

Has God Moved The Goal Posts?

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[0 : 00] This, the talk today, which you will see is on Romans, I mean you know already is on Romans, is entitled, Has God Moved the Goalposts?

Now, the way I'd like to justify that is that these are the goalposts here. And this is the field here. And we're playing towards the goalposts out here, you see, this is where the game's going on. And the fact is that God has moved the goalposts.

The game is going in this direction in case you didn't understand that. Now, the team that's out there, I would like to call, these are the children of Abraham.

That's the way they thought of themselves. And they were under the covenant which was given to Abraham, and they were aiming towards that goalpost. And then what happens, what Paul is talking about in Romans chapter 4, is of course that the goalpost has become the cross.

[1 : 12] And the game is now going on here. And the people over here are no longer the children of Abraham living under the covenant of Abraham. They are now what you might call the brothers and sisters of Christ looking for his coming again.

So that the goalpost is now this way. This was his coming in humility on the cross. This is his coming again as king. So the goalposts, in a sense, have been moved in that Abraham looked forward to this, and now with this behind us, we look forward to the coming of Christ.

That's the sense in which the goalposts have been moved. Now, the passage that we're looking at today, if you read it carefully, you will see that the person who it features is Abraham.

Now, if ever there was a good man, it was Abraham. And everybody thinks so. If you're a Muslim, you think so.

If you're a Jew, you think so. If you're a Christian, you think so. If you read the Bible, you think so. If you're part of the history of the world, Abraham is the patriarch of patriarchs.

[2 : 31] The one whom historically, through whom historically, the whole of the sort of faith of the world is built. So that Abraham was essentially a very good man.

Now, that's important to consider because we've been thinking mostly about very bad men. I mean, in the sense that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. We've been showing all the deficits of our humanity, all our inability to find God, all of our inability to understand God, all of our inability to seek God.

We've been looking at people who are, in one sense, losers. But humanly speaking, if ever there was a winner on the stage of world history, it's Abraham.

And so what Paul does here is to put Abraham in center stage and say, now, all right, let's look at him. The best of men. The best that humanity can produce.

That's Abraham. And Paul begins with a question. What shall we say then that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? Abraham was the one whom you may remember offered up his son Isaac.

[3 : 50] Remember God's, I mean, that terrific story, which is told, again, by Kierkegaard in a wonderful way. But the way God said that he was to take Abraham, Abraham was to take Isaac and to take him up Mount Moriah and there offer him as a sacrifice to God.

And Abraham did it. In a sense, that was the ultimate spiritual sacrifice. That was the ultimate, in a sense, bowing down before God and saying, your will be done.

Here is my son. I offer him to you in obedience to your work. There it is. You remember, for instance, that the prophet Micah said, with what shall I come before God?

Will I come before God with a thousand rams? Ten thousand rivers of oil? Will I offer to God the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

And so Micah says this is the sort of progression of the ultimate sacrifice by which God is to be propitiated and by which we are entering through relationship with him.

[5 : 05] This is the ultimate that you can do. And the whole of our religious life, particularly this side of the goalposts, so to speak, saw life in terms of a thousand rams, ten thousand rivers of oil, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul.

That something had to be done. Something very important had to be done in order to establish some relationship to God. To reach, as it were, the goalposts.

And so that's what Abraham was prepared to do. Now, when you get the beginning of the New Testament, what you find is John the Baptist was concerned about Abraham.

Because the Pharisees and the Sadducees came streaming out of the towns and villages to present themselves to John the Baptist for baptism in the River Jordan.

And John the Baptist preached a very comforting sermon to them and said, You vipers! You vipers! Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? You know?

[6 : 17] And you call yourselves the children of Abraham? John the Baptist said, God could make children of Abraham out of these stones. That's not good enough.

And then he told them that the whole structure of their religion, the whole panorama of their religion, that the axe was laid to the foot of the tree.

And down it's going to come. The whole elaborate religious structure by which you live your lives.

And that you've been so careful to erect and of which you are so proud.

He said, that's going to come crashing down. So John the Baptist was able to say to them that their relationship to this good man, Abraham, and the pretense that they were his children following in his ways was not really an acceptable argument.

And that that wasn't the way it was. Well then when you come to John chapter 8, you get that other wonderful story. Which begins with...

[7 : 30] You believe in... I've forgotten how it begins. You remember, it's the one about you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free. And then he said to them, and you are slaves.

You're meant to be free and you're slaves. And they said, we're not slaves. We are the children of Abraham. Oh no, Jesus said.

You're not the children of Abraham. Because you seek to kill me. Abraham rejoiced to see my day. And here I am among you. And the intent and purpose of your heart is that you will put me to death. So he said, you're not the children of Abraham.

And he went on and told them, you are the children of your father, the devil. The devil was a murderer and a liar from the beginning. And that's the thing that is on your heart.

[8 : 27] Murder and lying. And so he said, don't tell me. Jesus said to them, don't tell me that you're the children of Abraham. And that was when he told them, Abraham rejoiced to see my day and you seek to kill me.

