

# **ROMANS**

Part 9: “The Power of Faith and the Promise of God”

Romans 4:13–25

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Sunday, March 13, 2022 (Second Sunday of Lent)

## **Scripture Reading**

*“For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 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” (Rom 4:13–25).*

## **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, Almighty and Everlasting God, by the grace and illumination of you Holy Spirit, open our eyes that we might behold wondrous things from your word. Give us eyes to behold the glory of Christ, that we might put all of our trust in him. In Christ’s holy name we pray, AMEN.

## **Introduction**

There are two crucial words in today's Scripture reading that we must understand from the very beginning. Those words are “faith” and “promise.”

Faith is one of the most misunderstood words in the Christian and cultural vocabulary.

Many use the word faith as if it were the opposite of reason. Others view faith as the mere practice of religious rituals and rhythms. But perhaps the most common way that faith is misunderstood and used is as a term that means believing not what is true but believing in what we *want* to be true.

We mistakenly think of faith as a self-willed *wishing*-power, wherein if we want something enough and convince ourselves that we will have that something, then we will have it. But this is not a biblical understanding of faith.

As Romans will show us later on, “*So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ*” (Rom 10:17).

Said another way: *Faith is not wishing for what we want. Faith is trusting in what God has said. Faith is trusting in the promises of God.*

The second term that we must understand is the word promise. *A promise is a declaration in the present about a reality in the future.*

Because humans possess the capacity of language, we have the power to make promises. We make promises about what we want the future to be. We make promises about what we expect the future to be. We make promises about what we wish, hope, or intend the future to be.

Ultimately, however, our promises are contingent—they are conditional—because we are finite and fallible. We cannot control the future any more than we can control the waves of the oceans or the movement of stars.

But the promises of God belong to a different category. When God makes a promise, that promise is not about a conditional future but a certain future—a *certain* reality; a reality so real and true that it might as well already be present.

And there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to respond to the promises of God.

You don’t perform in response to the promise of God. You *believe* in the promise. You have *faith* in a promise.

Performance, according to a law, is a man-centered reality. Faith is a God-centered reality.

Performance is dependent on man. Faith relies wholly on God.

Salvation by performance is contingent on our efforts, perfection, and circumstances, wherein faith is null, and the promise is void. But salvation by faith is *guaranteed* by the power of God and the perfection of Christ.

As our today's Scripture reading begins, “*For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the*

*righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all” (Rom 4:13–16).*

As we continue our journey through Romans, today we find ourselves in the middle of chapter 4. The Apostle Paul, the author of this letter, is talking about the righteousness that we are given as a gift when we trust in Jesus.

And, in an unexpected move, he takes us back to the world of the Old Testament to remind us of the story of Abraham, the ancient patriarch of the people of God. For according to Paul, the story of Abraham displays for us *“The Power of Faith and the Promise of God.”*

Paul explores the nature of Abraham’s faith so that we might see and appreciate the supernatural power of God that we may experience when we trust in the promise of God. With that said, there are three themes of faith found throughout this text; three types of faith that are evident in the life of Abraham, that are also available to us today. They are *1.) Faith that God brings creation out of chaos, 2.) Faith that God brings righteousness out of unrighteousness, and 3.) Faith that God brings life out of death.*

## **Exposition**

### **1.) Faith that God brings creation out of chaos**

Abraham is one of the most important figures in the Old Testament. As the power of sin unraveled creation in the book of Genesis, God launches his plan of redemption and restoration in and through Abraham and the family that will come through Abraham.

In a world that is replete with idolatry and injustice, Abraham hears the word of God. God calls Abraham out of his homeland and the city of his fathers. He promises Abraham that he will be given a new land—a Promised Land. Even more, he will be blessed and given a family, and that family will become a nation that is destined to bless all the nations of the world (cf. Gen 12:2–3).

This is a pretty extraordinary promise—the promise of a future, a family, and a homeland. But there are a few problems with this promise from the outside looking in. Namely, Abraham is old, childless, and homeless. Of all the prerequisites needed for this promise to come to fruition, Abraham possesses precisely *nothing*.

But *nothing* is not a challenge for the God who made *everything*. Abraham is not just standing before any god. He is standing, as Paul says in Romans 4, *“...in the presence of the God... who gives life to the dead calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom 4:17).*

This is a reference to Genesis 1, which reveals God as the Creator and maker of heaven and earth. In the beginning, before time and space, God created all things. Out of the formlessness and void of chaos and nothingness, God speaks reality into existence. As the first chapter of the Bible tells us, *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light”* (Gen 1:1–3).

