

**“AGAINST ALL HOPE”**

(Narnia 6)

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Romans 4:1-3,18-25 (p. 1093)

Mrs. Macready, the sour faced housekeeper, was showing a group of sightseers through the house. She had warned the children to stay out of sight, and so they had run into the room with the wardrobe. But when they heard footsteps in the passage and saw the door handle turning, they all bundled into the wardrobe. There the four children sat, panting in the dark. Peter held the door closed but did not properly shut it; for he knew that you should never shut yourself up in a wardrobe.

*“The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe”* – Chapter 6

What a way to leave the reader hanging! *“Have you realized what we’re doing, says Edmund? We’re following a guide we know nothing about. And how do we know which side that bird is on? And if it comes to that, which is the right side?”* To me, that is a provocative bit of dialogue. First, Lewis pictures the four children following a mute guide into unknown territory on what appears to be little more than a hunch, a gut feeling that they’re doing the right thing. And immediately Edmund begins sowing doubts.

I wonder if it has occurred to you that someone could raise those same questions about your faith. Someone could quite plausibly say to you, *“You say you have faith. Well, how do you know you’re not off on some wild goose chase? How do you know you’re on the right side? Oh, I know you’ve been told God is good. But how do you know it’s true?”* How would you answer? With this disarmingly simple bit of dialogue, Lewis raises the question: What does it mean to have faith?

In his letter to the Romans, when he wanted to talk about faith, of all the people Paul could have chosen as an example, he chose Abraham. And to make his case, in verse 3 he cited a line from Genesis, chapter 15, where it says that *“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”* God was apparently delighted with Abraham’s faith – and told him so. And why was that?

Well, God had promised Abraham and Sarah a child – specifically a male heir. And the truly incredible thing (in case you’re not familiar with their story) is that that couple had never been able to have children. By the time we get to chapter 15, Abraham was pushing 100 years old, and Sarah wasn’t far behind.

And yet it says that Abraham took God at his word and believed him! And that is why God told Abraham, *“I have to give you credit – you are one righteous man!”*

Now what can we learn about faith from Abraham? In our lesson today Paul tells us three very instructive things about Abraham’s faith. First, his faith was grounded in a ***relationship with a person***. Second, it ***recognized the problems***. And third, it was ***resolute in its progress***.

**1.** First, note that Abraham’s faith was grounded in ***a relationship with a person***. It says, “Abraham believed **God**...” When people talk about faith it’s remarkable how non-specific they can be at times. We might say that we admire people with “lots of faith” or sometimes we’ll encourage people to just have “more faith.” We might admire people of “strong faith” while remaining suspicious of people of “another faith.” But the one immensely important missing ingredient in all these cases is the object of faith. The question is: In what or in whom do you place your faith? That is the really critical issue.

Stuart Briscoe said, *“Some people who had strong faith in thin ice never lived to tell about it; they died by faith. Others who had weak faith in thick ice were as safe as if they were standing on concrete.”* History is replete with stories of people with sincere faith that was sincerely misplaced, and their faith was lost; while others were quite oblivious to the strength of their foundation, and so their faith withered. The notable thing about Abraham’s faith wasn’t its relative strength, but that it was intentionally focused on God.

In verse 18 it says, *“Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed (God)...”* Sometimes, when we say, *“I hope such-and-such happens,”* our words betray a sense of desperation. We might say that we “hope” something will happen, but we have no real grounds for hope. And of course, humanly speaking, Abraham had no grounds to believe that at his advanced age he could become a father – let alone become the father of nations. Frankly, his was a hopeless situation. But Paul writes that “against all hope, he believed in hope...” How could he do that? He could hope against hope because his hope was grounded in a relationship with a person – God.

**2.** Second, Abraham’s ***recognized the problems***. In verse 19 Paul wrote: *“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.”* I know that to some people it would seem like the only way Abraham could believe in the promise of a child was by being blind to the practical reality of their situation. Face it; he and his wife were both too old to have children. But I would argue that Abraham, in faith, could admit the very practical problems they faced and then say, in effect, *“So what?”* Think about it. There’s nothing to be gained in terms of having a lively faith by ignoring those things that militate

against that faith. The best way that faith can handle those difficulties is by openly acknowledging them. And that is the character of Abraham's faith.

I say that because in verse 17 Paul tells us that Abraham had faith in "the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were." Abraham was quite willing to admit that he and his wife had problems – problems that, humanly speaking, were insoluble. But he was also willing to believe that if God is really God, then he can give life where there is no life and call into being that which, humanly speaking, cannot be. Learn a lesson from Abraham. If you're beset by a problem bigger than you can handle, don't deny it; don't try to run away from it. The secret to handling that problem is to face it, and then trust God to handle what you cannot. God loves you; and when you trust him that way, he will invariably make up whatever you lack. That's faith; and it's the only kind of faith that works.

3. Abraham's faith was grounded in a relationship with a person, it recognized the problems, and one more thing: his faith was *resolute in its progress*. At verse 20 Paul writes, "*Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God.*" Here you can catch a glimpse of the man's true character. Stuart Briscoe, again, said it's continually surprising to him that "the same sun that hardens clay also melts wax." There's something about the composition of those two substances that produces opposite results when exposed to the same conditions. So it is with People. The same discouragements that cause some people to "waver" will actually strengthen others.

Consider Abraham's situation. There must have been times when he was tempted to despair. But then he remembered God's promise and that was enough to encourage him to hold on. The remarkable thing to me was that he evidently didn't "waver" – he was resolute. How did he pull that off? I suspect the answer is deceptively simple. I think the key lies in that, whenever he felt the slightest encouragement, he "gave glory to God." And the more times he gave God credit for keeping his word, regardless of the circumstances, the deeper his trust in God grew.

Every time I board an airplane I'm a bit nervous. But invariably, somewhere into the flight I relax. Why is that? It's not because I tell myself to relax. It's because the longer I stay on the plane and the plane stays up where it belongs, the more I find it worthy of my trust, and I simply relax, and trust it all the more. The same is true of our faith in God. Our faith in God grows deeper not by telling ourselves, "every day in every way our faith is getting stronger and stronger." It's by routinely thanking God for being trustworthy. And when we do that, God proves to us that he is. The old song says it best: "*Trust and obey, for there's NO OTHER WAY to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.*"

Allow me one last word about faith. At verse 23 Paul writes, “*The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for Abraham alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness – for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.*” In his closing words, Paul reminds us of a truth that makes all other notions of faith pale in comparison. He reminds us that, while Abraham believed in a God who could hypothetically raise the dead, we know that God actually did that once and for all. The Christian distinctive is that the object of our faith is not just the God of Abraham, but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us and who, against all hope, was raised to life to give us life forever. When it comes to having faith – that makes all the difference in the world.

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