

Romans 4 Luke 8:42b - 48 (for Bible passages go to end of sermon)

Who do you think you are? is a popular programme where various celebrities are helped to uncover their family history. The programme's popularity is probably partly to do with the current preoccupation that so many have with the **issue of identity**. Adopted children seeking their real birth parents. *More than gender and sexuality categories on Facebook*. *Children growing up with serial father figures*. *Who am I? I had an uncle who won the Military Cross and would tell his son, my cousin, "Always remember son that you are a Petit"*. Now I love my family, but as the years have gone on, I have discovered that my family was very far from being perfect. In the last 2 generations there was a philanderer, and alcoholic and a serial bankrupt ! In fact, I reckon that until about 20 you think your family is normal. Then from about 20 to 30 you begin to discover all the skeletons in your family's cupboard and just how dysfunctional your family is. Then from about 30 onwards you discover that coming from a dysfunctional family *is* normal. For us as Christians, our identity is primarily found not in our natural family but surely that we are part of God's family – that He is our heavenly Father and Jesus is our brother as well as our Lord and Saviour. So the big question is how can we be sure that we really *are* part of God's family. With our human families we might look for characteristics. I have the Petit chin and the Atkins (my mother's family) teeth. Or maybe we look for other non-physical characteristics. I have also proudly inherited the Atkins gift of being accident prone – a gift I have proudly passed on to most of my children. So what is the key characteristic which will enable me to know that I am definitely part of *God's* family?

This is the issue that Paul tackles in Romans chapter 4.

At the end of chapter 3 Paul has stated that God is not just God of the Jews but of the Gentiles as well for he is the only God of the universe. Not only this, but he has also boldly claimed that to be part of God's family there is no requirement to be circumcised. Now for those Christians from a Jewish background this was a truly shocking statement. *Surely*, some might say, *Abraham was the founding father of God's family on earth and surely God commanded that all the males in his family should be circumcised?* And even if you weren't from a Jewish background, in the early church you would almost certainly know some Christians who were. And you must have been tempted to think *Well if I am truly to be part of God's family, perhaps I should be circumcised as well. That must be an essential family characteristic.*

4¹ should read: *What then shall we say, **have we** discovered Abraham, to be our forefather according to the flesh?* In other words, *Are we part of God's family because we are physical descendants of Abraham?* Paul eventually answers that in v.17 where he reminds us that God promised that Abraham would be father of many nations – not just his physical descendants, the Jews.

What then is the key characteristic that makes you part of Abraham's family and therefore part of God's family. *Well*, says Paul, *as Abraham is the founding father of God's people, let's look at what was Abraham's defining characteristic.* *Surely*, says Paul, *it was **his faith**.* Genesis 15 is the key passage when God establishes his covenant with Abraham and promises that he will be the father of many nations - as many people as the stars in the sky. In this same chapter we are told '*Abraham **believed** God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*'

Well, yes of course say some of the Jews, *we all know that Abraham had faith, but surely he lived a godly, righteous life as well.* NO says Paul, *it clearly says it was **credited** to him as righteousness* – in other words it was a gift. If Abraham had earned his righteousness by his good works then there would have been no need to give him/credit him with anything.

Yes, say some of the Jewish Christians, *but surely he had to be circumcised as well.* *You're quite right* says Paul, *but when God made his covenant with Abraham and when God credited Abraham's faith as righteousness, did he require Abraham to be circumcised as part of the deal?* No! that did not happen until at least 13 years later maybe longer. So, says Paul, *v.¹¹ Abraham received circumcision as a sign, a seal of **the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still***

uncircumcised. Yes, circumcision is a sign, a seal, but it's not the essential characteristic of being part of God's family – it can't be because Abraham was considered by God to be righteous and part of his family for at least 13 years before that.

My wedding ring is a sign and seal of my marriage to Lynda. I once lost it for several months – it came off in the garden. It was very sad, but did that make me any less married to Lynda? Of course not. It's possible that some of you married men never have had a wedding ring. Does that mean you are less married to your wife? Of course not.

In order to hammer his point home, that it is faith and not works that is the essential characteristic of being part of God's family, Paul looks at perhaps the greatest hero of the whole of Israel's history: **King David.** Not only was he the greatest king that Israel had ever had, but he was the key ancestor - the prototype - of the Messiah, Jesus. One of the most popular titles for the Messiah, which was often used by people addressing Jesus, was *Son of David*. It's as if Paul is saying: *if we are part of God's family it is because we are in Christ, so let's look at his key forebear King David.* What do we discover? David was blessed by God not because he was good at keeping God's commandments. *Thou shalt not commit adultery.* David had committed adultery with Bathsheba who was married to Uriah the Hittite. *Thou shalt not commit murder.* David effectively had poor old Uriah murdered by getting Uriah's commander to send him on a suicide mission. David failed terribly when it came to keeping God's law.