The Bible’s view of creation was a radical view among the peoples of the ancient Near East. If you look at ancient sources, like the *Enuma Elish*, which was the Babylonian’s creation account, you will find a much different explanation of the origin of all things.

In the typical ancient view, the cosmos was not an intentional act by one God. It was an accidental byproduct of a cosmic war between many gods. You see in the ancient world, many of our ancestors worshipped and deified aspects of their world, like the sun, the moon, and the earth; the stars, the seas, and the storms. They saw these aspects of the world as uncontrollable forces. Yet, they were at the mercy of these forces for their very survival.

Yet, the gods and goddesses of the ancient world were petty and proud. They waged war with one another, and that war threatened the fabric of reality. But, finally, so the story goes, one god named Marduk defeated another deity named Tiamat. He rearranges the rubble of that battle into the sky and the earth. And from the dead body of another fallen god, Marduk creates humanity to be slaves that work for and serve the surviving gods.

But against this backdrop, Genesis reveals a God that is completely different. He is not a God of pride and pettiness but a God of justice and goodness. He is not a god who creates by simply rearranging dead matter into something new. He creates by the very power of his word!

The God revealed in Genesis is a God who has no rivals nor equal. He is not one god among others. He is the one who calls into existence stars and the sun and the moon and the waters, simply by speaking! He is the God who creates the cosmos of all reality from nothing of chaos!

All this to say, it was this God—the God who said *“Let there be light”*—this same God said to Abraham, *“Go from your father’s house. I will make you a great nation. You will be blessed, and in you, all nations of this world will be blessed.”*

And when you read Abraham’s account in Genesis, you will not find an overly optimistic man. No, Abraham is a realist. He knows the reality of his situation. He knows he is childless. He laughs at the seeming absurdity of the promise of God, even as he believes it (Gen 17:17).

Yet sets his trust in the promise of God over against the expectation of man. He hopes against hope. As Paul writes, *“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’* (Rom 4:18).

Abraham hopes against hope that God would bring nations from his nothingness. He trusts that God’s word is truer than his circumstances.

For Abraham knows that all of reality—all of the cosmos—is rooted in the foundation of God’s word. So to trust in the promise that God speaks is not unnatural. God’s word is *supernatural*. It is above and beyond the natural. For God is the Creator who is the LORD over his creation.

Herein lies the supernatural power that comes through faith in the promise of our Creator. It is why the Virgin Mary can say, “Let it be according to your word,” when she is told that she will conceive Jesus within her womb. It is why the Apostle Peter can walk on water when Jesus commands him to. It is why *you* can trust his promises as well.

As the author of Hebrews says, *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible”* (Heb 11:1–3).

## **2.) Faith that God brings righteousness out of unrighteousness**

Now, I kept referring to this character from Genesis by the more familiar name Abraham. However, for several chapters of Genesis (11:26–17:3), this man is not known as Abraham. Instead, his given name is Abram.

His name was Abram when he was called out of his homeland. He was Abram when God promised, *“Your descendants will be more numerous than the stars of the nighttime sky.”* And he was Abram when first believed.

But later on, God gives this man a *new* name. As the words of Genesis 17 proclaim: *“No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations”* (Gen 17:5).

This name is essentially a compound word in the Hebrew language that means “one who is the father of many nations.”

Abraham believes, and God gives him a new name that goes alongside and with his new righteousness. It is a new identity. It is an identity that comes not from within himself but outside himself. It is an identity that was the opposite of who he once was. Yet, it is an identity that determines his destiny.

So too, Paul draws a parallel between the identity-altering righteousness Abraham is given through faith in God and the righteousness we are given through faith in Christ. As Paul writes, *“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" (Rom 4:20–24a).*

When we trust in the gospel—when we trust that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ saves us—we are given a new righteousness. It is a righteousness that is life-altering and identity-changing.

We are no longer identified by our sin. We are no longer identified by our failure.

You might say, *"Well, I believe in Jesus, but all I can see is my shame. All I can see is my constant struggle. All I can see are the multitude of ways that I continue to not measure up!"*

Against that mindset of shame, you need to know *the God who said "let there be light" has pronounced you righteous in his sight! The God who spoke the galaxies into existence has declared that you have been justified by faith!*

Justification is a big word, but it is an important term in the Bible. Martin Luther said that it is a doctrine so crucial that, by it, the Church stands or falls.

Justification means that God's judgment that awaits us at the end of time has already been rendered in the present because of what Christ has done on our behalf. Justification means that all who have faith in Christ have been forgiven of all wrongs, acquitted of all charges, and declared righteous in God's sight.

