

Abraham: Paul's Pattern of Saving Faith

Romans 4:17-25

Come and Rest Your Hope in the One who raised Jesus from the dead.

LTS: Rom. 15:1-13

I invite you to take your bible and turn with me to Romans 4:17-25

Read Rom 4:17-25

... 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

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."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.²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.²² That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness."²³ But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone,²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

It has been a few weeks since we last gathered around Paul's letter to the Romans, but we don't have time this morning to retrace the path we have traveled so far. If you are interested, you can find the previous sermons on our website.

Today, then, Paul would have us focus on Abraham one more time. He has brilliantly and convincingly used the story of Abraham as the biblical ground for the Doctrine of Justification by faith. But what exactly was Abraham's faith like?

That's an important question because Paul is going to end this chapter by inviting us – like Abraham - to rest our hope – our faith - in the One who raised Jesus from the dead. If we want a Justification like his we must have a faith like his. So, what kind of faith did Abraham have? This is what we are going to learn in Rom. 4:17-25

Now, this passage easily breaks down into three parts. We are going to consider

I. The Root of Abraham's Faith. (17)

II The Resilience of Abraham's Faith (18-22)

III. The Result of Abraham's Faith (23-25)

First, let's consider...

I. The Root of Abraham's Faith. (17)

1. Notice how verse 17 begins. Paul says, "As it is written, I have made you the father of many nations." You may remember that Abraham's original name was Abram which means Father of Many." Nevertheless, when God called him out of Ur of the Chaldees, Abram had how many children?

Well, he had exactly NONE

2. We know from our recent study of Gen. 15 that God promised Abram a son from whom would come many peoples and nations. Nevertheless, after waiting for nearly 40 years, he still did not have a son. Abram became wealthy and he was very well known. People would come to him, pitch their tents near his for protection.

3. Donald Gray Barnhouse, in his famous commentary on Romans, said regarding Abraham,

It must have happened 100 times, 1,000 times, and each time more galling than the time before. “O, father of many! Congratulations! And how many do you have? And the answer was so humiliating to Abram: “None”. And many a time there must have been the half-concealed snort of humor at the incongruity of the name and the fact that there were no children to back up such a name. Abram must have steeled himself for the question and the reply, and have hated the situation with great bitterness

Father of many? Father of none. ...

He had multitudes of cattle and multitudes of servants, but he had no children, and his name was “Father of many.”¹

4. it seems clear to me that God was setting things up in such a way that in the end, when he would fulfill his promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age, it would be an indisputable act of God – a miracle. And that’s the kind of faith Abram had. Namely, a faith that believed that Yahweh is a Powerful God and that everything he does is holy, righteous and good – therefore He can be trusted no matter the present circumstance.

- A. This is the kind of faith that God calls for when we are blind to his sovereign purposes by the pain and perplexities of life.
- B. More importantly, it is the kind of faith by which a sinner receives salvation; a faith that says, “God, you have promised to give eternal life to all who believe in what they cannot see; namely, that Jesus died in my place and that his sacrifice is more than sufficient to wash away all my sin and justify me in your sight so I can be forever reconciled to you. This is your promise. And I believe it with all heart.
- C. That’s the kind of faith Abram had. And it is the kind of faith we all had on the day we first believed, and the kind of faith that abides with us until we see him face to face.

5. Now, notice how Paul describes God here (17). He calls Him the God who gives life to the dead. And isn’t that our great hope? You see, God is unlike the idols of the Gentiles. They have eyes that can’t see, ears that can’t hear, and feet that can’t walk. But the God of Abraham – the true and only God – (17) is a God of power. How powerful is He? He is powerful enough to raise the dead.

Now, the bible speaks of different kinds of death and God is powerful over them all.

¹ John MacArthur, *Romans 1-8, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991

- A. First, He is powerful enough to raise sinners from spiritual death. What does that mean? Well, listen to how Paul describes people who are lost and without God in this world. He says, (Eph. 2:1) “You were dead in your trespasses and sins. IN other words, you were separated from God and unresponsive to God. That’s spiritual death. God is powerful over spiritual death.
- B. Second, He is powerful physical death. We understand that, right? I mean, if the Lord tarries, all of us are going to die physically. For example, Both sets of my grandparents have physically died. Moreover, both of my parents have died, and so have my wife’s parents and grandparents.
- C. The bible says that “It is appointed for man to die once and after that, judgment. But for those who have been reconciled to God- who have been justified by faith- to be absent from the body is to be... what? Present with the Lord. And one day, as Paul teaches in 1 Cor 15, our bodies will be resurrected, like a seed that is put into the ground and then returns bearing fruit. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness and raised in power” (15:42-43).
- D. And by the way, we know that Abraham believed that God has the power to raise the dead, because of how he trusted the Lord after Isaac was born and became a teenager, and God told Abraham to take the boy up the mountain and sacrifice him on the alter. And Abraham trusted God and obeyed. And just before the knife plunged into the heart of Isaac, his only son, God stopped him.
- E. What kind of faith is that? In what did Abraham put his trust when he led his son to the alter? Well, the author of Hebrews tells us (Heb. 11:17)

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,¹⁸ of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”

6. What kind of faith motivated Abraham to obey God even though it looked as if obedience to God would mean the death of his son?) The author of Hebrews answers...

