

Romans 4 The Life of Faith

If you were here last week (and if you weren't you can catch a copy of the sermon on our website) you may remember that I set out on a journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. This most influential book in the Bible will be our topic for the next three months of sermons as we grapple with its themes and message. Today's theme in chapter four is all about faith.

Bear Grylls, the TV adventure man and chief Boy Scout has been promoting the Alpha Course this Autumn and talking about his faith. In spite of being worth many millions of pounds, Grylls told [Radio Times](#) that he is not motivated by money and seeks succour instead in his family, health and faith.

"I really, desperately have learnt in my life that I need my faith, and I'm just not strong enough on my own. I try to start every day by kneeling down and saying, 'Lord Jesus, I ain't got it all right, and I'm nervous about today. I will give it my all, but will you help me?' It's never more complicated than that. I probably don't go to church enough, but my faith is a quiet, strong backbone in my life, and the glue to our family."

He confessed it had taken some time to "summon up the courage" to talk publicly about his faith and believes British audiences might find it "peculiar". He has "no problem at all with gay marriage", and makes a distinction between personal faith and wider religious doctrine.

"I really struggle with religion just because it's the source of so much conflict and disunity," he said. "The heart of Christianity is just about saying, 'I need help, and will you be beside me?' And I don't think anyone has a problem with that. What they don't want is religion – and I totally get that."

At age 16, Grylls lost his godfather — who had been like a second father. Crushed with grief and not knowing where else to turn, Bear looked to God. *"I remember wanting to pray, but not knowing how to." Grylls climbed up in a tree and poured his heart out to God. "Will you be that friend to me that you were at five or six when it felt natural?" he asked.* It was that simple prayer of surrender: *"It was no more complicated than that. And actually the amazing thing is that all God asks is that we sort of open the door and He'll do the rest. So often we kind of hide behind our yearning for love and acceptance with loads of complicated theological questions, and actually once that's stripped away, what we really are is just somebody who wants to have that relationship with your Father."*

With a restored faith in Christ, Grylls joined the 'Territorial Army' (Army Reserve UK) after high school and worked at the Special Air Service unit of the army for three years, surviving a horrifying parachuting accident in Zambia that almost took his life, but by the grace of God, Bear survived.

Bear met his wife, Shara, after he had finally recovered from his parachute accident and was focused on

preparing and training for the climb of his life – the summit of Mount Everest.

It was indeed, love at first sight. In a very unconventional marriage proposal, Grylls “popped the question” while skinny dipping.

Grylls revealed, “I pulled out the ring from my butt cheeks, ’Despite the bizarre proposal, she said ‘Yes’. Not sure if she put the ring on immediately!

But within a year of their wedding, Grylls’ father passed away at the age of 66. And a few months later, his wife Shara also tragically lost her father. The newlywed couple was crushed and devastated beyond belief.

“Losing my dad when we had just got married was a really tough one “Suddenly it was like, ‘Bang! OK. How are we going to pay the electricity bill? How are we going to look after our mothers?’ I felt totally thrown in the deep end. It always felt too early. We had to lean on each other, and that was when our marriage really started.”

It was at this low point that the couple decided to attend the “Alpha Course”. God sovereignly used this Christian course to cement the couple’s faith.

“It helped us in a very low-key, un-pressured way to explore some big questions. Faith has been the wildest ride. And Jesus — the heart of the Christian faith is the wildest, most radical guy you’d ever come across. He was always hanging around with the prostitutes and the tax collectors and having parties and banquets, and I found myself drawn to that character, not the kind of fluff that we like to box as religion.”

Despite his many achievements, Bear Grylls remains a humble family man who honours his wife and trusts in his Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Bear Grylls says, “Sometimes it’s hard for us to believe, really believe, that God cares and wants good things for us and doesn’t just want us to go off and give everything up and become missionaries in Burundi. And some people are just scared, and they go, ‘Oh, God just wants me to be religious,’ but actually He just loves us. He just wants us to be with Him, and that’s been a journey to discover that. That’s one of the big questions I asked, was that, you know: ‘If You do exist, are You crazy? Are You what my heart really aches for?’

Christianity is not about religion, it’s about faith, about being held, about being forgiven. It’s about finding joy and finding home... I’ve yet to meet anyone who doesn’t want to be forgiven or held or find peace or joy in their life. We try loads of other stuff — we think booze or foxy women or whatever will fill it — but it doesn’t fill the hole.”

“The simple things is what I try to keep my faith like: Jesus is unchanging and we are forgiven... I for one, do not want to reach the end of my life in a perfectly preserved body. I want to come flying in sideways, covered in scars, beaten up and screaming: ‘Yahoo! What a ride!’” – Bear Grylls

Faith is the theme of chapter four of Romans and it asks the question what is faith and why is it important? In context I suggested that one of the reasons that Paul wrote the letter was because he knew about the situation

of the church in Rome. Jewish Christians, previously expelled from Rome under Emperor Claudius, were now allowed back after his death. Paul was concerned about the reception they would get from the church they left, a church which was now made up predominantly of Gentile that is non Jewish, believers.

