

From First to Last

From the start to the finish – that is what Paul has to say about the endurance of our faith. End-of-life issues have been on my mind a lot lately. I'll be 49 this month, but that has little to do with it. Rather, my father's health and mind are declining rapidly. At 82, he is moving from cane, to walker, to wheelchair with a corresponding decline in his mental acuity. What does it mean that we will cling to a righteousness that is by faith *to the very last instance*, even as our physical and mental abilities fade?

As my dad departs this life, slowly but inexorably, I see myself recapitulating his end some day. Like him, I turn to my own sons to strengthen their hope in Jesus. I have dearly wanted my sons to commit themselves passionately, without reservation, to Jesus. To see them trust in God, expresses to some degree, what their righteousness – what everyone's righteousness – means. For as surely as my sons understand that they are not saved by their works, I know with certainty that neither my dad nor I am directly responsible for that understanding. Rather, it is in an abiding trust in my relationship with Christ that these other relationships obtain a peace and conviction that hope in Christ, transcends matters of life.

Monday – Hungering for Righteousness

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Matthew 5:6

1. Please read Romans 1:16-17. What do these verses say about righteousness?
2. What does it mean that this righteousness is from first to last?
3. Righteousness means right-relatedness. Why is it sensible that Christ followers will hunger and thirst for righteousness?

Tuesday – Abraham, Reason, and Righteousness

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding..." Proverbs 3:5

1. Please read Genesis 15.1-15. At this time, Abram (whose name is later changed to Abraham) is already old. What is Abraham's chief concern (see verses 2-3)? Why was this so important to him?
2. Notice in verses 2 and 3 how logical Abraham's thinking is as he reasons from cause to effect. Yet to believe God, Abraham is required to set aside his logic and reasoning. What would have happened if Abraham had chosen to rely on his own understanding instead of God's?
3. How do you think Abraham went about choosing to set aside his understanding in favor of God's?

Making it Personal – In what ways do you favor your own understanding at the expense of faith in God? Pray that God will open the eyes of your heart to take him at his word.

Wednesday – Ezekiel, Righteousness, and Idols

1. Please read Ezekiel 43.1-9. Here Ezekiel, after prophesying judgment, describes in detail a temple that is never built with human hands. Then, the glory of the Lord fills the place, animating an otherwise sterile building. How would you describe the dynamic contrast between the active agency of God's spirit and the human tendency to create and worship idols in "detestable practices?"
2. What promises does the Lord make in this passage?
3. What does the Lord care about?

Making it Personal – This passage clearly states that human nature has a dark tendency to create its own gods. We confront our proclivity to worship what we control instead of trusting in the one who transcends our control. What sorts of idols do you struggle with making and serving? Pray that God will reveal to you ways to deepen your understanding of his desire for righteousness in your life and in your world today.

Thursday – Paul, Righteousness, and the Law

1. Please read Galatians 3:1-11. Many elements in human nature are remarkably mixable: A person can concoct a crazy combination of pride and humility, of trust in God and trust in self-reliance, yet never realize what an implicit contradiction he or she is living. What were the Galatians guilty of trying to combine together?
2. Paul squarely confronts believers who, starting in faith, now attempt to mix a salvation by works with righteousness by faith alone. How would you describe Paul's tone? Why do you suppose he is so angry?

Making it Personal – Recall a time when you trusted in Jesus' grace completely. What led up to this experience, what changed inside you, and how did you live differently that day as a result of this trust? Everyone has personal weaknesses that make him or her susceptible to contaminating a pure, complete trust in Jesus' redemption of our sins with other attempts at righteousness. Where such weaknesses exist, Satan seeks to exploit them. What vulnerabilities do you face that might endanger the purity of your trust in Jesus? Pray that God will not lead you into temptation this day, but that he will extend your faith in Christ, "from first to last."

Friday – Patience, Humility, and Righteousness

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." James 4:6

1. Please read Habakkuk 2.1-5. The wider context of this short book is Habakkuk's ache that the Lord seems to tolerate unrighteousness, allowing evil to prey on the good, thereby perverting justice. The "he" of verse 4 refers to the self-reliant and godless Babylonian warrior.
2. What role does patience play in living righteously by faith? What role does humility play?
3. What do humility and patience have to do with righteousness (right-relatedness)?