

What Shall We Say?

Last week we introduced Romans chapter 4 as a response to Romans 3:27-30. Romans chapter 3 contained the principles of faith alone in Christ alone which results in the imputation of God's righteousness to our heavenly account. Chapter 4 contains illustrations from Abraham and David. Paul starts chapter 4 with a rhetorical questions about Abraham. What did he encounter concerning his personal relationship to God in his journey toward faith?

Romans 4:1 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?

There are issues with this first verse of Romans chapter 4. The reason I deal with them is that they show up in different English translations of the Greek. This will answer some questions concerning different translations. If you compare them, you may ask why do they not agree? You may not have asked the questions. Today you will encounter questions and answers in part because I had questions and needed answers. I have shifted my emphasis on the word "doctrine" to the word "answers." Bible doctrine answers questions.

1. **Textual Issue:** Does the Greek text say "forefather" or "father?"
2. **Interpretive Issues:** How to translate this verse. How do the words connect with each other. Is it "according to the flesh" – Abraham our forefather according to the flesh or "according to the flesh (human viewpoint) has found."
3. **Usage issue:** How does Paul use the question "What then shall we say?" Only Paul, in the New Testament uses this phrase, all in the

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book of Romans. So we will look at them. How does he use this question?

Answers to these questions lead us to understand what Paul is saying and how this fits into his argument of justification by faith alone in Christ alone.

The Textual Issue.

Is the word in the Greek text “forefather” or “father?” Textual critics say it is “forefather.” There are different Greek texts. This happens when the text is being copied. Sometimes a word sounds like another one and the wrong one is copied. Other times, copyists will change a word for different reasons. Here, the copyist sees a word that is not used anywhere else in the New Testament. The phrase “father Abraham” is uniformly used except here. So the copyist apparently decided to make it uniform by changing the original “forefather” to “father.” Forefather is the preferred reading.

This is the only time in the New Testament that this word, “forefather,” is used. It seems out of place, but it could be that Paul did this deliberately to get our attention. Other writers of Scripture have done similar things. As we saw last week, the Jews normally call Abraham “our father.” The meaning does not shift much in either case. But it does factor into the translation and who Abraham is father of. What follows indicates that Abraham was not just the father of the Jews but also the father of all who believe. He is our father as well. Our forefather. He is the example of faith.

Wycliffe’s translation, published in 1382, was translated from the Latin of the Vulgate. Both have “father” and not “forefather.” The Vulgate apparently used a later copy of the Greek text which has “father” rather than “forefather.”

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Who was John Wycliffe? Per Wikipedia: “He became an influential dissident within the Catholic priesthood during the 14th century and is often considered an important predecessor to Protestantism.¹”

Romans 4:1 (Wycliffe Translation) What then shall we say, that Abraham our father after the flesh found?

Jews say that Abraham was their father. They would say “our father.” The rest of the New Testament uses this term. But Paul does not use that term here.

Romans 4:1 (NET) What then shall we say that Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh, has discovered regarding this matter?

The New English Translation (NET) tries to avoid the issue by using “our ancestor.” While “forefather” is an ancestor, it is best to use the literal “forefather” in translation.

Romans 4:1 (NIV) What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?

The NIV and NASB and other translations use the text of the earliest manuscripts which have “forefather.” By using this word, Paul puts the Jews on notice that this is something more encompassing than “our father” of the Jews. Paul will explain in Romans that Abraham is the “father” or example of ALL believers. Abraham became a believer as a Gentile. Then, he became the first Jew.

The point of this discussion has been to answer potential questions:

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Wycliffe

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1. Why do different translations use “father” instead of “forefather”? They use a different ancient manuscript. Father is in the later manuscripts. Forefather is in the more ancient manuscripts. Textual criticism is based upon rules that give more weight to older manuscripts.
2. Why would Paul use forefather instead of father? Paul does this to get our attention that Abraham is our forefather, even if we are not Jewish. The Christians in Rome were a mixture of physical Jews and Gentiles some of whom were Jewish proselytes. This requires that we understand “flesh” differently than some translations. We will get to that issue.

The Interpretive Issue.

The problem concerns how the words in the text of the first verse relate to each other. How does “forefather,” “found” and “flesh” relate?

The word “found.” Paul doesn’t repeat the word and say, here is what Abraham found. He only asks the question, what did he find? He just gets to the logic of what Abraham would have thought. I’ll expand on this later.

