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Romans 4:13-25

Ninth Message

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THE ENEMIES AND ALLIES OF FAITH

Do you enjoy being given promises? I know I do. There is probably no greater joy to the human soul than to be the recipient of a promise properly administered. First comes the announcement of the promise, then the anticipation, and finally the realization.

When I was eleven years old, my mother hired a carpenter to work on our home, and I became his helper. Because this man had no sons of his own, we became especially close. At the end of his project, he made me a promise, saying, "This time next year, Brian, I am going to take you deer hunting." I cannot tell you what that promise did to my heart.

I spent the entire year, from October to October, getting ready for the fulfillment of that promise. He sent me to classes to learn how to shoot safely. Then we spent months selecting the correct rifle for me. I will never forget bringing home that 243 Winchester. Being an expert craftsman, he even shortened the stock for me and built a wooden gun box in which I kept all my ammunition and cleaning gear. Finally, he took me out to practice in the mountains.

Then came the day I will never forget. We loaded up a pickup truck and headed for the hills above the Sequoias. We stayed just south of an Indian reservation where year after year he lodged in an abandoned cowboy's cabin built of hand-split rails and shingles. Inside was a large potbelly stove on a dirt floor and a huge bed. I have many precious memories of that cabin. In all the years we hunted together, we never got a deer, but in my mind it made no difference whatsoever because of the love relationship we had involving his promise to me.

In contrast, when promises are poorly administered, they can damage the soul. I sometimes think that promises like my friend's are a thing of the past. About a month ago, I received a card in the mail which told me that I was to receive an eight-day vacation in either Hawaii, Australia, or Europe. The bottom of the card reassured me, "This is not a real estate venture!" I called the phone number on the basis of the promise, and the man at the other end of the line asked me some questions. He first inquired, "Would you like to receive a free vacation for eight days for two people?" Sure I would! Then he asked, "Would you be willing to take it within the next year?" I said certainly.

When he asked me for my preference of travel dates, I finally asked in return, "What is the stipulation?" (An ancient proverb says that if the king does not cross-examine his subject he fosters corruption.) The man answered by saying that I would be required to recommend his travel club to others. When I asked what club that was, he said, "The one you are going to join after the vacation." Finally, I said, "What is this 'free' vacation going to cost me?" He said, "\$399.00 which includes your membership, airfare and one week's hotel accommodation." In other words, on this 'free' trip, we would be responsible for meals and a rental car. I concluded, "I need to talk to my wife." Obviously, this gift was not a gift. All the joy and anticipation for this free vacation quickly melted away.

The latter scenario more than the former most typifies how many Christians live their faith in Jesus Christ. They may have started their Christian lives trusting God for the free promise of eternal life. But often someone who is well-meaning but perverted in doctrine adds stipulations which damage their faith, erode their joy and destroy their assurance.

This is what was happening in Paul's day when he wrote his letter to the Romans. Many Gentiles were coming to Christ by faith in the work of Christ alone on the cross. Then well-meaning Jewish believers told them they must also be circumcised and keep the Law. Paul as a loving shepherd never wanted Christians to lose the original joy of their faith. Therefore, he turned to the life of Abraham, the father of the faith, to analyze how the promise of eternal life is realized. Did he receive it by faith or by Law?

In Romans 4:13-25, we will answer three questions about faith. How is faith destroyed? How is it developed? Finally, how is Abraham's faith applied to our own lives? Let us look at the first question which will help us understand how the promise to Abraham was realized. Look at verse 13 of chapter 4.

I. How is Faith Destroyed? (4:13-17a)

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. (Rom 4:13 NASB)

When God began his program of salvation, he initiated a relationship with a man by the name of Abram. And he made a specific promise to him saying, "To your seed, I will give this land." When this promise of a land was first given, God gave it specific boundaries. Genesis 15:18 says the land crossed "from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates."

Throughout the Scriptures, these boundaries expanded until after the exile the prophets saw a day when the land would be immense. Micah says, "Extend the boundaries of your tent pegs because people will come from all over the world into this promised land." By the time of the New Testament, this promise encompassed the entire earth. Remember Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."

