

Faith in the Promises of God

Romans 4:13-25

July 30, 2017

Introduction:

Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* tells the story of Atticus Finch, a white lawyer in Alabama during the Great Depression who takes on the case of a black man falsely accused of raping a local white woman. While the book had an enormous impact in the literary world, it also had a significant effect on the legal profession. Many lawyers were inspired to study law as a result of the example of Atticus Finch and regard him as the ideal lawyer, a role-model they look to for inspiration.

A similar effect took place in an entirely different field of study regarding another character who became a source of inspiration for many: Indiana Jones is to archeology what Atticus Finch was to law. In a National Geographic article from two years ago, one expert said this, "We can document the impact [of Indiana Jones] statistically, based on the number of archaeology students before and after the first film. Some of the best archaeologists in the world today say Indiana Jones was what sparked their initial interest." ¹

We are inspired by examples, by role-models who embody those things we wish to be true of us. This morning, the apostle Paul is going to call our attention back to someone who is to be a role-model for all of us who live by faith: Abraham. Paul knows he needs to both explain the doctrine of justification by faith alone as well as provide us a flesh-and-blood example of what that faith looks like. So today we'll be reminded of Abraham's faith in hopes that it too will encourage and inspire us to walk by faith in God's promises.

To that end, let us open our Bibles and see what Paul has to say. This morning we're in Romans 4, covering the second half of that chapter. Page 941 is where you can find it in the hardcover pew Bibles, if that is what you're using. We're looking at v. 13-25 of Romans 4. Please follow along as I begin reading at v. 13. Paul writes, "**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. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.**"

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, who is the father of us all, 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. 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.' 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. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had

promised. That is why his faith was ‘counted to him as righteousness.’ But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

Faith is at the front and center of this passage of Scripture and so we want to consider what we can learn about faith through these thirteen verses. I’ve broken this passage down into three parts for us: we’ll consider first the centrality of faith over and above the law, followed second by the character of Abraham’s faith that serves as an example to us, and third the content of what we are placing our faith into. So let’s begin with our first point which concerns...

1. The centrality of faith (v. 13-17)

By way of quick review, in Romans so far, Paul’s been laying out his case that salvation is, and always has been, by faith alone. He spent the first three chapters demonstrating that everyone is under God’s wrath for sin, both Jews and Gentiles, because neither of them obeyed the law, whether it was the Law given to the Jews by Moses or the law written on the hearts of the Gentiles. Then in 3:21 Paul thundered out the good news that a righteousness had been revealed in the gospel that came apart from the law and was instead gained by grace through faith in Christ. Now in chapter 4 Paul’s making his case that this is not a change in God’s original plan but is rather the way salvation has come from the very beginning, going all the way back to the example of Abraham. In the passage before this, Paul reminded us that Abraham was declared righteous when he believed, long before the command to be circumcised and centuries before the Ten Commandments were given at Mount Sinai.

So then, Paul is continuing in that train of thought when he says in v. 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.”** This verse is a summary statement of what Paul was teaching in v. 1-12. God’s promise didn’t come to Abraham because he obeyed the law: rather, he believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness. The promise wasn’t something God was obligated to give; it was a gift freely given by grace, not because Abraham earned it by his deeds but pure and simply because of faith.

Now look at v. 14-15. **“For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.”** Paul is saying salvation has to be on the basis of faith otherwise God’s promises are void. Why? Well, if the only way to be heirs of salvation is by perfect adherence to the law, then the whole house of cards collapses because what does the law bring us? **“Wrath.”** As Paul said earlier in chapter 3, if no one will be justified in God’s sight by obeying the law because all have failed to do so, then no one will inherit anything from God because none of us have kept our end of the deal. If salvation is by works, then faith is null because it doesn’t factor into the equation at all and God’s promises are effectively void because none of us have the works needed. We’re all doomed if obedience to the law is the necessary condition.

The law only shows us how we fall short, and that's probably what's behind the unusual phrase at the end of v. 15 where Paul says, "...**but where there is no law there is no transgression.**" Timothy Keller explains it like this, "Paul is not saying that if someone does not know the law, they cannot be guilty of sin. But transgression carries the meaning of a deliberate, knowing contravening of a boundary. If I trespass on private property, I am guilty of trespassing. But if I see a sign saying *Private Property: Keep out* and then trespass, then I am a transgressor: I knew the law explicitly and I broke it. [So then] knowing the law does not make us heirs; it makes us doubly guilty." ²

Therefore, since the law can only bring wrath, not salvation, Paul concludes in v. 16, saying, "**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, who is the father of us all, 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.**"

Because salvation doesn't depend on our works, but rather on faith in God's promises, the promises of God then are guaranteed to all who share in Abraham's faith, whether Jew or Gentile. So again, it cannot be emphasized enough that salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, resting on the promises of God who is certain to do all that he said he would. That salvation was always by grace through faith is proved by Abraham's example: Abraham didn't do anything to earn God's favor: there were no laws Abraham had to obey in order to prove himself to God first: God chose him, called him, promised to bless him, and all Abraham did was simply believe and his faith was credited to him as righteousness.

