

IX. The Faith of Abraham

January 19/20/21, 2016

Romans 4:13-25

Aim: To look to Abraham as the father of faith for all those who believe, understanding that God's plan of salvation was the same for saints of all ages – *sola fide*.

A. Faith Apart from Law (Romans 4:13-17)

The noun 'promise,' which occurs for the first time here in the letter, is used four times in vv. 13-22, the verb 'to promise' once. In each case, the reference is to the promise given to Abraham, with Paul emphasizing particularly how it was faith that secured what God had promised.

1. Promise and Law (4:13)

¹³*For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.*

As the 'for' suggests, the paragraph beginning in v. 13 has an explanatory function – it explains why Paul made no mention of the law in tracking the spiritual descendants of Abraham (vv. 11-12). 'Law' refers, as the Jewish polemical context makes clear, to the Mosaic law. In Gal. 3, Paul makes his case for the exclusion of the law from God's dealings with Abraham on the basis of simple chronology – the law, given 430 years after the promise, cannot annul or substantially alter this previous agreement between God and Abraham (Gal. 3:15-17). Here in Romans, Paul has probably not used the chronological argument because he wants to apply his reasoning to Abraham's descendants as well as to Abraham.

There are two common ways of looking at this verse, both of which are helpful. Paul may be saying that the promise didn't come through the Law of Moses, since the law was not given until about 430 years after Abraham. Or he may simply be saying that one is saved by faith rather than by works. Both of these ideas are undoubtedly involved.

'Not through the law' denies, then, that what had been promised to Abraham was attained by him or his descendants through the law, for example, by their doing of the law. The clause 'that they should be the heirs of the world' explains what the promise is. This language does not exactly match any promise to Abraham found in the OT but succinctly summarizes the three key provisions of the promise as it unfolds in Genesis: that Abraham would have an immense number of descendants, embracing 'many nations' (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:4-6 16-20; 22:17), that he would possess 'the land' (Gen. 13:15-17; 15:12-21; 17:8) and that he would be the medium of blessing to 'all the peoples of the earth' (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18).

God's 'promise' to Abraham (and his descendants) to 'inherit the world' gathers up the many promises to Abraham—numerous progeny (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5, 18-21; 17:8), possession of the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:7 18-21; 17:8), all nations being blessed in Abraham and his 'seed' (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18).

When Abraham was declared right with God, he was neither circumcised nor in possession of the Mosaic law. Circumcision had not yet been required by God and the law had not yet been revealed by God. 'The promise to Abraham' was embodied in God's covenant with Abraham in which the patriarch was told that 'his descendants' would be heirs 'of the world' (Gen. 12:3; 15:5; 18:18; 22:18). In analyzing God's promise to Abraham, four significant factors emerge.

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First, the ‘promise’ involved a *land* (cp. Gen. 15:18-21) in which Abraham would live. Second, the ‘promise’ also involved a *people*, who would be so numerous that they could not be numbered, like the dust of the earth and the stars in the sky (Gen. 13:16; 15:5). Third, the ‘promise’ involved a *blessing* of the entire world through Abraham’s descendants (Gen. 12:3). Fourth, the ‘promise’ would be fulfilled in the giving of a *Redeemer*, who would be a descendant of Abraham through whom the whole world would be blessed by the provision of salvation.

If circumcision and its many blessings had nothing to do with Abraham’s justification, the Law had even less to do with it. The historical fact is, as Paul has written in Galatians 3:17, the Law came 430 years after Abraham was made heir to the promise by faith—and there is thus no way the Law could invalidate or restrict its scope. To make the promise conditional on obedience to the Law, which was not even hinted at when the promise was given, would nullify the whole promise. Righteousness and its promised benefits has always come by faith to those who live by faith!

‘The righteousness of faith’ is an important phrase. It doesn’t mean that faith makes you righteous. This would be contrary to the entire teaching of Paul, indeed the entire teaching of the Bible. Rather, righteousness comes as you are linked to the promises of God that have been fulfilled through Jesus Christ. By faith, you are entered into this righteousness. It is not an infused righteousness. Rather, it is always a declared thing. It is a legal matter between God and us.

We must be so careful never to let faith become a work. Faith has no value in and of itself. Faith is the act whereby you raise your empty hands, believe God’s promise, and accept the finished work of Jesus Christ on your behalf, whereupon God declares you justified. In legal terms, your sin has ended.

