

## **Romans: Abraham's Faith and Ours**

**Romans 4:18-25**

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to take them in hand and turn with me to Romans, chapter 4. In verses 16 and 17 Paul has been answering a hypothetical question that we've posed. Somebody says to him, "Well, Paul, we understand that God wants us to be holy, to live in righteousness, to obey His word. Why then would He justify us by faith alone? Why not faith and works? Why not mix some works and obedience in there for our justification, if He wants us to be a people that's set apart and holy and consecrated to Him and obedient."

And the apostle Paul explains his answer in verses 16 and 17. Why is justification by faith alone? Well, first of all, in verse 15 he had said it's because the law will condemn you. We live in an age of entitlement. We think that God owes us heaven. We believe that we deserve it. The apostle is saying, be careful what you demand, because what you deserve is not what you think that you deserve. And so he says, "Look, if you get what you deserve, you'll get condemnation. It is by faith in order that you would not be condemned, because the law will condemn you. It will bring God's wrath."

Why is it by faith? Well, secondly, in verse 16 he makes it very clear that faith is in accordance with the principle of grace. God's salvation is a gift; grace is a gift. How can you earn a gift. Moreover, how could you ever do anything that would earn the death of Christ which was the means whereby God forgave you? Paul says, "It is by faith – justification is by faith, your being declared righteous is by faith because that's the only thing which accords with this enormous gift of grace. You can't earn that gift of grace, you can only receive it." And that's what faith does. It stretches out an empty hand, and it receives a gift that you don't deserve.

Why is it by faith? Well, Paul also explained in verses 16 and 17 that God had made a covenant promise to Abraham. That covenant promise was that he would be the spiritual father of the nations, both Jews and Gentiles. Well, if he's going to become the father of Jews and Gentiles, then salvation cannot be by keeping the Mosaic ceremonial code or there would be no Gentiles who are saved. And, therefore, faith was the instrument, which God appointed.

And finally, Paul makes it clear that the promise that was made to Abraham was not only made to him, it was made to all those who believe in God, the same God of Abraham, whether they be Jews or Gentiles. And so faith was the way that God appointed.

Now in this passage, Paul comes to answer a slightly different question. Someone now comes to Paul here in verses 18 through 25 and says, "Okay, Paul, I give in. I want to trust in this God that you're talking about. I want to be justified by faith. What do I need to know? What do I need to do?" Paul is going to answer that here in Romans 4, verses 18 through 25. This is God's word. Let us hear it reverently and attentively:

In hope against hope he believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, 'So shall your descendants be.' And 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; yet with respect to the promise of God he did not waiver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore, also it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Now not for his sake only was it written, that it was reckoned to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will be reckoned, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord, as we study Your word this day, we ask that we would not only understand saving faith, that we would not only understand justification by faith, but that we would exercise saving faith, and that we would be justified by faith. For every believer here this day, I pray that their appreciation of the freeness of God's grace would be enhanced, and for every unbeliever I pray that his or her eyes would be opened so as not only to see and understand, but to embrace the gift which is held forth. In Jesus' name, we ask it, Amen.

What must I do to be saved? That question was asked to Jesus by a young man in Matthew, chapter 19, verse 16. And after Jesus gave His response to that young man and engaged in a conversation not only with the young man, but with His disciples, you remember in verse 26 His disciples say "Well, then who can be saved?" And Jesus says, "With men it's impossible. But with God all things are possible." Paul, in this passage, is answering that question. What must a person do to be saved, and he answers that question by answering three other questions for us in this passage, and I'd like to like at that with you for a few minutes this morning.

