

### THE BOOK OF ROMANS

#### Lesson 11, Chapter 4

As we saw to begin Romans chapter 4 last week, Paul is essentially offering a Midrash (an interpretive discussion) of Genesis 15:6 to bolster his case that the Gospel saves both Jews and gentiles under exactly the same terms. This Genesis passage tells the story of Abraham being reckoned by God to be righteous on account of his trust. But there is yet another aspect that helps us to understand where Paul was going with his line of thought. So let's take a bit of a detour to discuss something that although fundamental to our faith is not necessarily easy to grasp. We'll begin this way: while so far Paul has asserted that the Father will righteous people (justify them) on account of trust in Yeshua as Lord and Messiah, he really has not proved this to be the case according to Scripture (meaning Old Testament Scripture since there was no New Testament to refer to). The core of Paul's argument is that people (Jews and gentiles) can only be righteous only by an abiding trust in Yeshua's deed of going to the cross, and not by the works or deeds of following the Law of Moses. But most importantly, this applies to both gentiles and Jews.

This line of argument would have put him at loggerheads with the Jews living in Rome whether they were Believing or non-Believing Jews. Even more, on the surface (and especially to gentiles who didn't understand such nuances), it put him in a head-on collision with James, brother of Yeshua, who was the supreme leader of the early Church. James operated from his headquarters in Jerusalem where he led the Believing Jews of the Holy Land, while Paul worked throughout Asia leading the Believing Jews of the Diaspora as well as the Believing gentiles.

In the New Testament book named after him, James focused his writings as much on the works of a Believer as he did on trust in Messiah. Martin Luther noticed this and was so disapproving of what James had to say that he wanted the Book of James removed from the New Testament canon because Luther found no place in the Gospel of Christ for the role of deeds. Therefore he saw the Book of James as contradictory to Paul's writings and therefore as also contradictory to Luther's doctrine of faith and faith alone as the means to attain salvation. Part of Luther's stance stemmed from the fact that he was basically anti-Semitic and thus the Book of James was a bit "too Jewish" for his liking.

We're going to spend just a short time looking at what James said that particularly upset Luther because to him it ran completely counter to what we've been reading that Paul had to say in the Book of Romans; and therefore also counter to Luther's doctrine of grace. But it also highlights for us the conundrum that has always existed within the Christian and Messianic faith (even from Paul's day) about finding the proper balance between the roles of trust versus works. As I read this to you notice that it is almost as though James is responding directly to Paul's midrash about Abraham in Romans chapter 4, as James also refers to Genesis 15:6 and supplies his own reasoning for God reckoning Abraham as righteous.

James 2:14-26 CJB

<sup>14</sup> *What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no actions to prove it? Is such "faith" able to save him?*

<sup>15</sup> *Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food,*

<sup>16</sup> *and someone says to him, "Shalom! Keep warm and eat hearty!" without giving him what he needs, what good does it do?*

<sup>17</sup> *Thus, faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead.*

<sup>18</sup> *But someone will say that you have faith and I have actions. Show me this faith of yours without the actions, and I will show you my faith by my actions!*

<sup>19</sup> *You believe that "God is one"? Good for you! The demons believe it too- the thought makes them shudder with fear!*

<sup>20</sup> *But, foolish fellow, do you want to be shown that such "faith" apart from actions is barren?*

<sup>21</sup> *Wasn't Avraham avinu declared righteous because of actions when he offered up his son Yitz'chak on the altar?*

<sup>22</sup> *You see that his faith worked with his actions; by the actions the faith was made complete;*

<sup>23</sup> *and the passage of the Tanakh was fulfilled which says, "Avraham had faith in God, and it was credited to his account as righteousness." He was even called God's friend.*

<sup>24</sup> *You see that a person is declared righteous because of actions and not because of faith alone.*

<sup>25</sup> *Likewise, wasn't Rachav the prostitute also declared righteous because of actions when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another route?*

<sup>26</sup> *Indeed, just as the body without a spirit is dead, so too faith without actions is dead.*

