

PROLOGUE TO PRISON

Paul's Epistle to the ROMANS

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- 1954 -

Cowman Publishing Company, Inc. California

Chapter 9 -

ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD

Romans 4:1-16

Abraham, father of the Arab through Ishmael, father of the Jew through Isaac, father of the Christian through JESUS CHRIST. The three great monotheistic religions of the world, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity began with this one man. Abraham!

Abraham was a Christian, not in the conventional, commonly accepted sense of the word today, to be sure, but neither was Abraham a Jew in this sense. As a matter of fact, he was not a Jew in the way the Jews of JESUS' day thought of Jewry. It was quite obvious in much of this discussion with JESUS that they did not understand their own Scriptures.

This would have been true of Paul as Saul of Tarsus. He did not understand Isaiah, "**Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord, though your sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow,**" or "**Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty GOD, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace,**" or "**All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all.**" Saul of Tarsus did not understand Isaiah nor Jeremiah or Ezekiel, nor for that matter, Moses or Abraham until he was converted to CHRIST on the road to Damascus. (See II Corinthians 3:13-16). Now the Apostle Paul writes with the deep and revealed insight of these Old Testament saints.

We see this in Simeon. Dr. Luke records that Simeon was a devout Jew who devoted himself entirely in his last days to the temple. The SPIRIT of GOD had witnessed in Simeon's heart that he would not see death until he had seen the MESSIAH. Here was an Old Testament Jew in JESUS' day who had the insights about which Paul is speaking in Romans, chapter 4, and there were many like him. For example, JESUS said to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, "**Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?**" Nicodemus should have understood as Simeon did, for example, and JESUS' word was a mild rebuke.

Having declared that righteousness is by faith, through grace, apart from the works of law, and furthermore that the law and the prophets witnessed to it; (that is, the law and the prophets, JESUS CHRIST and the apostles, are one in their doctrine concerning the Gospel), Paul now

discusses the supreme question so far as the Jew is concerned; and in so doing, the apostle administers the coup de grace in his argument for justification by faith. He begins with the question, "**What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?**"

This is basic; the Jew could not reach beyond father Abraham, and Paul's answer is absolutely revolutionary to those who heard it then as well as to many today when its force finally breaks in upon us. In substance, he says Abraham was justified by faith through grace, and by this, because of this, he has become the father of all who have faith - circumcised or uncircumcised. That is his answer; now for some probing.

In the first five verses the Apostle Paul discusses Abraham's righteousness. He asks, hearkening back to his comment on boasting at the end of the third chapter, Does Abraham have anything in which to boast? This is a very practical question, for it touches a very sensitive area of Christian experience, the ego. Man craves to achieve something to which he can attach merit. This is the stubborn fact that keeps pestering faith; carnality, flesh, pride. Does Abraham have any thing in which to boast? If he does, it certainly is not before GOD because his righteousness was a gift of GOD to him because he believed. Not that his belief was meritorious, a subtle insinuation pride makes if it can boast of nothing else.

After all, what credit is there to one who believes in GOD? Discredit for not believing, but certainly no credit for believing in GOD. You would not, for example, give any special credit to a person for believing in the sun. What is remarkable about this? One is irrational not to believe. There is nothing exceptional about believing in the sun. Nor is there about believing in GOD. Something is wrong with the one who does not! "**The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God.**" This is carnality at work, crediting to belief or faith or "decision," a virtue which they do not deserve.

Continuing in verses 4 and 5 Paul argues if it were any credit to Abraham, then it was not a gift of GOD; it is his due, like wages to the man who works. The Word of GOD declares that his faith was reckoned as righteousness. GOD reckoned him righteous! This was said by Moses (Genesis 15:6); therefore, Moses certainly understood justification by faith; and as if that were not enough, he quotes from Israel's great King David (verses 6, 7 and 8), who also must have understood righteousness through faith by grace, as expressed in Psalm 32:1-2. GOD's righteousness, the only authentic righteousness, is a gift to be received not a goal to be achieved. At this point a question is appropriate: have you received this gift, or is righteousness still something you are trying to achieve? Have you received the gift of righteousness?

Then Paul goes on in verse 9 to show that this blessing was not limited to the Jew; it was a universal blessing. Hence the question, "**Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also?**" In his answer Paul makes one of his most revolutionary points. His answer poses a question, "**How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision.**" The answer is history; it was reckoned before he was circumcised.