And they said to him, look, you're not yet 50 years old. And you say, Abraham rejoiced to see your day.

What do you mean by that? And Jesus explained to them in these words, which before Abraham was, I am.

Which was a bit disconcerting for them. And it was at that point, you see, that they took Jesus out of the city to throw him off the cliff and put him to death.

And that was the sort of demonstration of the fact that what lay at their heart was the perpetuation of the lie by which they lived. And the murder of the one who stood in the way of who objected to that lie.

[9 : 35] And so you have that sort of a massive put down of Abraham. Then Paul comes along and he says, all right, let's look very closely at this man, Abraham.

That's what this passage is about. Paul says, let's look at this man, Abraham. Now, he says, if you look in the first book of Moses, you will see that Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.

Now, you think you are the circumcised children of Abraham. Notice that this, I mean, I'm elaborating a little on Paul's sermon here. Notice, he says, that this is in chapter 15 of Genesis. And the rite of circumcision doesn't come until chapter 17. And therefore, Abraham was counted righteous even before the sign of the covenant was given.

So that God's relationship to Abraham was based on faith. And Abraham believed God and it was counted to him or reckoned to him as righteousness.

[10:47] So, this word reckoned is the one that goes all the way through this passage. If you're reading the NIV, you'll see it's credited to.

The old authorized version says, reckon. It's a good word. Can I give you just a personal illustration? That I reckon, up until about this time last week, that I paid my income tax. I was very grateful to the government for this first full year of my life, in which month by month, I have received the old age pension.

So there I was, living in the lap of luxury. And then last week, I found out they want it all back. Now, I misreckoned what they reckoned for me and what I reckoned were two quite different things. And so that was a kind of sobering thing. Now, what this passage is telling you is you probably have misreckoned what the nature of your relationship to God is.

[12:15] And that's what Paul is desperately trying to put straight. Abraham was a good man.

But it's not on the basis of him being a good man that he was related to God. Look what it says. In fact, in verse 2, Abraham was justified by works.

He had something to boast of. He could climb up on his little pedestal and say, this is who I am. This is what I've done. This is where I stand in world history.

This is where I stand among humankind. I am a man who has something to boast of. But Paul says that boasting was not the basis of his relationship to God.

And I think that that's where we get confused. It's that we think because we can boast before men of all the good things we've done, that God will buy the same story.

[13:19] And we just don't relate to him on that basis at all. And that's why it says about Abraham, Abraham was justified by works. He had something to boast about, but not before God.

What does the scripture say? And then he quotes the passage from Genesis. Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness. So that he thus, in a sense, deals with Abraham. Abraham believed him that the basis of his relationship was a basis of faith in God, not works that he had done.

And, I mean, I suppose, in a sense, it's easy, I mean, relatively easy, for me to argue with you about this on the basis of Genesis.

Because I have the happy assumption that I know more about it than you do. And that's probably not true in many instances. But, you know, we all live in our own little world, our own little bubble of conceit.

[14:35] And, but, what Paul was doing was arguing with bearded Jews who had spent the whole of their life going syllable by syllable through the Torah to know exactly what it said, to know exactly what it meant.

They had, they knew every, every comma, every period, every jot, every tittle. They knew the whole thing and they knew it backwards. And Paul was taking the thing they knew so extremely well and, in a sense, rubbing their faces in it.

Because you know this, don't you? You know that it says in Genesis 15, Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. You know that. You understand all the implications of that.

And you can't deny that that's what the Word of God says. Even though you have never understood it fully, I'm telling you how to understand it fully. So you see the enormous clash that is taking place here between the learned rabbis and this other extremely learned and zealous rabbi, Paul.

So he says to them, Abraham believed God. Now, then he gives an illustration. And he uses, in this illustration, he uses two men.

[16:06] And I will, I think I will go on stage as a magician. I can make things disappear right in front of my eyes.

Here we are. Here's man number one. Look at him, if you will, in the story. When a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift but as an obligation.

This is the man who works for his wages and he gets what he deserves. It's an obligation that he be given it.

this is the one man. Then he says, there's the other man who does not work. Here he is.

And he doesn't work. He simply trusts God. Now, I might say to you, which are you?

[17 : 15] Well, you all know who you are. Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, this is who you are. And on Sunday, this is who you are. But the fact is that you're basically only one person.

And which one are you? And that's the, that's the, the story that Paul puts before them when he says, when a man, now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift but as an obligation.

In other words, he's earned it, he deserves it, he must get it. And he says, that is how people think of life. What they've worked for, they deserve to get.

And, and very often I find people often in the thrall of bitterness looking at their life and saying, I didn't deserve this. You know, I didn't work for this.

and so that you get, you get this pattern. This is, this is a mentality. This is a way of thinking. This is an understanding of who we are as persons.

[18 : 25] The other man does not work, it says. He trusts. Now, what, what that means in effect is this.

That, in this factory over here, the shop steward goes to the boss and says, \$21.50 an hour or we're out. And, the boss bows his head submissively and says, \$21.50 an hour it is.