2. Null and Void (4:14)

¹⁴*For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.*

Paul now explains (‘for’) why the promise cannot be attained ‘through the law.’ The phrase, ‘adherents of the law,’ does not refer to Jews per se, but to those who have nothing more than their status as Jews as a basis for inheriting the blessings promised to Abraham. Why if Jews were such heirs, would faith and the promise be jeopardized? Paul probably means that the exercise of faith has failed to attain its end. Why are faith and the promise rendered futile if Jews apart from faith are the heirs? The reason that is suggested by the logic of Rom. 1-3 and by the explanation in v. 15 is the inherent impossibility of any person adhering to the law to the extent necessary to gain the inheritance. In other words, Paul is arguing: ‘If it is the case that the inheritance is to be based on adherence to the law, then there will be no heirs, because no fallen human being can adequately adhere to the law – and that means that faith is exercised in vain and the promise will never be fulfilled.’

In verse 14, Paul again appears to be correcting the Jewish objector. Current Jewish theology said that God’s promises of blessing were for those who keep the Law of God, given at Mt. Sinai. In reply, Paul points out that God made no such promises when He gave the Law. His promises about inheriting the world were made to Abraham four centuries beforehand. Besides, ‘promise’ and ‘Law’ are mutually exclusive. God’s ‘promise’ can only be met with ‘faith’ for its fulfillment. Law, based as it is on human effort, nullifies both ‘promise’ and ‘faith.’

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If we could receive the gifts of God apart from faith—through our works and striving and attempts at merit—then we would, in effect, empty the significance of faith, which is indeed the solitary instrumental cause of our justification. The promise of God to Abraham and his seed has no effect apart from faith.

Faith is able to receive anything God promises. If, on the other hand, God's promise is only to be received through obedience to a law which neither Abraham nor his children could keep, then faith is cancelled. In other words, to predicate a promise on an impossible condition is to nullify the promise.

Pursuing righteousness both by the Law and by faith is impossible. The Law makes the promise worthless, because if we have to keep the Law to receive the promise, the promise will never be fulfilled.

3. Law and Wrath (4:15)

a) *When There Is Law (4:15a)*

¹⁵*For the law brings wrath...*

The first clause of this verse substantiates the conclusion drawn in v. 14 by showing what the law *does* – ‘produces wrath’ – as opposed to what it *cannot do* – secure the inheritance.

The law cannot save because ‘the Law brings about wrath.’ The more a person seeks to justify himself by keeping God's Law, the more he proves his inability to do so because of his sinfulness and the more judgment and wrath he brings upon himself. Just as surely as the law reveals God's righteousness so it also exposes man's sinfulness.

Moreover, the Law promotes transgression and wrath. No one can keep the Law; so the Law enhances one's sense of transgression and failure and the sense of being under God's wrath. The Law promotes defeat and pessimism, but faith brings joy, assurance of the promise, and thus a life of optimism. ‘Don't be fooled,’ says Paul in effect, ‘the principle of faith transcends the Law.’

What the law effects is not salvation, justification, or forgiveness; it is the wrath of God. If we put our confidence in the law, the only thing we can hope to gain by it is the wrath of God. If we seek to base our salvation on our merit, the only thing we will ever merit is God's wrath.

b) *When There Is No Law (4:15b)*

...but where there is no law there is no transgression.

The second clause in the verse is a parenthetical explanation of the reason why the law produces wrath. Paul's logic is as follows: 1) Violation of law turns ‘sin’ into the more serious offense of ‘transgression,’ meriting God's wrath; 2) God gave the law to the Jews; 3) The Jews have transgressed the law (cp. 2:1-29; 3:9-19); therefore 4) The law brought wrath to the Jews.

If God had not set any standards or imposed obligations on us, then we would be autonomous. We would be free to do whatever we want to do. As Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky said, ‘If there is no God, all things are permissible.’ We live in a society that seeks to banish the very concept of sin from human consciousness, but in order to do that we must first banish God from the equation. If God had never given any law, there would be no transgression. Without the law there is no sin, which is what the apostle is saying here. However, there is a law, and it manifestly reveals our sin. The law of God is what demonstrates our falling short of His glory.

