

Sermons through

Romans

The Certainty of Faith

Romans 4:16

With Study Questions

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Therefore *it is* of faith that *it might be* according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (Romans 4:16-17).

Introduction

Faith has become such a flimsy word. We speak of a “leap of faith” to express what we do when we’ve come to the end of rational thinking. I recall, as a younger Christian (and even well into maturity as a Christian), a willingness not to require of my religious life the same sort of critical thinking I would apply to other areas of my life. When it came to economic decisions, or career choices or personal health I would run all options through a severe grid of reason. But when it came to faith in God and its attending interactions of ethics, history, science, sociology, politics, etc., I would not impose my fallible ability to exercise logic upon an infallible God.

Now as humble as that might sound, it became a source of great consternation and even destruction, not only to me, but to the church in general. Stadiums, auditoriums and churches full of people who will not engage in critical thought (in the name of spirituality) become fodder for religious charlatans who are counting on their listeners checking their brains in at the door. The critical thinker is confronted with Isaiah 55:8—**“God’s thoughts are not your thoughts.”** When God says His **“thoughts are not your thoughts,”** He is not suggesting that He is entirely ‘other’ in His definition of truth. If so, truth wouldn’t mean anything to us. He is rather proclaiming His righteousness against our wickedness—the way the thoughts of a righteous king would be distinct from the thoughts of an evil king.

Because of the church's willingness to operate with this brand of thinking (this is not merely a modern problem) there was a great cultural divide in the 17th and 18th centuries brought about by the so-called 'Age of Enlightenment.' It was the age of reason where ideas of faith and tradition were put to the test. Scientific breakthroughs emboldened philosophers such as Spinoza, Locke and Voltaire to spread their philosophical wings.

But the Age of Enlightenment or Reason was not merely about men seeking to think clearly; it was a celebration of man's elevation to being the source of profound and absolute insight. Accessing truth now would require a buggy ride, not to the church, but to the university.

The philosophers and professors were now the pastors—but the source document of their exegesis would not be the Scriptures but their own personal reflections. Voltaire was one of the great critics of the church, but it didn't keep him from constructing his own pulpit. We see an example when he wrote:

It does not require great art, or magnificently trained eloquence, to prove that Christians should tolerate each other. I, however, am going further: I say that we should regard all men as our brothers. What? The Turk my brother? The Chinaman my brother? The Jew? The Siam? Yes, without doubt; are we not all children of the same father and creatures of the same God?

This was Voltaire's own version of the COEXIST bumper sticker. To whatever extent that above statement is accurate is not the point here, one must recognize the ethical challenge in it. There is an 'ought' to Voltaire's words—and even an appeal to God. But the question must be asked, how does one, by pure reason or empiricism, arrive at the conclusion that we "should tolerate each other" at all? The atheist, Marxist despots (Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Mengistu Mariam of Ethiopia, Pol Pot of Cambodia, Kim Sung of North Korea, Milosevic of Serbia) of the 20th century certainly didn't arrive at that conclusion through pure reason or science as they slaughtered tens of millions.

One thing we learned from the Age of Enlightenment is how to more efficiently kill innocent people while developing a secular philosophy to justify it. Secular philosophy and carnality are a formidable couple—a quick visit to almost any university today sadly proving the point.

Why the long introduction?

I mention these things because the church, in an effort to answer the assailing forces of secular criticism has, perhaps unwittingly, utilized the very methodology of the ungodly. We think we can philosophically or empirically **“answer fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes” (Proverbs 26:5)** when we may very well be ignoring the admonition to **“answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself” (Proverbs 26:4)**. When we use the “Age of Enlightenment” approach to argue for our system of beliefs, we have invited the fox into the henhouse, which will soon be inhabited by only foxes.

And, sadly, our fear or at least undue respect, for methods and conclusions of secularism can color our approach to Scripture. Perhaps this can be observed in the modern affinity for rejecting six sequential 24 hour creation days.

Even the radio station that airs our sermons recognizes that problem with its slogan, “The intersection of faith and reason.” The only downside of the slogan is that it implies that reason has its own freeway that may, at some point, intersect with faith. Or that faith, at some point, is not reasonable. I don’t think the Apostle Paul would allow for such thinking. It is in Christ, and I might add, Christ alone that **“all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”** are hidden (Colossians 2:3).

