**Series Title:**

**"OUR DILEMMA: GOD'S SOLUTION"**

**Paul's Letter to the ROMANS: Chapter 4**

***Ya Gotta Believe***

L

ORD OF THE RINGS, THE TWO TOWERS is boffo box office. The late Oxford prof J.R.R. Tolkien's movie epic tracks hobbits Frodo and Sam in their quest to destroy the evil ring.

Tolkien's faith in Christ permeates his fable. About it he said, "When Gandalf calls himself a 'servant of the Secret Fire,' that fire is the Holy Spirit." Director Peter Jackson adds, "Tolkien's themes really resonate today. … I don't think humans are capable of actually pulling themselves out of these basic ruts."

That's why Tolkien worshipped the God who dispatched to earth His only divine Son, Jesus, to once-and-for-all conquer sin for every human, giving us a way out of that "rut."

***Paul's Two Towers: Faith and Works***

Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, written in 57-58 AD, has been called "the fullest, plainest, grandest statement of the gospel." It answers the ages-old question of how can a person be made right with God (Job 9:2, 10).

Back in the Dark Ages I got a master's degree at the U. of Illinois, attending the occasional class in Gregory Hall, named for John Milton Gregory, U of I's first president. He was buried there, along with my transcript. His *The Seven Laws of Teaching* is still one of education's seminal works on effective instruction.

Gregory's 4th law is: "The truth to be taught must be learned through truth already known." That link between new information and old is usually an illustration. Romans 4 is a series of them to support Paul's epochal conclusion in Romans 3.

There he asserts that we're not reconciled with God based on what we do or don't do, but solely by placing our total faith in Christ and what He did for us on the cross.

By "saving faith" Paul means believing that we're sinful, that Jesus is God, that He died for our sins and rose from the dead to give us new life. It's a deep conviction, and involves the willful act of trusting God. **Let's rewind to Romans 3:20-24 and 27-28 (p. 1018).**

Paul says when we transfer our faith to Christ, God "declares" us to be right with Him. It's His gift to us -- not a reward for good deeds (4:1-8), or being religious (4:9-12), or for obeying God's laws (4:16-25). **Let's now read Romans 4:1-25 (p. 1018).**

***Yebbut, What About Our Father Abraham?***

***Romans 4:1-5***

Spencer Johnson, who co-wrote *The One Minute Manager*, has another smash with *Who Moved My Cheese? An Amazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Work & in Your Life*. Change makes us sweat because we feel out of control.

As a 1st century Jew in Rome 30-some years after Christ had returned to heaven, your first aftershock from reading Paul's sea-change words in chapter 3 might be: "But, Paolo, what about my man Abraham? He's our Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln all in one! If *anybody's* in heaven, *he* is!" Rabbis believed Abraham was made acceptable to God by his good works (Genesis 26:5).

So Paul builds his irrefutable case on the fact that whatever made Abraham worthy of God's acceptance should be the Jews' standard.

He explains that "faith" has been God's M.O. from the git-go. From Adam and Eve to now, living "right" doesn't admit us to heaven; faith does. It only inspires good works. Like calories, you can't see faith, but you can see what it leaves behind.

When God told 75-year-old Abe that, despite his and his 65-year-old frau Sarah's being over the reproductive hill, they'd have a boy, Abe bought it. As Paul wrote it, verse 3 reads, "Abraham put his trust in God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness" (Genesis15:6). (Righteousness is having your sins forgiven and deleted from heaven's books, making you acceptable to God.) "Counted" is an accounting term, meaning God credited Abe's account with the same righteousness Jesus has in His! What a transaction!

Paul's next illustration is that workers earn wages, but grace is unearned favor, not an obligation. And we get it by believing.

***Honest Abe from Ur,***

***Used Camel Dealer***

About 2500 BC, five centuries before Abram was born, desert folks began migrating north over today's Saudi Arabia and Iraq, along the grassy "Fertile Crescent" from the Persian Gulf to Turkey and down to Egypt. Armies and traders plied it from Europe to the Orient.

Abram lived during Egypt's 12th Dynasty, that empire's golden age. East of Egypt, across the Crescent, Sumerians controlled that region from their capital city, Ur. About 1950 BC they're overthrown by Elamites from east of the Tigris, sending hordes scrambling north where they flourished 'til 1700 BC when they were sacked by Babylonia's (today's Iraq) King Hammurabi. Abram, a descendant of Noah's son Shem, was one of those pagan herders who roamed constantly in search of food and water.

In 2000 BC the big city in today's Iraq was Ur, halfway between Baghdad and Kuwait City, in the ole no-fly zone. At Ur was the temple of the moon god, "Sin." Some church! The Temple of Sin!

The Bible says God told Abram to leave this land and head for an undisclosed locale. It's like your boss saying, "Trust me, this'll be a good career move for you."

Offered no proof or supernatural sign, Abram trekked the Crescent to Canaan, today's Israel. Later renamed Abraham ("father of many nations"), he banked on God's promise that he'd be given a son, a land and royal grandkids. His family would later include Isaac, Jacob, David and, 42 generations later, the Messiah.

***Israel's Slinger/Singer/Swinger***

***Romans 4:6-8***

Paul illustrates using David who is to the Jews what Tiger is to golf. After leveling Goliath with a slingshot, this shepherd became Israel's second and greatest king in 1004 BC. He wrote most of the Psalms, and captured Jerusalem, making it his capital, "The City of David."

Despite loving God, Dave screwed up. Once while his troops were off in battle, he slept with Bathsheba, a soldier's wife. To cover up, he had her husband killed in combat. But David always repented of his sins, asking God for forgiveness.

