

Progression in Faith

“I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”
—Romans 1:16,17

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

was Paul’s longest epistle, and in his opening salutation, he makes three important points. First, he defends his apostleship. An apostle is one who is called and sent out, especially to testify of the Gospel. Paul says that he was “called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God.” (Rom. 1:1) In this same verse he refers to himself as Jesus’ “servant.” That is, his life was totally devoted to doing God’s

will and spreading the message of the Gospel first given by Jesus.

Second, in his opening words, Paul states that the central theme of the Gospel is Jesus Christ. He says that Jesus is the Son of God, “which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh.” (vs. 3) As the “seed of David,” Jesus met one of the

qualifications needed to be a ransom, or corresponding price, for father Adam. That qualification was that he be a human being. Otherwise, he could not be a redeemer that would correspond to Adam, who was also of flesh and blood, and created as a perfect man. The ransom required a perfect man's life for a perfect man's life. As the Son of God, Jesus met another important qualification, that being the requirement of perfection on the part of the one who would redeem Adam and his race. Jesus, although a human being born of a woman, received the spark of perfect life from God his Father, which was placed miraculously by God in the womb of Mary. An understanding of how Jesus met both these qualifications shows us how he was able to be perfect, separate from sinners, and yet be a true corresponding price, or ransom, for Adam.

The third point of Paul's opening words in Romans was that Jesus' life and ministry was not to be carried out for just a few people, or for certain select groups or nations. On the contrary, it was part of God's eternal purpose that the Gospel of Christ would eventually bring salvation to all, through "obedience to the faith among all nations."—vs. 5

FAITH IS PROGRESSIVE

The verses quoted at the beginning of our lesson allude to one of Paul's fundamental teachings of this epistle, that being the importance of faith. The phrase "justification by faith," although not stated specifically here, is alluded to, and as we will later see, it becomes one of the central themes of this letter. Faith was now to become an all-important principle in the lives of all those who would strive

to obtain salvation through the Gospel of Christ, both Jews and Gentiles. In Romans 1:17, Paul reveals two important truths concerning faith. First, faith is a progressive matter, “from faith to faith.” By this, Paul meant that faith has various levels of development in the lives of God’s people. There is a more elementary faith—one that firmly believes in God and his plans, but has not been fully tested and tried in the experiences of life. As the children of God grow and develop, and their faith is put to the test, it develops a greater and more complete level of maturity, which eventually can be victorious in any experience of life regardless of severity or difficulty.

Paul’s second point in verse 17 naturally follows his description of the progressive nature of faith. This character principle should progress to the point that our entire life is one of faith, where every thought, word, and deed—every decision, action and prayer—is a matter of total and complete confidence in God and his will. This is what is meant by his statement, “The just shall live by faith.”

ADMITTING NEED

In Romans 3:23,24, we find these words from Paul: “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” Paul states earlier in this chapter that Israel had much in the way of advantage in comparison to other nations of the earth because “unto them were committed the oracles of God.” (vs. 2) The phrase “oracles of God” refers to the utterances, or words, of God. Israel had—through both its Law as well as its teachers,

leaders, and prophets—God’s instructions to show how their lives should be lived and to what principles their characters should be conformed. However, they lacked the necessary faith to keep God’s instructions as intended by him, and so Paul asks these further questions, “What if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect?” Paul immediately gives the answer, “God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged.”—vss. 3,4

Paul realized the situation that the Jews suffered under, just as any nation would have that God might have chosen to receive his Law, his words, and his oracles. God’s laws are perfect, and as such they cannot be kept in their totality by an imperfect being regardless of how hard they might try, and how noble their intentions might be. The struggle of man against sin is present with all members of the fallen race. This lack of faith points out the situation in which all mankind finds itself. Paul points this out, when he says, “Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.”—vs. 19

THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

The question remains, what about the faithfulness of God? What is his plan for the fallen race, both Jew and Gentile? Can they be recovered? Must God start over? Paul gives us the assurance that the answer lies in the former thought, that God does

indeed have a plan for the recovery of man. "Now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference." (Rom. 3:21,22) Paul says in these verses that God's plan for man's recovery centers in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. He further indicates that it is through God's grace, or unmerited favor, that this redemption is provided.

