

TREATED "AS THOUGH", ROMAN 4

Pax Romana #8

- ◆ **Intro:** When Paul penned his letter to the Christians in Rome, the Emperor of Rome, Nero, may have been on his mind. Among Nero's many immoral acts were the public banquets he offered for the people of Rome. It was said he used the whole city as his private house to entertain his myriad guests. But what went on at the gatherings could only be whispered in the streets. The Roman historian Tacitus (A.D. 56-120) described one of Nero's more elaborate parties, which he said was typical: The festivities were held on a small lake populated with exotic birds, fish, and other animals imported for the occasion. Guests were floated out on rafts to be lured in one direction or another. On one shore were brothels crowded with noble ladies; on another, naked prostitutes enticed the guests. As darkness descended, torches were lit, and the groves and buildings filled with song and laughter. Nero, the historian Tacitus says, "polluted himself by every lawful and lawless indulgence." The opening chapter of Romans describes similar activities of Paul's day.
- ◆ In AD 64, when a major fire ravished the city of Rome which some say was set by the Emperor, Nero blamed a small new sect known as "Christians" and began to persecute them. He fed them alive to lions in the arena for the entertainment of the crowds. And, for his evening parties, he had them covered with tar, nailed to crosses, and set on fire to act as lamps. What is even more amazing is that all a Christian had to do to avoid persecution was to recant on their faith in the person of Jesus, whom they considered the one true God. But they would not.
- ◆ I wonder if, like me, you've ever found yourself unable to feel hopeful on a rainy day. I wonder if you've ever waited for a very long time, maybe

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Pax Romana #8

years, asking God for something while it appears he isn't keeping his promises of provision that we read about in the Bible. I wonder if you've ever sobbed alone in a dark room about something you hoped for but didn't receive. Perhaps we've felt many of these. But I doubt any of us here have ever faced the emotions accompanying being lit on fire, or about to be eaten by a very large cat. I don't know about you but it feels like I could learn something about faith from these folks. Just what is faith? And what does it do for us with God? And what differences does it make?

◆ **1. My faith is surrendering my hope over to God.** You need to understand something. For the Jew, faith meant obedience to the law. Choosing right actions was having faith, to them. So if you did the lawful things, you were a "faithful" person, and God was obligated to respond to you with blessing. Paul is trying to show them and us that faith is not the same as obedience to law. Obedience can be done without faith and for all kinds of wrong reasons thus ruining it's good. You can obey out of fear of pain, but that isn't the same as fearing God, which is more a love and honor of God. You can obey out of greed or selfishness, because you seek favor though you do not care for whom you are serving. This is also devoid of true righteousness in the sight of God. Either way you cut it, if your faith is in your doings, or obedience, then it is not in God at all, but in yourself. But ...

◆ "If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about-- but not before God." Romans 4:2, NIV.

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Pax Romana #8

◆ Nobody boasts in front of God. There is no contest there. No, faith is not merely doing right things and thus earning the attention of God, be it blessing or salvation.

◆ A. My faith is believing God, surrendering hope to God.

◆ *"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see..." "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." Hebrews 11:1,8 NIV.*

◆ Abraham, the father of all the Jews wasn't declared righteous for doing the right thing. The Jews thought that the rite of circumcision as "doing the right thing," obeying the command of God. Do that one right thing and you're good, you're saved. We still operate that way often times.

◆ **Some** folks think as long as they're in church once every seven days, that religion base is covered. That's not what God wants from you. That base ain't covered. The Bible says he wants every action you take to glorify him. Every word you say, should make him look good. That you should be on a constant look out to use your talents to bless people for him. That he should be more important to you than ...golf!

◆ **Sometimes** folks think owning a Bible means they belong to God. Or getting baptized means they'll be saved when they die. Or taking communion magically takes care of the lying they did the other day. No says Paul (9-11)! Genesis 15 told us Abraham's faith was as good as righteousness. Genesis 17 (about 14 years later) Abe took the sacrament of circumcision. Communion, like circumcision and any other worship practice isn't earning us grace, it is celebrating

TREATED "AS THOUGH", ROMAN 4

Pax Romana #8

grace already given! It's taking God's mark, and identifying with him and telling the world so.

◆ **Sometimes** folks think their sins are covered because they "believe with all their heart." For them, God must reward the high level of their believing. Their faith has become the one "work" they do to earn God's love.

◆ B. If faith is the key to salvation, then I need to ask, "Am I surrendering my hope to God? Do I have saving faith?" Well, not if you feel like you ought to go to heaven. Not if you are happy with how good a person you are. Not if you obey law in order to get salvation. None of these are faith in God. That's faith in yourself. You might agree there is a God but that doesn't mean your hope and trust are in him.. Demons believe he's there too. But they don't want to be obligated to God. They don't want to owe God. When we take this approach we are like children receiving Christmas presents from Grandma, and then taking out our wallets and paying her. Or like friends, who when treated to dinner, stuff some bills in the treater's pocket at their parting. That's not receiving. That's making sure you are not beholding to anyone. That's paying your own way. Faith is willingness to be beholding unto God. Faith is receiving goodness, righteousness from God as gift, not as pay.

◆ C. We've been talking about saving faith so far, that which makes us righteous before God. But there are also ways in which you and I don't exercise our faith in this life, that is, we don't trust God to be the *good* giver, while we receive life from his hand, We don't believe his plan to be our ultimate good no matter what. I'm amazed at the faith of the

TREATED "AS THOUGH", ROMAN 4

Pax Romana #8

Christians having tar trowed onto over their bodies, about to light Roman garden parties, or those tied to posts in the arena, waiting to be chewed on— and still, not feeling it necessary to save their own skin. But we operate daily as though God is not in charge, and we must save ourselves, don't we? Isn't that what our **obsessiveness** is about? We must take care of every detail, check everyone's work. Oversee all things to insure good and healthy life. It's a horrible existence being God in your own house, but many try. Isn't that what **regret** is, beating ourselves up for failures? We're still trying to earn our image, our credit, -only by feeling bad and being crushed by our failings. We assume hating ourselves is our merit! God doesn't hate you! Your failing has not thrown off his interest in your day, or his desire to speak to you. After all he died for you when you were a wicked person!

