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# GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

## The Surprising of Mrs. Banks

By Ron Allen

Mr. Rudd was away from home for several weeks while the legislature was in session. He was the local member so he had to be in the House for sitting days. While he was gone, Mrs. Banks and her daughter Amelia went calling on Mrs. Rudd and her son Bart. Mrs. Banks was a fully paid-up member of the Temperance Union, and never was there a more zealous campaigner against the 'demon-drink.' She came to implore Mrs. Rudd to help stamp out this cursed blight on society once and for all.

"Many and many a time," spoke Mrs. Banks to Mrs. Rudd, "I do thank God that my husband never touches a drop. It is such a blessing to know, and to feel such confidence, that when my husband goes to the city on business, I know he will come home to me sober. I tell Amelia, she simply *must* get a husband just like her father."

Just then Mrs. Bank's sermon was interrupted by a dog barking and Bart, from the veranda yelling out, "There's two men coming down the road." Both Mrs. Rudd and Mrs. Banks left the kitchen and went outside to see who it might be. They squinted and shaded their eyes to make out two male figures with their arms around each other, weaving from left to right and back again, all over the road, looking as if they would both fall down any minute.

"Dear, dear, dear," said Mrs. Rudd, realizing at once that the two figures were drunk. It was more sermon material for Mrs. Banks. "There now, what have I been saying? Doesn't that prove what a deadly curse drink is?"

She was interrupted again by Bart. "One of the two is dad," he yelled. Mrs. Banks turned and looked pityingly at Mrs. Rudd. "Oh my heart goes out to you," she said. "You deserve better." Then Amelia squealed loudly: "The other man is my dad."

Mrs. Banks gave a start and clutched her daughter's arm. "Whose father, child?" "Mine," Amelia called out. Mrs. Banks sprang into action. She flew at her husband like a goose beating its wings. "Just wait till I get you home, Banks, just you wait," she screeched.



Mrs. Banks never came to visit Mrs. Rudd for a long time after that—about three years. When she did come, she never said anything at all about temperance.

This anecdote illustrates a social phenomenon. It is this: Individuals and groups like to justify themselves. That is, they seek to demonstrate that they are 'in the right.' One of the ways they hope to achieve this is by identifying themselves with a key person whom they take to be a paragon of 'rightness.' In the case of Mrs. Banks, this person was her husband. Groups of people often make recourse to another significant primary individual or group in order to establish their own bona fides.

For example, it is not unusual in public discourse to hear persons belonging to a political party claiming that *their* party is more faithful to the ideals of the Founding Fathers than other political factions.

Within the broad tapestry that is Islam, there are various schools of thinking and belief, each asserting that its particular perspective most accurately reflects the mind of Muhammad the Prophet himself.

In the Lutheran tradition, diverging theologies have evolved, and each stream hopes to demonstrate legitimacy by proving it is what Luther believed and taught.

At the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, the religion of Israel had been around for long enough to throw up a number of differing sects, each one holding itself up as the group which most truly believed and followed the righteousness of the Law.

The people of Israel traced their history as the covenant people of God from the time God spoke to Abraham and made promises to him. In New Testament times, many were accustomed to saying, "we are Abraham's descendants; Abraham is our father."

Israel's pastors, the Rabbis and Scribes, taught and believed they were righteous (in the right, right with God, in God's family) because they met the requirements of the law. Others, who did not so



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# EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

*“Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, ‘Don’t be afraid, just believe’” (Mark 5:36).*

What did *they* say? What did Jesus ignore? This: They had said to Jairus, “your daughter is dead. Why bother the teacher anymore?”

Jairus had gone in search of Jesus. On finding him, he prostrated himself at his feet, pleading with him to come and place healing hands on his sick daughter. Jesus had responded willingly to the ruler’s desperate request, but his passage toward the dying girl’s sickbed stalled when he stopped to help and counsel with a woman who had been ill for twelve years. It was while he was still talking to her that *they* came to tell Jairus to leave Jesus alone because his daughter had died. To them it was plain that the reason for appealing to Jesus had now dissolved. It was too late. His presence was required before her death; not now, after the fact.


Jesus ignored everything they thought and said, and made his way to Jairus’ home. He arrived to find a household and community in unanimous capitulation to grief. Musicians and professional wailers had been hired. With sobbing and sighing of family and friends, they dinned death’s victory.

In the same manner of his ignoring the messengers, Jesus

now ordered the mourners out. “She is not dead; she’s asleep,” he told them, but they laughed at him. They knew she was dead. Still ignoring them, Jesus took the girl by her hand and raised her back to life.

Marvel at Jesus’ gracious discourtesy. How fortunate for Jairus and his family that Jesus discounted their world view. How fortunate for us that God does not shorten his work to fit our ignorance. How mistaken if we think that faith in God should only be taken as far as *we* think is reasonable.

Many are sick and many have family members who are ailing. Many more have lost loved-ones to illness. Faith is appropriate in sickness—and in death. Jesus ignored the reasoning of *little faith*. He refused to join in the caterwauling of the specialist mourners. He did not balk or blanch at death. He did not solemnize it with ceremony. He even refused to call it by its common name, choosing rather to refer to it as sleep—and he overturned it.