## **I. What is faith.**

The first question you'll see in verses 18 through 22. And the question is basically is what is faith? What is saving faith? In verses 18 through 22 Paul is going to tell you about the nature of saving faith. In fact he's going to show you the character of saving faith in the life of Abraham. And this is what he teaches you. Paul teaches you that faith is trust in God and His promises despite our circumstances and the evidence to the contrary. Faith is trust in God and His promises despite our circumstances and the evidence to the contrary. In hope against hope. Don't those two little phrases sort of go in the opposite direction. In hope against hope. Really, they don't contradict one another. Abraham is simply doing this at the same time. In his thoughts he contemplates his human condition. And though there was no reason for him to hope at the human level against hope, yet he hoped in God, he believed in God and in His promise. So in hope against hope, he believed. There's no reason for him at the human level to expect not only a son, but to be the father of many nations. He's almost a hundred years old. He's childless by his wife. Sarah is long past childbearing years. There's no human reason for him to think that God's promise is going to be fulfilled against hope. But in hope he still believes.

Notice again specifically what he believes there in verse 18. That he might become a father of many nations. He specifically believes in God's covenant promise, despite their audacity. I mean, think of it. God hasn't even given him one child by Sarah yet. And God has already promised him that he will be the father of countless millions. And Abraham specifically believes God's promises, despite their audacity and impossibility. I want you to think about that for a moment, because the sinner is in precisely the situation that Abraham is in. The sinner has no human hope of forgiveness. There may be some who are apart from Christ here today who don't have much in the way of the experience of human forgiveness. You may have failed in some relationship, and the result of your failure in that relationship has been unmitigated condemnation by the person whom you offended. And they show no signs of ever wanting to forgive you, and you can't even imagine that what you've done in the past could ever be forgiven by God, because you haven't even experienced it at the human level. And yet the sinner's hope must be in God, and in His divine and gracious forgiveness, even as Abraham had to believe something that seemed beyond possibility.

And also, the sinner says, "Well, you know this message that you're preaching, it's wonderful, but, you know, it's too good to be true. I just can't believe in all this heaven stuff, this forgiveness stuff. It's just beyond comprehension. Just let me remind you again that today there are two billion people, two billion people, more than two billion people who profess to be the spiritual seed of Abraham, worshipping the one who is the divine seed of Abraham. Now this man was

childless 4,000 years ago. More than two billion people call on God and claim him to be their spiritual Father. You think God can't deliver? If you're a sinner, and you doubt God's ability to deliver, you remember what He promised to Abraham and you look around you today. You look around at the people here today, most of whom have no blood relationship to Abraham, but who are his children by faith, and by God's grace. God is able to fulfill what He promises.

## **II. Abraham's does not doubt.**

And we're told in verses 19 and 20 that the way that Abraham coped was not through denial. That's one of my favorite ways of dealing with difficulties. Here in the south we love to do that. You know, the elephant's in the room and you won't admit it. You're sitting around the Thanksgiving table, and so-'n-so and so-'n-so have been mad at one another for nineteen years. And nobody says a word about it, you know. We all say happy things and get along. We love to cope by denial.

That's not how Abraham copes. In fact, Paul tells us here in verse 19 that without becoming weak in faith, he contemplated his own body. It wasn't that he said, "I'm not going to think about it. I'm not going to think about how old I am." No, he contemplated his own body. "Lord, I'm a mess. There's no way humanly that I'm going to be a father." He was realistic about his and about Sarah's condition. He looked the situation square in the eye, and he still believed God. Faith uses divine, not human math. Friends, Abraham's faith is not possibility thinking, it's not positive thinking, it's not denial. It's not any of those things. Abraham's faith is trust in God. He doesn't cope with the situation by not thinking about the negative aspects. He doesn't cope with the situation by trying to think positive thoughts. He trusts in God.

I was listening to an interview with Alonzo Mourning who is an NBA center for the Miami Heat, and he is out this whole season with a liver or kidney ailment that is having to be treated. And as the interviewer was speaking to him, he said, "Well, what are you doing? How are you tackling this problem." He said, "Well, one thing is I make sure that nobody around me has negative thoughts. We all have to have positive thoughts about this thing. We're going to think positively. I'm going to get better." My friends, that is not what Abraham did. Abraham didn't say, "Now, nobody around me remind me that I don't have a son. We'll just think positively and a son will come along." Abraham is not doing possibility thinking. This is not Norman Vincent Peale that Abraham is doing here. Abraham is trusting in God.

