

The Gospel Preached To Abraham

Romans 4:13-25

Call: Ps 100 (NIV)

Scripture: Gal 3:6-9 (ESV)

I. Introduction

A. Introduction

Good morning! We enter back into Romans this morning in chapter 4. This will be our second week looking at Abraham's story through Paul's Gospel eyes. We'll see today the Gospel preached to Abraham.

B. Abraham Background

As I said last week, Paul assumes you know the Abraham story, so let me again give a quick refresher. God calls Abraham and Sarah out of moon-worshiping idolatry in the city of Ur, near Babylon. We're not told how this happens, but in Genesis 12, God shows up and tells Abraham to *"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you"* (Gen 12:1). Abraham is called to leave and follow in radical trust. Abraham's story is a story of faith.

And, soon after the call to follow, God makes incredible promises to Abraham, Genesis 12:2-3:

2 *"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.*
3 *I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever dishonors you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."*

These are extraordinary promises loaded with extraordinary hope. These promises are then elaborated on and clarified throughout Abraham's life. But, it's no exaggeration to say that the whole of the Old Testament and the whole of the New Testament is an unfolding of those promises spoken to Abraham some 4000 years ago.

Much of Paul's focus today is on these hope-filled promises and their clarification in chapters 15 and 17 of Genesis. So, I invite you into our text this morning, beginning in chapter 4, verse 13.

II. The Promises Made To Abraham (v 13-16)

13 *It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. 14 For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, 15 because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. 16 Therefore, the*

promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. (NIV)

A. Introduction

The key points in Paul's argument here revolve around the words law and promise. In fact, promise is used five times in our text today. In the first century, many Jewish writings placed law over promise. To a first-century Jew, law was everything. All of life revolved around the law.

B. Promise before Law

But, Paul inverts that thinking here. He's arguing, as he did last week, that if you get the chronology of the events wrong, you'll get your theology wrong. Let me explain.

In verse 13, the phrase "heir of the world" is not an Old Testament expression, but it is an expression in first century Judaism. And, the phrase is rooted in the promises to Abraham in Genesis chapters 12, 15 and 17. In chapter 12, as we just read, "*all peoples*" on earth will be blessed through Abraham (Gen 12:3). In chapter 15, what we talked about last week, Abraham is promised "*offspring*" as numerous as the stars (Gen 15:5). At that point, Abraham believes God, and God righteous-izes him. And, in chapter 17, Abraham is promised to be a "*father of many nations*" (Gen 17:5). And, note that all of this happens before Isaac, the child of promise, is born in chapter 21.

And, all of these promises occur some 500 years before the Mosaic law is given. If one gets their chronology wrong, then their theology will also be wrong. As we said last week, some first century Jews believed that Abraham was promised the world as an inheritance because he obeyed the law, even though he lived 500 years before the law was given. And Paul is arguing the opposite position here. Abraham was actually an ungodly pagan and under God's wrath, but God righteous-ized him through faith alone. His righteous-ification, and not obedience, is what allows Abraham to be the inheritor of the world, thereby fulfilling God's promises.

C. Jews as Heirs?

Paul then furthers his argument in verse 14 with an if-then statement. Paul says, imagine this. Imagine that the Jews are actually heirs according to the law. If this is the case, Paul says, then faith is useless and the promises of God are worthless. Why? Because promise and faith go together. Promises are based on faith in the promise-maker. But, if you are going to work to earn the thing promised, the relationship is no longer based on faith anymore; it's based on obligation. And that means that Genesis 15, where God credits right-relatedness to Abraham based on faith, means nothing. You might as well rip it out of your Bible right now! It means nothing! Well, actually, it does mean one thing. It means Abraham would be the father of only one nation, the Jews. But, if that's the case, then God's promises that Abraham would be the father of many nations would not be fulfilled. God's promises would be worthless, and God would prove to be unfaithful.

D. The Law

And, what about the law? Well, Paul says that the law produces wrath. What does Paul mean by that? Well, living under law means living with the penalties for violating it. That's God's wrath, just punishment for violating the law. Abraham lived before the law, so where there was no law, there was no transgression. Paul doesn't elaborate on this statement right now, but will in chapter 7. Here, he moves on to his conclusion of this paragraph, a monumental verse, verse 16.