If God is as Jesus represents him, it must be the height of good sense to take him at his word, and ‘*not be afraid, just believe.*’ If God is like Jesus, it is never too late. The worst possible turn of events is open to his reversal. He has done it. He will do it. 

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obey, were not righteous, not in the right and not in God’s family.

Such was the method of devotion for a great many of Paul’s contemporaries. They assumed that their model for this brand of piety was father Abraham. They said that Abraham was right with God because he, like them, obeyed God. Believing that Abraham was a primary figure in the divine narrative, they argued that their way of being righteous was in fact Abraham’s way. Ostensibly they were following Abraham because he was the definitive precedent for entrance into the family of God. Really, they were *using* Abraham. They were claiming that Abraham mirrored their own reverential brand.

In Romans chapters one to three, Paul argues that righteousness by dint of self-regulation and propriety has

been ruled out. The doorway to the favor of God is closed to people who retain vestigial moral standards, to those who subscribe to Jewish law—as well as rampant evil-doers. Being right with God has been excluded by the sheer magnitude and competence of God’s own righteousness which he grants to all who trust in Jesus.

Paul knows that many of his own people will not want to hear this. He knows they will appeal to Abraham as the conclusive exemplar for righteousness based on merit. In the fourth chapter of Romans, Paul sets out to destroy this premise by quoting Genesis 15:6 “*Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.*” The emphasis lies on the fact that Abraham *believed* God. But that on its own does not satisfy the point Paul intends to make. God credited (imputed, counted) Abraham’s belief for righteousness. →

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A Rabbi might say: “There you are; Abraham offered to God the obedience of belief and, on that basis, he was righteous. Paul will not allow Genesis 15:6 to be used that way. Making much of the word CREDIT, he argues in verses 4 and 5 that if Abraham had *earned* righteousness by his believing, it would not have been *credited*, it would have been received as due payment.



In order to strengthen this interpretation, the apostle goes to Psalm 32, to another Old Testament saint, king David no less, who writes: “*Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered; blessed is the man whose sins the Lord does not count against him*” (Psalm 32:1&2).

Paul is interested in the way the word *count* is used in these verses. Whereas in Genesis 15:6 the Lord *counts* Abraham’s faith for righteousness, in Psalm 32 God does *not count* David’s sin against him. David’s blessing does not come to him as recompense for being a good person. Rather, it contemplates his lack of virtue. That which makes David a blessed man is God’s action in not counting his sins against him.

By analogy, the action in Genesis 15:6, which counts faith as righteousness, is God’s action, not Abraham’s. Both David and Abraham received an identical blessing from God. Being forgiven and not having your moral failure counted against you is the reverse expression of having righteousness counted to you.

The implications flowing from this reasoning are weighty. Paul has shown from the Hebrew Scriptures that Abraham is not a religious model who can be used to prove that righteousness is earned through human endeavor. *That way of being religious was shut out in chapter 3—by an alternative mode of consecration called faith.*

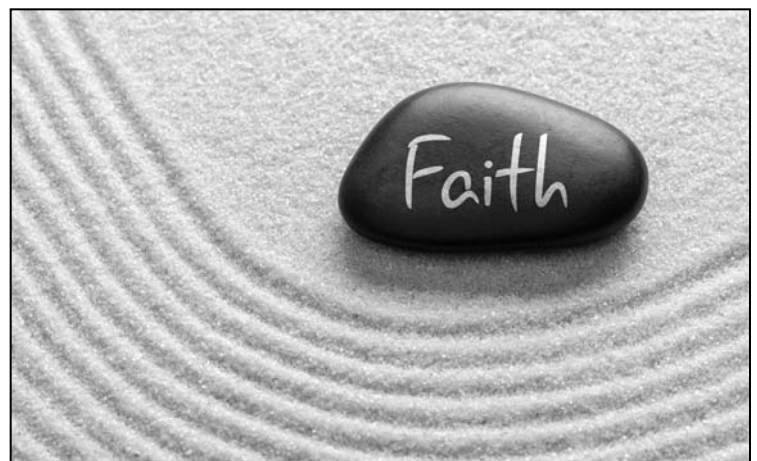
Father Abraham offers no comfort at all to Paul’s fellow-countrymen who boast about their relationship with God on the strength of their attention to the law. I recall discussions in my Bible class many years ago in which my fellow churchmen voiced the conviction that the saints of old were really advanced members of our congregation because they really did believe everything we believe and teach. It was said that revered dignitaries like Enoch and Elijah were practitioners of our brand of godliness. Much later, I learned

that sincere believers in traditions quite different from ours had the same eminent saints on *their* register.

So Paul tells his fellow Jews who think they are in the right because they keep the law and observe their religious tradition, they do NOT have in father Abraham, a precedent for their perspective. The fact is, before Abraham even began his pilgrim odyssey; before he did anything that might be construed as a religious duty, he believed God and God counted it for righteousness. He was in the family of God long before the body of divinity known as the law came into existence.