(11:19) “He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead. That’s the kind of faith Abraham possessed. A faith that believed God could raise the dead.”

7. And that faith was NOT hypothetical. Paul tells us (19) that when Abraham considered his own body... and when he considered the barrenness of Sara’s womb, the only possible conclusion was that they were as good as dead in terms of their ability to procreate, “since he was about 100 years old! So, we must understand that Abraham believed God could and would

“resurrect” or restore the parts of their physical bodies that were as good as dead and needed to be alive and well in order to give birth to their own child. And that is exactly what God did.

8. But Paul wants to remind us that raising the physically dead is no big deal for God. When he raises people from the dead, he expends ZERO effort. Paul says (17) God is so powerful that He is able (listen carefully) “to call into existence things that did not exist.” This is creation language, right? The very first words of the bible are, “In the beginning God create the heavens and the earth.”

9. And how did God create the heavens and the earth? By the power of His word. He spoke, and things that did not exist before suddenly burst into existence.

10. Listen, beloved, Abraham and Sarah had a big problem, and at times it seemed bigger than God. But they were wrong. From the perspective of Him who calls into existence things that do not exist, it was a very small thing. What kind of faith did Abraham have? He believed that the God who promised would be faithful to perform exactly as He had promised.

11. Friends, do you have such faith? I mean, do you truly believe in a personal and supernatural God who is the Giver and sustainer of life? Have you entrusted all your hope for reconciliation with God to the One who raises the dead? Abraham did. And he became the father of all who believe.

12. You see, when God promised Abraham that he would have a son in his old age and that this son would become a multitude of nations, Abraham knew how to respond because he knew God. He understood things about God and, he hung his whole life on what is true about God. And that’s what Saving, justifying faith looks like.

13. Well, that’s the substance of Abraham’s faith. He believed the seemingly impossible promise of God because he believed in the limitless power and faithfulness of God.

14. Second, Paul reveals...

II The Resilience of Abraham's Faith (18-22)

1. Look at v. 18. How did Abraham respond when God told him he would have a son in his old age? Paul says: “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.”*”

2. The little phrase “hope against hope” suggests a tension between two realities that are invariably true; namely, the reality that God is always faithful to His promises, and the reality that husbands and wives in their 90’s NEVER give birth to children!

3. But nothing is impossible with God. Because Abraham was convinced that God is powerful enough to “do all of His holy will” He believed.

3. Granted, when Abraham heard the news (Gen. 17:17) that this nearly 100 years old couple was going to give birth to their own child, he burst out laughing, but it was apparently the laughter of unexpected, overwhelming joy and not the mocking laughter of unbelief.

4. How do we know that? We know it because his belief in God’s promise, that he would be the father of many nations, was (according to Gen. 15:6) the means by which Abraham was counted righteous by God.

5. Nevertheless, we should not suppose that Abraham’s faith was never tested. Paul says (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. ²⁰ No unbelief [apistia] made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

6. Now we need to think about this a little more deeply, because we know the story of Abraham. We know that his faith was NOT perfect.

A. Think about the 2 times he lied about Sarah, putting her terrible danger to protect himself?

B. What about that time when He and Sarah took matters into their own hands having concluded the only way they would ever have a son of their own was to send Abraham into Sarah’s maid? To be sure, a son was born by that union, but not the son God promised.

7. Did Paul make a mistake here when he said Abraham’s faith never wavered? No. I think it’s safe to say that even though there were ups and downs; even though all those years of waiting must have been difficult. Even though there were seasons of temptation and terrible sin, Paul is looking at Abraham’s life as a whole. In the end, Abraham’s faith in God’s promise persevered.

8. You see, beloved, justifying faith is NOT a faith that never doubts. No one has a perfect faith. But ultimately, saving faith perseveres in the end.

9. Now listen carefully: When God looks at the lives of his children, he doesn't focus on all the bad stuff we have done. He focuses on the faith and perseverance that he has empowered you to have by his sustaining grace.

10. And isn't this what justification is all about? It's not that we achieve or earn righteousness, but that we are counted righteous by an act of free grace. He considers us righteous. In fact, when we get to Rom 5:20, Paul will tell us that "where sin abounds grace super-abounds!"

God justifies the ungodly.

11. If you doubt this, consider of the saints who are named in Hebrews 12 who are presented as models of faith. Think of Samson, and Barrak, and Jephthah! etc. O beloved, when we look at these men We see their faults, but God sees their faith. We see our sin, but God sees our savior. I don't know about you, but this does something wonderful to my soul.

- I know what a sinner I am.
- I know how unfaithful I can be – how unfaithful I have actually been!
- But because of the grace of justification, when God looks at me, He sees the righteousness of Christ imputed to me by grace, through faith.

