

To the church family

Readings for Sunday 23 May at 9 & 11 am

This Sunday morning, we will begin to look at Paul's teaching in Romans based on the life of Abraham.

It would be very helpful if you could read Genesis 12 – 25 before coming to church on Sunday, as well as Romans 3:21- 4:25.

I am going to be taking us through some key passages from Genesis, and helping us see how Paul develops them in his argument about the basis of how humans may be set right with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

I will be using my own retellings of these key passages, which I reproduce for you below. You may like to read them side by side with your usual translation – I hope they will make you think afresh about what you read!

May the Lord bless our reading of scripture together this week

*Paul Langham
19 May 2010*

Genesis 12: 1–4

God had already spoken to Abram about his future. 'Up sticks and move on. Leave everything behind, home, family, everything. Walk with me into an entirely new life ...

'You won't just father a few children, but a whole nation because of my favour.
Your name will live for ever
and others will bask in my favour because of you.
Any one who befriends you will be a friend of mine,
and any who oppose you will have to answer to me.
Every nation on earth will benefit from how I favour you.'

So at the age of 75, his father now dead, **Abram took God at his word**, and set out for lands unknown with his entire household – wife Sarai, nephew Lot and all he owned, lock stock and barrel.

Genesis 15:1-6

Sometime later, Abram had a vision, in which God said,

'Abram, never fear. I'll shield you from harm, and you'll never want for anything.'

'That's easy for you to say,' replied Abram. 'But what does it actually mean? Promises are all very well, but they depend on my having a family; and as that's looking less and less likely, your words seem empty. As things stand, I've had to make one of my servants my heir!'

'He won't inherit a thing,' said God. 'Your heir will be your own flesh and blood. Come outside the tent a moment. Now, look! Look at the night sky, see the stars, have a go at counting them! Your descendants will be scattered across the earth like the stars across the heavens.'

Abram took God at his word, and that faith put him in good standing with God.

Genesis 17

Thirteen years later, God said to Abram, 'I am God, more powerful than anyone else; walk with me, keep to the path I have shown you. I reaffirm the covenant between us – your descendants will be many.'

Abram fell to the ground and God said, 'For my part, I will make you father of many nations. So I give you a new name. You have been Abram, "great father." From now on, you are Abraham, "father of many." Whole nations will trace their roots back to you, and your family tree will feature kings. This covenant between us will be never-ending, faithfully maintained by me across the ages. This entire land, where you have no legal standing, will belong to you and those who follow you. And I will be God to them just as I am to you.'

'For your part, you and your descendants must keep your side of the agreement. And this is how you will show that you are keeping it. Every male child born to you and your descendants must be circumcised when they're eight days old. There are to be no exceptions; every male, whether your own flesh and blood, or foreign members of your household, must be circumcised. Any one who isn't will not be counted as part of my covenant people.'

'I'm also giving your wife a new name, as a sign of my favour. From now on, she is Sarah. Never doubt that she will bear you the son I have promised. She will be a mother of nations and kings.'

Abraham collapsed in a fit of laughter. 'Who ever heard of such a thing?' he thought to himself. 'A couple our age having a child! It's unbelievable!' Out loud, he asked God, 'Why can't you just accept Ishmael as the child of promise?'

But God was insistent. 'Laugh all you like, but Sarah *will* be pregnant, *will* give birth to a son, and you *will* call him Isaac. My covenant will work its way out through him and his offspring. And don't think I'm deaf to your pleas for Ishmael, either. He, too, will be the father of many peoples. But make no mistake, Isaac will be the child of promise. By this time next year, you'll be holding him in your arms.' Then God withdrew from Abraham's presence.

Abraham took God at his word, and circumcised himself and all the males in his household that same day. He was ninety-nine and Ishmael was thirteen. Every male, whether home born or foreigner, was circumcised, just as God had said.

Romans 3:21–4:25

Well, that's the bad news – bad news for the whole human family, regardless of how 'good' a life you think you lead.

But the good news is that God has taken the initiative to rescue us from all this and restore our good standing with him. It's not about keeping the Law or reading God's messengers of old, although they both point you in the right direction. This is nothing which human activity can achieve. **It's God's initiative, and it's as simple as this – you can be put right with God if you place your trust and faith in Jesus Christ.** Everyone starts from the same place, because no one has ever managed to meet God's standards. We've all missed the mark.