Grace Fellowship, there is no more important theological truth than this. Faith saves you, not works. If you think you can stand before God on the basis of how good a person you were, then you're in grave error. It is God's grace that saves you, through faith in his promises given to you in Christ, and nothing else. I know how the world can drum into your head the false notion that God will accept you because you're a good person but Paul has over and over throughout the book of Romans refuted such an idea. You are not saved because of any level of goodness in you. You can never do enough good works to put God into your debt, such that he owes you eternal life. Salvation is by faith in God's promises, and comes by God's grace to those whom he chooses to freely bestow with that gift. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Period.

But if it is faith that was credited to Abraham as righteousness, then perhaps it's worth pondering the nature of that faith. Paul wants us to see Abraham as a role model that can inspire us in our own faith. If righteousness comes by faith, then what does that faith look like? Abraham is an example for us to follow and so in v. 18-22 Paul relates to us the character of Abraham's faith so we have a flesh-and-blood example of what it means to believe in the promises of God. So let's move on now to our second point, which concerns...

2. The character of faith (v. 18-22)

What is saving faith? What does it look like? I think we can discern four ways that Abraham demonstrates the character of faith that can be helpful for us. Turn back in your Bibles now as we start with reading just v. 18.

Paul writes in v, 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.’”** So then, here’s the first thing we need to see about faith: *Faith is taking God at his Word.*

Faith isn’t merely believing vaguely that there’s a God. In Scripture, faith is focused on the promises of God given to us in his Word. Abraham was given a promise from God: he would make him into the father of many nations. God gave his Word that he would do something for Abraham and Abraham believed that promise.

So also is it true for us. God has given us in his Word a promise: that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life. So faith for us means taking God at his Word, specifically the Incarnate Word of Jesus Christ. It means we stop looking to ourselves to be good enough to earn the right to heaven and instead believe God’s promise that though we are sinners, Jesus became sin for us. God promised us over and over in Scripture to forgive us all of our sins and to raise us from the dead to eternal life if we look to Christ as our atoning sacrifice. Do you believe that promise? I’m not asking if you believe there is a God; I’m asking if you believe what he said about how he would save you is indeed the truth. Are you resting in that, relying upon it, staking your eternal destiny upon the truth of John 3:16 and elsewhere that says Christ died for you and only in him is there forgiveness of sins? Like Abraham, we demonstrate faith when we take God at his Word.

Now look back in your Bibles at v. 19. **“[Abraham] 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.”** So that illustrates for us a second aspect of Abraham’s faith that we can learn from and that is this: *Faith is trusting God in spite of the present circumstances.*

Given the circumstances, Abraham had reason to doubt God’s Word, didn’t he? He was almost 100 years old, which isn’t the prime time for a man to start a family. And his wife Sarah was also well past her childbearing years.. Everything in their present circumstances pointed to the fact that they would not have any more children: those days had long since passed. Judging by merely human standards, there was no way what God said would happen could ever take place.

We can be the same way, can’t we? We’ll look at our circumstances and think to ourselves, “How can God be working all things for my good in this?” Or we can think, “Considering all I’ve done, there’s no way I can conceive of God forgiving me, not after what I did!” But faith looks beyond the situations and experiences of our lives. It says, “Yes, from my limited perspective, I don’t see how this can be possible, but I’m not

going to rely upon my own understanding. I'm going to take God at his Word and trust his promises even if I can't comprehend how they can be fulfilled."

Now let's look at v. 20-21. **"No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."** Notice that last phrase: Abraham was "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised." That illustrates the third aspect of Abraham's faith which is: *Faith is relying on the truths of God's character.*

Abraham believed God had the power to do what Abraham and Sarah could not. He trusted in the omnipotence of God that could overcome all obstacles and bring about a child in Sarah's womb. He looked at his circumstances and then looked at God and said, "God is the kind of God for whom no thing is impossible and so I will trust in his ability and his trustworthiness."

Now if Abraham could trust in God's power and truthfulness, even though he had very little experience to go on, how much more should we believe that God can do all things after we've both read of the fulfillment of all his promises throughout Scripture and have experienced his power, mercy, goodness, and grace in our own lives! Faith is not about us looking at ourselves and our situations and thinking: "Well, that'll never happen;" it's about lifting our eyes to heaven and saying, "What is impossible with man is possible with God, and so when it comes to his promises I can rely confidently on his truthfulness and his power to fulfill every promise he makes."

But there's one other aspect of faith I want to point out that may not be as obvious from this passage but I think we need to state it lest there be misunderstanding and that is this: *Faith is not perfect but it does persevere.* Notice how in v. 19 it says, **"He did not weaken in his faith"** and in v. 20, **"No unbelief made him waver concerning the promises of God."** If you didn't know any better, you might think Abraham never had any doubts, no struggles, no questions, no weaknesses in his faith. But I know most of you know the story of Abraham: was his faith perfect? Remember the stunt where he tried to pass his wife Sarah off as his sister in order to save his skin? Or do you recall a woman by the name of Hagar who gave birth to a son named Ishmael - recall who his father was? Yep, it was Abraham, trying to fulfill God's promise through his concubine.

