

Sermons through

# Romans

In the Presence of God

*Romans 4:17*

*With Study Questions*

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In the Presence of God

*Romans 4:17*

**(as it is written, “*I have made you a father of many nations*”) in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did (Romans 4:16-17).**

## **Introduction**

Throughout the course of our normal mundane routine we engage in what might be called standard dialogue. We tell people where we’re going, what we plan to do, when we will be back and so forth. Sometimes we succeed in following through and sometimes we fail. We may not call it failure because setbacks happen. I have friends who I am quite confident will not be on time. Others who have a 30-50% chance of not showing up at all.

But if I were to ask any of these people (or if I were asked) to promise to be at a certain place at a certain time (after perhaps an awkward pause, wondering why I would make such a request) they would likely do one of two things: Not make such a promise knowing their own character, or make the promise resulting in a greater likelihood of showing up on time.

Every child knows that a promise is a precious thing. That they made a promise, or that a promise was made to them, ups the ante of any given circumstance. An oath has been made, perhaps even a vow! We seldom make oaths or vows. Such sacred activities are generally reserved for our weddings, or vows as a church member or officer. And this makes sense since we may consider many extenuating or mitigating circumstances which might justifiably cause us to be late for lunch—things which might overrule our mundane agreement to be on time (something as simple as a very serious conversation from which we could not be responsibly walk away). But when a vow is made to God or an oath to man, we are saying that that activity will take precedent over virtually all things. We are saying “I will do it!” or “I will be there!”

Now a highly significant aspect of what it means to be a Christian revolves around this idea of promise. And it is not so much our promises to God or each other (though we should certainly make and seek to keep those promises), but it is God’s promise to us. God has made a promise. We often use the word ‘covenant’. A covenant is a solemn and binding agreement. But the author of Hebrews, at least to some extent, sees covenant as synonymous with promise.

**For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, <sup>14</sup> saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.” <sup>15</sup> And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise (Hebrews 6:13-15).**

God had made a covenant with Abraham (Acts 3:25) which the author of Hebrews calls a promise.

### **What, and to Whom, is the Promise?**

We might, at this point, ask ourselves what the promise is and to whom is the promise made? Has God made you a promise? What is it? And is He keeping it? Because of the way these questions have been asked and answered, it has caused many to question the very faithfulness of God.

There is, in my opinion (and not only my opinion, but the opinion of the history of Christendom) a great error wafting through evangelicalism when it comes to at least one aspect of God’s promise—an aspect of God’s promise that He has been faithfully keeping. This error comes in the popular understanding of the initial promise given to Abraham.

**Now the Lord had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, From your family And from your father’s house, To a land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup>I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. <sup>3</sup>I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).**

There appears to be three aspects of this promise: From Abraham will come a great nation; God will bless those who bless that nation and curse those who curse that nation; in Abraham all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Who is this nation that God promised to Abraham? Peter, writing to Christians, writes this:

**But you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; <sup>10</sup> who once *were* not a people but *are* now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy (1 Peter 2:9, 10).**

The “**nation**” are those called out of the darkness into His marvelous light...those who have obtained the mercy found in Christ.

The blessing we read of in Genesis 12:3 is described by the Apostle Paul:

**And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” <sup>9</sup> So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:8, 9).**

The blessing of Genesis 12:3 is justification by faith; that the gospel would be preached and believed throughout the world. But it is the middle promise “**I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you**” that is isolated from the other two grossly misunderstood. I think an appropriate New Testament statement made by Jesus explains this aspect of the promise:

**And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).**

This is not God protecting a geo-political entity. It is God’s promise to preserve His church. The Westminster Confession states it nicely:

**The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; (1 Cor. 13:12, Rev. 2-3, Matt. 13:24-30, 47) and some have so degenerated as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. (Rev. 18:2, Rom. 11:18-**

**22). Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth to worship God according to His will. (Matt. 16:18, Ps. 72:17, Ps. 102:28, Matt. 28:19-20)<sup>1</sup>**

The nation is the church, the heart of the church is justification by faith and the promise contains God's preserving power throughout the ages.

## **A Land Without Churches**

For many the church is an enemy, for others (even Christians) it is viewed as expendable. It is difficult to imagine a land without churches, where there is no notion or presentation of the law and gospel of Christ, where hope and goodness are dictated by human nature, wisdom and ingenuity. It is my understanding that Disney, by design, had no church on Main Street. It could be the happiest place on earth apart from Christ. But even my children understand that the depth of happiness offered by the fantasy and adventures of Disney would rapidly lose their interest—eternity in Disneyland would be hell.

