

March 5, 2023

Romans 4:1-5,13-17, *The Message Bible*

¹So how do we fit what we know of Abraham, our first father in the faith, into this new way of looking at things? ²If Abraham, by what he did for God, got God to approve him, he could certainly have taken credit for it. But the story we're given is a God-story, not an Abraham-story. ³What we read in Scripture is, "Abraham entered into what God was doing for him, and that was the turning point. He trusted God to set him right instead of trying to be right on his own." ⁴If you're a hard worker and do a good job, you deserve your pay; we don't call your wages a gift. ⁵But if you see that the job is too big for you, that it's something only God can do, and you trust [God] to do it – you could never do it for yourself no matter how hard and long you worked – well, that trusting-[God]-to-do-it is what gets you set right with God, by God. Sheer gift. ...

¹³That famous promise God gave Abraham – that he and his children would possess the earth – was not given because of something Abraham did or would do. It was based on God's decision to put everything together for him, which Abraham then entered when he believed. ¹⁴If those who get what God gives them only get it by doing everything they are told to do and filling out all the right forms properly signed, that eliminates personal trust completely and turns the promise into an ironclad contract! That's not a holy promise; that's a business deal. ¹⁵A contract drawn up by a hard-nosed lawyer and with plenty of fine print only makes sure that you will never be able to collect. But if there is no contract in the first place, simply a promise – and God's promise at that – you can't break it. ¹⁶This is why the fulfillment of God's promise depends entirely on trusting God and [God's] way, and then simply embracing [God] and what [God] does. God's promise arrives as pure gift. That's the only way everyone can be sure to get in on it, those who keep the religious traditions and those who have never heard of them. For Abraham is father of us all. He is

not our racial father – that's reading the story backwards. He is our faith father. ¹⁷We call Abraham "father" not because he got God's attention by living like a saint, but because God made something out of Abraham when he was a nobody. Isn't that what we've always read in Scripture, God saying to Abraham, "I set you up as father of many peoples"? Abraham was first named "father" and then became a father because he dared to trust God to do what only God could do: raise the dead to life, with a word make something out of nothing.

John 3:1-17

¹Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." ³Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the [Child of Humanity]. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the

wilderness, so must the [Child of Humanity] be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that the only Son was given, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the [Child] into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

¹⁶“This is how much God loved the world: [God’s Child was given], [God’s] one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. ¹⁷God didn’t go to all the trouble of sending the Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. The Son came to help, to put the world right again.” *The Message Bible*

Jesus said, “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

We are “born of the flesh” – so we need rules, laws, doctrines that make sense of things.

Jesus’ frustration with Nicodemus comes from the fact that Nicodemus doesn’t accept how Jesus interprets and follows the Law, the foundation of the Jewish faith, the “flesh” side of relationship with God and the world

If Nicodemus doesn’t get this, he certainly isn’t going to understand the role of the Spirit in allowing us to “have eternal life”, to live “a whole and lasting life.”

Paul understands Jesus

faith does not equal belief – faith and belief are about trust

So, when John says, “everyone who believes in him ...” he means “everyone who trusts in him”, everyone who is willing to follow Jesus’ example

Paul is telling the church in Rome that God’s promise of “salvation”, of “the world being put right” is not based on what we do or say we believe, rather in trusting in the way of life Jesus lived – and living it

This means, for me, all the doctrines of the church, all the membership requirements of a church are not to be followed in order to win God’s approval.

We are born of the flesh, so we do need rules, laws, maybe even doctrines to live as God wants us to live

But when those rules and doctrines become harmful or divisive or leave people behind, then they are not helpful and it is time to ignore them.

If it is so easy to throw off rules, doctrine, the Law, what is our guide? What guided Jesus?

Paul is saying there are three guides: faith, hope, love

Abraham had faith in the promise, he trusted

The task seemed to be something only God could do, but – by faith, by trust – Abraham was hopeful as he headed off to the Promised Land

Paul then said in hope we trust in God’s promise by “embracing God and what God does” – love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind.

We do this when we share God’s love

Faith – trusting in God’s promise

Hope – especially in the darkest of days, we follow

Love – as hard as it might be to love someone, especially those who aggravate us, we love because God loves us and empowers us, in and through our trust and hope

It is a circle. May it be unbroken in our lives. Amen.