



THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Our modern, materialistic world does not regard faith to be a valuable commodity. People feel that the only things that are real are those that we can detect with our five senses. The result is that we tend to think that faith is a matter of psyching ourselves up to accept improbable facts that are hard, if not impossible, to believe. Some think that faith is actually self-deception—believing what we know to be untrue.

But in the Scriptures, faith is regarded in a very different light. David Roper writes that faith is the capacity to look beyond the seen to the unseen world of reality where the invisible God is at work:

There is...another realm of reality—more actual, more factual, more substantial than anything we can see, hear, touch, taste, smell in this world. It exists all around us—not out there somewhere... Faith is the means by which we gain access to that invisible world... Faith is to the spiritual realm what the five senses are to the natural. It is the means by which we grasp spiritual reality and bring it into the realm of our experience.¹

“Faith,” says the writer of Hebrews, “gives substance to things that are not seen.”

Most people profess belief in some sort of god, but they have no relationship of trust with their entity. Their life’s circumstances are such that they find it difficult to trust God. When they hear that verse from Hebrews, that faith is being certain of what we do not see, they think they will never be able to achieve that kind of belief. That is tragic, because faith is the most important thing in the world. Faith, the writer of Hebrews says, is what pleases God.

Faith is the theme of the fourth chapter of the Book of Romans. As we have seen, Paul has already made and sustained the charge that all mankind is guilty: we all have “sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” But the good news is that in the person of his Son, God has done something about the problem of sin. Jesus bore our sins in his own body on the cross, and by believing in him we are delivered from our sins. We are declared, “Not guilty!” and given the gift of righteousness. Faith and faith alone is what saves us.

In our last study covering the opening verses of chapter 4, we saw that salvation by grace, freely given on the basis of faith, has always been God’s way to salvation. There has never been a time in human history when God saved people by works. To make his case, Paul

uses the life of Abraham as an illustration of an Old Testament saint who was saved not by his works, but by his faith. The rabbis took it for granted that Abraham was justified by his works of righteousness: that he had earned his way into God’s good pleasure. But Paul took us back to Genesis 15, saying that before there was even a Law to obey, Abraham believed God and that was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Since Paul assumes that we know the Abraham story, let me quickly review it again for those of you who were not here last week.

Abraham lived in the city of Ur of the Chaldees, in the Mesopotamian Valley. He came from a family of idolaters, probably moon worshipers. He apparently had a heart for God, but didn’t know him. One day God appeared to Abraham and introduced himself to him. He called him out of Ur and promised to show him another land. He promised him a large posterity, and through him to bless all the families on the earth. And so, at 75, Abraham responded to the call. He set out to march, without a map, trusting God to lead him to a land he had never seen, and God brought him over to the land that we call Israel today.

One night God took Abraham on top of the mountain and pointed to the millions of stars in the heavens. God said, “Can you count them?” Abraham replied, “No.” Then God said, “You are going to have more children than these stars.” Abraham had no children at that point. To make matters worse, he was impotent. His body was dead, according to the text. And Sarah had already passed through the change of life. Abraham faced the facts squarely, but in spite of the seeming impossibility of this promise, he had confidence in God. The text says that when God gave him the promise, he looked up and said, “I believe it. I don’t know how you are going to do it, but I believe it.” And God said, “You are a righteous man.”

In our passage this morning, Paul continues his defense of Abraham’s justification by faith. He makes one further point. He declares that if Abraham was not justified by works (since God said that he believed and was justified), and he was not justified by circumcision (since he was circumcised 14 years later), then his justification had nothing to do with the Law, either.

We pick up Paul’s argument in chapter 4, verse 13:

For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through

the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, 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... (Rom 4:13-16, NASB).

Paul is saying that the promise that God gave to Abraham, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars, was made without any restrictions or stipulations. According to Paul, God's word came to Abraham as a promise, not a law. In these verses, Paul's reasoning is very clear as to why Abraham could never have been justified by the Law.

