

Faith and the Promise

Romans 4:13-25

The New Testament describes the faith of Abraham in a number of passages (Romans 4, Galatians 3, Hebrews 11, etc.). Hebrews 11 depicts Abraham's faith as something to imitate. He is among the great cloud of witnesses who would tell us that it's worth it to walk by faith. But Romans 4 (our passage today) stresses that if you're a believer in Jesus, you already have a faith that is like Abraham's. The main commonality is that we both agree that God is able to raise people from the dead.

We'll explain that as we go through verses 13-25 today, but I doubt that many of us feel very confident that we have a faith like Abraham's. If I were 75 years old and my wife were 65 and God told me that we were going to have a child, I don't know whether I'd believe Him. And yet that's how Abraham's faith is described. Even though his circumstances screamed something different, Abraham believed that God was able to deliver on His promise to give him a child.

Like Abraham, we sometimes face difficult circumstances that put us at a crossroads: we can either walk down a road of faith or a road of unbelief.

- Perhaps you're in a relationship that seems strained beyond repair. Humanly speaking you've done everything you can do to make it work, but you can't. What does it mean for you to walk by faith in the context of that relationship?
- Perhaps it's a financial situation that seems impossible. You've tried working more; you've tried spending less. You've tried all sorts of things but you're still in a hard place financially. You look around and other people seem to get all the breaks, but not you. What does faith look like? Do you pray for abundance or for contentment?
- Perhaps it's a temptation that never goes away. . . or if it goes away for a while it comes back with greater fury the next time. You've tried accountability, you've tried praying more, you've tried tricks/gimmicks to distract yourself. But the temptation is still there. What does faith look like in the midst of temptation?

Abraham and his wife Sarah found themselves in a situation that looked hopeless. God Himself had promised that He would give them descendants from their own bodies, and yet they couldn't conceive a child. The promise of God seemed to be in conflict with the realities of their lives. And yet Abraham believed God. Abraham had an incredibly hard life, but he lived by faith. He is a man whose faith is worth studying. His is a faith that is shared by those who believe in Jesus.

If you're a believer in Jesus, I pray that you're encouraged by this passage. I hope that you leave here today convinced that you don't have to manufacture some type of heroic faith out of thin air; I hope you are convinced that you mainly need to keep exercising the same faith you had when you first believed.

Abraham's Faith: believing "the promise" . . . trusting God's ability in spite of circumstances. (Romans 4:13-22)

Verse 13 begins with the word "for," indicating that Paul is continuing his argument that Abraham is the spiritual father of all who believe, of both Jews and Gentiles.

13 For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.

Here Paul makes reference to God's promise to Abraham "that he would be heir of the world" (i.e., inheriting the whole world). This is Paul's way of summarizing a cluster of promises God made to Abraham over time. Douglas Moo (*Romans, NICNT*, p. 274) points out that God's promise to Abraham had three core components (see Genesis 12:1-3, 13:14-17, 15:1-21, 17:1-8, 18:17-19, 22:16-18). God promised to Abraham these three things:

- **An immense number of descendants** (variously described as a great nation, as numerous as the dust of the earth or the stars of the sky, and a multitude of nations).
- **Possession of "the land"** (variously described as "the land I will show you," the land from the Nile to the Euphrates, and the land of Canaan).
- **Blessing to "all the families of the earth"** (see Genesis 12:1-3).

The New Testament boldly declares that this promise made to Abraham was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the descendant of Abraham through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. Those who believe in Jesus are Abraham's children. What we call the "Great Commission" in Matthew 28 is Jesus' directive to His people to take this blessing to "all the nations" - making disciples, baptizing, and teaching. And the promise of "the land" is expanded to the entire earth: "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

Paul points out here that this promise made to Abraham and fulfilled in Jesus "**was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.**" In the first half of Romans 4 Paul established that God pronounced Abraham as righteous **based on his faith.** Abraham believed God's promise many years before the Law was given (430 years to be exact - see Galatians 3:17).

14 For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; 15 for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation.

Of course it was good and right to keep the Law, but if people became heirs of the world because of their adherence to the Law, then "faith is made void and the promise is nullified." Paul makes this claim because "the Law brings about wrath," not blessing. This flows from what he wrote in 3:20 when he said that "through the Law comes knowledge of sin." They had been given the Law and had violated it; they were speechless and defenseless before God. So it was patently obvious that the promise couldn't be fulfilled through the Law.

Beginning in verse 16 Paul reiterates that the promise is received by faith - which is compatible with grace.

16 For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

If the promise is something that is realized/received by faith, it is “in accordance with grace.” When you work, someone is obligated to you; but when you have faith, you admit that God isn’t obligated to you and so you are placing yourself in a position to receive grace.

God’s plan all along was for the promise to be received by faith so that it would be available “to **all** the descendants” of Abraham, not only to those who were Jewish (and therefore “of the Law”), but also to those who are “of the faith of Abraham.” In other words, Abraham is the father of **everyone** who believes, whether Jew or Gentile. Paul supports this claim in verse 17 by referring to God’s statement to Abraham recorded in Genesis 17:5.

17 (as it is written, “A father of many nations have I made you”) in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

In Genesis 17:5 God changed Abram’s name to Abraham: “But your name shall be Abraham; For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.” A nuanced reading of Genesis suggests that God had the Gentiles in mind the whole time. Abraham would not merely be the father of the Jewish nation; he would be “the father of a multitude of nations,” which implicitly included Gentiles. This means that everyone who has the faith of Abraham is a spiritual descendant of Abraham.