Paul continues his lesson by reminding us that although redemption is given freely through the grace of God, there is a responsibility on our part to obtain the benefits provided by the Redeemer. That responsibility is faith in God, the author of salvation, and faith in Jesus, the instrument used to provide it. Together with obedience to God in the daily dealings in our lives he shows us his will and guides us with his providences. "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law."—vss. 24-28

AN EXAMPLE OF FAITH

"What saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness."

(Rom. 4:3) No man, Jew or Gentile, could keep God's law perfectly, and we have learned of the great importance of faith in the lives of those who seek to be found acceptable to God. Since Pentecost, the foundation of this faith is seen in the redemptive work accomplished by Jesus. Paul tells us, however, that such faith has always been especially pleasing to the Heavenly Father, and he uses the example of Abraham and his faith to show how God has taken pleasure in those down through the ages who have displayed this characteristic. Because of Abraham's faith, he was counted, or reckoned, as righteous before God. How was this possible? How could an inherently imperfect man, as Abraham was, be considered righteous simply by having this quality of faith?

The answer to this question lies in the great love and mercy of God, and in the great wisdom with which he designed his plan for mankind. In the case of Abraham, God knew well in advance that he could not be justified by the works of any law, "Because the law worketh wrath." (vs. 15) Yet he saw that Abraham had a great desire to serve him, and had a heart condition and motivation toward righteousness that he could use and develop. Knowing this, God devised a method whereby he, without violating his attribute of justice, could "count" or "reckon" Abraham righteous through his faith. Additionally, God tested and tried Abraham's faith in order to prove its depth and sincerity. A few of these tests were: 1) asking him to leave his own country and kindred to go to a land he knew nothing about; 2) not providing a seed to him until he and Sarah were both well past the normal age of

childbearing; and 3) instructing him to slay Isaac, his long-awaited son, and offer him as a sacrifice. (Gen. 12:1,4; 17:15-17; 22:1-13) Abraham passed all of these tests of faith, as well as others. As a result, wonderful promises were made to Abraham—promises that would eventually carry down to all the families of the earth. (Gen. 12:2,3; 18:18; 22:16-18) Abraham's faith, his testing, and ultimate promised blessing, was not the result of his keeping any law, except the law of faith. "The promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law [of Moses], but through the righteousness of faith."—Rom. 4:13

WE MUST ALSO HAVE THIS FAITH

In Romans 4:16, Paul says that Abraham was "the father of us all." This signifies that we, too, in order to receive the blessings of God, must display the same kind of faith that Abraham did. Additionally, our faith must be thoroughly tested as was his, in order for God to prove our loyalty to him under any and all circumstances. Further in this same chapter, Paul states concerning Abraham that "He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he [God] had promised, he was able also to perform." (vss. 20,21) The child of God today must develop this same level of faith exemplified in Abraham.

Just as was the case with Abraham, we too can be counted, or reckoned, as righteous before God through the attribute of faith. As Paul says, "Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it [righteousness] was reckoned unto him; but for our sake also,

unto whom it shall be reckoned, who believe on him that raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.”—vss. 23,24, *Revised Version*

THE BENEFITS OF FAITH

Paul continues the theme of faith with the statement, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom. 5:1) This is addressed to those who have, through faith in Jesus, righteousness imputed to them. This is what is meant by the phrase “being justified by faith.” As a result of this reckoned righteous condition, these have many potential benefits accrue to them. First, we have “peace with God.” Formerly, as sinners condemned through our inheritance from father Adam, we did not have peace with God. In our undone condition, we were at enmity with him, just the opposite of being at peace. However, through the blood, or merit, of Jesus’ ransom sacrifice, and by our full faith in it, we have obtained peace with the Almighty God, and he is able to deal with us as his children. The Prophet Isaiah speaks symbolically of how one obtains this peace by using the example of clothing which covers natural imperfections and blemishes. He says, “My soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness.”—Isa. 61:10

Other benefits obtained by those in this justified condition are that they have access to God which they did not have earlier as enemies, as well as a tremendous hope for the future. All this causes those who are in this condition to rejoice and glorify God. (Rom. 5:2) Paul continues this lesson by telling us

that, as one justified by faith, we will have a lifetime of experiences of all kinds, and that these experiences are specially designed for us by God himself to help us develop our faith even further, and to prove its loyalty under all circumstances. He says, "Not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit."—Rom. 5:3-5, *New American Standard Bible*

