

# ***“The Faith of David”***

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***We don't develop good habits to earn grace, but to live grace.***

***Psalm 32; Romans 4:1-8***

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## ***Remember the future***

This year during Advent I've been reading and recommending a book titled, *Do It for a Day: How to Make or Break Any Habit in 30 Days*, by Pastor Mark Batterson. The title is a hyperbole, but the book does offer some helpful strategies for making and breaking habits. Like any book I suggest – or any sermon I preach – there are flaws. If you find some of it unhelpful, you won't offend me. Me too.

The reason I'm suggesting the book is so that you can join me in thinking and praying about what habits need to be made and/or broken in 2022. Think and plan ahead.

I'm reading my copy a day at a time this month. Wednesday was December 8, so I read Day 8. It's perfect for Advent, titled "Remember the Future."

Batterson opens the chapter with a story about a POW named James Stockdale. Shot down over a mission into North Vietnam in 1965, he spent eight years in a 3x8 cell at the infamous Hanoi Hilton. How did he survive? In his words, "I never lost faith in the end of the story."

That's what Advent is. It's a season of remembering the "fulfilled and not yet" story of Jesus' first coming, and "the end of the story" in the Bible. As Batterson says, "We don't believe in happy ever after. We believe in...happily *forever* after!" Many of James Stockdale's fellow prisoners lost hope. He didn't...by remembering the future.

## ***David's sins***

If you haven't been with us the last couple of Sundays, you may find our choice of Scripture readings puzzling so close to Christmas. Neither reading mentions Jesus' first coming or his second coming. Perhaps one reason for our New Testament lesson is that Paul's letters are my favorite part of the Bible and I was looking for an excuse to read from Romans. The real reason is that we're connecting Jesus to King David.

David lived 3,000 years ago and is considered Israel's greatest king. During Advent we are discovering his name all over the pages of the New Testament, which is a little surprising since monarchy itself is downplayed in the New Testament. We saw that Jesus is called the "Son of David," just as human as David but also the Messiah in fulfillment of promises made to David. He emerges from the Stump of Jesse (David's father). He is the Root of David from whom comes new life and new hope.

If you know much about David's story, this attention to David's legacy may seem excessive and imbalanced. As the one chosen by God to reign as the GOAT (Greatest of All Time) kings, David is a type and forerunner of Christ.

But that isn't his whole story. Most of you remember David's one night stand with a woman named Bathsheba and the subsequent attempt at cover up by murdering her husband. That's just his best known sin. David's record is one of fear, unbelief, emotional volatility, anger, polygamy, pride, vindictiveness, and more. You don't have to look hard to find sins of thought, word, and deed in David's story.

That's where Romans 4 comes in. The faith of David is the faith we sinners need.

## ***Abraham and David***

The passage we read from Paul's letter to the Romans is torn out of its context. We chose it because in Romans 4:6-8 Paul invokes David's name.

Paul is writing to Christians in Rome, a city he's never visited. In most of Paul's letters, he addresses issues and answers questions from churches he established. Paul has never been to Rome. The benefit to us is that Paul systematically lays out what he calls "my gospel" (Romans 2:16; 16:25) in an orderly way.

Paul begins his gospel with a list of what most people consider someone else's sins – sexual impurity, idolatry, murder, gossip, and so on. He says the wrath of God judges these evils. He has you thinking, "And they deserve it." Just when you feel incredibly condescending toward all those rotten degenerates, Paul adds, "And when you judge them, you condemn yourself. Your condescension is your version of evil."

Paul expounds this theme throughout chapters 2 and the first part of 3. Whether you're moral or pagan, Jew or Gentile, civilized or barbarian, religious or not, shut up and stop trying to defend yourself before the Judge who knows all.

Paul then pivots to the Good News. All have sinned and are falling short of God's glory, but all have equal access to the remedy. God has made a way to declare every person, "not guilty" through Jesus Christ. Those who have been reading through the Bible in 2021 came to Paul's letter to the Romans this week. *The Message* is eloquent toward the end of chapter 3 –

*Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them [referring to Jews and Gentiles]) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God.... got us out of the mess we're in....*

*God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear. God.... set the world in the clear with himself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured.*

*So where does that leave our proud Jewish insider claims and counterclaims? Canceled? Yes, canceled. What we've learned is this: God does not respond to what we do; we respond to what God does.*

Any boasting before God is therefore ludicrous. The only path toward God is not by doing but by receiving what Jesus did on our behalf.

Chapter 4 opens with a logical follow-up question particularly relevant to Paul's Jewish readers. *No one* can boast before God? Paul's Jewish readers would quickly object, "What about Abraham and David? They were Greatest of All Time before God."

It's true that Abraham started the whole story – both from a Jewish perspective and from a Christian perspective. He literally and figuratively left the world, following God into the unknown. He was the first to be circumcised and circumcise the males in his extended family as the mark of belonging to God. He's called "the friend of God" twice in the Old Testament (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8). The record says, Abraham "believed God and God counted it as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). The Jewish rabbis before Jesus spoke of Abraham's "merit of faith." Abraham was definitely one person who could be declared righteous not only by what he did but by his great faith.

Paul agrees in Romans 4 that if Abraham is an exception to being made right with God by what he did, Paul's entire argument fails. But he doesn't think Abraham's story disproves his case. Abraham's story *confirms* that God "justifies the ungodly" (5).

How so, Paul? Well, first of all, consider all of Abraham's life. He may have been the first monotheist, but it took him a while to get there. The God he believed in at first just happened to be his God – but he didn't necessarily start out believing he is the only God. Abraham also lied – twice – to protect himself. He may have believed God would give him an heir, but he first thought it would be through his servant and next produced a son through his wife's servant girl. Sin marks Abraham's record.