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When we sin, we do not just sin against some abstract norm or piece of legislation. We sin against the one whose law it is. We must banish from our minds forever any thought of justifying ourselves by our behavior, good deeds, merits, or work. Just as Dante posted about the entrance to hell the words, ‘Abandon hope, all ye who enter here,’ so we should abandon all hope of entering the kingdom of God by virtue of our obedience to the law.

Paul’s use of the word ‘transgression’ rather than ‘sin’ suggests that he is not thinking of the general condition of sin that justifies the infliction of God’s wrath, but the more specific situation that obtains wherever people are confronted with clearly defined, verbally transmitted laws and commands. For Paul does not use ‘transgression’ as a synonym for ‘sin.’ ‘Transgression’ denotes a specific kind of sin, the ‘passing beyond’ the limits set by a definite, positive law or command. While every ‘transgression’ is also a ‘sin,’ not every ‘sin’ is a ‘transgression.’ Paul, then, is not claiming that there is no ‘sin’ where there is no law, but in almost a truism, that there is no deliberate disobedience of positive commands where there is no positive command to disobey. As Calvin puts it: ‘He who is not instructed by the written law, when he sins, is not guilty of so great a transgression as he is who knowingly breaks and transgresses the law of God.’

Does this mean that, before the Law of Moses was given, no one was lost? That is certainly what it might seem to say. Paul actually answers this question in the next chapter (5:13-14). We could paraphrase Paul in this way: ‘Yes, there is no judgment until there is law; nevertheless, those between Adam and Moses had the seal of death upon them. Why? Because they were sinning against another law. They did not have the revelation of the Law of Moses, but they did have a law.’ Of course, we know from chapter 2 what that other law was. The people who lived before the giving of the law, just like people without the Bible throughout history, will be judged against what they do know about right and wrong. It is true that, ‘Where no law is, there is no transgression.’ It is also true that no one was judged on the specific basis of the Law of Moses before the law was given. But the overriding reality is that, from the time of Adam on, all humans have sinned against one law or another. This is a very important part of the Christian position, because it would be unjust to judge people on the basis of a law they don’t have. In fact, however, people are going to be judged upon the basis of the law they do have (cp. 1:19; 2:15).

Before and outside the Mosaic law wrath certainly exists, for all people, being sinners, stand under God’s sentence of condemnation (1:18). But the Mosaic law ‘produces’ even more wrath; rather than rescuing people from the sentence of condemnation, it confirms their condemnation. For by stating clearly, and in great detail, exactly what God requires of people, the law renders people even more accountable to God than they were without the law.

4. Promise and Faith (4:16a)

¹⁶*That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham...*

In vv. 14-15, Paul has elaborated the negative point in v. 13: the inheritance comes ‘not through the law.’ Now Paul turns to its positive antithesis: the inheritance is given ‘through the righteousness of faith.’ What is this ‘it,’ the implied subject of the verse? Probably, in light of v. 13,, ‘the promised inheritance.’ The intimate relation in Paul’s thought between faith and grace emerges again here. The benefit is twofold: that the promise might be ‘firm’ – that it might

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come to fruition – and that the promise might be confirmed to *every* descendant of Abraham. Neither blessing would have come to pass if it had depended on human ‘works’ or obedience to the law: but because faith grasps the absolutely sure promise of God, a promise that He has determined freely to give, the inheritance God has promised can become a reality, and a reality for anyone who believes.

The crux of this passage is verse 16. God reckons the believer’s faith as righteousness in order that salvation ‘might be in accordance with grace.’ Where it not for God’s sovereign grace providing a way of salvation, even a person’s faith could not save him. That is why faith is not simply another form of human works, as some theologians throughout the centuries have maintained. The power of salvation, or justification, is in God’s grace, not in man’s faith.

Here Paul is redefining the true people of God, the people of the End-time. Who are they? They are believers, both Jews (‘the adherents of the Law’) and Gentiles (‘those who hold the faith of Abraham’). By what principle are they the people of God? By the principle of ‘grace,’ that is, not by the principle of ‘works’ of Law-keeping. God has given His word of promise and those who have *believed* Him are His people.

Luther argued that the real issue underlying the debate over justification was not *sola fide* but *sola gratia*—salvation by grace alone. The apostle says that justification is by faith so that it might be of grace so that all the seed of Abraham—all those who come after him and follow in his way—may be sure.