Paul interprets the promise the same way here. He says that Abraham would be heir of the world. Hebrews 11 even tells us that this promise referred not just to an earthly land but also to a spiritual land: "Abraham...was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God,...a better country, a heavenly country." Therefore, this promise to Abraham ultimately finds its fulfillment in the new heavens and new earth. The promise includes the fullness of eternal life in a new heavenly land.

Are you interested? Abraham was! The recipients were Abraham and his seed. Paul tells us in Galatians 3:16: "Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'And to seeds,'

as referring to many, but rather to one, 'And to your seed,' that is, Christ." Thus, anyone from the physical seed of Abraham would have to have faith in the seed Christ. And anyone not of the line of Abraham would still have faith in this seed in order to become a recipient of the promise. This was the nature of this promise and the recipients.

Paul goes on to say that the Law could not be the basis for the promise. Look how he defends this in verses 14-15:

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.

Imagine God saying to Abraham, "Abraham, are you interested in eternal life? I am gifting you this inheritance; it is your gift by faith." Remember Genesis says that Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. But supposing a few years later, the Lord came to Abraham and said, "By the way, I have added something to the promise—the Law. You must memorize and keep everything in this book. Then you can have what I promise" Then a few generations later, God would add the oral law which accompanies the written law. Then he would add the works of the rabbis who wrote the commentaries about the connection between the oral and written law. With each addition, God would say, "When you have all of this memorized, then maybe the land will be yours!" What do you think this would have done to Abraham?

I find this is so easy to do as a parent. I often make unconditional promises to my children for a gift or an outing. Then I find their behavior does not coincide to the moral standards I have established. In order to motivate them to change, I add stipulations to the promise. Then the focus shifts from me to them. Now the promise depends upon them and their performance. Since it is no longer unconditional, it is no longer assured. As a result, the joy and life that was meant to accompany the promise are gone.

This is what Paul is saying here. If the promise of eternal life were based upon the Law, then faith would be made void and the promise nullified. This would void out faith because it shifts the responsibility from the faithfulness of an invisible God to the person who no longer has faith. If this happens, it is no longer a promise, and all assurance is gone.

Further, Paul says this violates the purpose of the Law. God did not give us the Law as a stipulation for the receipt of the gift. Rather, the Law was given to provoke sin and increase transgression that man might see his need and come to faith in Christ Jesus. This is why the Law cannot be the basis of the promise. Woe to us a parents when we add stipulations to our own promises.

When faith is the basis of the promise, there are different results. Look at verses 16-17:

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 [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, (as it is written, "A father of many nations have I made you")...

When God makes a promise and the basis for that promise is faith, three things occur. First, faith makes the promise a gift. Man has done nothing to deserve the promise. When we receive life on that basis, there is a tremendous sense of joy and appreciation.

In my own life, I have appreciated life the most when I have not expected it and when I knew I did not deserve it. On the other hand,

those times when I have thought I deserved life (like a vacation) and have had certain expectations, I have not experienced the joy of that life, especially when things go wrong. When you receive the promise of eternal life as a gift, there is appreciation and joy.

Second, faith makes the promise a certainty. Paul says this promise of eternal life is an absolute "certainty." This word was used in contemporary legal literature to denote a legally guaranteed security. I cannot tell you what that does for me. When I wake up and review my past week or day to consider all my shortcomings involving my tongue, mind or heart, I do not get disheartened. I still face each day with assurance knowing that I have eternal life and that there is nothing I must do to earn it. I can step into each day and immediately possess eternal life despite my past record. It is a certainty.

Third, Paul says faith not only makes the promise a gift and a certainty, it also makes the promise universal rather than particular. Whenever stipulations are added to God's promises, God's love is narrowed to a select group. This causes elitism. But when the promise is received by faith, it is open to everyone. We can offer this gift of life to anyone who will receive it.

What destroys faith? The answer is the Law; adding stipulations after the promise was given. As I look back on my young Christian life, there were at least three attacks upon my faith, three crises which tried to destroy my Christian walk. Not long after I first accepted Christ, I was approached by certain believers who said belief was not enough. They told me I needed another experience in order to receive the "full blessing," to enter into the "full life."