E. The John 3:16 of Paul

Some writers consider this verse to be pinnacle of Paul's theology, "the John 3:16 of Paul" (Bird, 148).

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

Fulfillment of God's promises comes by grace through faith, not by law. Abraham will become the father of nations and will bless all peoples on earth by grace through faith. God's promises are rooted in Abraham, not Moses, which means salvation is by grace through faith.

Verse 16 is such a great summary of the pillars of our faith:

- "God's fatherhood,
- [the] emphasis on grace [and faith],
- the universal nature of salvation in Jesus,
- and the [marrying] together of the individual and corporate horizons of redemptive history" (Bird, 148).

Now, imagine how these monumental statements are heard by the church in Rome, a church comprised mostly of Gentiles at this time. They would be greatly encouraged! They were not second-tier "members." They were sons and daughters of Abraham, that giant of a man from Genesis. They were legitimate family members! And, in fact, they were legitimate heirs of the promises to Abraham through their faith in Jesus! This would have been tremendously good news, and unifying good news, to the church in Rome, as it should be today for us. There are no 2nd-tier members in any church today. There are no second class citizens in any church today. There is only "*one God,*" and He is creating for himself one people through his one solution, namely faith in Jesus Christ, to the one human dilemma of sin.

F. Transition

Verse 17.

III. The Sensibility of Abraham's Faith (v 17-22)

17 As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not. 18 Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many

nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” 19 Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. 20 Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. 22 This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” (NIV)

A. Introduction

In these six verses, Paul wants to show the sensibility of Abraham’s faith, that his faith is reasonable. Why is it sensible? It is sensible because of God’s power, specifically the power of creation and the power of resurrection, plus it is sensible because of God’s faithfulness.

Let’s look at His power, beginning with creation first.

B. The God of Creation

God has the power, verse 17, *“to call into being things that were not.”* He is the creator God. He calls into being that which is not, out of nothing, ex nihilo. In the first creation, God spoke, and it happened. God speaks and things happen. God’s Word does not return void. It informs, it performs and it transforms.

As we said way back in chapter 1, the wonder of creation reveals God’s power. It also reveals His immensity and His beauty and His order, but primarily His power, which should lead us to worship.

C. The God of Resurrection

God also has the power of resurrection. Verse 17 again, God has the power to *“give life to the dead”* (v 17). In verse 18, Paul describes more of Abraham and Sarah’s story, especially as it relates to resurrection. The birth of Isaac captures resurrection for Paul.

Although Abraham’s body was as *“good as dead... about 100 years old and Sarah’s womb was also dead,”* Abraham still had hope (v 19). To Abraham, his body was literally *“already dead.”* In the Greek, we would hear the stench of death arising from Paul’s word choice here. As Malcom Muggeridge once said, “Abraham had to drag his dead carcass around with him” (Stott). From a human standpoint there was no hope for Abraham and Sarah. Abraham’s body was dead, and Sarah’s womb was dead. But, in the face of hopelessness, Abraham did not lose hope, because his hope was grounded in the power of God. He believed that God had the power to *“give life to the dead”* (v 17). Over against the stench of death, Abraham’s faith did not waver, but actually grew stronger as he *“gave glory to God,”* as he worshipped, verse 20.

Way back in Romans 1, Paul stated that the answer to sin and idolatry was worship. Elsewhere, Paul says that worship is a sweet aroma to God. And, if we walked through the Abraham story, we would see that he was a worshipping man. When he first enters Canaan, he walks through the land building altars to God, probably right next to the Canaanite shrines. As Calvin said, Abraham *“endeavored, as much as in him lay, to dedicate to God, every part of the land to*

which he had access, and perfumed it with the [aroma] of his [newfound] faith” (Greidanus, 143). Abraham is perfuming the land with the aroma of God as he walks through it. He is worshiping, and he worshiped throughout his life. Worship is not simply inner thoughts and feelings, although it does include them. Worship expresses itself in public action. “Worship is a verb” (Webber book). Abraham is proclaiming God everywhere he goes, filling the land with the sweet aroma of the living God. His faith never wavered as he gave glory to God throughout his life. He wasn’t perfect by any stretch, but he gave glory to God, believing that God was able to give life out of death!