One thing the great tyrants of history were able to accomplish was to convince others that they knew what they were talking about and could accomplish their particular task. Hitler was elected! Sadly, history is one long ballad of people who were solidly convinced that others had their best interests at heart and had the chops to deliver the goods. As one gets older and reflects upon the history of one’s own life and the history of the world, it becomes quite obvious that those who can speak with certainty

and fulfill the certainty of which they speak are on the short list (one or three is you're speaking of substance or person). The Apostle Paul would have us ever turn our hearts toward the only true source of certainty.

Therefore *it is* of faith that *it might be* according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed (Romans 4:16a).

A Sure Promise

We spoke last time of the “**promise**” that Abraham and his seed would be “**heir of the world**” so I won't speak much about it here. Suffice it to say that God has made a promise to restore through Christ that which was lost in Adam. Paul makes the point that to be included in that glorious restoration, at its heart, means to be justified before a holy God via faith in the person and work of Christ.

Again here I risk veering from Paul's point, but from a ministerial perspective it is difficult to keep ones foot on the exegetical gas when you see the phrase “**so that the promise might be sure.**” There is a certainty attached to faith. So far from faith being a traditional wet noodle sucked up and spit out by Voltaire, it is faith which digs its moorings into the solid Rock.

The word used by Paul for “**sure**” (*bebaian*) speaks of something that can be relied upon not to disappoint.¹ It is used to describe an anchor:

We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain,²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:19, 20).

¹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.) (172). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Peter uses the word to describe the word of God itself:

And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed (*bebaioteron*), to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts (2 Peter 1:19).

There is a certainty to our faith. Though it is immaterial, not something that can be tested in a laboratory and it is not something that the natural man will arrive at through his own wisdom or philosophy:

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (1 Corinthians 1:21).

True faith, a faith in “**Jesus Christ and Him crucified**” (1 Corinthians 2:2), is deeper, more certain and inescapably true. I sit with my secular friends and they speak of incontrovertible facts, whether it’s the age of the universe, the origin of man or their systems of ethics which flow from these things. Interviews needn’t last long before it becomes apparent how false the claim of incontrovertible is. But what they can’t seem to shake is an inherent knowledge that there is a God. It may make them feel guilty, angry and they may scream in vehement disbelief. The only thing truly incontrovertible is the denial of something they know to be true.

So when the apostle tells us that the promise is “**sure**” (even a promise which, as we shall see next time involves giving life to the dead) he is not asking us to check our brains in at the door or to believe something against all sound reason. He is rather affirming that of all things in our human experience as believers, there is nothing more solid than the faith (a faith no doubt checkered with human hesitation) we have in Christ and the promises attached to Him and His victory over sin and death.

According to Grace

And why is that? Why is faith so solid? Because it is really not the faith itself that makes it sure. What does the passage teach? **“...it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure.”** Faith is certain because it is according to grace. Among Christians who might designate themselves as Reformed, grace is a very precious noun. True grace is a one-way street, perhaps more like a living, full, powerful and eternal waterfall. It embraces, cleanses, directs and irresistibly escorts us to our glorious destination.

True grace is not about the works or man, the ability of man or the choices of man—though it will have its affect upon all those things and more. True grace recognizes the power of God, the victory of Christ and a hope that does not lie within us but in a righteousness that is nor our own. True saving faith is according to God’s grace. So even though we may wrongly define it, be weak in our assurance of it and from time to time live as if we don’t have it, because it comes from the grace of God, it simply will never leave us. The Westminster Confession XIV, 3 says it nicely:

This faith is different in degrees, weak or strong; (Heb. 5:13–14, Rom. 4:19–20, Matt. 6:30, Matt. 8:10) **may be often and many ways assailed, and weakened, but gets the victory:** (Luke 22:31–32, Eph. 6:16, 1 John 5:4–5) **growing up in many to the attainment of a full assurance, through Christ,** (Heb. 6:11–12, Heb. 10:22) **who is both the author and finisher of our faith.** (Heb. 12:2).²

² *The Westminster confession of faith.* 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Questions for Study

1. What are different ways you've heard faith defined? What are the strengths or weaknesses of these definitions (page 2)?
2. What is meant when God says "His thoughts are not our thoughts" (page 2)?
3. Is "reason" important for Christians? What was the "Age of Reason (Enlightenment)" and how did/does it affect the church/the world (pages 2, 3)?
4. How have Christians be unduly influenced by the Age of Enlightenment (page 4)?
5. Review what the "promise" given to Abraham was. Of what did it consist (page 5)?
6. How does the Apostle Paul speak of faith (pages 5, 6)?
7. Why is faith so certain (pages 6, 7)?