The word “flesh,” in some translations, modifies our father as “according to the flesh.” In other translations it modifies “found” which is an infinitive, “Abraham found according to the flesh (human thinking).” How these two words relate changes the meaning of the sentence.

I wasn’t going to confuse you with a variety of translations. But, since you may read different translations and be confused, let me address the issue. The NASB95 is what I use as a starting point. Sometimes I consider the translation wrong. When that happens, I tell you. But since translations you use may differ from that, a brief explanation is in order.

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Romans 4:1 (NIV) What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter?

Note that the NIV connects “according to the flesh to “forefather.” This would then focus the argument to just Jews.

“Forefather according to the flesh.”

The NASB is similar. The use of “our forefather” put us on notice that this may be different than what the Jews would think. They would say that Abraham is their father, not the father of Gentiles. From a physical standpoint this is true. But here in Romans, Paul is teaching concerning spiritual issues, not physical heritage. Have I said that enough times?

Romans 4:1 (KJV) What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?

In the English, not sure if the KJV is saying our father as pertaining to the flesh or pertaining to the flesh (human viewpoint) what has he found. But then read the New King James Version:

Romans 4:1 (NKJV) What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?

The New King James Version seems to clarify this as according to human viewpoint thinking.

OK, so you ask what is the “New” King James Version. Here is an explanation from Wikipedia:

“The New King James Version (NKJV) is a translation of the Bible in contemporary English. Published by Thomas Nelson, the complete

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NKJV was released in 1982. With regard to its textual basis, the NKJV relies on a modern critical edition (the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia) for the Old Testament, while opting to use the Textus Receptus for the New Testament.”

“The NKJV is described by Thomas Nelson as being "scrupulously faithful to the original King James Version, yet truly updated to enhance its clarity and readability.”²”

Romans 4:1 (Amplified) What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather humanly speaking, has found? [Has he obtained a favored standing?]

Again, the Amplified translation goes with physical heritage.

Robby Dean explains Romans 4:1 in relation to chapter 3.

“The first illustration is the key one, and that is Abraham. He introduces the topic with a rhetorical question in Romans 4:1 “What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?” When he uses the term flesh, he is talking about him in terms of his humanity. What has he found in the physical realm? Has he found spiritual righteousness, an eternal righteousness or has he just found a relative righteousness?”

Using the translation “found according to the flesh Abraham...” then we can assume that at some point, the unbeliever Abram was asking questions about God. As an unbeliever, Abraham, applied logic to a spiritual situation. Paul is taking us back to before Abram believed. There was a spiritual journey that led him to faith. All believers have a journey to faith. Some are more involved than others. The Bible doesn’t narrate this journey for Abram/Abraham, there is a non-Biblical story

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_King_James_Version

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that might shed some light on this. At some point, someone, or maybe even God Himself, since no written canon of Scripture existed at that time, gave Abraham the gospel. It answered his logic, including the logic of Job, that no human can make a sinner clean. The ten questions of Job. So here we have the logic as a result of Abraham's example.

There is a story in Midrash that I have quoted before and which I will now quote again from Wikipedia:

“ According to Genesis Rabbah 38.13, Hiyya b. Abba, a third-generation Amora, told following story:

“Terah was an idol manufacturer who once went away and left Abraham in charge of the store. A man walked in and wished to buy an idol. Abraham asked him how old he was and the man responded “50 years old.” Abraham then said, “You are 50 years old and would worship a day old statue!” At this point the man left, ashamed.”

“Later, a woman walked into the store and wanted to make an offering to the idols. So Abraham took a stick, smashed the idols and placed the stick in the hand of the largest idol. When Terah returned, he asked Abraham what happened to all the idols. Abraham told him that a woman came in to make an offering to the idols. The idols argued about which one should eat the offering first, then the largest idol took the stick and smashed all the other idols. Terah responded by saying that they are only statues and have no knowledge. Whereupon Abraham responded by saying that you deny their knowledge, yet you worship them! At this point, Terah took Abraham to Nimrod.”

“Nimrod proclaims to Abraham that we should worship fire. Abraham responds that water puts out fire. So Nimrod declares they worship water. Abraham responds that clouds hold water. So Nimrod declares they worship clouds. Abraham responds that wind pushes clouds. So Nimrod

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declares they worship wind. Abraham responds that people withstand wind.”

