

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS

CHAPTER 4

The Story so far My name is Paul, and my job is to tell everyone I can the Good News of Jesus. I hope one day to visit you believing folks in Rome, because I know we can encourage each other. The Good News I share is the power of God for everyone: Jews first, then everyone else. Look around the world: there is something wrong with people! They prefer to worship things they can buy, even though they sometimes catch glimpses of eternity. Unnatural and selfish behaviour leads on to a warped mind. But God does not compel people to believe in him, he allows them to choose their own hell if they want to. People behave badly, even though something inside them often warns them about their wrong choices.

But when you condemn bad behaviour, you are being hypocritical, because you yourself are not perfect. Life in God's kingdom is for those who patiently do good. God gives you time to put things right, but one day there will be a crunch time. Jews first, and equally the rest of us. For Jews who know the Jewish Law, that will be the standard. For Brits who don't, there will be a different standard. It is great to be a circumcised Jew, but what happens if uncircumcised Brits obey the Jewish Law? Don't they become 'virtual' Jews? God especially loves folk whose hearts are circumcised, who obey the spirit rather than the letter of the Jewish Law.

What the Jewish Law gives you is the knowledge of what God hates: nobody can be declared to be in the right before God on the basis of complete obedience to the Jewish Law, because nobody has ever done it. God gives Jesus to us to be the place where we can find mercy, so that justice and mercy can be brought together for everyone who trusts in the shed blood of Jesus. God makes Jews OK on the basis of their faith, and he makes non-Jews OK on the basis of their faith as well. Faith does not replace obedience to the Jewish Law, it affirms it.

Executive Summary of Chapter 4:

What about Abraham? Was it what he believed or what he did? We read in Genesis 15: 'Abraham believed God, and it was calculated in his favour, indicating that he was in the right'. When you work, you get paid for what you do. But if you don't work, and simply believe in the generosity of the employer, then in the upside down world of God's Business, you still earn something. Jewish King David, who wrote Psalms, also believed this.

The benefits of faith come to circumcised Jews and uncircumcised Brits alike. Abraham received his benefits when he was still uncircumcised, so he is the first in the long line of all uncircumcised believing Brits. Of course he is also the first in a long line of circumcised Jews who are not only circumcised, but have the same faith that he had.

So Abraham is the ancestor of all who have faith. The 'Law' can only stir up God's anger, for where there is no law there is no lawbreaking. That is why being made OK with God can only be through grace by faith. Abraham believed in the God who brings life to the dead and creates something out of nothing.

Abraham and his wife were too old to have children when he was told he would become 'the father of many nations'. He believed. He grew strong in faith, and gave thanks to God, believing that God would do what he had promised. That's why 'it was calculated in his favour'. But this story was recorded for our benefit! It will be 'calculated' to us too, when we believe in God who raised Jesus from the dead, the one who was handed over for our disobedience and raised so we can be made OK with God.

So if Abraham is our Dad, what sort of Family have we joined?

We could read chapter 3 as though it were simply about how individual sinners are justified by grace through faith, without reference to God's promises to Israel. But if you miss out all those references to Israel, chapter 4 will look a bit odd. Why does Paul want to talk about Abraham?

Tom Wright says the theme of the whole chapter is not about Abraham as an example of justification, or as a proof from scripture, or anything so 'trivial'. "It is," says Wright, "an exposition of God's intention in establishing the covenant with Abraham in the first place, and hence of the nature of Abraham's family. The climax of the chapter comes in a passage often regarded as something of an aside, in verse 17: the point is that Abraham's family is not composed of a single ethnic nation only, but of '**many nations**'."

So what sort of family have we as Christians come into? Paul makes a controversial statement: Abraham is the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also follow the steps of Abraham's faith, the faith he had even before he was circumcised. Tom Wright comments: "Many people resist this conclusion, but it is in fact inescapable. Paul has redefined the family of Abraham in two ways. **First**, he has opened it up so it contains Gentiles as well as Jews—specifically, Gentiles who believe in the Gospel. **Second**, however, he has narrowed it down, so it no longer includes all Jews automatically. Jews - like Paul himself, and all the earliest Christians - are of course welcome, and Paul will argue later in the letter that God wants more and more of them. But the badge they, too, must now wear is that of Christian faith."