Then what about the verse that says God counted Abraham's faith as righteousness (Genesis 15:6)? "Right," Paul insists, "It's his *faith*, not his works." That statement comes in the record while Abraham was still partially mired in a pagan world view, before Abraham lied the second time about Sarah, before the covenant was made, before he circumcised himself and his family, before the debacle with Hagar that produced Ishmael, long before Isaac was born to Sarah, long before he was willing to sacrifice Isaac on the altar, and WAY long before the law was given through Moses. The faith that prompted justification by God was before any significant works.

Then, Paul, what about David? Can he not boast that he was good enough to be declared righteous by God? After all – consider his legacy. The Greatest of All Time kings. The height of the monarchy. The standard by which all subsequent Israelite kings were measured. The singer-songwriter. A man after God's own heart. The visionary of Solomon's temple. The one who established justice and security for his people.

"But he was a sinner too," Paul retorts. He admits sin in his own writings. Look at Psalm 32, a psalm of David. "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered" (Romans 4:7). Whose sins is he talking about?

David continues, and Paul quotes him: "Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against him" (Romans 4:8). The key theme throughout this part of Romans is the Greek word *logizomai*, from which we get the word "logic." Its root meaning is to "think, to reason, or to reckon." If you're a Southerner, you recognize that last synonym, "I reckon" can have a range of meanings, but one of them is, "I've thought a lot about this, I've reasoned it out, and this is my logical conclusion."

About whom would God say, "I reckon that person is righteous"? Paul insists it's no one who tries hard, but anyone who believes in Jesus Christ." Paul loves this word.

Abraham believed God, and God said, "I reckon his faith makes him righteous" (v. 3). David said, "Blessed is the man God reckons as righteous" (v. 8). There's no boasting in that – just gratitude.

### **Psalm 32**

When we read Psalm 32 through that lens, it's powerful. We can only guess what David might have thought about the fact that we're still talking about his sins three thousand years later. If God "remembers our sins no more," why must people of faith remember David's? Perhaps the answer is in Psalm 32.

Today's sermon is about "the faith of David." A key aspect of that faith is how incredibly blessed we are to know we are forgiven, to know that God "covers" our sins. To know that God says, "I reckon Bob is righteous" is a beautiful thing. It really does change everything for me. To what extent David could grasp that a millennium before Jesus and Paul is a mystery to me.

When he says in verse 2, “Blessed is the one...in whose spirit is deceit,” he is not saying, “the one who never tells a lie.” All of verses 1 and 2 are his conclusion, which is typical of many psalms. After reflection on his journey, David is telling us, “I’ve learned some lessons through my sins. It’s incredibly freeing to know that God doesn’t reckon me as a sinner. He reckons me has forgiven. When I stop lying about and covering my sin, I am free.”

David journals what it was like to live in denial. The effect was palpable, physical. He was weak (3). Night and day he couldn’t function (4).

Only when he acknowledged, when he confessed, did he find forgiveness (5), protection (6), security and joy (7), and direction (8).

David says, “Don’t be like the horse or mule, because they need to be controlled (coerced) before they will come” (9). Come to God voluntarily. I know it’s scary to expose all your stuff to him, but you’ll find him to be safe when you’re vulnerable. You’ll experience his covenant love (*chesed*) surrounding you (10).

All this leads to David’s doxology in verse 11. “Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous!” (Who are they? The ones who have been “reckoned” righteous in spite of who they really are and what they’ve really done.) “Sing, all you who are upright in heart!” (These are the ones whose heart acknowledges God’s “I reckon.”)

Paul will move through his gospel to the end of chapter 8 where he exclaims, “I’m convinced that nothing can separate us from the love of God!” (Romans 8:38-39). Then, after an interlude in which he discusses the future of Israel, he concludes, “Have you ever come on anything quite like this extravagant generosity of God? Always glory! Always praise! Yes. Yes. Yes.” (Romans 11:33,36, The Message)

### ***The Gift of Grace***

How does all this connect to Christmas? Christmas is about the Gift of Grace.

For two thousand years we have battled two great distortions of grace. The first distortion is Difficult Grace. In this distortion God’s grace is like a fragile Christmas ornament balanced on top of a pillar. It’s free, but you have to work hard to claim it. Once you have it in your hands, you risk dropping it to shatter on the floor.

The other distortion is Cheap Grace. This response says, “Wow, forgiveness for all sin! I can do what I want. The more I sin, the more God forgives!”

Grace covers everything, but grace changes everything. The reason I’m suggesting good habits need to be formed and bad ones need to be ended is not to earn grace. It’s to live grace. What new habits will you form in 2022 that are actually a response to grace?

Let me suggest a few grace habits. Mark Batterson suggests stacking habits. Connect a new habit to one you already have.

- *Bedtime confessions.* When you go to bed every night (an existing habit), spend a few minutes uncovering the sins of the day and allowing God to cover them.
- *Morning grace.* Drop to your knees first thing every morning and bless your day with Psalm 32:1 or another Scripture. Whichever one you choose, make it the same Scripture every day to imprint it deeply on your mind.
- *News Prayers.* Wherever you get your news – TV, Internet, newspaper, create a habit to pray following the news. Pray for your political enemies – not against them but for them. Pray for their wisdom, their joy, their blessing. Pray for those facing disasters, like those where tornadoes ripped through their communities yesterday.
- *Coffee blessings.* Keep a sharpie next to your coffee mug and write one word down every day that represents one of God’s blessings in your life.
- *Gift alarm.* Let your smartphone remind you once a day to do something that pays forward God’s grace – buy a gift, send an encouraging text, serve someone who hasn’t served you, bless someone with words.

Mark Batterson says, “Do it for a day.” Then do it for a second day, then a week, then a month. Before long it will become a new habit for a lifetime. Amen.