship with God is not for people to judge, but God alone. So whatever we think of the rights or wrongs of this, Paul's point is now clear. No one can claim a relationship with God through the practice of their religion.

Next, Paul asks whether righteousness, that is, a right relationship with God, is available for Gentiles as well as Jews (4:9). To answer this, he goes back again to the story of Abraham. He does not dispute the fact that as ancestors of Abraham, as proved by circumcision, the Jews have a relationship with God. However, he says that because Abraham was proved righteous by faith (Gen 15:1-6) before he was circumcised (Gen 17), this proves that God responds to the faith of the uncircumcised. And if Abraham had a relationship with God by faith before he was circumcised, why should God not exercise the same grace to uncircumcised Gentiles (4:11)?

Paul set this out to show that the Gospel message does not vary for different people. In his day, some Gentile Christians wanted nothing to do with the Jews, because their insistence on keeping the Law compromised freedom in Christ. Jewish Christians felt that their heritage should be honoured and circumcision should be retained. Also, traditional non-Christian Jews strongly opposed the Christian faith because it threatened all they held dear, especially the purity of their religion and the laws of Moses.

We may think that a passage of scripture that tries to deal with such ancient cultural issues is not worth dwelling on today. However, God's people are hardly any better today, though the issues over which Christians are divided are different. These divisions look to outsiders like squabbling about the Gospel! Surely, we must accept that, like Paul, we must seek the truth of the Gospel within God's Word, and that despite our sins today it is one and undivided? Whatever the merits of Paul's detailed arguments here, he presents a clear and right conclusion that God counts as righteous those who have faith in Him and confess their sins. Sometimes we need to be reminded that this is God's Gospel, not ours.

Going Deeper

Each step Paul takes within this part of his letter needs to be read with care if it is to be well understood, and we will now attempt this under these three headings:

- The faith of Abraham, law and circumcision; what does it all mean? (4:1-5)
- The quote from David and the Psalms (4:6-8)
- What comes first, faith or obedience, and who may receive God's grace? (4:9-12)

Going Deeper

The faith of Abraham, law and circumcision; what does it all mean? (4:1-5)

It is probably true to say that the Jewish people regard two things as basic to their existence as a people of God. Firstly, they are God's chosen people because they are physically descended from Abraham, through his first son Isaac (the only son of Sarah), and through his grandson Jacob, renamed by God as 'Israel' (Gen 32:28). This ancestry is proved by the physical sign of circumcision. Secondly, the Jews are people of the Law, and live in obedience to the revealed laws of God, as given to Moses after Israel escaped from Egypt (the Exodus). Much has been built on this, of course, and the way that the Law has been interpreted has changed radically over the centuries. Indeed, at the time of Jesus, Pharisees were instigating wholesale reforms within Judaism based on their interpretation of the Law, built up in their community through recent generations.

This is why Paul deals with these two issues; the law and circumcision. If he was to persuade people that the Christian faith was consistent with its Old Testament past, then he had to deal conclusively with these two issues. He had to show that God's intent was always to 'choose' not only the descendants of Abraham but Gentiles; and this meant that he had to break the perceived connection between circumcision and God's favour. He also had to show that in order to 'count' people as righteous in His eyes, God required faith and not right religion according to the Law.

It is far easier to unravel verses 1 to 5 if we keep Paul's aim in mind as we go, for if we do not, then we will easily get lost trying to work out what he is saying and why. Now at the end of chapter 3, Paul argues that God is the God of the Gentiles as well as the Jews, and that the Law is valid but cannot save. He is aware that these concepts strike at the heart of Judaism, and purposefully see to justify this by turning to scripture.

We will understand this text best if we recall that God appeared to Abraham to tell him he was chosen and give him divine promises, at least three times. On the first occasion God promised to 'bless' Abraham and 'all the families of the earth' (Gen 12:1-3), and Abraham gave no response. Later, Abraham was worried about being childless and having no heir, so he brought the matter to the Lord. God then promised Abraham that he would have a son and 'many descendants' (15:1-5), and Abraham '*believed the Lord, and the Lord counted it to him as righteousness*' (Gen 15:6 – the words quoted by Paul in Romans 4:3). The third appearances revealed the practice of circumcision (Gen 17).

At this point in his letter, Paul simply makes the point that Abraham's basic response to God had nothing to do with either circumcision or the Law. He was not put right with God by doing the 'work' required by the Law, but through his faith. During his life, Abraham was responsible for many things, and he even had other sons and daughters apart from through the line of Isaac and Jacob (through his second wife Keturah - Gen 25:1-11). However, no one can read the story of Abraham and not say that he was indeed a man of faith, and this was the key to His relationship with God. Paul's point held valid in the first century and it is true today.

The quote from David and the Psalms (4:6-8)

It may seem odd that Paul chose this next text, in which the psalm declares a blessing on those '*whose lawless sins are forgiven and whose sins are covered*'. The psalm goes on to describe the forgiveness of sins in terms of being 'counted' as right before God (4:8), which seems very different from the subjects of faith and the law under discussion here. It is only when we recognise the connection between this psalm and the quote from Genesis found in the word 'count' that it makes sense, as I have explained above. However, we are still left wondering why Paul chose this text, for Abraham was counted as righteous due to his faith, but David (the assumed author of this psalm) was counted as righteous despite his sins, and on the surface, this seems less than fair.

It is likely that Paul chose the example of David for a number of reasons, however. Firstly, it emphasises the fact that people's acceptance in God's eyes cannot be earned. Now, David had clearly sinned by committing both adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11). It is interesting that this is the first mention of forgiveness in the whole letter of Romans, and the first indication that God will forgive sins according to His will and pleasure. Now, we should not think that David escaped the consequences of his sin. His repentance and confession

brought with it God's judgement, and he was forgiven after he accepted the punishment, and was then able to move on in his life. He was then able to write a psalm, some time later, about the forgiveness of God.

