

Sermon: Saved by Faith through God's Grace.

Paul's letter to the church in Rome is arguably one of the most influential documents in church history. St Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Karl Barth, and others all had their hearts "strangely warmed," as Wesley put it, through reading *Romans*. These men were great reformers in their respective generations, and the passage today, complicated and dense as it, tells part of the story of their spiritual transformations and their long-lasting influence in the life of the church.

It is thought that this letter was written while Paul was in Greece in about A.D. 57, having earlier written letters to other churches - such as to Corinth. We don't know *how* the church in Rome was established; but we do know that in A.D. 49 Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from Rome because of disturbances over Christianity. After Claudius was murdered in A.D. 54, it seems that the Jews were able to return back to the city. And while Jewish Christians may have been prominent at the beginning, during their absence from Rome Christianity grew amongst non-Jews, and consequently there were tensions between these two ethnic groups at the time Paul wrote his letter. This had all the potential to polarize and, indeed, split the church, as we read in Acts 15. It seems that the Jewish Christians considered themselves as the superior, true custodians of Christianity. Left unchecked, this would make the non-Jewish Christians second-class. How did Paul respond? What advice and teaching did Paul write to a church he had never visited? He reaches way back to the patriarch Abraham and he insists that he is the prototype of faith for *all* who believe - both Jews and non-Jews. It is through Abraham that Paul establishes the foundational principle that we are put right with God *through* faith.

Billy Graham understood this point well when he insisted that there should be no segregation based on colour in his crusades within southern United States. He took heat from white Baptist preachers who disagreed, but he knew that discrimination on *any* grounds was an insult to God. We are not saved by *any* perceived merit in ourselves, whether that is based on social status, nationality, colour, wealth, good deeds, or abilities. We are rescued by God's loving generosity towards us - by God's *grace*, which we embrace by faith. That is the topic for today.

The Jewish sense of superiority arose because they considered themselves as directly descended from Abraham, as well as through the covenant of circumcision. Indeed, by the first century, Abraham had become an object of hero-worship; we can even see it in Paul's description of Abraham here - since *all* of Abraham's doubts and mistakes are airbrushed away (see v20). Recall too that John the Baptist was highly critical of the Jewish religious elite who claimed that they were "right with God" - or "righteous" - simply *because* they *were* descendants of Abraham. John rebuked them, exclaiming even "out of these stones God can raise children of Abraham!"¹ Paul would have agreed.

So how does Paul persuade the Romans that Christ was available for everyone, without favoritism - as he writes in Rom 2:11? As mentioned earlier, he rewrites the story of Abraham, portraying him as the *first* person of faith. We read in Genesis 15:5 that God *promises* Abraham that his children would be as numerous as "the stars in the sky." And in the very next verse we read, "Abraham *believed* the LORD, and he *credited*

¹ Matt 3:9.

it to him as righteousness.” God “reckoned” Abraham as right before him simply because he *believed* in that promise of God! God later reiterates this promise in our Old Testament reading this morning, saying that Abraham will be “the father of *many* nations.” Paul *leaps* on this aspect. Abraham is not simply the father of the Jewish nation, but the *whole* world is his inheritance. Paul emphasises that God wanted to bless the whole world through Abraham, *and* through the nation of Israel. And, as we will see, that connection with the wider world is realized through Jesus Christ.

Paul makes it clear that Abraham was not right before God through his own actions, nor through circumcision – that deed occurs later in Genesis 17. Nor was it for keeping the 10 commandments – the Law; Moses comes later! Abraham was reckoned as right before God because he simply believed in God’s promise. And if you think about it, it was a *totally crazy* promise! Paul knew that too; in Romans 4:18 - 19 we read:

“When it was *beyond* hope, [Abraham] had *faith* in the hope that he would become the father of many nations, in keeping with the promise God spoke to him: [namely] “That’s how many descendants you will have.” Without losing faith, Abraham, who was nearly 100 years old, took into account his own body, which was as good as dead, and Sarah’s womb, which *was* dead!”

Faith in this physically-impossible promise understandably seems irrational for many today. Well, we are in good company – Abraham knew it was physically impossible too. Yet – at least in the way Paul tells it - Abraham was fully persuaded that what God had promised, God was able to deliver.