◆“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8, NIV.

◆Unfaith (lack of faith) is a root of our **anxiety** too. We have believed the lie that we must manage our world. But we cannot, and we will not commit the details to God. Am I touchy to **criticism**? Isn't it because I believe my value is earned by my performance? Criticism shows my flaws. I cannot be loved if I have flaws! I cannot receive. I must earn! These all come from not believing what God has said!

◆Faith is living like God is God and I don't have to be. Faith is trusting that even if this life stinks, God is going to turn it all to my eventual good. Heidelberg Catechism puts it so beautifully in speaking about what “I believe in God the Father Almighty” means...

TREATED "AS THOUGH", ROMAN 4

Pax Romana #8

◆ I trust him so much that I do not doubt

he will provide
whatever I need
for body and soul,
and he will turn to my good
whatever adversity he sends me
in this sad world.

He is able to do this because he is almighty God;
he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father

◆ That's faith! Where is God calling you to surrender hope to him. Pray now and tell him you want him to be God. Now for the beauty of what happens when we surrender our hope to God. Paul is going to use two prominent Jewish figures to prove his point: Abraham the father of the nation, and David it's greatest king.

◆ **2. My faith is what God credits as though it were actual**

righteousness. The single most repeated concept in our chapter is what? That term "credit" (11 times).

◆ A. What's credit? It's someone treating you as though you are or have something you actually do not. "Put it on my tab, barkeep." That means *act as though* I paid you when I haven't. "You've been pre-approved for a CityBank Visa card!" That means we will let you *act as though* our money is your money if you will pay us a lot more money for the rest of your life on earth. (How long do you think it will take to pay off \$7500 on a credit card making monthly minimum payments? How much will that credit of \$7500 cost you? answers: 30 years and 2 months. \$23000 in interest.) Credit is what God is doing when we entrust our lives to him. He is in essence saying, "I will treat you *as though* you are as holy as my only begotten Son, Jesus, when you surrender your hope to me!"

TREATED "AS THOUGH", ROMAN 4

Pax Romana #8

◆ You see, as Martin Luther put it, the believer is at the same time both wicked and righteous. Do you understand. We are not actually righteous. No man is (3:23). Even Jesus said to the young ruler "No one is good except God alone." We are fallen, sinful, wicked. But God justifies wicked people (5). He accepts faith in his promises *as though* it were a planet-full of goodness that we had done. (v5 *his faith is credited as righteousness*.)

◆ B. Now Paul uses David to show the same thing in a reverse sort of way. Being forgiven is also a kind of credit! Forgiveness and credit are twin gifts. We get both in Jesus. The one, forgiveness, takes away demerit from one person, and puts the suffering on another, the forgiver. The other, credit, gives merit from the giver to the one without. David says it's blessed to have the Lord "not credit" (same word) our sins against us (v8, Ps.32). When you forgive, you treat someone as though they are not wicked, guilty, or discredited. This is also what we get through God's son Jesus: 1) we are seen as though we aren't sinful, but forgiven and 2) we are seen as though we are holy and full of merit, righteous! If I will take God at his word, that is, believe this promise in faith, he will make it so.

◆3. My faith makes a difference.

◆ Clearly faith in the person of Jesus made a difference for the Christian of Rome in Nero's day. Maybe you'd like to try it!?

◆ A. Like Abraham, they could see beyond their circumstance (19). The circumstance was Abe was 99 and Sarah was 89. Science would say,

TREATED "AS THOUGH", ROMAN 4

Pax Romana #8

there's no point in Abe and Sarah turning the lights down low and putting on Kenny G music. Faith makes you a courageous person.

◆B. Like Abraham (v21) they were fully persuaded by God's power, and so did not waver (20). They were not thoughtless, non-thinking individuals. They had weighed the teaching, the history, the resurrection that turned the world upside down, and were persuaded! Faith makes you a hopeful person.

◆C. Like Abraham, they knew that they were a part of God's purpose in the world. They had identity that carried them on. They were part of his family, the one through whom God was bringing salvation to the world. (11b-12). Faith makes you God's person in the world.

◆

◆**Conclusion:** Abraham was not the perfect God-follower, you know. He tried to solve the childless problem by having a baby with Sarah's servant girl. There's been dissension between Arabs and Israeli's ever since. He tried to protect his wife by lying to a local king and pretending she was his sister. Actually, he did that twice. No, Abraham needed the righteousness credited to his account just like we do. And just like Abraham you and I too can have our wickedness covered and our right standing with God conferred on us anyway (23-25). This is the gospel of Christ! Jesus suffered eternal death for you, took your dirt. Jesus gives you his eternal merit, righteousness.

◆It's paradoxical, isn't it, that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church? The more Nero killed Christians, and the more people saw them accept death rather than disown their faith, and the more people saw their

TREATED "AS THOUGH", ROMAN 4

Pax Romana #8

un-killable hope in a living Jesus, the more people were attracted to the God the Christians served. People wanted a faith that made a difference like that. Within four years of the great fire in Rome, Nero will have killed himself. Within three-hundred years, Christianity would become the dominant religion of Rome under the Emperor Constantine. Today Rome Italy is a center of the Christian Church which Nero tried to kill off. The Roman Empire is gone, except for ruins. The peace in the message of Romans is still living!