He pays them. Even though he gets \$75 an hour in terms of return on their work, that's what he pays them. I'm just putting in a little union bitterness here to, to heighten the picture a little.

But, that's how it works. The other, the other picture over here is the shop steward goes to the boss and says, boss, we just want to work.

If you decide to pay us, that's great. But, for our concern, we just want to work. Now, how many of you are in firms like that? No. That, in effect, is what, is what Paul is saying.

[19 : 43] That's how, that's how it's to be understood. We, this man, trusts, does what he's told and, and trusts the boss to give him whatever.

I mean, he just trusts the boss. You see that word there, the gift in verse 4. This is, a man works for a gift, not to incur an obligation.

That our life is not based on incurring an obligation and being able to live on the payoff of it for the rest of your life.

That's not what life is about. Life is lived as a gift, trusting in the one who gave it. Now, what that adds up to then is that God reckons you to be righteous.

as the basis of your relationship to him. They've had a wonderful series of sermons on Sunday nights at St.

[21 : 07] John's on God, sex, and the lie. And we had a discussion after the last one last week. and of course, one of the eloquent pleas at the discussion group afterwards was that in my relationship to my girlfriend, give me some rules.

And, you know, I'm not very smart, but I said to him, there aren't any rules. If you love God and love her, that's all the rules there are.

That's the end of it. Now, I can see some of you older and wiser cynics thinking you've got to say more.

the thing is you betray the basic relationship to God of an adult person.

Now, I'm going to get myself in trouble if I go on with that illustration, so we'll terminate it right here.

And I'll go on at the top. What has happened here, you see, is that Abraham has believed God, trusted in him.

[22 : 33] He said, God is a righteous God whom I trust no matter what happens, the kind of faith of Job who says, though he slay me, yet will I trust him.

That that primary relationship is one of trust in and love for God. God, and God, it seems, returns the compliment and says, I trust you.

I reckon you to be righteous because you trust in me. Now, the other part of this story, you see, is not only does Paul talk about the good guy, Abraham, he also brings in the bad guy, David, murderer, adulterer, liar.

He brings him on the scene, too. And both of them, he illustrates, the really good man in the Old Testament, who is Abraham. The really bad man in the Old Testament is David.

Both of them were very good friends of God. Remember, Abraham was a friend of God, and David was a man after God's own heart. Both these men stand in this wonderful relationship to God, the good man and the bad man.

[23 : 59] And Paul is making the point here that both of them understood their relationship to God in precisely the same way. They had a faith relationship.

And to demonstrate that, Paul quotes David in Psalm 32, and David's recognition from his perspective is that he is blessed, and those are blessed whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not count against him. So both of them understood their relationship to God in terms of God's grace and mercy towards him.

That God had wonderfully trusted them in giving his son, Jesus Christ, to die for them. And that their response is to trust him.

And that that becomes the basis of the whole of our primary relationship to God.

[25 : 13] God. See, if you're the good man, you can boast if you want to about that, but the relationship to God isn't based on that. The relationship to God is based on faith.

If you're a man who has been an adulterer, a murderer, and a liar, your relationship to God is that you trust him. And because he is the God by whom your transgressions are forgiven, your sins are covered, and whose sin the Lord will never count against him.

It's quite remarkable. So that what you end up with, you see, is two basic understanding of what being a human being is all about. And most people, and I think most religion teaches this, that what you're supposed to do is work hard, earn your wages, and get your pay.

Well, I'm telling you that if you do that on the basis of the reckoning of Romans chapter 3 and 4, then your pay packet will be surprisingly thin.

It'll hardly be worth carrying home. And yet, so many people live with that model, with that understanding.

[26 : 50] And what Paul says you must learn to do, is you must learn to trust God. Even in the most awkward and difficult and trying of circumstances, Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

And God whose heart for you is to provide you more than you could ever ask or think by his grace, gives to you, out of that abundance of his love for you, what you could never ever deserve.

And that's what our life in Christ is meant to be. That's the difference. And Paul hammers it away so that they won't forget it. Well, there it is.

And with this we conclude Romans. And, but, but, but do you see, I mean, I just, I mean, I find it hard. I, I come at this passage and it doesn't open up and I work at it and work at it and work at it and it doesn't open up and then suddenly the light comes through and you see what it is, the implications of what he's saying.

And I just pray that your heart may be so broken into by this passage of Rome that the light will come streaming in as it were and that you will see the wonder of that relationship which God offers us in Christ and the wonder of how you are to live in that relationship to him.

[28 : 32] Let's pray. Our God, we thank you for the wonder of the fact that it's possible for us as human beings to be reckoned as righteous before you because you call us to put our trust in you and as we put our trust in you you teach us that you have put your trust in us and that we are to live in that kind relationship to you with all the joys that belong to it and all the deep contrition which necessarily is part of our sometimes failure to live out that relationship.

Thank you that you are as David knew you to be the God who by whom our transgressions are forgiven our sins are covered we are those who by your grace that you will never count our sins against us because of Jesus Christ in whose name we pray Amen