Paul’s ‘universalism’ is a ‘qualified’ universalism that gives the Gentiles the same opportunity as Jews to respond to the gospel and to become part of the people whom God is calling out of the world in the last days. This inclusion of both Jew and Gentile in the ‘seed’ of Abraham is what is in view in this last part of v. 16. Paul has forcefully stated that the true descendants of Abraham are those who believe (vv. 11-12); and when he uses the word ‘seed’ here, it must be with this spiritual meaning that he has given the word.

5. Faith and Abraham (4:16b-17)

a) Father Abraham (4:16b-17a)

...who is the father of us all, ¹⁷as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’—...

Abraham is the ‘father of us all,’ the spiritual forefather of all of ‘us’ who are believers.

The quotation in v. 17a, from Gen. 17:5, substantiates v. 16, the ‘many nations’ including both Jews and Gentiles. The promise in Genesis probably has a similar intention, although whether it refers simply to physical ancestry or spiritual ‘fatherhood’ also is not clear. In light of the promise quoted in 17a, Paul is thinking to some extent of God’s bringing life from the body of Abraham and the womb of Sarah. The exposition of Abraham’s faith that follows confirms this (v. 19). Paul is further alluding to the certainty of the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham: although ‘the many nations’ do not yet exist, God can address them as if they did.

b) Creator God (4:17b)

...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.

When we talk about faith that justifies, such faith has content to it. There is information that must be understood. Historically we call that the data or the *indicia* that we believe. We must

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believe it in the sense of intellectual assent, what the Reformers called *assensus*. However, belief and intellectual assent, although necessary to saving faith, do not make up saving faith. The critical element of saving faith is *fiducia*, personal trust. We are justified by faith by trusting in Christ alone for our salvation. That is the nature of the faith of Abraham. He did not just believe in God; anybody can believe *in* God. Satan believes in God. The demons believe in God and tremble (James 2:19). Saving faith is all about believing God, putting our trust in Him for our life and death, and living by trusting His promises even when we cannot see the fulfillment of those promises.

Abraham heard God's promise and drew near into His presence and believed that promise. He did so on account of 'who' God is – the One who created the universe from nothing and the one who also *re-creates*, that is, 'who raises the dead.' This God, the God of infinite power and goodness, promised old Abraham many descendants and Abraham believed him.

Paul gives two qualifications to describe God. First, this God is the one 'who gives life to the dead.' Abraham had experienced first-hand the power of God. He was miraculously given Isaac, the son of promise, long after Sarah had passed her child-bearing years and after Abraham was 'as good as dead' as far as his fathering a child was concerned (Heb. 11:11-12). Second, this God is the one who 'calls into being that which does not exist.' Paul here obviously refers to God's power as expressed through creation, in which 'what is seen was not made out of things which are visible' (Heb. 11:3).

The God 'who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' was clearly the object of the patriarch's faith. It is fundamental that we understand that the object of one's faith is most important. One's faith, outstanding as it may be, will never benefit its owner if it has the wrong object. Abraham's faith was not exemplary due to its intrinsic strength, strong as it was, but because its object was God.

Abraham grasped two massive concepts about God. First, he understood that God 'gives life to the dead.' Although there had been no recorded resurrection at this point in history, and although God had not revealed any doctrine of resurrection, Abraham believed in God's resurrection power! This was borne out when he obediently raised the knife above Isaac. He knew that if Isaac died, God could resurrect him (cp. Gen. 22:5; Heb. 11:19). Second, he saw God as a God who 'calls into existence the things that do not exist.' God creates *ex nihilo*, from nothing. This is, of course, a towering concept. Perhaps, in retrospect, there is some suggestion here of God's restoration of Abraham and Sarah's procreation process. God for all intents and purposes created Isaac *ex nihilo*.

B. Faith Apart from Sight (Romans 4:18-22)

1. Faith and Hope (4:18)

¹⁸*In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, 'So shall your offspring be.'*

The emphasis in v. 18 falls on the paradoxical description of Abraham's faith as 'against hope, on the basis of hope.' It was against man's hope, in hope which is of God. His faith flew in the face of that hope which is founded on the evidence of reason and common sense – 'hope' as we often use the word ('I hope to win the lottery'). Yet his faith was firmly based on the hope that springs from the promise of God. We note here that Abraham's faith is not described as a 'leap

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into the dark,’ a completely baseless, almost irrational ‘decision’ – as Christian faith is pictured by some ‘existentialist’ theologians – but as a ‘leap’ from the evidence of his senses into the security of God’s word and promise.