But that means everyone can take advantage of this extraordinary free gift, which has been paid for by Jesus Christ. And what a cost! Jesus died in our place so that everything we've ever done wrong could be forgiven. There was no other way the slate could be wiped clean. I mean, God couldn't simply overlook all the wrong committed by human beings, could he? If God could look at the things we do to each other and say, 'It doesn't matter', how could there ever be justice? No, no, the price had to be paid. But by paying that awful price himself, rather than exacting it from us, God has every right to declare that all those who trust in Jesus are in good standing with him.

Do you see why there's no room for bragging in any of this? It's out of the question, because we don't achieve good standing with God by our own efforts, such as keeping the Law, but only by trusting in Jesus Christ. This invitation isn't limited to Jews, for God is God of the whole world. It's not conditional upon keeping the Jewish Law. All you have to do is trust. That's not to denigrate the Law, because this is what the Law was pointing to all along. God's free and gracious gift of life is the culmination of all the Law hoped to achieve.

Chapter 4

1-8

Now, of course, all Jews look back to great father Abraham. So what does he have to say about all this? If his good standing with God was down to his own efforts, my argument would go up in flames. **But the Word of God records that God credited him with good standing simply on account of his faith.**

There are two ways of being in credit. You can earn it, as you do when you work for wages. Or you can accept a gift from someone else that puts you in credit. Getting into God's good books isn't something you can earn, no matter how hard you work – you just have to trust him to do it for you! The amazing thing about God is that he just loves to take wicked people like us under his wing and give us a fresh start.

How terrible it would be if we had to earn God's love and forgiveness. How would we know if we'd done enough? What if we didn't make it? How liberating to discover that what we could never earn or deserve is waiting for us as a gift.

King David understood this, and wrote

There's no better feeling than to know God has wiped your sins from his mind, buried them, never to be held against you

9-12

Does this work only for those who have been circumcised? How can it, when it worked for Abraham before he was circumcised? **In fact, circumcision was a symbol of the relationship Abraham enjoyed with God, a relationship in which he simply trusted God.** Abraham, then, is the great father, not just of Jews, but of all those who, despite never being circumcised, have found themselves in God's good books simply by trusting him. And, of course, he's the father of those who, rather than trusting in their circumcision to see them right, follow Abraham's example by trusting in God.

13-25

God promised Abraham he would be father to many nations. God made this promise long before the Law was given. **In fact, it had nothing to do with the Law, but had everything to do with Abraham's faith, which put him in good standing with God.** If following the Law were the main thing, then faith would be pointless, and the promise an empty one.

The Law leads to condemnation. But the promise is received by faith, so that it is plainly seen as God's generous free gift, and can be guaranteed to everyone whose faith makes them a child of Abraham (this is what God meant when he said Abraham would be the father of many nations). Abraham is the father of all those who trust the God who revealed himself to him – the God who turns death into life and makes something out of nothing.

Abraham clung to this hope when hope was all but extinguished, and so lived to see God's promise fulfilled. God had promised him a son, yet, at their age, he and his wife were as good as dead when it came to having a child. But Abraham refused to allow doubt or unbelief to corrode God's promise, unwavering in his unshakeable faith that God would keep his word. It was in response to this unshakeable faith that God declared Abraham to be in good standing with him. And God will do the same for everyone who believes in him, who believes in the one who raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus died to wipe away our sins. He was raised that we might live without guilt or shame before God.

Genesis 24

1-4

God had made Abraham's long life rich in every way. Only one thing now concerned him. Calling his most trusted servant, he said, 'Swear a solemn oath before the God of the whole world, that you won't let Isaac marry one of the local girls. Go back to my homeland and find him a wife from my own family.'

10-15

So the servant set off, taking camels loaded with gifts and provisions for the long journey back to north-west Mesopotamia, and the town of Nahor, where Abraham's family originated. He arrived one day in the evening, and waited by the town well for the women to come and draw their water. As he waited, he prayed, 'O Lord, my master's God, help me in this quest of mine, for the sake of my master Abraham. Show me the woman you have chosen for Isaac. Let her be the one who, when I ask for some water, gladly offers me a drink and then also offers water for the camels too. This will be the sign, and I will know she is the one.'

Before the prayer had left his lips, Rebekah appeared, shouldering her water jar ...

34

So Abraham's servant told them the whole story ...

50

'What can we say?' answered Laban and Bethuel together. 'This is clearly the work of God himself. It's not for us to say anything.'