Jl Packer says that there is a spiritual principle in these verses, and it is this, “If you want to grow strong in faith, become strong in worship. Look at God a lot, give Him glory for all the gloriousness you see in Him [and I would add, all the gloriousness you see in creation]. Keep praising Him and your faith will grow stronger and stronger” (Packer MP3).

D. The Birth of Isaac

And, of course, we know the end of the story. God did bring forth life out of their dead bodies. Isaac, the promised son, was born from Sarah’s dead womb, and from him, Jesus, the blessing to *“all peoples on earth,”* will come (Gen 12:3). The promise-maker is the promise-keeper.

E. God’s Faithfulness

Paul finishes these verses focusing on God’s faithfulness, verse 21. Abraham’s faith is sensible because God is faithful. Abraham became “fully persuaded” of God’s faithfulness. A better translation might be that Abraham became “fully assured” of God’s faithfulness *“to do what He had promised.”*

So, again, what is faith? Generally speaking, faith is trusting in someone and their word. And, faith’s sensibility or reasonableness depends on the reliability of the person who spoke the word. It’s always sensible to trust the trustworthy. Our friends are friends because they’ve proven their trustworthiness over the time of our friendship. It makes sense to trust them, because they’ve proven their reliability.

And, there is nobody more trustworthy than the living God. God is completely dependable. He is utterly trustworthy. What he says happens. We can trust Him! We can throw our entire weight upon His promises. We can collapse into His arms and onto His promises because the promise-maker is the promise-keeper.

And, that’s exactly what Abraham did.

F. Saying Yes To God’s Faithfulness

Let’s do another call and response right now regarding some of God’s extraordinary promises. If you are able, can you say yes to these four incredible promises?

- Jesus said, *“Everyone who looks to [me] and believes in [me] shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day”* (John 6:40). Do you trust Jesus’ promise?

- Jesus said, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will rest you”* (Matt 11:28). Do you trust Jesus’ promise?
- God says through Paul, *“If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”* (2 Cor 5:17). Do you trust God’s promise that you are a new creation?
- God says through Paul, *“He who began the good work in you will not give up on you. He will bring it to completion!”* (Phil 1:6). Do you trust God’s promise?

G. Summary

It makes good sense to have faith in God, because He is utterly faithful. He is powerful and able to keep all his promises. *Great is His Faithfulness*. Most people in our modern world think that faith is outdated or improbable or unreasonable or irrational. Paul doesn’t think so, and he says so in these verses. Faith in God makes good sense based on his power and his faithfulness.

Paul ends this all important chapter with a summary of his argument as it relates to the church in Rome, verse 23.

IV. The Application of Abraham’s Faith (23-25)

23 The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, 24 but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. 25 He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. (NIV)

A. Introduction

Paul concludes here with what we’ve been saying all along, that Abraham’s being put into a right relationship with the living God, was not just for him, it was also for the church in Rome then, and for PBCC today, and for all people who believe for all time. Abraham is paradigmatic for all those who believe. We are all righteous-ized like Abraham by grace through faith in Jesus. The God who *“gives life to the dead,”* is the same one who *“delivered [Jesus] over to death for our sins and raised him to life”* again, meaning when one has the same faith as Abraham, their sins are atoned for through Jesus’s death (v 17, 25).

B. Delivered over

As many people have noticed, in verse 25, Paul uses a curious word for *“delivered over”* (v 25). It’s the same word that is used in Isaiah 53 in the Greek version of the Old Testament:

*“All we like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
And the Lord gave him over to our sins”* (Isa 53:6).

The Lord delivered him over for our sins. And, of course, that verse comes right after this famous verse:

*“But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,*

and by his wounds we are healed” (Isa 53:5).

I think Paul is drawing a deliberate connection here to Isaiah 53. Here is Jesus, the suffering servant of Isaiah 53,

who is delivered over to death,

who bore the sins of many,

who was vindicated by being resurrected,

and who resultantly makes us righteous, raised to life for our righteous-ification.

By His wounds we are healed! Amen!

C. Resurrection

Paul’s last words are not death, but life. Death is not the last word anymore. Life is. Jesus goes through death and comes out the other side into an indestructible life, and He invites us to follow Him. God is a God of life! He indeed *“gives life to the dead!”* And, of course Paul would end here, because as he says elsewhere, *“If Christ is not raised, your faith is worthless”* (1 Cor 15:14). He is risen... He is risen indeed!