So while Paul says in Romans 3:24 that: **Romans 3:24 CJB** <sup>24</sup> *By God's grace, without earning it, all are granted the status of being considered righteous before him, through the act redeeming us from our enslavement to sin that was accomplished by the Messiah Yeshua.....* we find James say <sup>14</sup> *What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but has no actions to prove it? Is such "faith" able to save him?..... faith by itself, unaccompanied by actions, is dead.*

On face value it sounds as though these two statements are at odds with one another. But in

reality there is no fundamental contradiction between Paul and James; rather they are expressing two sides of the same coin. Essentially they are approaching the same matter (the balance of faith and works as expected by the Gospel of Christ) from different angles. Paul, due to who he was addressing (the Romans) and what he was trying to prove, puts more emphasis on how one initially attains righteousness; while James, due to who he was addressing (Holy Land Jews) and what he was trying to prove, puts more emphasis on how one maintains the righteousness that they have received. Let me repeat: Paul is dealing with Believing Diaspora Jews and gentiles; James is dealing almost exclusively with Believing Jews in the Holy Land. These are very different cultures with equally different religious concerns.

What is especially challenging, however, is that James says that Abraham was righteous on account of his deeds (putting his son Isaac on the altar as the example); while Paul says that Abraham was righteous on account of his trust. It is my opinion that we are dealing mostly with semantics and the fact that the organic unity between the Law and the Gospel can be quite difficult to pull apart and then discuss each as separate things. But when we do, it is even more difficult to then try to determine which is more important than the other: the faith of the Gospel or the works of the Law. Because while James is speaking of deeds and actions in terms of physical, tangible obedience to the various written regulations of the Law of Moses, Paul is speaking of the spirit that undergirds the Law of Moses and the goal that the Law strives for; and that righteousness is attained by means of God's grace.

The seeming distance between Law and trust (if not the un-crossable gulf that Christianity has made it) is highlighted by the fact that a half-century after Paul's and James' era, the Jews continued the route of deeming obedience to the Law as preeminent, while gentile Christians decided that trust was preeminent. The debate became so polarizing that Jews determined that righteousness was attained and maintained solely from obedience to the Law; while gentile Christians determined that righteousness was attained and maintained solely from trust (a classic case of both sides throwing the baby out with the bathwater). Neither of these determinations mirrors actual Scriptural truth but rather they express manmade doctrines, prejudices, cultural differences and political considerations. In reality Paul says that while God righteouses us according to our trust, the Law remains alive and well and that it goes without saying that properly doing the provisions of the Law (deeds) remains paramount in the life of a Believer. **Romans 2:5-6 CJB** <sup>5</sup> *But by your stubbornness, by your unrepentant heart, you are storing up anger for yourself on the Day of Anger, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed;* <sup>6</sup> *for he will pay back each one according to his deeds.*

Conversely James says that if indeed you have actually been righteoused by God, then your faith will surely show up in your deeds. If your deeds don't reflect the faith you claim then you are simply deceiving yourself about your faith. <sup>21</sup> ***Wasn't Avraham avinu declared righteous because of actions when he offered up his son Yitz'chak on the altar?***

<sup>22</sup> ***You see that his faith worked with his actions; by the actions the faith was made complete;***

So now back to focusing on Paul and Romans chapter 4. In verses 4 and 5 Paul makes it abundantly clear that God accepts those who sin (Jews and gentiles) without requiring them

FIRST to prove their trust in Him either through deeds of kindness or through doing the commandments of the Law. Let me say it this way: it is NOT through trust **plus** deeds that one is initially righteoused by God (that one is saved by God). However, it certainly is that once one puts their trust in God and God righteouses them (saves them) DESPITE his or her deeds, then the expected result is to express that trust by means of being obedient to Him through works and deeds as defined by the Law. Or, perhaps more succinctly, works and deeds as defined by the spirit of the Law. First trust, then deeds. This order can never be reversed nor can one only have trust OR do deeds as a Believer. And in this, James and Paul are in full agreement; they just express it a bit differently.