GOD'S MERCY AND GRACE

Paul reminds us further in our lesson, lest we become conceited in our own minds, that God showed his love to us by sending his son, Jesus, "while we were yet sinners." (vs. 8) "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life." (vs. 10) The death of Jesus as the ransom provided the means possible whereby we might have peace with God. However, in order to obtain the full salvation which God desired, it was required that Jesus not remain in death, but be raised again to life, to apply the value of his sacrifice to the bar of God's justice, and hence buy back Adam's race from the condemnation of sin and death. All this was part of God's intent and plan, and was made possible by his mercy and unending love for his creation. Truly Paul could say, "We also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation."—vs. 11, *NASB*

Paul summarizes this part of our lesson by saying, “If by one man’s offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ. Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.”—vss. 17-21

EXPERIENCING NEW LIFE

It is one thing to receive the grace of God, but quite another to act upon that grace in a way that is pleasing to him. We cannot expect to continue to receive of his mercy and favor if we are not seeking to follow it up with proper daily living and character building in our life. This is the point of Paul’s statement: “Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” (Rom. 6:4) Having freely received of God’s grace through Jesus Christ, we are asked to bury our will into his, even unto death, and follow in the footsteps which he set before us. A godlike character includes service for others, suffering for righteousness sake, and loyalty to God under all circumstances.

(John 13:12-15; Gal. 5:13; I Pet. 3:14; Prov. 3:5,6)
This is what is embodied in the phrase, "buried with him by baptism into death."

We are reminded that, although Jesus died a sacrificial death he was "raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father." The resurrection of Jesus was a most glorious event in God's plan. The scriptural account says, "In the end of the sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre. And, behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow: And for fear of him the keepers did shake, and became as dead men. And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you."—Matt. 28:1-7

Jesus' closest disciples did not at first fully understand the import of this great event. Later, after receiving the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, their eyes were opened to the grand meaning of Jesus' resurrection. (Acts 2:1-4,14-36) It truly was ushering in a new feature in God's plan especially designed for those who would desire to be footstep followers of the Master. In Romans 6:3-5, Paul also ties in the truth of Jesus' resurrection with the

privilege his followers have of walking in his steps. "Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection." Just as Jesus was the recipient of a new life upon his resurrection from the dead, so also we, having fully dedicated, or consecrated, ourselves to God, and burying our wills into death with Jesus, are "raised up" symbolically to walk in "newness of life," newness of attitude, character, and service.

NEW CREATURES IN CHRIST

Paul in another place identifies this "newness" by saying, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature." (II Cor. 5:17) As New Creatures we are to walk and live our life in newness of thought, word, and action, not serving sin as we once did, but serving righteousness to the best of our ability. Although we cannot do this perfectly, it should be our desire to do so if it were possible. Because we are covered with the robe of Christ's righteousness, as previously discussed, God is able to overlook the unintentional failings resulting from our inherited sinful condition. It is not that we ignore those blemishes and failings, but we must strive each day to overcome as much of the fallen condition as is possible. (Rom. 6:1,2; I Cor. 9:27) Having done that, God exercises his great mercy toward us by viewing us as New Creatures and

looking at the robe covering us, and not at the blemishes residing underneath.

It is not only important that we strive to overcome as much as possible the sinful nature of the old flesh, but also that we replace it with the traits and characteristics that should accompany such a newness of life. Paul mentions a few of the characteristics and positive ways we can develop in this newness. He says, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law." (Gal. 5:22,23) Likewise, the Apostle Peter exhorts us to add to our foundation of faith such qualities as "virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity [love]."—II Pet. 1:5-7

In many ways these characteristics of our new life in Christ begin in the mind and with our thoughts. (II Cor. 10:5) This becomes the great battleground of life as we strive to have our mind and its thoughts conform to those that would please our Heavenly Father. "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." (Phil. 4:8) Let us, then, by the renewal of our thoughts, words, and actions, seek to grow and mature in faith, day by day, experience by experience, remembering that "this is the victory [Greek: means of success] that overcometh the world, even our faith."—I John 5:4■