First, historically, Abraham received the promise of righteousness long before the Law was ever given. Paul says in Galatians 3 that the Law came 430 years after Abraham was counted righteous because of his faith. Secondly, Paul reminds us that Law and promise are two entirely different, and quite incompatible, things. Law language is different from promise language. John Stott is very helpful on this point. He writes: "Law-language...demands our obedience, but promise-language...demands our faith. What God said to Abraham was not 'Obey this law and I will bless you', but 'I will bless you; believe my promise.'"² To make the promise conditional on obedience to the Law would negate the whole arrangement. So Paul concludes, in verse 16: "For this reason it is by faith, that it might be *in accordance with grace*." Paul brings together God's grace and our faith. Salvation originates in the graciousness of God. The only proper human response is faith. Stott comments: "Grace gives and faith takes. Faith's exclusive function is humbly to receive what grace offers."³

Thirdly, the reason justification is by grace through faith is, "that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, 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." Only the gospel of grace and faith can ensure the promise of salvation to all the descendants who follow Abraham's faith. It unites Jews with Gentiles, and places everyone on the same level—at the foot of the cross. Thus, all believers belong to Abraham's seed and receive Abraham's promise.

Abraham was justified by faith alone, and so are we.

The content of Abraham's faith is defined and illustrated in verses 17-21. Here we have a picture, an instant replay as it were, of Abraham's state of mind on the occasion when God gave him that promise. As we look at his example we will come to a better understanding of faith, one that will help us examine our own faith. Verses 17-22:

(as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE

YOU") in the sight of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. 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 waver 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.

There was a rationale behind Abraham's faith. Those who think that faith is merely psyching oneself into believing things that are impossible to believe otherwise are given this insight into Abraham's thinking. Faith is trusting a person, and its plausibility depends on how reliable is the person in whom one is trusting. And there is no one more reliable than God! Abraham knew that.

John Stott points out that Abraham was sure of two things: God's power, and his faithfulness.⁴ Those two qualities were the basis of Abraham's faith.

First, God's power. Paul makes two statements at the end of verse 17 describing what Abraham knew about God: He is the God "who gives life to the dead [resurrection] and calls into being that which does not exist [creation]." These two elements formed the glorious content of Abraham's faith. God takes the things that once were alive and vibrant but have died and brings them to life again. And God calls into being that which does not exist. He is the God of resurrection and he is the God of creation. Stott comments that "nothingness and death," the two great mysteries of humanity, "are no problem to God."⁵ He created the world out of nothing, and out of death he raised Jesus.

God is the creator God of Genesis 1. He began with a chaos that was empty and dark. Then he spoke in the midst of that darkness, creating light, filling the emptiness with teeming life, redeeming the chaos, and blending all things into a system of such perfect order that it boggles the greatest of minds. God called each created item into being from nothingness. That which had not previously existed suddenly was brought into being by his word. Remember Jeremiah's words in prayer to his sovereign Creator when he declared, "Ah, Lord God, Behold, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm!" And then he declared: "Nothing is too difficult for you" (Jer 32:17). And remember Paul's prayer in Ephesians, that we might know the surpassing greatness of God's power which he displayed in Christ when he raised him from the dead.

God is the God of creation and resurrection. That

firm conviction of God's power is what gave Abraham the strength to believe *in hope* and *against hope*, according to Paul. On that starry night when God told Abraham that he would have more children than the stars of the heavens, Abraham and Sarah hadn't have a single child. Abraham faced the facts squarely. He didn't retreat into a fantasy world, ignoring reality. The text says, "*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.*" Some people think that a person of faith inwardly agrees to ignore the facts. But it is never that! Abraham faced the facts head-on. He thought about the hopelessness of his situation, his dead body and Sarah's barren womb. Humanly speaking, the situation was impossible. He was 100 years old and Sarah was 93, way past her childbearing years.