It helps us to understand what Paul was dealing with in his letter to the Romans when we learn that the Jews of his day absolutely would not have seen obtaining righteousness as a possibility without first faithfully doing the works of the Law. He was also dealing with a Jewish society (both the Diaspora and the Holy Land Jews) who didn't distinguish any significant difference between the Law of Moses and Tradition (*Halakhah*). So even using the term "The Law" was full of ambiguity and it required some careful explanation.

One of the main thrusts of Paul's argument is what he sees as misinterpretation of Genesis 15.6 by his fellow Jews. That is, when it is said that Abraham believed God, and God reckoned it as righteousness, Paul says that this is speaking of Abraham's faith and NOT his faithfulness. What's the difference you may ask? The issue between the meaning of faith and faithfulness has become especially murky in the modern West because of the way we commonly use those words. In our day faith can mean a particular religion ("what faith do you belong to?") or even an ideology. It can mean a reasonable expectation or a hope for something and even a wish for something. Faithfulness means loyalty to a person (usually a marriage partner) or an organization, involving either sincere intentions or in actuality. But Biblically speaking faith is a term that speaks of a person's trust and confident belief even without tangible proof to back it up; it speaks of a mindset that usually involves a spiritual condition. Faith and trust in the Bible are so closely tied together that they are virtually synonyms. On the other hand Biblical faithfulness speaks of person's loyalty to a covenant. In the case of Jews, it was loyalty to the divine covenants of Abraham and Moses. Put another way: faithfulness is far more than only a mindset, hope or intention; it is the actual performance of the terms of a covenant agreement. Faithfulness is expressed in physical actions; faithfulness is accomplished through works and deeds. Biblically this definition applies both to God and to man.

So in applying this understanding to our issue of James versus Paul, Paul is approaching the Gospel more in terms of faith; James is approaching the Gospel more in terms of faithfulness. Paul's approach is about mindset; James' approach is about actions. And yet in living reality, the faith and faithfulness of a true Believer are to operate together as one. The actual existence of a true saving faith in a Believer will always be evident through our faithfulness. And the active faithfulness of a Believer is the necessary tangible proof of our true saving faith. As it pertains to the Gospel, trust (or faith) and Law can be separated in theory in order that we can discuss each of them; but in reality they are so tightly interwoven that they operate together as one complex entity. It is the same challenge with trying to discuss the Godhead. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit can be separated in theory in order that we can

discuss each one of them; but in reality they are fused together as one complex entity (God is **echad**.....God is one).

I know this concept can be a bit difficult to think about but I've spent so much time with it because it is fundamental to understanding the core nature of our faith, and how we gain and maintain membership in our faith. So I'll use an example that I used many years ago to illustrate it. I'll say upfront that it is not a precise illustration, but it is close enough to help communicate the concept. Becky is my wife. But she is also mother. In addition she is grandmother. Further she is a friend to many and she is also a child of God. I can speak of the separate and various roles and elements of Becky my wife, Becky the mother, Becky the grandmother, Becky the friend, and Becky the child of God. I can even emphasize one over the others, or give more weight to one over the others. And she can climb in and out of those roles as circumstance dictates. But that is only theoretical because at the same time I can't physically separate Becky into those several parts and identify one part of her as wife, another part as mother, and so on. That is because Becky is **echad**, one. God makes it clear that He is one; humans are similar, and James and Paul show us that within the Gospel Law and trust operate that way as well. I hope that helps.

Let's re-read part of Romans chapter 4.