“Nimrod becomes angry with Abraham and declares that Abraham shall be cast into the fire, and if Abraham is correct, i.e. that there is a real God, then that God will save him. Abraham is cast into the fire and is saved by God.³”

This story is not just found in the Jewish Midrash. Parts of this story are also found in the Koran! So, even if it is not entirely correct, there is some background to it shared among the peoples of the Middle East.

The point of the quote is that Abram as an unbeliever was searching for the true God. Abraham found God and understood the concept of faith in God. It reminds me of the spiritual journey of Gideon in Judges chapter 6. Perhaps you had a journey to faith. That is your testimony.

The Usage Issue.

Paul uses a phrase that he repeats throughout Romans. It is found nowhere else in the New Testament. So a question is, how does he use it? The phrase is “what should we say?” As Robby Dean indicated, it is a rhetorical question. The answer is already known. But it is more than “just” a rhetorical question. This phrase connects previous discussion with what follows. It is like a rhetorical question that acts as a bridge between a settled fact and an argument against an obviously false illogical assertion. It seems to also be an attack on someone or something. He gives what becomes obvious as a ridiculous example to convince us of the error of the assumption included in the question. The first usage of this phrase was in Romans chapter 3.

Romans 3:5 But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_and_the_Idol_Shop

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shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.)

Romans 3:6 May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?

Paul poses the question of God's righteousness versus our unrighteousness. The question impugns God's integrity. God's integrity must judge unrighteousness. The cross is the place that God judged the sins/unrighteousness of the world. Sinners may accuse God of being unrighteous because of His wrath based upon His integrity. There is the perspective of Satan that Herman has mentioned. Satan's question might be, "How can a loving God cast one of His creatures into the Lake of Fire?" Satan's question singles out "love." But God is all of His attributes all the time. His righteousness demands a just wrath be imposed on sin. God cannot have fellowship with sin. For humans, the work of Jesus provides God's solution. I do not know what kind of solution was available to the demonic realm. Maybe their revolt was so absolute that there was no salvation. As a result, God has allowed the Angelic Conflict to be worked out in the human race. God demonstrates His solution. God demonstrated His love (John 3:16). But He had at the same time to demonstrate His righteousness (Isaiah 53) on the cross that we gain His righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Romans 3:28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

Romans chapter 4 is an illustration from human experience of that truth. Romans 4:1 provides that bridge or transition from the principle in chapter 3 to the illustration in Romans chapter 4.

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Paul introduces Abraham as the illustration. Abraham found in the past, but is now teaching us through Paul by his example. We might start out thinking that Paul is addressing the Jews because Abraham is their father, but he later explains that Abraham is the father of all believers. Our forefather.

Also consider that this bridge is to address the attack on the Law and works as a way to salvation.

I give the texts of the other uses of the question “What shall we say?” without comment. We will get to them.

Romans 6:1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?

Romans 6:2 May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?

Romans 7:7 What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “YOU SHALL NOT COVET.”

Romans 8:31 What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *is* against us?

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Romans 9:14 What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!

Romans 9:30 What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith;

Romans 9:31 but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law.

1. Each is a rhetorical question.
2. Each is connecting a previous argument to an obvious contradiction. Question against logic. Reducto ab absurdum.

Romans 4:2 For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

Here is a flashback to something I have already covered. It is about our salvation. There are three critical issues that need to be dealt with for an unbeliever: sin, life and righteousness. These are part of the barrier between man and God. Jesus Christ bore the judgment for sin on the cross. But everlasting life and God's perfect righteousness are only available through faith in Jesus Christ as savior. Once we believe, God imputes to us life and righteousness. Imputation is the ascribing to our account, life and righteousness. The book of Romans deals with the imputation of righteousness to our account. The Gospel of John deals, in part, with life. Imputation is an accounting term. God has "books" which

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reflect our saved status. We see the importance of the book of life in Revelation chapter 20.

Revelation 20:11 Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them.

Revelation 20:12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds.

Revelation 20:13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds.

Revelation 20:14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

Revelation 20:15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Is your name written in the book of life? If you put your trust on Jesus Christ, His work on the cross for you, then your name is in the book. If your name is not there, you can add it by just believing in Jesus Christ for your salvation.