## **III. Abraham trusts God.**

And notice specifically that Paul tells you in verses 20 through 22 that Abraham

trusted in God, in His promise, in His power, and in His purpose. Abraham's trust was not in his faith. His trust was not in positive thoughts. His trust was not in anything else but in God Himself, and specifically it was God's power and God's promise and God's purpose that Abraham trusted in. Abraham believed that God had the power to do what He said. Abraham believed the promise that God had given to him, and in realizing that promise, Abraham knew that God had a plan of which he was a part, and he trusted in all those things.

Saving faith, my friends, is not possibility thinking. And, in fact, saving faith is far more than a momentary decision. We often talk about people making a decision for Christ. Well, it true. You do have to decide for Christ. But saving faith in Christ is far more than simply a momentary decision. You know, sometimes we run into people who make professions of faith by signing cards or praying prayers, almost like you do when you give in to a telemarketer. You know, they've been on the phone with you for fifteen minutes, and you go, "Okay, okay, I'll buy anything. Just hang up and let me eat my supper." That's not saving faith, my friends. Saving faith is not saying, "Okay, anything to get the witnessing team out of my house." Saving faith isn't "Okay, anything to get my neighbor off my back. I'll say anything." Saving faith is far more than that.

Saving faith is profound, ongoing trust in God and His promises especially focused on Jesus Christ. The object of saving faith is the power of God, the purpose of God, the promises of God. Now I'd like you to take your hymnals and see this very clearly. If you'll look all the way to the back of your hymnals to page 875 in the section on *The Shorter Catechism*, look all the way down to the bottom of the page and to the right-hand column at Question 86: "What is faith in Jesus Christ? Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace whereby we receive and rest upon Him alone for salvation as He is offered to us in the gospel." Now that's a mouthful, and we really could spend a few weeks just digesting it. But you see that faith entails a whole soul commitment to God in Jesus Christ. You rest upon Him alone, as He's offered. You put the whole of your marbles in that basket. You put the whole of your hope in Jesus Christ, and you trust in Him alone. And then turn back a few pages to page 856. This is in the section on *The Confession of Faith*, chapter 14, section 2, in the middle of the page. And this gives you a little expansion on that definition 'by this faith.' What kind of faith? Saving faith. "A Christian believes to be true whatsoever is revealed in the word." We're going to see Paul emphasize this in verses 23 and 24. Believing what the Bible says, believing that it's for you. A Christian believes "whatsoever is revealed in the word for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acts differently upon that which each particular passage thereof contains; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and," listen closely, "embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come." And then the confession goes on to say something that Paul is going to emphasize in verse 25. "But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace." Saving faith is trust in God and in His promises. No matter what our

circumstances are, no matter what the evidence is to the contrary. That's the first thing that God teaches in answer to the question what is faith?

#### **IV. People are saved today in the same way as Abraham.**

In verses 23 and 24 he answers the second question. The question is, "Paul, so what, what does Abraham's experience have to do with me? I mean you're telling me how I'm made right with God. You take me back to this guy who's been dead for 4000 years, and you tell me about what happened in his life. What does what happened to Abraham have to do with me? What does his experience have to do with us?" Well Paul basically gives you the answer in this. He says, "The story of Abraham's justification by faith was written for us." It's not the only time that Paul says that, by the way. He says that in 1 Corinthians 10, verse 11, when he's talking about the Exodus experience of Israel. He says, "That happened and was written for us." What is Paul saying when he's saying this? People are saved. They are justified today the same way that Abraham was, by faith.

I want you to pause for a moment, looking at verses 23 and 24, and just thinking about the ways that our faith is identical to Abraham. We're in different circumstances, we live in a different land, a different time, different technologies. There are all sorts of differences that we could point to between Abraham and ourselves. But in these three ways our faith is identical to Abraham's faith.