### **RE-READ ROMANS CHAPTER 4:9 – end**

Beginning with verse 11 Paul is again using the term "circumcised" to identify Jews, and "uncircumcised" to identify gentiles. This is because of the preeminent place that the ritual of male circumcision held in Judaism at that time. It was akin to a person citing the pledge of allegiance to their particular flag and nation. Thus Paul is saying that while having a circumcision is on the one hand obedience to both the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants, on the other hand what it really has come to signify in his present day is more of a symbol of national allegiance to Israel and to the national religion of Judaism. However originally Abraham's circumcision was intended as an outward sign and authentication of his inner trust in God as his heavenly king. Therefore, if a person has trust in God but does not have a circumcision (Paul is speaking of gentiles), the lack of this outward authentication does not revoke the righteousness given to him by God because of his trust. And the proof of this is that Father Abraham was reckoned with righteousness 29 years **before** he was circumcised. Therefore Abraham is legitimately the father of the uncircumcised who trust God, as well as the circumcised who trust God. Ladies and gentlemen this reality is why this ministry is called Seed of Abraham. It is not to say that we are a congregation consisting only of Jews that are Abraham's physical seed, or only of gentiles that are Abraham's spiritual seed. It is an acknowledgement that Abraham is as much the father of gentiles who have trust in the God of Israel, through His Son Yeshua, as he is the Jews' father. The difference is that Jews have a God-given right to also see Abraham as their source of citizenship to earthly Israel, while gentile Believers do not have any such national rights; our rights are entirely spiritual in nature.

Paul continues with impeccable logical reasoning for his conclusion in verse 13 by saying that Scripture states that Abraham would inherit the world. But this inheritance would not come through legalism (that is, through Abraham's obedience to the Law), but rather through the

righteousness that is reckoned to him because of the trust he has in God. That is logical because the Law did not exist in Abraham's time, and would not exist for another 6 centuries. But even more, if it is obedience to the Law that produces a saving righteousness, then it can't also be said that a saving righteousness is produced by trusting. If it was only by obedience to the Law that the promise to Abraham to inherit the world comes about, then this is no promise at all but rather it would have required Abraham and his descendants to work for it.

So Paul is challenging a fundamental principle of 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism. In fact, he is essentially redefining Abraham's covenant in relation to how Judaism defined it in Paul's era. He is saying that the inheritance promised in the covenant does NOT come through doing the Law, but rather through the righteousness that comes by trust. Let's be clear: Paul is NOT saying that maintenance of the divine covenant, and the relationship between God and man that it produces, is no longer needed. He is saying that the maintenance fundamentally requires a foundation of saving righteousness that can only happen by means of trust. Therefore while Believers should do the Law, it is only effectual if doing the Law is done on the basis of **first** having trust in God. Put another way: faith first; faithfulness second.

Verse 15 seems to throw us a Major League curveball. In fact many Bible scholars feel a little bewildered why this statement is even here. Is it meant to be a conclusion or summation of what Paul has just said? Is it just a straggler that somehow fell into this passage centuries ago perhaps by a copyist error? Opinions vary. First let me say that the CJB translation where it says "for what the Law brings is punishment" is not a good one; it gives us the wrong idea and doesn't allow us to make an intended connection. It is much more literal and correct (and agrees with just about all other English versions) to have it read, "For what the Law brings is **wrath**". Using the word wrath is important because what Paul is doing reminding his readers of the other major reason that both Jews and gentiles must have trust in order to be given righteousness. It is that all humans are liable to God's wrath, whether they are humans who follow the Law or humans that don't have the Law (gentiles). But since Paul is, in this section, directly addressing Jews then he is speaking from their point of view and that view, by its nature, is a view involving the Law. Paul says that despite what Judaism thinks (that the Law produces righteousness), in fact what the Law produces is not righteousness but wrath because by the Law we learn what sin is (that's the purpose of it, in Paul's view) and when we break the Law we sin. And because of our highly developed evil inclinations, it is the fate of all mankind to embrace sinning. And how much more responsible are people who have God's laws and commands (the Torah, the Law) but violate them, than people who do NOT know His laws and commands but do have the natural law and violate it (that was an earlier premise that Paul established). Thus what the Law cannot do is precisely what trust alone can do; provide a saving righteousness.

