

Romans 4: Abraham's trust

1. In Chapter 4 of Romans, Paul turns to the Old Testament figures of Abraham (leading role) and David (supporting cast) to illustrate his abstract points about justification through faith. As you read through the amazingly rich chapters 3 and 5 of Romans, do you find chapter 4 a brilliant enricher of the “essay”¹ or a distracting digression? What are the benefits of Paul’s approach to using the OT in this way?
2. *How* was Abraham made right with God?² *When* was Abraham made right with God?
3. When Paul states that Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness (v. 9), the Greek is *pistis*, which means the “state of believing on the basis of reliability of the one trusted; trust, confidence, faith” (BDAG). Is this the contemporary understanding of faith outside of the church? Within the church? In your 21st century mind (shaped by two cultures – the secular and the sacred), how do you typically think of faith? What are the (connotative) differences between faith, belief, and trust? Might an ideal translation for contemporary readers be “Abraham's *trust* was reckoned to him as righteousness”?
4. Paul describes Abraham’s belief in God’s promises as follows: “not weakening” (v. 19), [it] “did not waver through unbelief” (v. 20), he was “fully convinced” (v. 21). Read Genesis 15:2-3 (Abraham questions God), 15:8 (Abraham asks for reassurance), 16:1-2ff (Abraham “helps God out” via Hagar), 17:16 (Abraham laughs, seemingly in disbelief). How do you reconcile the Genesis account of Abraham’s faith and the Romans account of Abraham’s faith? What exactly was the quality of Abraham’s faith?
5. Paul draws a parallel between the faith-righteousness link for Abraham and the faith-righteousness link for us. Compare and contrast the specifics of the two.
6. In what way(s) do you think it was harder for Abraham to have faith than for us to have faith? In what way(s) do you think it is harder for us to have faith than for Abraham to have faith?
7. Imagine (hopefully with ease) that you agree with and even fully internalize Paul’s message about justification – that it comes through faith in the person and work of Jesus, not your own good deeds. In knowing that faith is the key, is there a danger of turning “having faith” into something you “work to achieve”? What spiritual prophylactic(s) keep us from making this error?

Additional Notes:

1. Many scholars see Romans as more of an “essay” than a standard “epistle”, because it is less personal and letter-like (a more like a logical narrative discourse) than Paul’s other contributions (Paul didn’t found the church at Rome, and many think he was not as personally connected to the congregation in Rome as to other congregations).
2. Many Jewish authors who were read in Paul's day saw Abraham as justified by works; e.g. “Abraham was perfect in all his dealings with the Lord and gained favor by his righteousness throughout his life” (Jubilees 23:10; Stott, p. 123).

Romans 4: Abraham's trust

1. In Chapter 4 of Romans, Paul turns to the Old Testament figures of Abraham (leading role) and David (supporting cast) to illustrate his abstract points about justification through faith. As you read through the amazingly rich chapters 3 and 5 of Romans, do you find chapter 4 a brilliant enricher of the “essay”¹ or a distracting digression? What are the benefits of Paul’s approach to using the OT in this way?

Answers:

Distraction: why is he talking about Abraham/bringing up circumcision – isn’t this, especially circumcision, an odd thing to raise here? It is helpful in that it a) makes the abstract more concrete, b) it nicely establishes a parallel between justification that helps enrich our understanding of this centrally important concept, c) it helps integrate the OT and the NT.

2. *How* was Abraham made right with God?² *When* was Abraham made right with God?

Answers:

How: Abraham was made right with God through his belief/faith only, not any works that he did.

When: Paul goes out of his way to state that Abraham believed before he was made righteous (he believed and then circumcision was a sign that he was made righteous due to his belief; it wasn’t that he was made righteous/circumcised and then believed). It’s a forceful argument for faith → righteousness rather than works → righteousness.

3. When Paul states that Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness (v. 9), the Greek is *pistis*, which means the “state of believing on the basis of reliability of the one trusted; trust, confidence, faith” (BDAG). Is this the contemporary understanding of faith outside of the church? Within the church? In your 21st century mind (shaped by two cultures – the secular and the sacred), how do you typically think of faith? What are the (connotative) differences between faith, belief, and trust? Might an ideal translation for contemporary readers be “Abraham's *trust* was reckoned to him as righteousness”?