12. This is what the faith of Abraham was like. It wasn't a perfect faith. It was a faith that was sometimes weak. But, if Abraham was anything like me, he became stronger as he battled the temptation to doubt God's promises – God's word. When he considered his own body and the barrenness of Sarah's womb, he had to fight for faith in God's promise. And as he fought the temptation to doubt, his faith grew stronger. And God was glorified.

13. And God is always glorified when we fight the fight of faith in our battle against temptation and sin. You see, Abraham's faith was not perfect, but it was a resilient faith.

So we have seen:

I. The Root of Abraham's Faith. (17)

II The Resilience of Abraham's Faith (18-22)

Now finally, Paul shows us...

III. The Result of Abraham's Faith (23-25)

Read v. 23-25

But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone,²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

1. The clear message here is that this amazing Gospel of Justification by faith is not only for Abraham, but for all who come to God with a faith like His – a faith that trusts in nothing other than God’s promise that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is God’s only means of salvation.
2. O my brothers and sisters, is this truth still glorious to your ears? I trust it is. But there remains one more thing that we need to consider. Paul says that the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone,²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and (listen carefully) raised for our justification.
3. Now, we understand what he means by “delivered up for our trespasses”, right? Paul is pointing to Jesus’s voluntary execution on the cross in our place as our substitute. “The wages of sin is death, therefore Jesus died in our place. But what is to be made of the second statement (25) “he was raised for our justification.” What does that mean?
4. We might think that the resurrection is about Jesus’ justification. In other words, we might think that Jesus’ resurrection was about demonstrating to the world that He was indeed the holy, harmless and undefiled Son of God; that he was everything he claimed to be in his life and ministry on earth. To be sure, that is one reason why he arose from the dead. But that’s not what Paul says here. Rather, he says, Jesus was raised for our justification. What does that mean?
5. R.C. Sproul was very helpful to me on this question this week. You see, it is appropriate and necessary on occasion to understand that sinners are not merely sinners but people who are in deep in debt. We see this in Matthew 18 where the unforgiving servant owed to the king a debt he could never hope to pay.
6. If we are going to understand Paul rightly, we need to know the difference between a Moral debt and a Monetary debt. In order to clarify this distinction Sproul offers an illustration.

A boy goes to the ice cream parlor and orders a double dip ice cream cone. The owner of the store then makes the ice cream cone, hands it to the boy and says, “That will be two dollars.”²

At that moment the boy’s face begins to show obvious concern because he only has one dollar. Now he has a problem. He is indebted to the owner of the ice cream store, and he has no way to pay. Now what? Well, I suppose if I were in line behind him, I would do what any of us would do. I would reach into my wallet and provide the dollar that the boy needs to set things right.

Now, here’s the question: Is the owner of the Ice cream store obligated to accept the dollar? The answer is YES. Why? Well because the debt is a monetary debt and the U.S. government has stamped that dollar with the words,

“This note is legal tender for all debts, public and private.”

So, the owner of the ice cream store is, in fact, obligated to accept the dollar as the appropriate payment to settle the monetary debt.

But let’s change the story just a bit. This time the boy runs into the ice cream parlor, dives behind the counter, creates a double-dip ice cream cone as fast as he can, and then bolts out the door! But it just so happens that a policeman is just outside the door who sees the boy and hears the store-owner crying out “Stop! Thief!”

The policeman then grabs the boy by his collar, forces the boy back into the store and asks the owner, “Is this the thief you were crying out about?” And he says, Absolutely! He stole two dips of ice cream, - not to mention the cone!

At that point, I reach into my wallet and produce two dollars and hand it to the store owner, saying, let’s just pretend this never happened.” Is the store owner obligated to accept the money to pay the debt? No. Why? Because the debt is not primarily a monetary debt. It was a moral debt.

The policeman says to the store owner, “Sir, you don’t have to accept that money. This boy has broken the law. He is guilty petty larceny. Would you like to press charges? The man has every right to press charges and is

² This illustration is adapted from R.C. Sproul, *Faith Triumphs Over Trouble – Part 1; Audio sermon*, (2007)

under NO obligation what-so-ever to accept my vicarious payment and cancel the boy's debt.

If he is a gracious person, and merciful he might accept the substitutionary payment on the boy's behalf, but he is not obligated because it was NOT a monetary debt, but a moral one. When there is a moral debt, the offended party is not under obligation to accept the payment of a substitute on behalf of the guilty.

7. Christ, however, Jesus lays down his life for His sheep on the cross. He offers Himself in His perfect righteousness and his perfect innocence, taking upon himself the sin of his people and offers his death to the Father.

8. If Jesus died on the cross and stayed dead, you would have NO justification. But when the Father raises the Son from the dead He says to the world, I accept this payment for these moral debtors who cannot possibly pay.

9. So, the resurrection of Jesus is not simply for His own vindication, but it is for our justification. It is God's demonstration to his unjust people that He accepts the payment in full for the moral debt that has been encored by us.

10. My friend, how will you respond to this grace? Your debt can be canceled this very day. All of your sins can be forgiven. The Son has offered payment in full. The Father has accepted the transaction. Will you believe? Will you receive? I pray you will... to your everlasting

Come and Rest Your Hope in the One who raised Jesus from the dead.