

How Faith Lives on a Promise

Romans 4:18-25

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Today we continue our Romans series in chapter 4. Romans 4 highlights the faith of Abraham. Why? Because if anyone was saved in the Old Testament, it was Abraham. God made promises to Abraham. Abraham obeyed in leaving Ur to go to a promised land. Abraham's faith and obedience (and some failures as well) are highlighted throughout the Old Testament. But the bottom line is that God identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Talk about being secure in your salvation. If God ever spoke and said, *I am the God of Steve DeWitt, I would say, I'm in! See you in heaven.*

So, the most saved guy in the Old Testament is Abraham. Yet, as the earlier part of the chapter highlights, even Abraham wasn't saved by obeying the Old Testament law because there was no Old Testament law in Abraham's time. That came through Moses hundreds of years later. Well then, how was Abraham saved?

"And he believed the LORD, and he [God] counted it to him [Abraham] as righteousness."
(Genesis 15:6 ESV)

The gospel message is that all sinners are saved by faith alone in Jesus and his death in our place on the cross. Even Old Testament saints couldn't earn their way to heaven by moral merits or a righteous life. Even Abraham was saved by faith alone.

But what kind of faith saves us? This is a much more complex question than you may realize. Everyone uses the word "faith" in some way. Is it possible that I could have what I think is faith and it turns out to be the kind that doesn't actually save? We want Abraham's kind of faith because we know that's the kind of faith that saves. So, what was his faith like?

"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." (Romans 4:18-25)

Of all the incredible moments in Abraham's life, this portion is dealing with God's promise that Abraham would be the progenitor of an immense family tree. God tells him in Genesis 15, *look at the stars, so shall your offspring be.* How many stars are there? What Abraham didn't realize is that God was speaking both of his physical and spiritual descendants. Billions of them.

Abraham would have thought, *Sounds great! So God, when do we begin with this whole descendants thing because my Sarah hasn't even had one yet?*

Not only is there the reality of no kids yet, but there is another complicating factor. Do you know how old Abraham was when God told him he was going to have all these descendants? 75. There was another complication. Sarah his wife was 65. What must Abraham have thought? *How's a 65-year-old woman going to give birth? Who ever heard of such a thing?* It's nearly as unheard of as a virgin giving birth, but God shows he can do that too.

This leads to the first mark of genuine faith.

Faith Trusts God's Promise Over Life's Circumstances

"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." (Romans 4:19)

This is what Paul is holding out to us. We can either live by what circumstances are saying or by what God says he will do. There's no better example of this than Abraham. You may not know the rest of this story. God promises Abraham a son and descendants when he was 75. Eleven years pass and nothing happens. Abraham is 86. Sarah is 76. Sarah is also feeling the pressure.

What do we tend to do when God doesn't seem to be coming through? We take matters into our own hands. Sarah brings her maidservant Hagar to Abraham and says, *Sleep with her and then we will have the son God promised us.* (Genesis 16:2) That sounds morally abhorrent to us, but there were cultural norms at that time which allowed for it. So, Abraham fathers a son through Hagar, named Ishmael. But that's not what God promised. He promised a son by Sarah, so Ishmael was not that son of promise.

They wait, and they wait. Thirteen more years pass. Abraham is 99 and Sarah is 89 when God once again says, *you will have a son.* (Genesis 17:16)

Have you noticed how God likes to get us in places where the only hope we have is God? I think of Gideon's army which kept getting reduced to finally only 300 who would go to war against the mighty Midianites. Or Israel marching circles around the fortress of Jericho. We see from this that God loves surprises. A 99-year-old man? An 89-year-old woman? It's hard to believe on multiple levels.