Moses records in Genesis 15:6 that GOD reckoned Abraham righteous, and in chapter 17, verse 25, after Ishmael was born, at least fourteen years after he was reckoned righteous, Abraham was

circumcised; and circumcision was simply the symbol and seal of righteousness which he already had as a gift of GOD.

There is something else to be seen here; circumcision, like any other religious rite, is significant only in terms of the reality which it symbolizes, and yet carnality is so strong in man that he is inclined to think of rites or sacraments as meritorious; keep the sacraments and earn merit. We may not put it explicitly, but we tend to feel that way. This kind of sacramentalism is a reproach to the promise GOD made to Abraham and a reproach to the blood of JESUS CHRIST, GOD's Son! It is a marvelous device by which an entrenched hierarchy may protect its vested interest, but there is nothing biblical, Christian or Jewish, about it.

The sequence in the last half of verse 11 and 12 is not accidental. Reckoned as righteous before he was circumcised, this was deliberate in order that Abraham should be the father of all who had faith, circumcised or uncircumcised. This is a radical switch;

- Abraham was first the father of the uncircumcised!
- Abraham was first the father of the Gentile!
- Abraham was reckoned righteous before he was a Jew!
- He was reckoned righteous before Ishmael was born.

Ishmael was the son of his marriage to Hagar, the handmaiden of Sarah. Ishmael was the progenitor of the Arab race, and the Arabs and the Israelites are not exactly friends. Incidentally, is it not significant that this act of disobedience in which Abraham and Sarah did not rely on GOD's promise but tried to work it out by themselves produced Ishmael and the Arab, and four thousand years later at the mid-twentieth century, the Jew and the Arab constitute one of our knottiest international problems without any solution in sight?

Imagine what a blow that must have been to the Jew who insisted that before a Gentile could become a Christian he would have to be circumcised, he would have to be proselytized to Judaism. Many were, a practice which Paul opposed zealously. In fact, the first church council met to resolve this issue (Acts 15). The Jews were insisting that Gentiles must be circumcised to be in the faith. Now suddenly Paul drops this bombshell; Abraham was the father of the uncircumcised before he was the father of the circumcised.

But that is not all. This matter of faith had not only to do with the righteousness which is a gift of GOD, it had also to do with the deep national aspirations of Israel. **"For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith"** (verse 13 following). The devout Jew of Paul's day had a very clearly defined eschatology*. Simeon, for example, mentioned earlier, came into the temple at the time Mary and Joseph entered with the Baby JESUS; and he took the child in his arms and said, **"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word."** Why? You promised me that I would see the MESSIAH before I died. I am ready to go, **"For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou has prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel"** (Luke 2:29-32).

* *Eschatology- The doctrine of last or final things.*

What was the glory of his people Israel? Never were days so glorious for Israel as when King David reigned upon his throne. That was the epitome of Israel's glory. From that day she declined, and in the heart of every devout Jew who pondered over the Old Testament there was this desire, this aspiration, this Messianic conviction that the day would come when another greater than David would reign upon that throne and Israel would inherit the world. Now Paul is saying that this promise was not exclusively for the Jew. They seemed not to have heard all of Abraham's promise; their attitude was that this promise was limited to the circumcised. No, circumcision had nothing to do with it except as a sign. Do you have faith in GOD?. This promise is for all who have faith.

Paul knew whereof he spoke. This is a glorious fact, and what a day to believe that JESUS CHRIST is the Lord of history, that He holds history in His hand, that He is ordering history at this very moment to serve His eternal purpose. He reigns now.

Paul just touches this here; he will deal with it later on in Romans 9, 10 and 11. Then, he argues in verse 14 and 15, if this promise of inheriting the world were only to those who adhered to the law, faith would be negated and the promise would be void or meaningless. Why? Because there is only one thing to do about a promise and that is to believe it. GOD said, "I will," Abraham accepted it. That settled it. GOD made a promise which Abraham accepted by faith, and he says the law does not apprehend this promise; all the law can do is to bring wrath. The blessing promised by GOD to Abraham is universal.