So here's the thing: Abraham's faith wasn't perfect: he had his moments of weakness and doubt. But the overall trajectory of his life was that of faith. He persevered in his faith through the times of trial and uncertainty. On a whole, he stayed the course, even if at times he had momentary lapses.

If I might go to a NT example for a moment, consider Peter: pillar of the church, one of the twelve apostles, preached a sermon on Pentecost where 3000 people are saved. A hero of the faith, right? But was Peter ("the Rock") flawless in his faith? Didn't he sink like a rock after first walking on water once he doubted? Didn't he deny Christ three times the night Jesus was betrayed? Yes, he did. Peter had his moments of weakness, but he persevered in his faith. He got back into the boat and continued to follow Christ. When Jesus reinstated Peter, Peter served the church the remainder of his life as an

apostle. The trajectory of his life was one of faith in Christ, even though he had in his life moments of weakness.

So let me encourage you that your faith doesn't have to be perfect to be pleasing to God. It wasn't for Abraham or Peter and, if we're honest, it isn't always that way for us. I've had my moments of doubt and fear and anger and faithlessness. But real faith gets past those times when our faith temporarily flies off the rails. Genuine faith, the kind of faith that saves, is a persevering faith that picks itself back up and gets back on the narrow road of following Christ. Bunny trails of doubt and fear are inevitable parts of the journey of faith, but they do not define the journey. True faith will always come back to relying upon God's Word and following him down whatever road he leads you.

So Abraham is a wonderful and inspiring example of faith but of course the promises of God that he believed are different than those we're called to believe. None of us have been promised by God to become a great nation or inherit the land of Canaan or even to have a child when we're elderly. We have different and far better promises because the promises given to us point us to the atoning work of Christ. So then, we've looked at the centrality of faith in that we are justified by faith alone and not by works of the law. Then we considered the character of faith - what does it look like to have faith in God? How does Abraham serve as a role-model of faith in God's promises? This then brings us to our third point this morning, which concerns...

3. The content of faith (v. 23-25)

What is it that we are called to believe? What is the content of what God has promised us in his Word? To answer that, I would direct your attention back to the final three verses of Romans 4. Please follow along as I read v. 23-25. **“But the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”**

The account of Abraham is not meant to simply give us an interesting biography of the progenitor of the Jews. That Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness is not only true for Abraham but is true for us and therefore has been recorded for us in the book of Genesis to teach us that God works the same way with us today. When we believe God's promises to us, our faith is counted to us as righteousness. But what is it we are to believe? Paul sums up the key components of what Christ did for us in v. 24-25 by focusing on this death and resurrection.

First, Paul says Jesus was **“delivered up for our trespasses.”** Jesus didn't have any sin, but God reckoned our sin to be Christ's sin, so that when he was delivered into the hands of the Jews and Pontius Pilot to suffer and die, he was experiencing the wrath of God for sin in our stead. So central to our faith isn't so much that Jesus died on the cross - anyone can believe that since everyone who ended up nailed to a Roman cross eventually died - but rather that Jesus suffered and died as our substitute. Our faith rests on the promise that Jesus actually satisfied God's wrath for our sin by having our sin considered to be his sin. That Christ was condemned in my place so that I might

be forgiven - that's the promise of God we are to believe. It is faith in that wonderful promise that God counts to us as righteousness.

But not only do we have faith in his atoning sacrifice on the cross, we believe that on Easter morning Christ arose from the grave. So Paul says also at the end of v. 25 that we believe Jesus was **“raised for our justification.”** That Christ was raised to new life in a glorified body is what Paul speaks of elsewhere as the “first fruits” of our salvation. In other words, Christ’s resurrection gives us an advance preview of what is awaiting all who look to Christ as their savior: they will be ultimately justified in God’s sight after death, because they will be raised to new life in a glorified body fit to spend eternity with God. When we believe in the resurrection, we are saying, “I believe what happened to Jesus will happen to me. Death will not be my end. One day, God will call me forth from the grave, not to eternal death and judgment, but to eternal life.”

So again, it’s worth repeating that saving faith isn’t a vague belief there is some kind of God. Faith is trusting in the God who has revealed himself in Scripture and specifically in the person of Jesus Christ. It is believing in the promises of that God who said that his Son became flesh, dwelt among us, and then suffered and died and innocent man in our place, becoming sin for us. It is believing that he then rose from the dead after three day and that all who trust in him will also be resurrected to eternal life. That is the content of a faith that saves.

Conclusion

As we close then, my hope is that you’ve been strengthened in your understanding of the centrality of faith as the only way we’re made right with God. Furthermore, I hope you are inspired by Abraham example, that from the character of his faith you might also look not to your own understanding or despair over what seem to be hopeless circumstances and instead trust in the power and goodness of God to keep all his promises to you. And then finally, may you trust fully in the promises of God given to us in Jesus Christ, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised on the third day for our justification.

Let us go to our promise-keeping Heavenly Father now in prayer. Please bow your heads with me as I close.

Endnotes

1. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/05/150514-indiana-jones-archaeology-exhibit-national-geographic-museum>
2. Keller, Timothy. Romans 1-7 For You. The Good Book Company: USA, 2014.

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