V. Implications

A. Introduction

So, as we come to the close of chapter 4, we finally can answer the question Paul posed at the beginning of this chapter, in verse 1: *“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered?”* (Rom 4:1). What is it that Abraham discovered?

B. The Gospel

Well, for one thing, he discovered the Gospel, for that is what was *“preached to him,”* as Paul says in Galatians (Gal 3:8). He discovered grace, faith, righteous-ification and resurrection life, and he found all of it apart from circumcision and the law. This is the Gospel! This is the power, the dynamite, that is needed for salvation. And, it is good news for all people, people in the first century and people in the 21st, and everyone in between.

C. The God of the Gospel

He also discovered the God of the Gospel, how trustworthy He is and how powerful He is. There are the two things which baffle us as humans, two things that produce the greatest fear in all of us: death and nothingness. We can’t control either one. Death is the one event that none of us can escape. We will all die. Some of us are closer to it than others, but none of us will escape it. Every one of us will die. That’s the reality of life on this planet.

But, nothingness also puts great fear into us. As John Stott says, “The angst of the existential modern man is his dread of the abyss of nothingness” (Stott MP3).

But, nothingness and death are no problem to our God, the living God. God creates out of nothing, and He resurrects out of death. So, the very two things we cannot even begin to control are easily manageable by God. The creation of the universe out of nothing and the resurrection of Jesus from the dead are the two great acts of the power of God in history. And

we have a completed Bible in our hands which records both great acts, plus God's utter faithfulness throughout. In many ways, we can have greater hope and live with greater assurance than Abraham because we live on the other side of Jesus.

D. How to Walk

And, lastly, he discovered how to walk, *"by faith and not by sight"* (2 Cor 5:7). Abraham trusted God. He took God at His word and threw the weight of his life upon God and His word.

"Abraham lived with a firm conviction that what he hoped for one day would happen, that the future would turn out as he hoped it would" (Bird, 153). Abraham is the preeminent man of faith. And yet, at many points in his life, it seemed everything was against him. At many points, it seemed his own family was against him. At many points, he seemed to be against himself! But, he never gave up. He never lost hope. He kept trusting in this God against what he was seeing all around him. He continued to *"walk by faith and not by sight"* (2 Cor 5:7).

So, what can we say about his faith that might help us in how we walk:

1. **First, he walked by faith that overcame much fear.** Beyond the fear of death and the fear of nothingness, it was obvious that other fears gripped him too: fear of not having children, fear of foreign kings, fear of Lot ruining everything. But through it all, he didn't give up on God. He kept his faith and trusted that God would come through on all His promises. His faith overcame much fear.
2. **Secondly, he walked by faith that was entirely God-centered.** His faith was oriented away from himself and directed entirely toward God. He was a worshiping man. As Michael Bird says, "[His faith] wasn't based on human possibility or logical probabilities... It was a faith in God's person, God's plan, God's promise and God's power" (Bird, 154). The power of faith is not in ourselves, it is entirely in God, because nothing is impossible for God.
3. **Thirdly, he walked by faith that was about individually belonging to God, but also belonging to a family.** Romans 4 is about who the people of God are. And, they are all those who have faith like Abraham. Faith is about family, the family of God. We walk within the family of God. And, so, we sing the *Father Abraham* song,
*"Father Abraham had many kids, many kids had father Abraham.
I am one of them and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord."*

This fun song captures the thrust of Romans 4. By faith, we are all Abraham's children and belong in Abraham's family. We walk together in faith as the family of God. Amen.

Benediction

Go now as one family, walking by the same faith as Abraham, and living in the hope that our God can bring something out of nothing and can raise the dead. Nothing is impossible for our God!

Resources

Achtemeier, Paul, *Romans: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*

Bird, Michael, *Romans (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 6)*

Gorman, Michael J, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*

Greidanus, Sidney. *Preaching Christ from Genesis*

Packer, JI, *Romans* (Regent MP3, 1313E)

Stott, John, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*

Thielman, Frank, *Romans (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*

Webber, Robert, *Worship is a Verb*