‘Against hope’ could better be translated ‘beyond all possible hope.’ This is a marvelous expression. Faith in God is not a blind step into the dark. It always involves believing a specific promise of God. In Abraham’s case, this meant believing a promise that defied every logical human basis for hope. Humanly speaking, it was ridiculous for Abraham to think that he and Sarah could have a child when she was more than ninety years old. Yet he believed, beyond all possible hope, because he believed in God’s power to keep His promise. God had created the world from nothing, so He could certainly create a child from older parents!

The apostle declares of Abraham that ‘in hope against hope he believed.’ The terms *hope* and *faith* are related, but they are not the same. ‘Hope,’ in this case, is the desire for something that might be true or might happen, whereas faith is the firm confidence that it *is* true or *will* happen. The ancient patriarch had hope when, from the human vantage point, there was absolutely no basis or justification for hope.

Sometimes people think that saving faith is a leap into the dark. Jesus never calls people to jump into the darkness. He calls them to jump out of the darkness. He never asks us to crucify our intellect to become Christians. Faith is not believing the absurd or the foolish. Faith is ultimately trusting what is preeminently trustworthy. Here is Abraham, who, against all hope, hoped. Is that a leap of faith, or did he have a reason for it, against all earthly indicators?

2. Faith and Weakness (4:19)

¹⁹*He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.*

Verses 19-20 detail the way in which Abraham believed ‘against hope on the basis of hope.’ Paul stresses that Abraham continued to believe God’s promise to him even as he observed the physical condition that rendered the fulfillment of that promise so unlikely. The physical evidence would certainly have given Abraham reason to doubt that he would produce offspring through Sarah. His own body was ‘already dead,’ in the sense that he was past the age when procreation was likely to occur – he was ‘about a hundred years old’ (cp. also Heb. 11:12). Since Genesis 17:1 claims that Abraham was ninety-nine years old when the promise of offspring was renewed, Paul’s is an acceptable approximation. But standing in the way of the fulfillment of the promise was not only Abraham’s advanced age but the ‘deadness,’ the ‘barrenness,’ of Sarah, the woman predicted to be the mother of the child through whom Abraham’s ‘seed’ would come. Since the word ‘deadness’ is not the normal word for a woman’s barrenness, Paul has deliberately chosen his language to make clear that Abraham’s faith with respect to this promise was specifically faith in the ‘God who gives life to the dead’ (v. 17b).

What did Abraham believe? He believed that God could ‘quicken the dead’ (4:17). He didn’t believe this as a theory or a theological abstraction; he actually believed. Even after taking into account the deadness of his and Sarah’s childbearing potential, Abraham believed that God could fulfill His promise to give them a son.

Abraham looked at himself and his wife and saw a hopeless situation. ‘How can I possibly believe that promise?’ Then he looked at the One who made the promise and realized instantly

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that there was nothing hopeless about it. The only thing hopeless was the idea that the promise would *not* come to pass, because it is impossible for God to lie. It is impossible for God to break a promise.

Abraham's faith faced two obstacles. The obvious barrier to his believing God would give him a child was the biological impossibility due to Sarah's and his age. The less obvious obstacle was the staggering nature of the promise. That is, the promise was so wonderful, it was hard to believe—it was too good to be true!

To become 'weak in faith' is to allow doubt to cloud and partly undermine belief. Abraham had been trusting God for 25 years. As far as we know, Abraham had witnessed no miracle of God. Because Abraham's faith in God was strong and unwavering, his own ignorance and weakness were no obstacles to his trust. He therefore did not falter when 'he contemplated his own body.' Abraham's natural procreative power was now gone, 'as good as dead,' yet that physiological fact did not diminish his faith. Natural impotence was no problem to Abraham, because his faith was in the supernatural God who had created him in the first place.

3. Faith and Promise (4:20-21)

²⁰No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

Paul does not mean that Abraham never had momentary hesitations, but that he avoided a deep-seated and permanent attitude of distrust and inconsistency in relationship to God and His promises. Unlike the 'double-souled' person who displays a deeply rooted division in his attitude toward God (James 1:6-8), Abraham maintained a single-minded trust in the fulfillment of God's promise.