Sadly this verse 15 is another one that is regularly used out of context to say that for Christians the Law is dead and gone. Or, even more off the mark, that Paul is saying that the best thing for Christians to do is to stay away from the Law because "where there is no Law there is no violation". That is, if we just deliberately shun the Law then we can avoid sinning! In other words: where in American jurisprudence we have the saying that 'ignorance of the law is no excuse', in the New Testament we have Paul saying that 'ignorance of the Law of Moses is not only a good and acceptable way to excuse our sins, he advises that we should strive to

know nothing about the Law. To me that is near to blasphemy.

In verse 16 Paul indeed does sum up what he has said thus far in this chapter; and it ends with Paul making a statement that would have enraged most Jews. It is that Paul's explanation of Abraham receiving his righteousness by trust alone is why God made the promise to him that he would be a father to all nations. Therefore Abraham is the father for "all of us", meaning all Believers (Jews and gentiles). To the Jews hearing this, Paul just gave away their most revered Jewish Patriarch, Abraham, to their enemies: the gentiles. However what Paul really did was to redefine what the seed of Abraham consists of; and Paul says it consists of all Believers in Yeshua, Jew and gentile. In verse 17 Paul even quotes Genesis 17:5 to prove his case: **Genesis 17:5 CJB** <sup>5</sup> ***Your name will no longer be Avram [exalted father], but your name will be Avraham [father of many], because I have made you the father of many nations.***

Interestingly over time, Jews made peace with this idea of gentiles who choose the God of Abraham as their God as also becoming seed of Abraham. However, this peace had a caveat. Maimonides, aka the Rambam, one of the greatest Jewish sages of all time, lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and said this as it concerns gentiles:

***"You ask me if you are permitted to say in the prayers, 'God of our fathers,' and 'You who worked miracles for our fathers'. Yes; you many say your blessing and prayer in the same way as every born Jew. This is because Avraham avinu (Abraham our father) revealed the true faith and the unity of God, rejected idol worship, and brought many children under the wings of the Shekinah. Ever since then whoever adopts Judaism and confesses the unity of the Divine Name, as prescribed in the Torah, is counted among the disciples of Avraham avinu, peace unto him.....Thus Avraham avinu is the father of his pious posterity who keep his ways, and the father of his disciples and of all proselytes who adopt Judaism".***

So from Maimonides perspective the caveat for a gentile being allowed to see himself or herself as a seed of Abraham was official conversion to Judaism. Unfortunately we see some of Rambam's thinking alive and well within the Hebrew Roots and Messianic movements and I want to say as firmly as I can that this is entirely wrong minded. Paul makes it clear that gentiles become a seed of Abraham because of our trust in God, through our trust in God's Son Yeshua, and this involves no conversion whatsoever. But the same is true for Jews who believe in Yeshua; no conversion or renouncing of their Jewishness is required....just trust.

I want to take a moment to emphasize something I said earlier: Paul explicitly makes Abraham the father of gentile Christians as well as Jews. Think upon that. What role has Christianity given Abraham in our faith? Practically none. He is mostly the subject of Sunday School stories for children. But if Abraham is the father of all who trust in God as Paul says he is (and Paul has spent considerable pen and ink on the subject of Abraham), and if Paul is right that since Abraham is the common father of Jews and gentiles in a spiritual sense, then how can the Church assign Abraham to Judaism but not to Christianity? How can the Church make Abraham as applicable only to the Old Testament and largely irrelevant to the New Testament? How can the Church say that the Covenant of Abraham has been abolished and

replaced by the so-called New Covenant in Christ? For right here Paul explains that gentile Believers who trust in God, through Yeshua, are fulfilling the most ancient of covenants: the Abrahamic Covenant.

If you want to demonstrate to others the fallacy of saying that the Old Testament is obsolete for Believers; or that the covenants of old, Abraham's and Moses', are dead and gone and nailed to the cross, just refer them to Romans chapters 3 and 4 when by Paul's words gentiles are directly attached to, and called, seed of Abraham. And point out how gentiles do NOT replace Jews, but rather are added to the mix. Paul will explain this addition of gentiles to the mix more thoroughly in Romans chapter 11, when he uses the term "grafted-in".

