

## **Romans 4 Faith**

File: Romans4Faith.pdf

Version: 1.0

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Orig Date: Aug 31,2008

The Book of Romans unfolds in meaning very slowly. The discovery of the flow and context itself appropriately enough came only through God's grace.

This article offers a little examination of chapter 4. Hopefully a few highlights about the chapter will create a confidence about Paul's topic and intent.

Part of the problem in understanding the Book of Romans comes from Paul's interweaving of several objectives within the discussion about Abraham. Even in simply presenting Abraham's name the audience becomes drawn to the details of his life rather than to the actual arguments being made by Paul.

### **First Topic of Romans 4**

Initially in presenting the name of Abraham, Paul was dealing with the boasting of the Roman believers about becoming people of faith over and against the Jews who were under the Law. Paul focused on Abraham as a man who was kind of considered to be Jewish and hence seen as the father of the Jews.

After introducing Abraham and the inability to boast before God, Paul focused on the topic of Abraham's faith as being the father of those of faith. The benefit of having faith was not something that he could boast about.

### **Direction of Topic of Abraham**

The direction Paul was heading was to provide words of security to the Roman Gentile believers in the face of persecution (see Rom 5:3). To achieve this, faith was presented to counteract the despair among the Romans.

1. Shows inclusion of Gentiles under Abraham
2. Presents the promise for children of Abraham to cherish
3. Describes the faith that focuses the believers upon God and His promise

That which needs to be seen here is that Romans 4:13-25 heads in a specific direction that should result in the encouragement of the believers. The passage can be read for the unified topic as well as the nuggets of inspiration.

### **Inclusion of Gentiles**

Romans 4:11 presents the Gentile believers as children of Abraham so these believers would start feeling comfortable as being solidly in God's hands by including Gentiles under Abraham while likely relying on the words of John the Baptist

**Mat 3:9** And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to *our* father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham (KJV+)

So, if God could start with stones, it was reasonable enough rather to start with Gentiles.

His Gentile audience then would be encouraged to feel as comfortable in their faith as those who were naturally children of Abraham while being of faith too. Paul apparently counteracted the insecurity of these Gentiles, feeling like a stepchild.

Note at the same time that Paul may have same time, in his effort to lead the Gentiles to accept Jews back into the congregation, sought to make the Gentiles feel a bit as outsiders and then bring them into comfort after a subtle emphasis on the Jewish father, Abraham.

So, as mentioned before, by introducing Abraham as a father of the Jews, Paul emphasized the Jewishness of Abraham and the right of Jews to be seen as children. Then while the Gentile believers felt excluded and as outsiders, Paul invited them in as children of Abraham, relieving the tension he just promoted.

### **Promise of Abraham**

Up until recently I did not understand the significance of God's promise being brought up at verse 13. True there is some sense that the discussion of the promise fits into the words about faith and this natural fit also tended to hide the importance of the mention of the promise. Finally upon closer reading, it became apparent that the *promise* was being emphasized rather than only being a side topic.

What stands out here is that the promise had to be introduced so that the Roman believers could see that they have a part in the promise. This participation in the promise naturally followed their inclusion as descendants of Abraham. But the promise also was important as the stepping stone of faith. Without the audience, the Gentiles, being a sharer in the promise of Abraham, there was nothing in particular for which the Gentiles could hope.

Verse 16 then showed that the Gentiles too would enjoy the benefit of the promise. This promise was that they would be heirs of the world (verse 13) which truly was to be applied in plural form, not just as a promise to Abraham. This plurality was mentioned in Douglas Moo's *Epistle to the Romans* when commentating on Romans 4.

[Here's a quick idea – verse 18 could suggest that the Roman believers, and even believers today, could also be fathers of many nations. This is really speculative but was mentioned more as a reminder to investigate the idea later.]

Paul therefore educated them on their possession of the promise. Then the faith of these believers in Rome would be connected with the promise of God.

### **Faith Focusing on God**

Verse 18 presents the idea of the struggle of faith in hope against hope. This struggle was the struggle of endurance that was being faced by the Romans. Believers in Rome were failing in

this struggle and consequently were following the flesh instead of the spirit.

Faith was being presented as a cure for the anxiety of the Romans, their fear of the wrath of God (Rom 1:18, 2:3-5). *Faith* toward God had to be connected with a promise of God since there has to be something for which the believers trust.

Faith implies trust toward God and what God says, His promises. Otherwise, *faith* would be relying on subjective thoughts rather than on specific benefits revealed by God. Though the subjective reliance on God could have some merit, the objective promises offer sounder reasoning which also becomes a more convincing argument to help the Romans become calm in the midst of persecution – the persecution mentioned in Rom 5:3.

Therefore, several verses were used to shore up the faith and show the faith in operation in the midst of difficult times as shown in the example of Abraham in verses 18 to 20. Then the endurance of that faith was described so as to show the Roman audience that they ought to follow the same path of assurance.

### **Transference**

Chapter 4 ends with indication first that the account of Abraham should not just be taken as an interesting story about Abraham. The account should be realized to apply directly to the contemporary audience.

In verse 23, Paul was overcoming the problem, with the Gentile audience, similar to what I had mentioned too, namely about the audience being drawn to the details of Abraham's life rather than to the argument Paul was making. So Paul mentioned that the “imputation of righteousness” was written for their sake – for those originally receiving and hearing the letter by Paul.

There does seem to be some resistance in Paul to automatically assume that the audience actually were all believers, so the letter shows a conditional “if **we** believe on Him that raised Jesus...” at the same time though that there is the implied “we” such that Paul was softening the caution (almost a rebuke??) by speaking in plural rather than the more authoritative rebuke of saying “if **you** believe on Him that raised Jesus.” [The words “implied 'we'” just means that the English translation uses the pronoun 'we' yet there are no pronouns in Greek – if I heard this correctly.]

If this isn't Paul's caution (in assuming them to be believers) it may be a challenge to the Roman audience to check and make sure they are believing – inasmuch as anyone could make a course correction here. Paul's phrasing here may match Jesus' question “Will there really be faith when the Son of Man comes?”

[Maybe Moo's commentary shows that this is not really a conditional statement familiar in English.]

### **Recapitulation**

Now the discussion could proceed further into verses 24 and 25 then into chapter 5 to show the next stage of the argument whereby Paul shows God's love and where this love becomes the basis for being strong in persecution, but what is more critical is to see what just happened in chapter 4.

The verses that could often be viewed as isolated bits of knowledge about Abraham now have a context assigned to the words. Paul was building a case upon which the audience would then feel confident that they were to enjoy the same benefits as Abraham. This confidence counteracted their fears of even being subjected to the wrath of God and being isolated from the Jews. From this fear they were being comforted and led into the assurance through the promise and through faith.

Such assurance and faith then was basis for enduring the persecution. But, as implied by the start of this section, Paul would add further argument to help them trust God during these persecutions. But such further details can be seen more readily having clarified the purpose and flow of Paul's Bible study about Abraham.

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