Though it was all so incredible, he did not vacillate. Through all of the years of waiting, Abraham did not waver regarding the fantastic promise. Faith without reason is *fideism*; reason without faith is *rationalism*. In practice there must be no reduction of faith to reason. Likewise, there must be no reduction of reason to faith. Biblical faith is a composite of the two. Abraham did not take an unreasonable leap of faith. How did Abraham come to such a massive exercise of faith? He weighed the human impossibility of becoming a father against the divine impossibility of God being able to break His word and decided that if God was God, nothing is impossible. Applying this to ourselves, if God is who He says He is (and He is!), none of His promises will fail because He forgets us or our situation is beyond His power. The problem is, many of us keep in the back of our minds unexercised suspicions that what we say we believe about God's power is not really true. For all our lip service about trust in God, we rely chiefly upon what we can do ourselves. A good measure of how much spiritual truth we have appropriated is, how long is our worry list?

We learn in verse 21 that Abraham's belief in God was not just some sort of vague or general faith, but belief in a specific promise of God. No faith in God is really valid unless it involves faith in a specific revelation or promise of God. God had made a specific promise to Abraham, and Abraham believed that God could and would keep that specific promise. God promised Abraham that he and Sarah would have a child even though, because of their advanced age, this was humanly impossible (cp. Heb. 11:8-11-12). This focus on a specific promise helps people understand that belief in Christ is not just some sort of generalized faith. It isn't a vague thing.

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It isn't an emotion. It isn't a 'leap of faith.' It is choosing to believe a specific promise of God. Saving faith is not a blind leap; it is our response to the specific, dependable promises of God.

Abraham put his trust in the promise of God. That is what it means to be a Christian. Our only hope in life and death is trusting in the Word of God. There is nothing else to trust in. Everything this world offers passes away. Abraham did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God.

Struggling faith is not doubt, just as temptation to sin is not itself sin. The very fact that Abraham was trying to understand how God's promise could be fulfilled indicates he was *looking* for a way of fulfillment, although he could not yet *see* a way. Weaker faith might have simply succumbed to doubt. Sincere struggling with spiritual problems comes from strong, godly faith. Such faith refuses to doubt and trust in God's promises, even when no way of fulfillment is humanly imaginable. When Abraham was tested by God, he 'grew strong in faith.'

In what way did Abraham's faith 'grow strong'? In the sense that anything gains strength in meeting and overcoming opposition – muscles when weights are raised; holiness when temptation is successfully resisted. So Abraham's faith gained strength from its victory over the hindrance created by the conflict between God's promise and the physical evidence. And in this strengthening of his faith, Abraham gave 'glory to God.' In his faithful response to God's word, Abraham therefore accomplished what the idolaters of 1:21 failed to do. As 'giving glory to God' denotes the result of Abraham's growing strong in faith, 'being fully convinced that He was also able to do what had been promised' repeats and further describes what this 'growing strong' means.

Paul says that Abraham's faith was characterized by his 'giving glory to God.' Godly faith glorifies God; the One who gives faith receives all the credit. Conversely, any faith that does *not* glorify God is not of or from Him. Faith in God, because it affirms His trustworthy character, is the supreme way that men glorify Him.

The first objective of Abraham's faith was to glorify God, as the last line of verse 20 asserts. In this connection we should emphasize that God is never glorified in a believer's life apart from faith—a full reliance on God. Abraham's life glorified God as few lives have because he demonstrated a faith that few mortals have shown. Some argue convincingly that verse 21 is one of the best definitions of faith in the Bible as it describes Abraham as 'fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised.' May we glorify God in the same way, taking Him at His word.

4. Faith and Righteousness (4:22)

²²*That is why his faith was 'counted to him as righteousness.'*

The second objective of Abraham's faith was righteousness. Faith that makes one righteous before God perceives the immensity of God who creates from nothing and gives life to the dead (v. 17). Next, it is a faith that does not deny the existence of obstacles, but evaluates them in the light of God's Word and power (vv. 18-20). Ultimately, it brings the full assurance that what God has promised, He will perform (v. 21). That faith is reckoned for righteousness (v. 22). Faith is the only way any of us will ever be righteous before God.

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God imputed righteousness to Abraham because Abraham believed God's promises. Paul is simply repeating the wonderful truth he stated in 4:3 as he quoted Genesis 15:6: Abraham's faith was 'counted' or 'imputed' to him as righteousness.