Significantly, Paul says that Abraham believed in a God “who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.” In the immediate context, God’s ability to give life to the dead is demonstrated by giving Abraham and Sarah a child from their own bodies. And “calling into being that which does not exist” is a reference to God calling into being “many nations” from among Abraham’s descendants. He explains Abraham’s faith in this God in this way:

18 In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, “So shall your descendants be.”
19 Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb;
20 yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God,
21 and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.
22 Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness.

Abraham's faith involved believing that God would fulfill His promise: God would give him an immense number of descendants, God would give him the land, and God would bless all the families of the earth through him. Abraham was fully assured "that what God had promised, He was able also to perform." This faith was not supported by the "facts"; the fact was the Abraham was so old that he was "as good as dead" and so was Sarah's womb. Nevertheless he had faith in a God "who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist." Because of his faith, "it was credited to him as righteousness."

Being a man of faith didn't mean that Abraham had an easy life. Abraham and Sarah would have to wait 25 years for God to give them a son. Twenty-five years is a long time, especially when you're 75 and 65 years old. Along the way God sent Abraham additional confirmation and encouragement that He would do what He had promised. And Abraham needed it because his circumstances didn't change during those years. God kept reminding Abraham, "I will do what I have said I will do." Abraham's faith involved believing "the promise" and trusting God's ability in spite of his circumstances.

You may be thinking, "This is all well and good, but what does it have to do with us?" That's a great question. It's a question that Paul answers in verses 23 through 25. Paul basically says that our faith is like Abraham's because we too believe the promise; we believe in the same God who raises the dead.

Our Faith: believing "the promise" . . . trusting God's ability in spite of circumstances. (Romans 4:23-25)

Paul says that what we know about Abraham was written "for our sake also."

23 Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, 24 but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

From Paul's perspective, the Old Testament wasn't primarily a history book, merely recording what happened to other people. The Scriptures were written for "our sake also." In I Corinthians 10, for example, Paul described how the children of Israel in the wilderness fell into idolatry, immorality, and grumbling (a common "trinity of sins"). Paul pleads with the Corinthians not to fall into the same patterns themselves. He explains:

11 Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. 12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.

The example of the children of Israel in the wilderness was written/recorded "for our instruction," so that we might avoid their sins. In a similar way, Paul says here in Romans 4:23-24, "Now not for his [Abraham's] sake only was it written that it was credited to him, but for our sake also. . ."

Notice in verse 24 how Paul draws a parallel between Abraham's faith and ours.

23 Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, 24 but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,

Whereas Abraham looked forward and believed God **would fulfill** His promise, we look back and believe that God **has fulfilled** His promise in Jesus. We believe that Jesus was the descendant through whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. Paul describes us as "those who believe in Him who **raised** Jesus our Lord from the dead." Like Abraham we believe in a God who gives life to the dead: God raised Jesus from the dead, and God will raise all who are "in Christ" from the dead. In a very foundational way, our faith is like that of Abraham, our spiritual father.

Notice how Paul describes Jesus in verse 25. This is another way to describe how Jesus fulfilled the promise that God made to Abraham.

25 He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

Paul is using what Greek scholars call "the divine passive." By saying "He was delivered over because of our transgressions," Paul is saying that God the Father gave up His one and only Son to pay for our transgressions (see Isaiah 53:12). By saying Jesus "was raised because of our justification," Paul is saying that God the Father raised up Jesus from the dead because our justification demanded it. In an objective sense, our justification was accomplished through the death of Christ on the cross; but His resurrection confirms or authenticates what His death accomplished - namely our justification.

When we put our faith in Jesus, we experience the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham. We become part of the "multitude of nations" who will inherit the world; we experience the blessing that comes from being justified by faith. And **we now live by faith in this world** (just like Abraham did), participating with God in the great drama of history in which He is drawing others into the fulfillment of His promise.

And so when we face difficult circumstances like Abraham did, we don't need to manufacture some type of heroic faith out of thin air. We mainly need to return to the faith we had when we first believed. Having faith in God isn't out of character if you're a believer; it's a continuation of the faith you had when you declared, "I believe in a God who gave His one and only Son to die for my sins and who raised Jesus from the dead." When you think about it, we've already exercised faith in an ultimate (even extreme) way.

Abraham had a specific promise to believe. God repeatedly promised that Abraham and Sarah would have a child of their own. Abraham's faith meant being confident that "what God had promised, He was able also to perform" (v. 21). If you and I are going to exercise this type of faith, we'll also need to focus in on a specific promise(s). We'll

need to do that (sometimes) hard work of searching the Scriptures to know what God has promised and what He wants of us. In other words, our faith will need to have content. And our faith will need to be in God, not in specific outcomes (unless He's promised specific outcomes).

For example, when facing some type of temptation, a promise like 1 Corinthians 10:13 can provide specific content for our faith.

13 No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.

That verse makes a number of statements that you can either believe or not believe. It speaks of God's faithfulness to provide "the way of escape" so that we might not yield to temptation. You don't read a statement like that in a vacuum. You read it in light of the command to "flee" from various temptations (1 Timothy 6:11, 2 Timothy 2:22, etc.); you run like your hair is on fire. You also read it in light of the need to pray, "Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matthew 6:13). I'm not saying you should qualify it to death; I'm just saying that you don't read it in a vacuum. Still, you believe that God will be faithful to provide you a way of escape in your temptation: through prayer, through other people, through circumstances, etc.

If you need to trust God for a relationship or for some type of provision, you'll need to find specific promises or commands or attributes of God that are relevant. In this way you will know **what** you need to believe and afterwards **that** you have believed.

Again, you and I should be filled with courage by the realization that our entire relationship with God is based on the foundation of a faith that believed that God raised Jesus from the dead after He died as our substitute on the cross. And so this type of faith is only consistent with that faith. And this type of faith is consistent with the perspective found in Romans 8:32, which says:

32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?