Finally, in the last of this chapter from 16 to 25, Paul becomes very explicit concerning the faith which GOD reckoned as righteousness in Abraham. It was not just a vague faith in GOD; everyone has this kind of faith except the atheist - faith that GOD is good or GOD is love or GOD is omnipotent or omniscient - all of which is true; but there is something more in the faith which is reckoned as righteous. Paul's description begins with verse 17, Abraham believed One Who "**quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were.**" He believed in a GOD who raised the dead, who could create out of nothing.

The resurrection of JESUS CHRIST and the resurrection of man are the very fullness of Christian aspiration. We profess that we believe in the resurrection. There is a loved one whose body you placed in a grave in the hope that that body would be raised from the dead; that is the heart of the Christian faith. One great event in history upon which the whole superstructure of Christian faith rests, which if discredited, renders Christian faith null and void; that is the resurrection of JESUS CHRIST, without which faith is empty.

Paul is zeroing in on the faith reckoned as righteous. It was faith in the GOD who raised the dead, but the description continues, verse 18, Abraham "**against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations; according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be.**" Abraham hoped when it was hopeless. What was hopeless? Sarah was ninety years old, and he was one hundred years old; Sarah had never been able to bear a son; now was it not ridiculous to expect a child to be born to her? It was biologically impossible, yet GOD said, "**Sarah shall have a son!**" Verse 19 says, "**And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb.**" When he considered the circumstances, he did not weaken in faith. He chose to believe in GOD instead of the circumstances, a choice we make continually, and

unfortunately, many times we choose to believe the circumstances instead of GOD's promise. Abraham believed the promise.

Analyze our faith, most of the time we believe the circumstances of our own ingenuity. Face to face with an impossible situation we say, yes, I believe GOD will do it, but we look for some way we can work it out ourselves, and when we have exhausted all the possibilities, our faith collapses. We have not believed GOD at all; we have believed our own resourcefulness. We are like Jacob, desperately trying to work ourselves out of our dilemmas. But after we have exhausted all the alternatives, we can be sure GOD has unnumbered ways that would never occur to us in a million years. He is not limited to a few alternatives. He has an infinite variety of solutions to your problem.

"He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief," says Paul, verse 20, **"but was strong in faith, giving glory to God."** Glorifying GOD in impossible circumstances, that is how to be strong! Finally, verse 21, for **"And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform."** His faith was related directly to the promise. What promise? That he would become a mighty nation through a miracle son, Isaac, by the womb of Sarah. This is the reason faith was reckoned as righteous. There was nothing vague about Abraham's faith. But there is still more. Remember when GOD said to Abraham, **"Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of."** The commentary in Hebrews, chapter 11, is illuminating, **"By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure"** (verses 17-19).

Do you recall the occasion when the Sadducees thought they had JESUS on the horns of a dilemma? The Sadducees were the first century counterpart of our twentieth century modernists who reject belief in the supernatural, who believe the grave is the end and there is no life after death. They came to JESUS rather smugly with what they thought to be an inexplicable problem. One can almost see them, grinning knowingly, rocking on toes and heels, rubbing their hands together as they challenge JESUS. **"Master, Moses wrote unto us, If a man's brother die, and leave his wife behind him, and leave no children, that his brother should take his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother."** Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Now there were seven brethren: and the first took a wife, and dying left no seed. And the second took her, and died, neither left he any seed: and the third likewise. And the seven had her, and left no seed: last of all the woman died also. In the resurrection therefore, when they shall rise, whose wife shall she be of them? for the seven had her to wife." They really thought that they had Him.

JESUS' answer was classical. He said to the Sadducees, **"Do ye not therefore err, because ye know not the scriptures, neither the power of God?"** Then with painful penetration, **"Have ye not read in the book of Moses"** (The Sadducees would be proud of Moses and the law), who called GOD **"the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?"** They lived

four hundred years before Moses, his GOD was theirs who lived four hundred years before him. Did the great lawgiver believe in the GOD of the dead or the GOD of the living? The implication is obvious; Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are living still!

You may believe many things about GOD and remain unsaved, for the faith that GOD reckons as righteous is faith which sees Him as a GOD Who can raise the dead, Who indeed demonstrated it when He raised His Son, and Who promises to raise up us also likewise. The day is coming when these mortal bodies shall be immortal, when these corruptible bodies shall be incorruptible, and these immortal, incorruptible, eternal bodies will inherit the world! This Christian faith embraces as certain. *This is our hope!*

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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