I remember years ago we had a wedding in our church that raised some eyebrows. The man was about 100 years old and he met a woman in our church who was in her mid- to upper 80s. They announced they were getting married. We all were happy and inside quietly wondering about a few things. Hundred-year-old men don't tend to get married. They certainly don't tend to become first-time fathers. But that is what happened to Abraham. Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 when Isaac was born. Let's note a few things here:

God is often slower to fulfill promises than we think he should be

To be clear, where do we find God's promises? In the Bible. He is not obligated to do what we think he should do or fulfill desires we impose on him. But whatever God promises to do, he will do. God is absolutely truthful and therefore trustworthy. He never lies. That said, we need the maturity to understand that God's timetable is often different from ours. We will think God's too slow. *He should be doing something by now.* No. God is never slow or fast, he is always exactly on time.

"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

Faith takes the long view on God's promise-keeping and doesn't question God's faithfulness by a short-term circumstance. The second is the corollary truth.

Just because God hasn't yet fulfilled a promise, doesn't mean he won't

Think of all the great men and women of the Old Testament, highlighted in Hebrews 11, who did what they did clinging to the promise of God's Messiah. They died trusting that even if the Messiah hadn't come yet, it didn't mean that he wouldn't. Why? Because God promised.

God has made many promises to us about meeting our needs, granting us strength and mercy, and not making a temptation or trial beyond our ability to endure. When we are in the cauldron of a trial we think, *any time God. Like right now!*

We must see that the pattern of God is to take us to places where our human resources can't provide or fix things. There, in the desert, when all we have is God, God is free to fulfill his promise without us taking any credit or glory.

Faith Trusts More in What God has Said Than What Life is Saying

This really is the point in Romans 4. When you are 99 years old and you still think you can impregnate your 89-year-old wife, I think it takes faith just to try! The practical reality is that Isaac was not a virgin birth. Abraham and Sarah's expression of faith was trying to get pregnant.

The faith that justifies us rests in God's promise to save all who trust in Jesus as Savior and Lord. What happens one second after you become a Christian? A lightning bolt from heaven? Do you go out and walk on water? No. Most would say they feel within them almost nothing. No halo. Nothing. What's different?

Now there is a trusting in Jesus for salvation from God's wrath. Now there is a trusting of my whole eternal destiny in God's promise that all who believe will be saved. Life's circumstances don't change. What has changed? My faith, my hope, my identity, my eternity are all bound up in this new faith in Jesus and new life in him. How do I do so? I believe the promise of God and take my stand on his reliability, trustworthiness, and faithfulness.

Faith is Convinced in God's Reliability

"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." (Romans 4:20-21)

The final clause is the key. What is faith? Being fully convinced that God is able to do what he promised. This infers not just thinking God *can*, but being convinced that God *will*.

There is a grace here. Abraham's faith is lauded, and if you didn't know better you would think he was the Mr. Incredible of faith. But wait, we look into the story and what about Hagar and Ishmael? What about Abraham thinking he would make Eliezer his servant his legal son? What can we say but that Abraham's faith was far from perfect. What does that

tell us? It tells us that Abraham was a lot like us. Maybe he didn't waver, but there was some wiggling. There was some doubt. He was human. While he believed he also wondered. I think of even Jesus who absolutely didn't waver, but that picture of him in the Garden of Gethsemane as his humanity shines forth asking God to take the cup away, "*Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.*" (Luke 22:42)

Abraham's faith is a model faith, but it is also a human faith. Clinging to the promise of God even while shaking under life's circumstances. It's OK to wonder. It's OK to wiggle. Just don't waver from a bottom line confidence that God is able to do what he promised.

Sustaining Faith Does with Life What Saving Faith Does with Jesus

"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." (Romans 4:23-25)

We begin with saving faith, for surely that is Paul's focus here. He reemphasizes that when Genesis 15 tells us that when God credited Abraham righteousness by faith, it was written down for our instruction. If even Abraham was saved by faith, then who are we to think our righteousness or moral awesomeness can save us? If Abraham was saved by faith, then so must we. Here is the promise. *It will be counted to us* [same words as Abraham] *who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord.* Abraham believed God and was justified. Paul urges us to Abraham-like faith.