First of all, notice that Abraham's faith was in God. What does Paul say in verse 24? We believe in God. Those who believe in Him. Abraham believed in God. We believe in God. Well, that seems fairly simple. You say why bring up that point? Because there are a lot of people today that think that you're saved by just believing hard enough. They think that your faith saves you in this sense. That you have faith in your faith. You just have enough faith, if you have the right kind of faith, then you'll be saved. We think we're saved in the believing, that the believing is the thing that saves us. But Abraham's faith is focused away from himself. It's not looking inside himself, "If I just believe hard enough, if I believe right enough." His faith is focused towards God. He's not trusting in denial, he's not trusting in positive thinking, he's not trusting in his own strategies or attitudes, he's trusting in God. And so Paul says in verse 24, "That it is in Him. Those who believe in Him." So Abraham believes in God, looks away from himself. We believe in God and look away from ourselves.

Secondly, notice again, that Abraham believed in the power of God. He believed in God's omnipotence. Look at what Paul emphasizes in verse 24: "To whom it will be credited as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus, our Lord from the dead. We believe in the omnipotence of God. We believe in the all powerfulness of God because He raised our Lord Jesus from the dead. Abraham believed in the power of God, we believe in the power of God to raise the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. And Abraham believed in God's promise. We believe in God's

promise.

Notice again this phrase. "Those who believe in Him who raised Jesus." The death and resurrection of Jesus was God's stratagem for the fulfillment of his what to you? The fulfillment of His promise to you. His promise of what? His promise of the forgiveness of sins. Abraham believes in the promise of God. He'll be the father of many nations. We believe in the promise of God. He will forgive all who trust in His Son. Your faith is the same kind of faith as Abraham. You believe in God, you believe in His power, you believe in His promise. We don't put faith in faith, we don't put faith in self, we don't put faith in positive thinking. We put faith in God who is all-powerful and who promises us forgiveness in Jesus Christ. People are saved today the same way that Abraham was saved, by faith.

## **V. Who or what is the focus of our faith?**

Finally, look at verse 25. Third question. "Okay, I know what faith is now, I know why Abraham's story is relevant to me, but what ought to be the focus of my faith? Where specifically, Paul, do you want me to look?"

Maybe I should put the question this way: Who ought to be the focus of my faith? Paul tells us here in verse 25 that faith looks to God's promise accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. So we look to the promise of God for the forgiveness of sins, but we look to that promise as it is accomplished in Jesus Christ. So faith looks to Christ. I know whom I have believed. Not, I know that I have believed. Not, I know what I believed. Not, I know when I believed. But, I know whom I have believed. We look to Christ. We are justified by faith. That faith has to be directed to Jesus Christ. It is in union with Christ that we are justified. As we trust in Christ, we are united to Him, and His righteousness is credited to us. The righteousness of Christ is the righteousness whereby we are justified. It's not our own goodness that justifies us. It's Christ's goodness credited to our account, as we trust in Him that justifies us. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the great event that accomplishes our forgiveness of sins and our being counted and declared as righteous before God, and it is through Jesus' intercession for us that we come to stand in the presence of God, in the grace of justification. We look to the promise accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins. That's where we look. The focus of our faith is upon Jesus Christ.

And that's the challenge for every one of us today. For the believer to continue to focus the hope and the ground of his life in the work of Jesus Christ. For the unbeliever to realize his problem, sin. There may be a lot of other problems out there pestering your life; bank accounts with no money in them; bad business deals; IRS back taxes; family problems. But the biggest problem you have is, however, is separation from God, alienation from Him because of your sin. That

problem is only remedied, completely remedied in Jesus Christ. You look to Him, you believe in Him, you commit yourself to Him, you rest in Him, you receive Him as your risen Lord, and you find total peace with God, forgiveness of sins. May God deal with your hearts and work that truth in them. Let us pray.

Our Lord and our God, if we come to this place as Your children, refresh us with this glorious truth. If we come to this place, as those who are rebels and orphans not knowing the saving embrace of Christ or what it means to be a member of His family, we pray that You would show us our sin, and then show us the Savior, and then by Your divine grace enable us to believe. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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