Answers:

Contemporary scene: faith is often more of a mental assent – agreeing with the right premises, stating the right beliefs. A deep trust is much more embedded in the core of the person; it is an affective/cognitive, gut level foundation from which other perceptions emerge. It is inevitably manifest in good works (James’ emphasis), but faith leads to works and works without faith are “dead”.

4. Paul describes Abraham’s belief in God’s promises as follows: “not weakening” (v. 19), [it] “did not waver through unbelief” (v. 20), he was “fully convinced” (v. 21). Read Genesis 15:2-3 (Abraham questions God), 15:8 (Abraham asks for reassurance), 16:1-2ff (Abraham “helps God out” via Hagar), 17:16 (Abraham laughs, seemingly in disbelief). How do you reconcile the Genesis account of Abraham’s faith and the Romans account of Abraham’s faith? What exactly was the quality of Abraham’s faith?

Answers:

Reading Romans 4 alone, one might think Abraham’s faith was completely without any hint of doubt, but the Genesis account refers to several instances of seeming doubt. The key seems to be the deep trust that remains steady and foundational in the midst of periodic (more surface level) doubting.

5. Paul draws a parallel between the faith-righteousness link for Abraham and the faith-righteousness link for us. Compare and contrast the specifics of the two.

Answers:

Comparison: a) Abraham's belief was in a specific promise that he would be given a child; b) he was not told of the contingency ahead of time by God – "Believe this promise and I will declare you righteous" – he just believed and God declared him righteous; c) there was not a specific link between the *content* of the belief and being made righteous. For us, a) the belief is in a different specific promise (that we will be given New Life), b) the contingency is put in place ahead of time – if we believe in Jesus' death and resurrection, then we will be declared righteous; c) there IS a specific link between the content of the belief and being made righteous – we must believe in Jesus' person and work.

6. In what way(s) do you think it was harder for Abraham to have faith than for us to have faith? In what way(s) do you think it is harder for us to have faith than for Abraham to have faith?

Answers:

Abraham harder: a) It was literally a miracle that he was promised, against all odds, b) he had no written history of God's redemptive relationship with human beings, c) he had no community of believers, both contemporary and throughout a 2000 year history, to encourage and support him, d) many years passed between the promise and its fulfillment (Abraham was first told about the promise at age 75 [Genesis 12:4] and he was at least 100 when Isaac was born).

Us harder: a) We do not have direct encounters with God like Abraham (Genesis 12:7 – "the Lord appeared to Abraham"); this happens repeatedly for him, b) the Bible is not an easy book to understand, in parts, nor is the Church helpful, at times, c) our new atheistic, relativistic culture can be challenging, d) our affluence (and accompanying self-sufficiency, self-perpetuating self-focus, distracting hedonic alternatives like entertainment and exotic food) can make it hard to feel a need for being made right or to even notice that we need to be made right with God.

7. Imagine (hopefully with ease) that you agree with and even fully internalize Paul's message about justification – that it comes through faith in the person and work of Jesus, not your own good deeds. In knowing that faith is the key, is there a danger of turning "having faith" into something you "work to achieve"? What spiritual prophylactic(s) keep us from making this error?

Answers:

Yes, we can try to muster up enough faith to earn God's declaration of "righteous" – this, of course, is just another variant of working our way to righteousness. (I couldn't resist the prophylactic reference, given the circumcision emphasis in the chapter). To avoid this error, make sure we remember that faith itself is a gift from God.

Additional Notes:

1. Many scholars see Romans as more of an "essay" than a standard "epistle", because it is less personal and letter-like (a more like a logical narrative discourse) than Paul's other contributions (Paul didn't found the church at Rome, and many think he was not as personally connected to the congregation in Rome as to other congregations).

2. Many Jewish authors who were read in Paul's day saw Abraham as justified by works; e.g. "Abraham was perfect in all his dealings with the Lord and gained favor by his righteousness throughout his life" (Jubilees 23:10; Stott, p. 123).