Then there was the time I was leading a Bible study in my fraternity house when I walked two Mormon missionaries. The night before, I had just led my roommate Brad to Jesus Christ. Brad shared his life with these two fellows saying, "I had no hope. Then I found Christ! I have gone from death to life and from war to peace. Isn't it wonderful?" Their only response was to say, "That is fine, but you need something else. There are some other stipulations."

A few years later, I worked on a construction crew with a group of Christian men. At the time, I was preparing to come to Peninsula Bible Church to become an intern. As I shared this with these Christian men, they replied, "Why are you going there?" When I said I was seeking spiritual growth, they replied, "You won't find it there because God has ordained only one local church for each city, and PBC is not it. We go to the right church."

All three of these situations had one thing in common. In each case, people tried to narrow the circle of God's love. They all shut me out that I might seek them. They all shifted the work and responsibility from God to me, and they all created external standards for acceptance. Ultimately, all of them attempted to rob me of the joy of faith in the work of Christ alone.

The promise is not administered by the Law. It is administered by faith.

The second issue Paul deals with is how Abraham developed his faith. If faith is destroyed by the Law, how is it cultivated?

II. How is Faith Developed? (4:17b-22)

Many people think of faith in Christ as a heavenly insurance policy. When you have a homeowner's policy, you sign upon the dotted line and put it away in a drawer. You do not need to think about it again until the house burns down. Some think the same is true for

Christians. A person puts his faith in Christ, and then he forgets about it until he dies and goes to heaven.

But that is not faith at all! Faith is living and vital. It must be nurtured and cultivated. This is why Paul gives us a three-stage cycle by which we are to constantly grow in our faith. We are to have a strong, steady faith rather than a weak one. Look at 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 [seed] 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.

Notice where Abraham’s faith begins. His faith was not based upon speculation but upon a revealed person. Many people today suggest that it is enough just to have faith in faith. They agree with Linus in the cartoon strip who says, “It does not matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.” I have heard many unbelievers say that. Others believe that if they think up outlandish schemes or wild-eyed visions which really put their lives on the line, God will support them. Thus, the vision depends upon the man, and God is then committed to support him. But that is not faith at all.

Abraham’s faith was not based upon his own vision. It was based upon the revealed word of God which said, “A father of many nations have I made you.” Our faith is to be based upon a revealed person, Jesus Christ. Therefore, we must read the Scriptures and understand how God is administering his kingdom in this age. If we do not, our experience will be inauthentic.

Witness the tragedy of the Children’s Crusade. During the Medieval era, well-meaning but misinformed Christians thought they would reclaim the promised land from the Turks just as Joshua claimed it from the Canaanites. They went throughout Europe with their grand vision and rounded up children for their army using the verse “out of the mouth of babes is the bulwark of strength” as their rationale. At the Italian outpost, they looked across the Adriatic Sea and read in Joshua about how the waters parted by faith. They sent the children into the waves to drown. Those who did not drown were later taken as slaves by the Turks. What a tragedy!

Yet how often we still misinterpret God’s word because we are unaware of how God is administering his kingdom. Therefore, we are not committed to that which God is committed, and our experience is inauthentic. This has happened to me many times. I especially remember after we had lost our first child reading in the Old Testament about the firstborn being given to the Lord. I was convinced that God would never take another child from us. When he took our second child, I was horrified. My belief in the promise of physical health was inauthentic. We must read the Scriptures and understand how God is administering his kingdom in the age of the Spirit.

Second, the passage reveals two things about Abraham’s faith after the promise was given. His faith was “contrary to hope,” and it was “in hope.” This seems confusing. It was contrary to hope because

Abraham contemplated the age of his own body and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not ignore the physical limitations or the physical world around him. He heard the heavenly promise that he would have a seed, and then he looked at his own life and at Sarah’s. Humanly speaking, it was impossible to bring about that promise. Thus his faith from a human point of view was contrary to hope.