In the last part of verse 17 Paul highlights two of God's primary attributes: He gives life to the dead and He is the Creator of all things. And the point is that while Abraham had little familiarity with God at first, he quickly recognized these 2 important, although basic, aspects of God's nature. I'll use this opportunity to emphasize that we can only know God in 2 ways: by His name and His attributes. Thus if any religion (such as Islam) claims that the Judeo-Christian God is the same as their God, that is easily refutable because the Muslim God has a different name and different attributes than the God of Abraham. It is wrong for a Believer, even if out of some misplaced sense of compassion, to ever allow a Muslim to claim that we all worship the same God; we definitely do not. And if we allow him to think that way, what incentive is there for him to seek the true God? We become complicit in condemning that person to Hell.

Here Paul reminds his readers that Abraham was very old when he was finally given a son. A son was necessary from a practical viewpoint if he was going to be a father to many nations. If Abraham had no sons then his line would have ended with his death and God's promise could not have been fulfilled. Abraham fully understood that he was too old (almost 100 years old) to father children. But his wife, Sarah, was also too old to bear children. So what hope was there that God's promise could possibly be fulfilled? Paul describes Abraham as "as good as dead". Dead men don't produce offspring. Yet Abraham, so very aware of his impossible situation, did not give up hope; he trusted that God would somehow give Abraham and Sarah children despite their dead reproductive systems. This trust is why he was credited with righteousness.

I think it is entirely fair, in fact it is only logical, to call Abraham's belief that he would produce offspring regardless of he and Sarah being past child bearing age, a deed or a work. Even though the intention was misplaced, that he took Sarah's handmaiden and slept with her believing that his infertility would become fertility, is of course putting faith to action. Sadly that action was wrong, because his faith wasn't pure or because his understanding of God was a bit off the mark. When we hear from Paul that Abraham never lacked trust that doesn't mean he didn't have moments of doubt. Rather it means that he did not enter into a deep-seated and permanent mode of distrust; essentially renouncing the trust that initially brought him his righteousness. This is something that all Believers need to pay attention to. Our trust, our faith, is not perfect nor is it steady. We will have our moments of doubt from which we can recover. It is falling into that permanent mode whereby we deeply, sincerely, no longer trust when we are in grave danger. As for Abraham; later after it turned out that God supernaturally restored



Abraham's fertility as evidenced in Hagar becoming pregnant by Abraham (God bringing life from the dead), God also restored Sarah's dead womb and with that belief firmly in mind, Abraham slept with Sarah and she became pregnant by Abraham. The result was the true son of the promise: Isaac.

Having given us the example of Abraham, in verse 23 Paul now explains that the reason for God righteousing Abraham was not meant only for him; this was not a one-off event meant only for a special Patriarch. Rather the recording of this event and the written accounting for how righteousness is obtained is meant to inform everyone about it. I maintain that the story of Abraham as we find in the Old Testament is the earliest recorded form of the Gospel. In fact, I think that Paul's entire theology is based around his conviction that the Old Testament, throughout its many books, speaks directly to the matter of the Gospel. After all, what else did he have to refer to than the Old Testament?

Finally, in the last few words of chapter 4, Paul connects and compares Yeshua to Abraham. Notice how Paul turns the phrase (especially since the point is to compare Yeshua to Abraham) such that we are to trust in the one who raised Yeshua from the dead, just as Abraham trusted in the same one who has the power to raise from the dead. That is, Paul is indicating that we should "trust the Father". It is by the Father's power that Yeshua was raised; Yeshua did not raise Himself. It is by the Father's power that people are righteoused. However, also trust in Yeshua's perfect faithfulness.....His action and deeds.....because Yeshua's deeds were 100% without sin. It is on account of Yeshua's perfect faithfulness that He can be our atonement for sin, which is a prerequisite for our being righteoused by His Father. It is how we become seed of Abraham.

We'll begin Romans chapter 5 next time.