In the first three chapters as I briefly illustrated last week, he claimed that all have sinned. All fall short of the glory of God. Not only Gentile believers but also Jewish believers. We are all lost. Even the Jews who had the law, given to them by Moses, the Ten Commandments and all that, to guide them, have failed to live up to their calling.

The old understanding of Paul's view of the law was that the Jews tried to keep it in order to be right with God. This was known as 'works righteousness'. In blunt terms you tried to live a good life and hope that on the day of judgement God would look favourably on you. Many still live with that attitude today. I wish I had a proverbial pound for every grieving relative who has entered the plea to me that the deceased led a good life, as if I may put a good word in to the almighty for them.

Recent developments in theology have revised this opinion of Paul's understanding of the law and its place in the life of the Jewish faith. By and large the agreed consensus now is that the Jews always believed that they were acceptable to God through faith and not by keeping the law. The law was important as a way of maintaining the relationship with God and of emphasising their identity as a holy people (one of the

biblical understandings of holiness is being set apart, called out, to be different and live to a different value to the surrounding nations). The law was not a way of establishing the relationship with God. God had done that by making a covenant with them to be their God and they to be His people.

The prophets, often speak of God's covenant with his people like a marriage bond, or family ties. You may struggle with your family, you may have difficulties with your partner, but God is the one who keeps faith with his partner – the Jews, God is the one who cannot relinquish his family ties. God remains faithful even though we are faithless. It is not about them keeping the law, trying to be good, trying to please and pacify an angry God.

But Paul argues in this chapter that God originally established this covenant with Abraham, in other words before Moses, and before the giving of the law.

The story of Abraham in the middle of the book of Genesis is an amazing story. Paul uses it as a story of faith. This is what faith is like. In Genesis Chapter 15 God calls him out and tells him he will be a father of many nations. He was an old man at the time and so wondered if that would ever come true. He had his doubts and questions yet trusted God through all that. Verse 18 says 'against all hope, Abraham in hope believed... One thing the young people in Nicaragua observed was how many of the Nicaraguans lived hopeful lives despite in their view not having any reason to be hopeful. Often their faith in God gave them

a reason to enjoy life and live for the present and hope for the future. Abraham hoped against hope. He did not hope in himself but in God.

He argued with God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham challenges God about how to act justly. In other words this model of faith in the bible shows that it is full of struggles and issues. Yet Abraham stuck to the journey with God despite all those doubts and questions. His faith wasn't subservient and mindless but he did believe God and set out from the comfort of his own home in search of the Promised Land. And Paul said it was his faith that justified him – his faith established this relationship with God. This basic trust in God was the important thing, not anything he did.

So what can be the application of this argument to us?

It is obvious that being a Christian involves believing that certain things are true: especially that God came as Jesus and God raised him from the dead for our sake. Nevertheless faith is something more than that and quite different from mere belief. It is not just a matter of believing that... (holding certain things to be true), but rather a matter of 'believing in..' (trusting the person who tells you these things). That basic trust is the heart of faith.

Paul is using it to say to the church in Rome that the law, whilst important for the Jews, doesn't establish a relationship with God. Like Abraham, people come to a relationship with God through faith, through trust that

God does what is right. Gentile believers or Jewish believers neither are better than the other.

We contemporary Christians try desperately to find ways to reckon ourselves right with God and better than one another. We set out to boast in ourselves: either we find little to boast about and fall into despair and self loathing, or we pretend there is much to boast about and turn ourselves into our own gods. But the God who is God acts for us in Jesus Christ and gives us something to boast about, someone to boast in.

We boast in God who brings something out of nothing and gives life to the dead, through Jesus. Faith is seeing that God is there for us and loves us and journeys with us in the whole of life.

A young woman was very zealous for God and trained for the ministry. Among her classmates was a student suffering from a form of muscular dystrophy that made it hard for him to walk. One morning after class she observed him having trouble walking down the long flight of stairs. In an effort to encourage her classmate she told him: 'if you have faith, brother, God can heal you'. Her humble, but wise peer, smiling, turned to her and said 'I do have faith. God already has.' His response indicated a deeper understanding of faith. It is not how hard we believe, but the One in whom we believe, that makes us right with God.

Many advocate a 'name it and claim it' philosophy. The power of positive thinking. Some would even lead us to believe that only if our faith is strong we can have

whatever we want. But if the promise is not realized we are crushed with guilt. If the promise is fulfilled the emphasis can be on the believer's faith and their power can steal God's glory. In both cases faith is misappropriated as the object of the believer's will and volition. Our faith is not the object of our faith. Paul is advocating belief and trust in God, not ourselves.

Abraham's faith was reckoned as righteous not because it was something he earned, nor was it a faith that he did not struggle with, have his doubts or have his questions with. It wasn't how hard he believed but whom he believed that was the key. He hoped against hope. He had the courage to trust God when all evidence suggested he stood still or turned away. Abraham, stepped out and acted upon what he believed, even though he had doubts and questions. Our faith is not in ourselves but in God.

Like the faith of Bear Grylls can we say "The heart of Christianity is just about saying, 'I need help, and will you be beside me?'"

Lord increase our faith.