His Psalm 32 expresses his great relief after fessing up about his adultery (2 Samuel 12:1-25) and receiving God's pardon. No wonder he announces that God will make truly happy those whose sins are forgiven, never to be replayed on God's DVD.

***The Skins Game***

***Romans 4:9-12***

Jumping through religious hoops won't score points with God, Paul argues, citing that God had justified Abraham 14 years before he was circumcised (Genesis 17:22-26). This painful procedure was not intended to make Abe "right" with God, but simply benchmarked God's prior promise. Paul teaches that, like baptism or any religious custom, this private tattoo is only a sign, not our salvation.

After God declared him righteous, Abe lived a far from sinless life -- as did David. Throughout the Bible God honors people of faith not because they're perfect, but because they put their faith in Him (Hebrews 11:39).

God doesn't wait for us to get perfect before He accepts our faith. Nor does He hold our sins against us afterward! Can you say GRACE.

***Abe's Offspring: Heir of the World***

***Romans 4:13-17***

Abraham was not even declared right with God by keeping Moses' law -- since God had justified him 400 years before the law arrived!

And since God gave the law to only Israel, if obeying it were to be the only route to God's favor, then it'd be limited to the Jews. But it's open to every race, color and nationality (Galatians 3:26-29).

Guinness Book says history's most prolific mother was in Shuya, Russia, where, from 1725-1765 she bore 69 children -- by one man! None was a single birth; she had 16 sets of twins, seven of triplets and four sets of quads! Twenty-seven times she shook her hubby and said, "Time to go to the hospital, Zhivago."

It's enough to make you forget Wilt Chamberlain's and Shawn Kemp's scoring feats, proving it doesn't take a village; she is a village. Her obstetrician is Domino's poster boy. Can you imagine mornings at her house, getting the kids off to daycare AND to the senior center! Their Christmas tree was a Redwood.

This valiant lady who holds this honor is Mrs. Fyodor Vassilyev. Sadly she was unable to climb up on stage to accept her award.

This amazing Russian couple's plumbing worked too well. Not so with elderly Abe and Sarah when God said they'd bear their first child. God promised Abe (Genesis 15, 17 and 22) that his seed (Jesus, the Messiah) would inherit the world, referring to God's global kingdom over which Christ will reign one day. Paul says it another way; **let's read Ephesians 1:4-10 (p. 1061).**

The Jews thought they were the sole heirs of God's promises to Abraham, that happiness would come from obeying Moses' law and their religious traditions. But, alas, the law only metes out justice, while God's grace offers the free gift of His mercy.

As imperfect mortals, we can't keep God's law perfectly, so He says we deserve His punishment for our sin. **BUT** in His love God created an exit for us to escape our "sin rut" by sacrificing His sinless Son to take the heat for your sins and mine (Romans 3:24).

Abe is the spiritual dad of all who come to God in faith. God's promises to him were collateralized by (a) Christ's resurrection, and (b) the Creation. The Bible says before you and I place our faith in Christ, we're "dead" in our sins. When we give God our trust, He gives us new "life" by sending His Holy Spirit to reside in us as a "down payment" on what's coming in heaven (Ephesians 1:13-14).

Promises require faith. Abe believed God could bring life out of death (as son from Sarah's dead womb), and that with just a word, God could make something out of nothing (a teeming ethnic group where one did not previously exist)!

***Honeymooning at Viagra Falls***

***Romans 4:18-22***

God told Abe to leave Ur at age 73. Abe didn't ask why. 4: 21 may define genuine faith better than any verse in the New Testament. Even at 99, with all his reproductive equipment way past warranty, Abe was "absolutely sure" God would come through. Real faith ignores circumstances; it measures the greatness of the Object it trusts. A year later Isaac is born to this centenarian and his 90-year-old honey, 25 years after God's promise (Genesis 21:1-5).

***Put Your Rent Money on Red***

***Romans 4:23-25***

Paul wraps up four chapters on sin and salvation, stating that as far back as the Jews' superheroes, Abraham and David, God's never saved anyone based on merit -- always on faith.

He saves us from our sins the moment we believe that when Christ spilled His blood on the cross, our sin-debt to God was paid off! Those who follow Christ put all their chips on red (Christ's blood) as their only hope of being set right with God.

***The Gospel According to Seinfeld***

Jerry says, "Life is truly a ride. We're all strapped in, and no one can stop it.... I think that the most you can hope for at the end of life is that your hair's messed, you're out of breath, and you didn't throw up." It's a good thing we pay Jerry zillions for comedy, not wisdom.

In Romans 3 Paul says we're guilty before God, not because we sin, but because we're born sinners. As such, we're condemned to live forever, after death, apart from God in a place the Bible calls hell.

But this loving God has intervened, giving us a priceless shot to receive His free gift of forgiveness, purchased for us by Christ's sacrificial death. When we receive that gift by faith (not by being good or "religious"), God declares us "safe at home."

Have you placed your faith in being a moral, upstanding guy; in some ritual (which may well be meaningful, inspiring and affirming), in coming from a religious home, in living by "the rules?"

If you haven't yet put yourself in God’s hands by trusting Christ as your Savior, now's the time, now before we split, to say a simple prayer like: "Dear God -- You made it so difficult for Your Son Jesus, but You've made it so simple for me. I know I'm a sinner. I believe that You love me. I believe that Jesus' death totally paid for my sins -- past, present and future. Here's my heart, here's my faith, here's my life. I'm submitting them all to You. Thank You, Father, for saving me. Please teach me how to live as Your son. In the powerful name of Jesus, I come to you. Amen."

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