So what made David a member God's family so loved by God, what was his defining characteristic? Answer: He trusted in God's forgiveness: *Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven.* Obviously, David had no concept of Jesus dying for his sins, because he lived 1000 years before Christ. However, he knew and he trusted that somehow God had made provision to deal with his sin and that was the only reason that he could know the blessedness of being known, accepted and loved by God:

*Blessed are those whose sins are **covered**.*

⁸ *Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them*

So, this brings us to the issue of **what is this faith that Abraham had?**

Yes, Abraham believed God, but what did he believe God **about**?

Note the phrase: not *Abraham believed in God*, but ***believed God***. After all, as James says, *even the demons believe in God, yes and tremble.*

But Abraham believed **something specific that God had told him.**

If you look up Genesis 15 where this statement comes, God had just told Abraham that he even though he and Sarah were way beyond child-bearing age, they would have a son and he would be their heir (and not Abraham's nephew, Lot) and it would be through this son that he would be the father of countless descendants.

In the time of Abraham, there was little idea of eternal life as we think of it. Instead, the hope was to be able to live on in your descendants. This is why it was so desperately important for Abraham and Sarah to have a son and why the idea of being unable to bear children was the equivalent of having no hope of eternal life. But after Abraham had had his extraordinary encounter God, you could say that even though Abraham did not know about the idea of resurrection as we know it, nevertheless believed in a *kind* of resurrection, in that he believed God could bring new life out of his own body – which was, says Paul, “*as good as dead*” – and out of Sarah's womb which, says Paul, was “*also dead*”.

In the same way Paul says in v.24 the starting point for *our* faith is that God *raised Jesus our Lord from the dead*. But **saving** faith is also trusting that Jesus v.25 *was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification* in other words, like David, knowing that I have failed and sinned and so my own righteousness falls far short of what God would require, but also knowing that in Christ God has made provision for all my sin and it is only because what Jesus has achieved on the cross – his complete victory over sin and over death itself as proved by his resurrection – that I am *justified* – declared righteous by God.

So what is the defining characteristic of being part of God's family? Well it's certainly not circumcision – but nor is it baptism (even though that is a helpful sign and seal), nor is it being born to Christian parents or having a Christian upbringing, nor is it being a “good person” and keeping the 10 commandments. The defining characteristic of being part of God's family, of being able to say God is my heavenly Father, and Jesus is my brother, is **faith – trust that Jesus died and rose again for my sin.**

Some will say: *That's a cop-out. You can live whatever life you want, do terrible things and all you have to do is say: I believe Jesus died and rose again for my sins.* No! Faith is not just **saying: I believe**; faith is *actually* trusting and believing. And if that trust and faith is real, sincere and genuine, it will in fact have an extraordinary transforming effect on your heart and your life:

- You will be filled with gratitude to Jesus and love for him because of what he has done for you.
- That gratitude and love will mean that you will want to follow him and serve him and lead a life that is pleasing to him.
- Recognising that you are a forgiven sinner will mean that you treat others generously and magnanimously and are forgiving when they sin against you.
- You will be someone who is secure in your identity, because you will know that you are a beloved child of God and you don't have to go around trying to prove how great you are to others.
- Above all, when you truly have faith and put your trust in Christ, He comes to live in you by his Holy Spirit and He will begin gradually to change you into the wonderful person that God created you to be.

Romans 4 ¹ What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? ² If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about – but not before God. ³ What does Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ ^[a]

⁴ Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. ⁶ David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

⁷ ‘Blessed are those
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

⁸ Blessed is the one
whose sin the Lord will never count against them.’ ^[b]

⁹ Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. ¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! ¹¹ And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. ¹² And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

¹³ It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. ¹⁴ For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, ¹⁵ because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith

of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations.'^[c] He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

¹⁸ Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'^[d] ¹⁹ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah's womb was also dead. ²⁰ Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. ²² This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.'²³ The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, ²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness – for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. ²⁵ He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Luke 8 ^{42b} As Jesus was on his way, the crowds almost crushed him. ⁴³ And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years,^[a] but no one could heal her. ⁴⁴ She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped.

⁴⁵ 'Who touched me?' Jesus asked.

When they all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you.'

⁴⁶ But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me.'

⁴⁷ Then the woman, seeing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed. ⁴⁸ Then he said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.'