The antecedent of 'it' (or 'that') is the patriarch's belief in God which has been mentioned directly or indirectly in every verse from verse 16 to verse 22. That belief was not vague and diffuse but directed specifically to God's promise to the old man.

This verse draws a consequence or conclusion from the preceding verses. Since these verses include aspects of the promise that are brought out in Gen. 17 and later, it would seem that Paul agrees to this extent with Jewish tradition, that the faith Abraham exercised in Gen. 15:6 is explained and exemplified in the later career of the patriarch. But the verse may serve to conclude more than the immediate section. With a last reference to Gen. 15:6, Paul rounds off the discussion of that verse which has been the constant touchstone since v. 3. Now, in a sense, Paul's 'historical' exposition is ended, and he can turn in application to his Christian readers.

The heart of this entire passage, in fact of the whole chapter, is that in response to Abraham's faith, God graciously reckoned it to him as righteousness. It is not that faith merits salvation but that faith accepts salvation from God's gracious hand. Through that acceptance comes the righteousness that only God can impart.

C. Faith and the Christian (4:23-25)

These three verses can be considered a separate paragraph because they draw conclusions from the entire exposition of vv. 3-22. Paul has, of course, applied his far-ranging exposition of Gen. 15:6 to Christians throughout the chapter, in both explicit and implicit ways. But nowhere does he so solemnly and clearly state the application as he does here.

Now comes the application of Genesis 15:6 to which Paul has been pointing to since verse 3. Paul begins drawing things together again, showing how these truths about salvation through faith apply not just to Abraham, but to all people—Jew and Gentile alike—for all time.

1. The Subjects of Faith (4:23-24a)

²³But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also.

The conviction expressed in vv. 23-24 that what is written in Genesis about Abraham has relevance to the Christian believer has been the implicit assumption of the whole of chapter 4. Paul's conviction that the OT everywhere speaks to Christians is fundamental to his theology and preaching. In the case of Genesis 15:6, the significance is clear and direct. Christians share with Abraham the same basis for justification – faith – and the same God as the object of that Faith. Paul cites only the words 'it was reckoned to him' from Gen. 15:6 in v. 23, perhaps as a 'shorthand' allusion to the verse, or perhaps because all along it has been Paul's concern to unfold the meaning of that 'reckoning.' It is *faith* that is 'reckoned': a faith that is *apart from works, apart from circumcision, apart from the law, apart from sight* – and therefore a 'reckoning' that is solely a matter of *grace*.

Paul tells the Roman Christians and us that Genesis 15:6 ('righteousness was reckoned to him') was not written only for Abraham but also for us today. The marvelous thing about Abraham's faith being reckoned as righteousness is that the same divine principle applies to every person who trusts in God's Son.

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2. The Object of Faith (4:24b)

It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord...

First, Christians are those ‘to whom it is going to be reckoned’” that is, those people who experience in its eschatological fullness the righteousness that Abraham attained by faith. Second, Christians are ‘those who believe in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.’ Not only is our faith of the same nature as Abraham’s: it ultimately has as its object the same God, ‘who gives life to the dead’ (v. 17b). And the connection is even closer. For Abraham’s faith in God had to do not just with the miraculous creation of life where there was ‘deadness,’ but with the fulfillment of God’s promise to bless the world through him. It is the God of the promise, the promise given to Abraham but ultimately fulfilled in Christ and Christians, in whom both Abraham and we believe. While, therefore, the locus of faith has shifted as the course of salvation history has filled out and made ever more clear the specific content of the promise, the ultimate object of faith has always been the same.

God imputed righteousness to Abraham because Abraham believed God’s promises. And He will impute this righteousness to us as well, if we believe His promises. Abraham was dead and Sarah was dead, as far as reproduction is concerned. God made a promise. Abraham believed that God could quicken the dead—and the child was born. There was life from death. Likewise, Jesus was dead, but we are called to believe that God did in fact raise Him from the dead.

The story of Abraham and of his faith is important to us today because men are now saved on exactly the same basis on which Abraham was saved—trust in God. Even the sacrificial work of Jesus was the provision for Abraham’s sin by which God saved him. Men today have much greater divine revelation than Abraham had. From the human side, the key phrase in verse 24 is ‘who believes in Him.’ Faith is the necessary condition for salvation.

