

“AGAINST ALL HOPE”

Studies in Romans – 5

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

Up to this point in our study of his letter to the Romans, Paul has been writing in rather abstract theological terms: righteousness by faith, justification, atonement. These are all extremely important concepts, of course. But abstract ideas like these make a lot more sense when you see how they’re played out in a person’s life.

Paul wants us to grapple seriously with what the Scripture means by “faith.” And so in chapter 4 Paul moves from the abstract to the concrete. Remember, I said last week that it might surprise you to learn that the man Paul chose to cite as a prime example of faith wasn’t even a Christian. Well, I’ve got news for you. He wasn’t even a Jew! In fact, when we first meet this great example of faith in the Bible, he apparently didn’t have a clue as to who God was. But that didn’t stop him from believing. His name was Abraham, and his is the remarkable story of a growing, trusting relationship with God.

Paul begins chapter 4 by asking, *“What can we learn about faith from Abraham, our forefather?”* Now, what did Paul mean by calling Abraham “our forefather?” Was this an aside, a parenthetical comment directed at his fellow Jews only? Not at all – although I’m sure devout Jews would have read his words that way. After all, they considered themselves the true children of Abraham – the people of the covenant. And they were undoubtedly troubled by Paul’s statement in 3:28 that *“a man is justified by faith (in Jesus) apart from observing the law.”*

They would argue, *“Do you mean to say that God would forgive a heathen convert who happened to believe in Jesus; while our father Abraham, who lived a superb life without the benefit of knowing Christ, would not be accepted? That’s absurd!”* And of course, there was no doubt about the quality of Abraham’s life. In fact, God had called him “my friend.” And God said in Genesis 26:5, *“Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commandments, my decrees and my laws.”* So of course the faithful Jew would argue that, because Abraham obviously had no personal relationship with the Lord Jesus, the only logical reason that God would have approved Abraham was because of his faithful behavior. And who would have the audacity to question Abraham’s righteousness?

Ah, but remember what we said last week about the difference between behavioral righteousness and positional righteousness. As far as ethical behavior was concerned, Paul says in verse 2, Abraham *“had something to boast about – but not before God.”* In other words, from a human perspective that argument

sounds very convincing and very logical, except where it really matters, that is, before God. Ethical behavior is wonderful, but it doesn't earn you a right relationship with God. That kind of righteousness, that right-relatedness, comes through faith. So what is faith; and what does it look like, for example, in a person like Abraham?

Notice Paul's words in verse 3. He asks, "*What does the Scripture say?*" (In other words, when in doubt always go to the primary source.) And then he quotes from the record of that dramatic conversation between God and Abraham in Genesis 15, where it says: "*Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*"

The story of the covenant between God and Abraham in Genesis 15 is great reading. It tells how the Lord visited Abraham in a vision, and told him that his reward would be "very great." Abraham's crusty retort was, "*Lord, how can you say that when I'm constantly denied the one reward that means more to me than anything else in life – the gift of a son who will be my future! My wife and I haven't been able to have children. And in case you've forgotten, I'm 85 years old!*" Then comes the Lord's remarkable reply. It says "*God took him outside and said, 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars...'*" That is: "*Abraham, you will have a son, from your wife; and through him you will become the father of so many people they'll be like the stars of the sky.*"

Now, despite all the obvious difficulties bound up in such a promise, Abraham trusted God implicitly. With remarkable abandon, this man entrusted himself and his most cherished dreams for the future to his God and to what God was committed to do. And the Scripture says, "it was credited to him as righteousness."

Paul argues from a favorite Jewish text that Abraham's acceptance by God came through his faith, not because of his behavior – despite the fact that his behavior was exemplary. God did not accept him because he was so good. Abraham lived a good life because God had freely accepted him. Abraham simply believed God. Nothing else is mentioned. And that faith in God, the Bible says, "was credited to him as righteousness."

That kind of logic is sometimes hard for us to follow. It might help you to know that the word translated "credited" is λογίζομαι – which means: "to place to someone's account." It's a term that comes from the world of finance. It's rather like a father depositing \$10,000 in a child's account and saying, "*It's yours. It's a gift – credited to your account.*" Now, the child is free to claim it and enjoy it; but he has no business pretending that he's earned it or deserved it. So he has nothing to boast about – certainly not before the father.