A pivotal verse is 17, which says: “Abraham is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.” First, Paul claims that *everyone* who *God credits* as being right with him - through faith - has Abraham as their father, whether they are Jewish or not. Second, and importantly, it is an affirmation that only “God gives life to the dead.” In the case of Abraham, God gave life to Sarah’s dead womb. In the case of the crucified Jesus, God raised him from the dead. *Both illustrate that God gives new life to whom God wills.*² This not only includes non-Jews, so fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham, but it emphasizes that it is *only* through *God’s initiative* we can become right with God. In other words, it is *through God’s generosity, or grace, and by faith.*

All Christians are therefore children of Abraham, which is not something we think about too much today, but it *was* a big deal in Paul’s day. Where Jews are descendants physically of Abraham, and where Muslims discover him as the model Muslim, Christians find in Abraham, the person who had faith in the promise of God. *Trusting* in the promises of God, argues Paul, is the primary mode of through which God’s relates with us; it is *not* by keeping rules. Instead, Paul stresses that we are to trust that God fulfilled his promise to Abraham, namely that he would be the father of many nations, *through* the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. More specifically, to believe that through Christ’s death and resurrection “God was reconciling the world to himself” – as Paul puts it in 2 Cor 5:19. Moreover, since Abraham’s inheritance is the entire world, this promise is available to everybody. All this makes *God’s* action and initiative *central*; it

² Incidentally, this is demonstrated in Acts in that the (life-giving) Holy Spirit (who makes us a “new creation”) is given lavishly to all at Pentecost, and to non-Jews in Cornelius.

is all about *grace*. Whereas, obedience to the 10 commandments, and the whole Jewish Law, makes *our* actions central. See the difference?

There are various common responses to this good news today.

The first is denial, or “so what?” It is all too easy for us to try to convince ourselves that sinfulness is *no big deal*. We secretly think of ourselves as not truly wicked, like a mass murderer or a cruel, power-hungry dictator. We look in the mirror and say “I’m actually a fairly good person. I don’t commit *that* many sins. If I get a little bit of touching up, I will be fine!” Paul would laugh at this! God knows *everything* about you and me, so don’t let’s not kid ourselves about how good we are, and let’s not be casual about God’s grace. As we heard last week, Christ *suffered* and *died* to rescue us, so let us not belittle that cost with ingratitude. Instead, let us respond to God’s graciousness by living for God as faithfully as possible.

Here is a second response. In a competitive, hard-working, individualistic society, many see God’s grace being completely *unfair* because we are convinced we need to earn God’s favour by merit. Many of Jesus parables also relate to that theme and the religious leaders of his day found the concept of grace most offensive, because they believed “you get what you deserve.” Some of us think this way today because, basically, we find it insulting to think all those good deeds and effort does not make God love us all the *more*! That is what is so shocking and amazing about grace. Those who are fully aware of their own brokenness, however, can be overwhelmed by this *good news* because they know they will *never* be good enough! That is one reason why the message of Jesus was welcomed by society’s outcasts and outsiders wherever Jesus – and Paul – preached. And that is also why the influence of the book Romans has endured and Wesley’s sensation of being “strangely warmed” comes from finally letting go of all that effort to try and please God and to instead simply have faith in the promise of life through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

Here is a third common response. There are people, even Christians, who believe that what they have done in the past is so awful that it is beyond forgiveness. Some despair that their past sin has cut themselves off from God and there is absolutely no way to heal or restore that relationship. They therefore live in perpetual guilt; they basically see God as nasty, not nice. Again, Paul would beg to differ. He would say that God chose to break *into* history in Jesus Christ. Your right relationship with God *cannot* be earned through your obedience to rule keeping. Our perpetual efforts at being good only remind us how imperfect we are! Instead, a right relationship with God is built on trust in Jesus. If this is you, then stop dwelling on your failures and live in confident trust that you are a forgiven child of Abraham, and you are given another opportunity to be obedient. The simple truth is that we can never earn the love of God. There is *nothing* that we do that can make God love us *more*, and there is nothing we can do that will make God love us *less*. Grace is something which is *always undeserved*.

If our response to God’s grace is to say “so what?” or “that’s unfair” or “it is too good to be true” then we need to stop and do some soul searching this Lent. As we reflect, let us be open to God’s Spirit revealing afresh this good news message which historically has transformed the Church through its reformers and have our hearts “strangely warmed” by God’s presence. Amen.