Of course, David was one of the other great pillars of Jewish self identity, and Paul was keen to demonstrate that he was made right with God by grace and not by his own obedience to the law. David was the great leader of God's people, and it was believed that the Messiah would be a 'Son of David'. In a subtle way, Paul used an example from the life of David to add to his point about faith. For if God had not forgiven David these sins, then he would never have proved worthy of the honours God placed on him, especially the great promise that someone of his own line would 'sit on the throne of Israel for ever (2 Samuel 7:13).

What comes first, faith or obedience, and who may receive God's grace? (4:9-12)

Verses 9 to 12 are often referred to as the place in Romans where Paul makes the case that faith comes before circumcision, so the grace of God is more important than the old covenant of Judaism symbolised by the law and circumcision. We should be very careful with this text, however, because if we follow through what Paul is saying, his aim not to dismiss the Jews but to include the Gentiles.

Yes, in verse 10, Paul argues that Abraham's faith comes before his circumcision, and Paul uses circumcision here to represent all it means to be a Jew, including keeping the Law. It is only by looking back at his previous point about being counted as right before God (4:1-5) that we can now draw the conclusion that faith is basic to any relationship with God, rather than the Law. Here, at the point where Paul draws out the timeline of Abraham's life, he is illustrating a different point. When he says, '*how then was it counted? Was it before or after he was circumcised?*' (4:10), it is to conclude later on that Abraham is '*the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised*' (4:11). In other words, Abraham's story proves that Gentiles can be saved!

The remainder of this part of the text is devoted to an explanation that God saves people and counts them righteous on the basis of their faith whether they are Jew or Gentile (4:12), so it is clear that Paul's point is inclusive not exclusive. We must be very clear about this because it still causes confusion amongst Christians even to this day. In everything Paul says about the Law, circumcision, grace and faith, he never says that the Law is replaced by grace or that it is superseded by grace. He says that Faith and the grace of God are fundamental, and that they are the way God saves people, and not the law, but he does not reject what the law stands for of itself. As he wrote at the end of chapter 3, '*do we throw out the law because of faith? ... No ... we uphold the law!*' (3:31).

Application

I have heard many preachers attempt to simplify the Gospel by saying that the old law of 'works' has been replaced by the new law of 'grace'. This is often preached as the true message of Galatians chapter 3, for example. I strongly suggest that you read both Romans 4 and Galatians 3 very carefully, for to say such a thing is a presumption. Every time Paul writes about this he emphasises that God saves people by grace alone and not by the law, but he never dismisses the law as irrelevant, he writes in an inclusive way to say that God's grace is all sufficient. Whereas the law could not deliver salvation, grace does, however, the law has a place in God's plan which is to reveal sin, and woe betide us if we forget it! The preacher should always make the Gospel inclusive, and never belittle the importance of God's past revelation of His moral law.

You may have heard sermons about grace and law, and you may not have thought about this before, but it is a very important point. Moreover, this comes directly from the detail of this passage here in Romans 4, and we will miss it if we ignore it! It would be wrong to dismiss any part of God's Word, of course, but those who turn past this part of Scripture lay themselves open to Satan's attack to deviate the Gospel message. The deviation is just slight, the difference between proclaiming grace and abandoning the law, and proclaiming grace and putting the law in its place may seem to be only a matter of emphasis to some. However, the church has an enemy that specialises in altering the truth just a little in order to pervert it; this is what he did in the garden of Eden (see Genesis 3:1-7)!

Today, the Christian must still proclaim that God saves by grace, and he saves all sinners, Jews and Gentiles and people of all races, cultures and religions. If we are to explain God's grace to people then we need to demonstrate the truth of God's moral law so that others can see the difference between what is right and wrong. We therefore need to know the Law, live it and be willing to explain it. However, we do this to go one stage further, which is to testify to the grace of God found in Jesus Christ, and show that He is the answer to the quest of every human heart, and the one who does indeed forgive sins. Today's text goes to the heart of all this, and we should not think otherwise.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Look back at the previous verses in chapter 3 (27-31) and check that you understand how this leads into our passage today. What does it say to help us interpret this passage?
2. Look up the passages in the Old Testament quoted by Paul and discuss what you think they mean.
3. Do you believe that people understand the difference between the Gospel of grace and the importance of the law today? If not, why not?

Personal comments by author

I have sat and listened to a number of sermons that have been well meaning but completely ignorant of Paul's concern to make the Gospel inclusive. Sometimes, I have listened while other preachers have insisted that the Gospel of God's grace supersedes the 'Old Covenant', and as a consequence, the law has no place in the life of the believer. Such an attitude to God's work throughout history is in my view tragic, and it seems to me that in its worst forms, it represents a form of religious bigotry that can never serve God's purposes. The only way that God's people can proclaim a true Gospel that reflects the heart of God is to make sure that Scripture lies at the heart of what is preached. I hope this is obvious from this study today.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think through all that you have received from God, as a free gift of His grace. Then read through the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1f.) and confess your sins. Give thanks for God's grace, and give thanks for God's law.*
- *Pray for preachers who carry the great burden of proclaiming the Gospel. Pray that they will be willing to use God's Word and preach from it. Pray that they will be blessed by the Holy Spirit and given insight into God's eternal truth, for the benefit of all and the Kingdom of God.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, may I be like a tree planted by a stream drawing water from the eternal springs and growing stronger every day, fed by Your warmth, light, and water. May I so grow that in due season I bear the fruit I have been created to produce, and contribute to Your harvest; an offering of thanksgiving dedicated to You.
AMEN