The righteousness of God in Christ is so powerful and so perfect that when it is imputed to you, it is as if you had never sinned at all! And, Paul tells us, *this righteousness "...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" (Rom 4:24–25).*

As you can see in that last verse, the doctrine of justification hinges on the reality of Christ's resurrection. And it is to that crucial truth that we will now turn our attention.

### **3.) Faith that God brings life out of death**

In addition to believing that God could create from nothing, Abraham believed that God is the God *"...who gives life to the dead..." (Rom 4:17).* And it is for this reason that Abraham *"...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." (Rom 4:19).*

Now, I was surprised when I looked at the Greek of this passage to see how toned down this English translation is. There is no "as good as dead." Abraham considers his body to be dead. So too, Sarah's womb is not barren; it is also dead (νέκρωσις).

Abraham has a dead body, and his wife Sarah has a dead womb. Yet, Abraham trusts they will be given a son. And God gives them a son.

This is a picture of our spiritual condition of need and the miraculous nature of salvation. We were dead in our sin (cf. Eph 2:1). *Outside of Christ, we are not dying people in need of resuscitation—we are dead people in need of resurrection.*

And the resurrection from our death is exactly what the Christian gospel offers to us.

## **Conclusion**

That hope of resurrection is pre-figured and foreshadowed in the story of Abraham in multiple ways.

Perhaps, this is nowhere more clear than in the account of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis chapter 22. At long last, Abraham is given his son, and the dream comes true. His son is named Isaac, which means laughter and joy. Isaac is a divinely wrought miracle, and he is the one through whom all of the promised blessings will come.

But then, in a terrifying turn of events, God commands Abraham to do something that makes no sense. He tells Abraham to offer Isaac up as a sacrifice to God. He tells Abraham, *“Give me what matters most to you; offer to me freely that which is most precious to you.”*

Nevertheless, Abraham trusts God with a radical, incomprehensible faith. He trusts the promise of God even though the command of God is not understood.

And so Abraham takes his son. He places wood for the fire on his back, and together they climb a hill. He prepares to do the inconceivable act of offering his own son as a sacrifice to God, knowing, as the author of Hebrews says, that God was even able to raise his son from the dead (Heb 11:17).

But just then, an angel of the LORD intervenes. He commands Abraham to stop. He points to a ram, stuck in a nearby thicket, which God has provided as a substitute in Isaac's place. God said to Abraham, *“Now I know your trust me because you would not withhold even your son from me.”*<sup>1</sup>

It is a mysterious and moving passage. But according to the New Testament, it is all pointing to the greater truth that God is able to bring resurrection out of death.

The story of Abraham and Isaac foreshadows the moment God would require his son to carry wood up another mount. But unlike Isaac, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was not spared. There was no substitute found, for Christ was the substitute for all—he was and is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! He was the One who died that we might live!

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<sup>1</sup> This treatment of Genesis 22 is indebted to the work of Rev. Dr. Timothy Keller.

And now we can look to God and say, *“Now we can know your love because you would did not withhold your son, but you gave his very life for our sake!”*

So, we might ask, why should the faith of Abraham, a bronze-age shepherd and desert Bedouin, matter to us today?

The faith of this ancient man matters because it testifies to a Creator who has not abandoned his creation, a sovereign Lord who has a plan for history, a God who has made a way to save us when we could not save ourselves.

The faith of Abraham matters because it points beyond himself to Christ, who is the author and perfecter of our faith and the meaning of all the Old Testament, all religious yearning, and all of human history.

God is glorious and holy. He lacks nothing. We can't add to him any more than we can take away from him. But we can glorify him and recognize him for who he is and who he has revealed himself to be.

We can have faith in the promises of God because—from Abraham to the present age—he has a long-standing history of being faithful to his people. And there is supernatural power in such faith.

So Redeemer Christian Church, may we trust in the power of our Creator in the midst of our chaos! May we trust in the righteousness of God when we are mired in sin! And may we trust in the resurrection of Christ in a world of death!

AMEN.

### **Discussion Questions for Gospel Community**

- 1.) Read Romans 4:13–25. Observe how Paul connects the concept of "faith" to the "promise of God." What is faith, and how is this concept often misunderstood?
- 2.) Notice how Paul alludes to God's act of creation in Rom 4:17 (see: Gen 1). How should the doctrine of creation encourage Christians to trust in the promises of God?
- 3.) What does the righteousness that was “counted” to Abraham have to do with Christians today (see: Rom 4:22–25)?
- 4.) What is justification, and why does Paul connect the idea of Christ's resurrection with our justification?