I was once told that the presentations of Hollywood were horrifying to R.J. Rushdoony because he saw in them an attempt to create a world where God was absent. To the shallow thinker this may be preferable—like teenagers excited to find their parents will be leaving on a vacation. The house will be at their disposal! But even a shallow thinking teenager would recognize the horror of finding that the parents are gone for good.

What happened in the Old Testament church and was making headway in the New Testament church was the church, as a community of people participating in certain rituals, had inherent value in the eyes of God. That this community which would perhaps do good deeds, or perhaps not (perhaps their very deeds were a stench to God) would either de-emphasize or dismiss altogether the need of justification by faith in Christ to be a church at all.

It is worth noting in our current culture how churches which dismiss the central doctrines of the Christian faith amplify works as the primary mission of the church (many of the works falling in

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<sup>1</sup> *The Westminster confession of faith*. 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

lockstep with an unbiblical social agenda). As the confession teaches, many churches so degenerate as lose their status as a legitimate Church of Christ and become, as Jesus taught, synagogues of Satan. We might ask ourselves how is it a church descends into a synagogue of Satan? The answer, generally speaking, is one person or one doctrine at a time. So a community of faith will only remain a community of faith if the individuals in that community remain faithful.

Not to downplay the importance of word, sacrament, discipline and all the other elements that comprise a faithful community, but if there is not true saving faith in the individuals of the community, all of those elements become a sort of Disneyland storefront Christianity—a conglomeration of meaningless religious activity. Even worse, the entire show of religiosity becomes a sort of ironic and pathetic drama with the cast members mocking the very God who will hold them in derision and judgment.

## **Is Abraham Our Father?**

It is in light of this what we might ask ourselves if Abraham truly is our father—and by this I mean do we have the faith in God’s covenant promise fulfilled in Christ that Abraham had? Or to put it Paul’s way, how are we viewed **“in the presence of Him?”** How does God see us/you/me? We may look fine sitting in church today—perhaps even a member in good standing. But how do we look when gazed upon by the searching eyes of a righteous and omniscient Judge?

It makes one to think of Peter in all his bravado—willing to die for Jesus (Matthew 26:35), willing to take on the Romans armies for Jesus (John 18). But when it got right down to it:

**But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about.” And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. <sup>61</sup> And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.” <sup>62</sup> And he went out and wept bitterly (Luke 22:60-62).**

Christ, even in His physical body, **“turned and looked at Peter”** resulting in an utter breakdown for the great, brave apostle. Perhaps Peter there began to develop a superior appreciation for his inability to stand before a holy God.

## **Who Gives Life**

Paul then offers attributes of God **“who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did.”** So the faithful participation in this community is not likened to the mere joining of a club or organization. Is not merely having the wisdom or presence of mind to pick the correct social or cultural guild. No, the faithful participation—to stand before a God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things which do not exist as though they did, requires His giving of the very life that is required.

Paul may be using these two actions to describe the Jew and gentile. The Jew who was a member of the covenant community but dead in sin is made alive, and the gentile was altogether excluded from the covenant community then called to exist in it. Either way, it is quite remarkable that Paul seems to compare regeneration (being born again) to creation itself. Not only were we dead in our sins, we might think of our being new creatures in Christ as a sort of creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).

This brings us to a topic in the discussion that levels all opposition. For not even the pagan gods claim to bring into existence that which does not exist. And all the empiricists laid end to end come face to face with their own dusty humanity when pondering the beginning and something springing from nothing. It is necessary to our reality, yet inexplicable apart from an eternal self-existent God from whom all things flow.

But let us not lose the point, that the power necessary for creation is the power necessary for re-creation in Christ. The instrument of that power being faith in Christ and the subsequent imputation of the righteousness of Christ **“who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification” (Romans 4:25).** Calvin explains:

**We have here also a type and a pattern of the call of us all, by which our beginning is set before our eyes, not as to our first birth, but as to the hope of future life, — that when we are called by**

**the Lord we emerge from nothing; for whatever we may seem to be we have not, no, not a spark of anything good, which can render us fit for the kingdom of God.** <sup>2</sup>

## Questions for Study

1. How is a promise different than the normal things we may say we'll do or not do (page 2)?
2. What is a covenant and why is it so important for Christians (pages 2, 3)?
3. Discuss the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. To whom does it apply? What is its heart? What is a great misunderstanding today about that covenant (pages 3-5)?
4. Would the world be better or worse without the church? Explain and defend your answer (page 5).
5. How do churches descend into synagogues of Satan (pages 5, 6)?
6. Is Abraham your father in the faith? When God sees you, what does He see (page 6)?
7. Why does Paul mention God's power to raise the dead and bring into existence that which does not exist (page 7)?

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 4:17). Albany, OR: Ages Software.