Anti-Semitic? This leads us into dangerous territory. As Tom Wright says, "Paul must have known how controversial this would have been at the time, and in our own generation it has become so again. We are very much aware of the danger of saying anything that can be constructed as even implicitly anti-Jewish, let alone anti-Semitic. And we must insist that this passage, and the rest of Paul, is neither of those things. Paul, in fact, belongs on the same map as other Jewish movement leaders in the two or three centuries before and after the time of Jesus. There seems to have been a sense throughout this period that God was somehow redefining Israel, redrawing boundaries, bringing in a covenant renewal in which nothing could be taken for granted. Paul belongs on this (essentially Jewish) map ... But he remains clear: membership in Abraham's family is on the basis of faith. And by 'faith' he clearly means the faith he will describe in detail at the end of the chapter: faith that finds its focus on Jesus and his resurrection as the great, covenant-renewing act of the one true God... The church today, and in every generation, must make sure the door is wide enough open to let in people of every ethnic group, every type of family, every geographical region, every sort of moral (or immoral) background. But it must also make sure that the defining characteristic of the membership for this multi-ethnic family remains firmly stated and adhered to: the faith that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead. ***Keeping this balance, and doing so in the right spirit, remains a major task facing Christians in the twenty-first century.***"

What about the Palestinians?

Exactly what did God promise to the Jews, and is this an issue for us today? Tom Wright points out that the promise to Abraham and his family was that he would inherit the **world**.

Although in Genesis the writer declares that God promised Abraham the 'land of Canaan', Tom Wright points out that 'for Paul and indeed for the whole New Testament, the idea of a holy land in terms of one strip of territory over against all others, has simply vanished. In its place are the beginnings of a completely transformed idea of land: that the whole world—in Romans 8 the entire creation—is claimed by God as 'holy land', and is promised to Abraham and his family as their 'inheritance'.

'This is,' says Wright, 'one of the most breathtaking revisions of standard Jewish thinking we can imagine ... The privilege of geography, as of birth, counts for nothing in the new world ruled over by the crucified and risen Messiah.'

Putting People back together again "Paul's description of Abraham's faith goes deeper than simply an account of heroic trust in the face of overwhelming odds. It is a deliberate reversal of his description of the degeneration of the human race in chapter 1. What Paul says is that in Abraham's faith, and in faith of the same kind (by which we see at the end of the chapter he means Christian faith), human beings are put back together again and enabled to rediscover what a genuinely human life is like."

"This is how it works," says Tom Wright. "Humans ignored God, the creator (1:20,25); Abraham believed in God as creator and life-giver (4:17). Humans knew about God's power, but didn't worship him as God (1:20); Abraham recognized God's power, and trusted him to use it (4:21). Human beings did not give God the glory he was due (1:21); Abraham gave God the glory (4:20). Human beings dishonoured their own bodies by worshipping beings that were not divine (1:24); Abraham, through worshipping the God who gives new life, found that his own body regained its power even though he was long past the age for fathering children."

To Think About:

1. If Jews, Christians and Muslims look to the promises given to Abraham, what should we Anglicans say and think about Abraham in our teaching and worship?
2. Research shows that churches of one class, or ethnicity, or culture, or background, are the ones that grow fastest. Why do you think this might be? What should we be doing at St Andrew's to beat the statistics?

As we come to the end of chapter 4, Paul says that the ancient Jewish dream has been fulfilled: God called Abraham to undo the sin of the human race, and this is how it has happened. God is the God of new hope, of new fruitfulness, because he is the God of new starts, of fresh creation.

A VERSE TO MEMORISE THAT MIGHT BE HELPFUL TO YOU:

Romans 4:24-5 It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

St Andrews Book Club

These Studies are based on Tom Wright's 'Paul for Everyone' Series. You can get a copy of Romans 1-8 for £2.50 from Jim Thornton