In discussing the significance of Abraham, Paul—far from studying him with an eye to his good behavior—presents him as a man who “*DOES NOT WORK but trusts God who justifies the ungodly*” (Romans 4:5). Instead of being the archetypal pious Jew, obeying the law, ticking all the requisite boxes of conformity, Abraham was, for all intents and purposes, one of the *ungodly* when God justified him.

Mrs. Banks was sure she was on firm ground when she spoke so confidently of her husband as an example of the probity which she subscribed to, and which she urged upon everyone else. She was certain her benchmarks were backed and sealed by Mr. Bank’s avowed teetotalism. But alas! It was not as she had supposed. He failed to vindicate her. He did not justify her. Instead of the paradigm and endorsement of her moralizing, he lurched into view as the contradiction thereof. Paul’s detractors hold Abraham as exhibit A for the religion they practice and urge upon others. They believe they are in the right because of the way they live, what they do and what they don’t do. In their way of thinking, Abraham came to be in the right the same way as them. But Paul shows that their ancestor is the pioneer, not of the excellent and the correct, but of the opposite kind of person—who entrusts himself to God.



In terms of the discussion in Romans 4, Abraham is the ancient equivalent of Mrs. Bank’s husband. He supplies no endorsement at all to any way of doing religion expecting to merit God’s verdict of approval. No, Abraham is the primeval man who does not work but trusts in him who justifies the ungodly.

Believing in God, trusting him, relying on his promise. From verse 17 to the end of chapter 4, Paul uses the word faith  
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# One Last Sermon

By Harold Kushner

As an advocate of religion as a primary source of spiritual nourishment, I am deeply embarrassed by the tendency of so many religious spokesmen to play on our vulnerability to guilt and shame as a way of controlling our behavior. I have often been amused to hear Protestants, Catholics and Jews compete over the question of whose religion was more guilt-producing. The answer is that none of these religions make normal people feel guilty when religion is properly taught and properly understood, when it has realistic expectations of us introduces us to a loving God, and any one of them makes us feel guilty when religion uses our inevitable shortcomings to manipulate our emotions and make us feel unworthy. Religion properly understood is the cure for feelings of guilt and shame not their cause.

Several years ago, I was invited to speak at Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore, Maryland. After my noon talk to the staff the chief came up to me and said, "Rabbi Kushner, we have a patient here at the hospital who would love to meet you. He is a thirty-two-year-old Episcopal minister and he's dying of AIDS."

I indicated I would be willing to see him. The chaplain led me down a corridor and into a room where I saw a pale, emaciated figure lying in a bed and hooked up to several intravenous tubes. I introduced myself and asked him how he was doing. "Not too good," he told me, "but I'm getting used to it." I asked him, "Do you ever worry that you might be dying without God? That your disease might in some way be a punishment from God for something you did?" He looked up at me and said,

*"No, just the opposite. The only good thing that has come out of this is that I found that something I always wanted to believe is really true. No matter how much I may have messed up my life, God hasn't given up on me. I've felt his presence here in this hospital room. He can love me even when I find it hard to love myself."*

*"When I was young I thought I had to be perfect for people to love me. My parents gave me that message, threatening to withhold love every time I offended them. My teachers at*

*school gave me that message. My Sunday school teachers reinforced that lesson. We didn't go to one of those hell-fire and brimstone churches, but we heard a lot about how much pain we were causing God every time we sinned, and I think that was just as bad, especially given the list of things we were told were sins.*

*"Lying here in this hospital bed, knowing I'm going to die soon, I had this insight: God knows what I'm like and he doesn't hate me, so I don't have to hate myself. God knows what I've done and he loves me anyway."*

*"I don't know if my congregation will take me back, now that they know I'm gay and have AIDS, and I'm dying. I hope they will, because there's one last sermon I want to preach to them. I have to share with them the lesson my illness has taught me: You don't have to be perfect. Just do your best and God will love you as you are."*

-Harold S. Kushner: HOW GOOD DO WE HAVE TO BE? pp. 42-47.



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no less than six times in reference to Abraham. He notes that the patriarch was one hundred years old when God told him he would father a son and Sara past her fertile years. Despite all, Abraham in hope believed (verse 18). He believed God when he was as good as dead (verse 19). He entrusted himself to the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were (verse 17).

When his manhood was at an ebb, when human options were exhausted, when he had run out of improvisations, Abraham's attention turned to God who makes things to be which are not. Up to his eyeballs in impotence and death, Abraham looked away from what humans think to do for God, to what God can do for humans. In this way he glorified God (verse 20).

The justification of the ungodly is an achievement fit for God. Our instincts tell us that there is something daring, foolhardy, even impossible, about it. It is unexpected, counterintuitive. It breaks all our rules, making our vaunted creeds and moralisms seem trivial or ridiculous.

How shocking to find out that God is willing to let tax-collectors and harlots into his society before decent folk like us! How unseemly it is to learn of a God who finds a way to sit down to eat at a table with 'undesirables.' It's devastating—but not if you are one of the undesirables; not if you are among the ungodly, but because then you know that this is a God who meets your case. There is a religion for the likes of you, and it is one where nothing is deserved, everything is given. You are simply invited to trust and to enter into the joy of the Lord.