By the way, who has it easier? You or Abraham? What if rather than the entire New Testament and the ongoing story of the gospel for the 2,000 years of the church, all you had was what Abraham had? *Your descendants will be like the stars and through you all nations will be blessed.* (Genesis 15:5; 17:16) That's it. All you got. All you know to trust in. Now you see how we are in such a privileged and blessed place in history as we have so much more revelation and evidence of God's trustworthiness. How? God fulfilled his Abrahamic promise. Jesus has come. The New Testament bears witness. History bears witness. The church bears witness. God's people bear witness. We have so much more than Abraham! If Abraham could trust God's promise with the little he had and be saved, might you today place your trust in what God's promise fulfilled with Jesus dying for your sins? That's where Paul goes.

"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." (Romans 4:24-25)

The essential gospel. Jesus was delivered over by the Father to mankind for mankind's sin. He was raised back to life for our justification authenticating that God's promise of salvation is true. God will declare us righteous forever if our hope, faith, and trust are in Jesus and what he did for us on the cross and in his resurrection. That is saving faith. But notice that for Abraham there is a lot of living after God makes his promise in Genesis 15. Abraham would wait 25 years for God to fulfill his promise of a son.

This is so helpful as we sometimes think there is one kind of faith that saves us and one kind of faith that sustains us. No. Not at all. It is the same kind of faith. Abraham believed, and it was credited to him as righteousness and Abraham continued to believe and it sustained him as he waited a quarter century for God to fulfill his promise.

Faith's role in the Christian life is the same. The same faith that I expressed in trusting my eternal destiny to Jesus, I continue to apply to the ongoing issues in my life. If I can trust God for the big things by faith, shouldn't I trust him for the daily things by faith?

Scripture urges us to see that God's promises include the big and the small. "*He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*" (Romans 8:32) Do you see the argument from the greater to the lesser? Friends, what are we so afraid of? What are we worrying about? God's promises are true even when life seems to call his reliability into question. That's the power of Abraham's example as there are probably no more unlikely circumstances in which God could come through than 100-year-old Abraham bearing a son by 90-year-old Sarah.

"Let us also remember, that the condition of us all is the same with that of Abraham. All things around us are in opposition to the promises of God: He promises immortality; we are surrounded with mortality and corruption: He declares that he counts us just; we are covered with sins: He testifies that he is propitious and kind to us; outward judgments threaten his wrath. What then is to be done? We must with closed eyes pass by ourselves and all things connected with us, that nothing may hinder or prevent us from believing that God is true." (John Calvin)¹

Imagine it's the dead of winter and you, for whatever reason, must cross a frozen river. You must get from one side to the other side. But you hear the ice cracking and making noises and you wonder, *will this hold me?* So, you take your first step and you hear, *crack!* You take your next step and you hear a louder *crack!* You think you feel the ice giving way and so you quickly lay down on the ice spread eagle. You slowly inch your way across, each movement terrifying you that it will be your last. You are halfway across the river and are sure you are about to die when you look over and here comes across the frozen river a concrete truck. It passes by you. The driver grins and waves and you watch it get to the other bank and go up on to the road.

What do you do? Do you remain spread eagle and crawling? No. You think, *if this ice can take the concrete truck than it certainly can handle my weight.* You stand up and walk with confidence to the other side.

What is Romans 4 teaching? The ice is the power and promises of God. The cracking is the fearful sounds and terrors of life all around us. The concrete truck is Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. If God's promise can hold up the weight of our eternal salvation, then should I be able to trust him in the cracking trials of life, in the scary health moments, in the parenting trials, the job loss, the relational pains, the cracking sounds of the uncertainties of life?

Faith sees God's faithfulness to his promise in Scripture and in his Son and applies the same promise-trusting faith to the daily struggle of life. This fights our fears and allows us to stand up, brush off the snow and ice, and to walk forward in life confident that while I may tremble on the ice, the ice will never tremble under me.

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¹ John Calvin as quoted by Douglas J. Moo, *Romans: New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, p. 1132.

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