Yet, verse 20 says that behind all of those observable impossibilities lay the promise of God. Abraham was faced with a critical choice. He could focus on his absolutely impossible circumstances or trust the promise of God, the God who raises the dead and creates out of nothing. Paul says what his choice was: "*yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver 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.*" When Abraham looked at his dead body, he remembered that he had a God who raises the dead; and when he thought about Sarah's womb, he remembered that he had a God who calls into being that which does not exist. Thus in hope, against all human hope, Abraham believed. And he grew strong in faith. We see that later, when he faced the greatest test of his faith. He was asked to sacrifice his only son Isaac, the one through whom God had said his promises would be fulfilled. The writer to the Hebrews says that Abraham reasoned that God would bring him back from the dead.

And so Abraham glorified God through his faith. He trusted God to be faithful to his promise. Stott writes, "Behind all promises lies the character of the person who makes them."⁶ Abraham knew that. He knew the impossibility of his situation. He wasn't ignoring the facts. But he also knew that the facts were not always as they seemed. He reminded himself of God's power and faithfulness. He faced his problem through the lens of God's promise. Citing Hebrews 11:11, "By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered Him faithful who had made the promise" (NIV), Stott comments that Abraham "knew that God could keep his promises (because of his power) and he knew that he would do so (because of his faithfulness)."⁷

But it isn't merely Abraham's faith that Paul is concerned with. It is our faith too. The apostle concludes the chapter by applying these lessons to our lives. Verses 23-25:

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.

The whole Abraham story, like all of Scripture, was written for us. The same God who reckoned Abraham's faith as righteousness will reckon righteousness to us if we "believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." Abraham was not unique in his experience of being justified by faith. This is God's way of salvation for everyone.

Let me ask you: How is your faith this morning?

Some of you are living in situations similar to Abraham's. Humanly speaking, all you have is faith in the unseen realities. You can't walk by sight. Others of you are living in terrible family situations. There are no promises that God will make your home into the haven you long for, but he has promised to give you stability and supernatural help when the heat is on and all hell breaks loose. Can you trust God even though others never come through? Can you trust him that he is there even though you can't see him? That is the deeper faith to which God is taking you.

Maybe you struggle with an habitual sin. Just when you see progress you fall flat on your face. Yet, God says that "sin will not have dominion over you." Can you keep trusting his word? Can you pick yourself up and go on even though you keep falling down? Can you believe that one day you will be perfectly pure even though you are not now? Will you trust Jesus and side and struggle with him against your sin?

Some of you are out of work and you are depleting precious savings. You are beginning to wonder if the right job will ever come along. Can you continue to believe that God will never leave you or forsake you? that he knows your needs and will not withhold any good thing from you? that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you?

Are you suffering physical or emotional pain which seems endless? Do you believe that "momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17)? Do you believe that suffering is making you a man or woman of God, drawing you to him and purifying you of self-interest and self-glorification so that *His* glory can be seen? You can, if you look at the "things which are not seen" (2 Cor 4:18).

Second Kings 6 tells the story of Elisha and his servant in the city of Dothan. The Syrian army had surrounded the city, because God had been tipping off Elisha concerning the whereabouts of Ben Hadad, the king of Syria, and the king determined to put an end to him. When Elisha's servant awoke to see the surrounding army, he roused Elisha with the bad news. Undaunted, Elisha told his servant, "Don't worry. There are more of us than there are of them." We can imagine the servant saying, "Really? But there's only you and

me. What do you mean?” Sensing what was going on in his servant’s mind, Elisha prayed, “Lord, open his eyes that he may see.” The text says that the man’s eyes were opened to see the myriads of angels surrounding the Syrian army.

What we can see with our eyes alone is not the ultimate reality. Behind what we can see is the sovereign, powerful God who is in control of all events. Let us believe him, like Abraham, that we may by faith enter into his glorious salvation.

1. David Roper, *Seeing Through* (Multnomah Books, 1995) 204-205.
2. John Stott, *Romans* (Downe’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 131.
3. Stott, 131.
4. Stott, 134.
5. Stott, 133.
6. Stott, 134.
7. Stott, 134-135.

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