

It Depends on Faith

Romans 4:13-25

¹³ For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

¹⁶ For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷ as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. ¹⁸ Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." ¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰ No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." ²³ Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵ who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Have you ever gotten a care packet? When four of my brothers were in active duty military service at the same time I remember my mother baking pound cakes, collecting items she thought would be useful to her sons, and items that were legal to send through the U.S. and military postal services. She wanted to let her sons know she loved them and was thinking about them during the holiday season although they were far away from home! I have not spoken with my brothers about this act of love, but if they are anything like me, they truly appreciated her making this extra effort. I can imagine the church in Rome was grateful that the Apostle Paul for thinking about them and lovingly writing this orderly and detailed explanation of the work that God did for them and us through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus on our behalf!

In Paul's Letter to the Romans dealt with a whole laundry list of issues. Last week his emphasis was on the power of the Gospel, reminding us that we have all sinned and therefore all need salvation. In today's scripture, Paul explains that our right relationship with God is about faith, not from obeying Jewish Law, not performing religious rites, but about faith.

Paul begins this passage by indicating that the promise of God illustrated in Abraham rests on faith. This promise is apart from the law and demonstrates the grace of God guaranteed to all Abraham's descendants. Paul also makes the point that Abraham's descendants include Jews and Gentiles. This he expounds upon in verse 16, when he states that Abraham "is the father of all of us." The importance of the promise being based on faith rather than the law is underscored by the fact that the law is connected to God's wrath. Those who do not keep the law suffer the penalty of their misdeeds. Gentiles did not adhere to the law and Jews could not perfectly follow the law; so, if based upon the law, the promise would be empty and void. However, where there is no law, there is no wrath (v. 15b)—that is why the promise is based upon faith. Having successfully argued his point concerning the fulfillment of the promise based upon faith.

A young woman was so zealous for God that she enrolled in seminary to prepare for 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 this understanding of faith that Paul seeks to illustrate in our passage of Scripture to the Church at Rome.

Contrary to what many believe, Abraham is not someone Paul suggests that we imitate. Rather, he is the example of the attributes of faith. In his life we see God's power operating—calling "into existence the things that do not exist" (v. 17). We learn from our passage that Abraham was "hoping against hope" (v. 18) he would become the father of many nations. The hoping against hope is important to understanding faith. Abraham did not hope in himself, because he considered his body dead.

Abraham, in Paul's account, is the great exemplar of that faith because he did believe God's promise to him, in spite of its evident absurdity. After all, the man was *old* ("about a hundred years," Paul says, and thus "already as good as dead," v. 19). On top of that, his wife had never been able to bear children, even when she was young. *This* is the man who is supposed to be "the father of many nations"? Nevertheless, Paul insists, "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (vv. 20-21). Here is the heart of the doctrine of justification: this faith, this utter trust in God's word despite all odds, "was reckoned to him as righteousness" (v. 22). In other words, his faith counted as fulfilling the whole law.

The subject of Abraham's faith was God. Abraham believed God could bring forth life from the dead and that God would fulfill God's promise to make him "the father of many nations" (v. 18). In sharing Abraham as the example of faith, Paul suggests God as the object of our faith.

At first glance, we believers may find Paul's assertion difficult to understand. Those of us who know the biblical story are aware that Abraham struggled in faith, especially as the fulfillment of the promise was prolonged (see Gen. 17:15-17). You remember that he and Sarah had earlier taken matters into their own hands and another child was born from their attempts to help God out. However, in

stating "he did not weaken in faith" (v. 19), Paul implies that Abraham did indeed struggle with his faith as he acknowledged his age and Sarah's barrenness. Paul makes another difficult assertion that "no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God." The understanding of this statement becomes clear when we understand the meaning of "he gave glory to God" (verse 20b). Leander E. Keck and other New Testament scholars translate this as "Abraham was made strong in faith." The one who made Abraham strong was God. Abraham gave glory to God because he was convinced in what "God was able to do" (v. 21). Therefore, Paul tells us Abraham's faith was reckoned as righteousness (v. 22). The righteousness is not something Abraham earned because he believed hard and did not struggle in his faith. It is not how hard we believe, but the One in whom we believe, that makes us right with God.

The importance, not of faith in our own will and volition, but of faith in God is further expressed in the concluding verses of this passage. Paul explains that the words "it was reckoned to him" were not written for Abraham's sake alone, but for ours also (vv. 23-24). Paul then restates what he says all along—that we who believe in God who raised Jesus from the dead will also be reckoned as righteous.

We live in a world where people advocate the prosperity gospel and "name it, claim it" philosophies. Such thinking places the believer's faith at the center of power. Some would even lead us to believe that if our faith is strong, we can have anything. When this is the case, how hard we believe is the determining factor for the fulfillment of God's promises. This reverses the intent of God's grace and places people in the position of power. It can produce a weight of guilt in Christians when the promise is not realized. We wonder did we not pray enough, did we not believe enough, or did we not do enough! On the other hand, if the promise is fulfilled, the emphasis can be on the believer's faith— we did pray enough, we did believe enough, and we did do enough - which "power" that steals

God's glory. In both cases, faith is misappropriated as the object of our will and desire. **Diane Givens Moffett**

Paul writes that Abraham believed the promise "hoping against hope" (v. 18). Luther comments that this verse shows "the difference between the hope of people generally and the hope of Christians. For the hope of people in general is not contrary to hope but according to hope, that is, what can reasonably be expected to happen." Christian hope, on the other hand, is hope for what is naturally unreasonable; yet that hope is certain, because only God can do it, and God has promised to do so. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).

In our passage Paul is exhorting us, like Abraham, to trust in God's promise despite its commonsense unlikelihood, hoping against hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to justify our lives before the throne of God, putting us in right relationship with God. **Garrett Green**

My brothers and sisters, it depends on faith in the One who made the promise!

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