Do we see what Paul is saying? God’s ways have not changed. As Paul said in verse 17, Abraham believed in God ‘who gives life to the dead’ and for that God reckoned him as righteous before him. For Paul’s readers today, the issue remains the same: do we believe in God who raises the dead? Specifically, do *we* believe that God raised Jesus our Lord from the dead? Such a belief then made Abraham our father and today makes us his children.

The moment that we do believe on Him who raised Jesus from the dead, we are believing exactly what Abraham believed when he believed that God could bring forth life from death. And when we believe Him and believe on Christ as our Savior, we who are dead become alive. This concept of living by faith is not just an idea, it isn’t just a word, it’s a reality. Before we believe God, we are truly dead. But when we believe God, and believe what He has done and therefore take Christ as our Savior, we who were dead are made alive. We were dead, just as dead as Sarah’s womb. As far as the possibility of reproduction was concerned, Sarah was completely dead. As far as the possibility of eternal life is concerned, we were completely dead, under the wrath of God, separated from God, without purpose. Sarah’s dead womb couldn’t produce anything, and the unsaved individual can’t really produce anything with significance.

3. The Content of Faith (4:25)

...²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Christ’s resurrection was real, not merely token or symbolic. Christ was truly dead and truly buried but no less truly raised bodily to life on the third day. This is history. But it is unseen to

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us, just as God's promise was unseen to Abraham. Yet he believed, notwithstanding God's invisibility, and so do we.

The two clauses of the verse exhibit a clear parallelism. It is probably best to give the word 'for' a retrospective meaning in the first line and a prospective meaning in the second: 'He has handed over *because of* our trespasses [e.g., because we are sinners], and was raised *for the sake of* our justification [e.g., in order to secure our justification].' Paul is affirming here a theological connection between Jesus' resurrection and our justification (cp. 5:10). As Jesus' death provides the necessary grounds on which God's justifying action can proceed, so His resurrection, by vindicating Christ and freeing Him forever from the influence of sin (cp. 6:10), provides for the ongoing power over sins experienced by the believer in union with Christ.

'Delivered up' was a judicial term, referring to the commitment of a criminal to his punishment. Jesus Christ 'was delivered up' to serve the sentence of death that 'our transgressions' deserve, and He 'was raised up' to provide the 'justification' before God that we could never attain in our own power or merit.

By whom was Jesus 'handed over' (*paredothē*)? Jews or Gentiles or both? The answer is both; Caiaphas the Jew and Pilate the Gentile were equally culpable. Ultimately, however, it was God who 'handed over' His Son into the hands of wicked men who killed Him. Yet by that unjust death has come our salvation (cp. Is. 53:12). In both Isaiah 53 and Paul's allusion to it the word 'for' does not express purpose but *cause*. It was *because of* our sins that Jews was 'handed over.' Our transgressions brought about his death.

'Justification' (*dikaiōsis*) is a close relative of 'righteousness' (*dikaïosunē*), the key-word of this chapter. God's raising of Jesus was not a bare event, but laden with meaning. 'He was raised *for our justification*,' that is, for God's approval of us as 'right' with Him. As in the first leg of this aphorism, the preposition 'for' (*dia*) is *causal*. The raising of Christ *caused* our 'justification.' On account of His resurrection of Jesus, God graciously recognizes as 'righteous' those very ones whose transgressions *caused* the death of His Son. God reckons (or imputes) His righteousness to those who believe in Him as the resurrector of Jesus our Lord.

With respect to our condition of guilt before God, the language of the New Testament is often expressed in the category of indebtedness. What is the nature of the debt that we owe God because of our sin? The church fathers made the distinction between a moral debt and a pecuniary debt. A pecuniary debt is a monetary or financial debt, which is not the same thing as a moral debt. When offering legal tender for a pecuniary debt, one is under obligation to accept that tender in payment of the debt. However, when a moral transgression has taken place, the offended person is under no obligation to accept the payment of a substitute on behalf of the guilty. Christ laid down His life for His sheep on the cross. He offered Himself in His perfect righteousness and took upon Himself the sin of His people. If Jesus had stayed dead, we would have no justification, but when the Father raised the Son from the dead, He said to the world, 'I accept this payment for the debtors who cannot pay.' The resurrection of Jesus is not simply for His vindication; it is for our justification, because it is God's demonstration to His unjust people that He accepts the payment in full for the moral debt they have incurred.

For next time: Read Romans 5:1-11.