He had also learned the terrible lesson about implementing God’s promises through fleshly efforts. Man-made fulfillment to God’s promises will always produce an Ishmael instead of an Isaac. Remember Ishmael gave birth to all the Arab nations. The Arab/Israeli conflict began when Abraham in his own strength tried to fulfill God’s supernatural promise. The result was a heritage of strife, anger, bitterness and division that runs so deep it could be the cause of World War III, if it were not for the grace of God.

Abraham’s faith was contrary to hope. He did not ignore the physical limitations. But it was also in hope. Once he received the heavenly promise and had looked at the human impossibility in his own life, he then turned back to God and allowed the character of God to overrule all the physical limitations. This is how his faith was strengthened.

I think many of us are double-minded. We have one eye on God and one eye on our circumstances. We keep looking back and forth until we become unstable in all our ways. Abraham did not do this.

He contemplated his own body, considered it to be as good as dead, then he gave glory to God, believing what God said he would do. He trusted in the power of God to fulfill his promise. And Abraham knew that God was a God who brings life to the dead and who can call into being that which does not exist. Thus he allowed the character of God to overrule his own limitations. As Charles Wesley says in his hymn:

In hope, against all human hope,
Self-desperate, I believe; ...
Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees.
And looks to that alone;
Laughs at impossibilities,
And cries: “It shall be done!”

Abraham knew God could bring the dead back to life. This was why he was willing to sacrifice Isaac. When God said, “Take your son, your only son, the one whom you love, Isaac, and sacrifice him.” Abraham obeyed because he knew that if Isaac was the seed which was going to be a blessing to the earth then God would resurrect him. And in the resurrection, that seed would be multiplied. In fact, this is exactly what God did with his own Son Jesus Christ.

Faith is strengthened when, after looking at all the facts, we allow the character of God to rule in our hearts and we act upon that basis. As J. I. Packer says, “God teaches us to think, moves us to trust, and when we trust we become strengthened.” This cycle will be repeated continually in our lives resulting in a stronger faith each time.

How is Abraham’s faith applied to our own lives? Look at verses 23-25.

III. How is Faith Applied? (4:23-25)

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.

If you ever doubt that God forgives you of your sins, underline the last verse. Jesus would not have been raised from the dead had God not been satisfied that our sins were completely paid for!

Paul tells us that Abraham's faith is not unique. It is typical. How Abraham believed in the power of God for his seed and was justified is how we must believe in his seed Jesus Christ. As we believe in it contrary to hope and in hope, we too are justified.

Our faith, too, is contrary to hope. Like Abraham, we contemplate the body of Jesus, this Jesus who was delivered up for our transgressions to be crucified on a cross and buried. From a human standpoint, there was no way for his life to be restored. No human reality could bring life to that dead body. Therefore, there was no way to receive forgiveness of our sins.

But our faith is also in hope. We too must allow the character of God to overrule human limitations. We must put our faith in the God who raises the dead by his word. As we believe in Christ who was delivered up to death and then raised by the power of God, we too are justified.

If you think about your own body, you will realize it lies within the realm of death. How are you going to put life into this decaying body? There is no human way of incarnating eternal life. Some of you are walking in the realm of death in your marriages and at your work situations. Perhaps, some of you students are in a hostile setting in which your university is weighed against Christ. How are you going to bring life onto your marriage, workplace, or campus? It is humanly impossible.

We must first examine all the facts and realize there is no way. Our faith is contrary to hope. Then we must trust Christ to bring life out of the grave. He can renew your marriage or bring a fellow-student to Christ. Life does happen! And it will happen again and again as we go through this three-stage cycle. This the basis of our faith.

How is your faith? Are you like that joyous lad who went deer hunting every year? Or are you like that frustrated traveler, looking for that free vacation? Did you begin the Christian life with faith but now find it to be damaged? My exhortation to you is to remove the stipulations you have placed upon yourself.

Second, is your faith authentic? If not, read the Scriptures, especially the New Testament.

Finally, is your faith being strengthened or is it stagnating? Having received the promise of eternal life, are you overwhelmed by the horrible odds of the world until the flame of faith has been snuffed out in your heart? Give glory to God and let his character overrule your observations of the world.

My prayer for you all is that your life will be filled with the joy of a faith filled with assurance and authenticity and vitality. This is a growing faith indeed!

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