We've been talking thus far about faith in a general way. Now it's time to get specific. Because in Abraham's case the gift God promised him was infinitely

more precious than funds credited to an account. And so, beginning at verse 18, Paul tells us three things about Abraham's faith that are very instructive and very personal.

1. First, I want you to note that Abraham's faith was *confidence in a person*. When it comes to the subject of faith, it's amazing how vague people can become. We admire those with "lots of faith," and we'll encourage people to have "more faith." People of "strong faith" are revered, while those of "another faith" are suspect. In all these expressions of faith there is one major misunderstanding. In all these cases it is the object of faith that matters more than anything else. So the root question is this: In what or in whom do you place your faith?

Stuart Briscoe says that "*some people who had strong faith in thin ice never lived to tell the tale; they died by faith. Others who had weak faith in thick ice were as safe as if they stood on concrete.*" History is replete with stories of people whose faith was sincere, but sincerely misplaced; as well as those who were oblivious to the strength of their foundation. Abraham's faith was exemplary not because of its strength or lack of it, but because its object was God.

Verse 18 says that "*Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed (God)...*" It's interesting that when we talk about hope we often actually convey a sense of hopelessness and desperation. We say that we "hope" something will happen, but we have no real grounds for such hope. And of course, humanly speaking, Abraham had no basis for believing that, at his advanced age, he would become the father of nations. Face it, his was a hopeless situation. In spite of that, he believed "in hope." Why? Because his hope was grounded in a growing relationship of intimate trust in God. Abraham's faith was, first of all, *confidence in a person*.

2. The second thing I want you to note about Abraham's faith is that he was *conversant with the problems*. I realize that it's possible to read Abraham's attitude as though he were ignoring the practical realities of the situation, closing his eyes to both the fact of his old age and Sarah's apparent infertility. But it's also quite plausible that he had considered both these factors very carefully.

Think about it. There is nothing to be gained in terms of a lively faith by ignoring those factors that militate against that faith. In fact, a healthy faith is more likely to triumph over those difficulties that it fully understands and openly acknowledges. You sense that quality of faith in verse 17 where Paul says that Abraham believed in "*the God who gives life to the dead.*" Rather than trying to generate enough personal faith to believe the impossible, Abraham openly acknowledged the deadness of his own body. The marvelous effect was that his own inadequacy became the arena in which God's power would be shown, instead of the place where his faith would sink without a trace.

What's more, Abraham was quite open about the fact that Sarah had been unable to bear a son, even in her youth. But that open admission was balanced by

Abraham's uncompromising conviction that this God, with whom he had become fast friends, was the One "*who calls things that are not as though they were.*" And so the incapacity of Sarah's womb became the place where God would show his power to create life where there had been nothing.

3. Abraham's faith was *confidence in a person* and it was *conversant with the problems*. There's one last thing to note about the character of Abraham's faith. It was ***consistent in its progress***. Notice verses 20-21 of chapter 4: "*Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.*"

Stuart Briscoe, again, says that there is something continually surprising about the fact that the same sun that hardens clay also melts wax. Obviously there is something about the composition of the two substances that produces opposite results when exposed to the same conditions. Some people, when faced with discouragement, will "waver" while others seem to be actually strengthened by those same disappointments.

Consider Abraham's situation. There must have been times when he was tempted to despair. But then he'd remember God's promise, and that would encourage him. I think that kind of "wavering" is very true-to-life. What's remarkable is that Abraham refused to give in to that temptation to vacillate. And by holding fast to God's word, Paul says, he "gave glory to God." The more times he consciously gave God credit for keeping his word, irrespective of the circumstances, the deeper his trust in God grew.

Every time I board an airplane I'm a little nervous. But invariably, about halfway into the flight, I relax. Why? It's not because God has given me more faith. It's because the longer I stay on the plane and the plane stays up where it belongs, the more I learn that it is worthy of my trust, and therefore I trust it all the more. The same is true of our faith in God. Our faith in God is deepened and strengthened not by our generating a deeper and stronger faith, but by choosing to place our faith in God and allowing his faithfulness to prove our faith in Him.

One last word about the faith of our father Abraham. Paul writes at verse 23: "*The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him 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 the closing words of chapter 4, Paul reminds us of a truth that literally explodes the old notion of faith beyond all previous experience; a truth that reaches out to embrace every one of us.

He reminds us that while Abraham believed in a God who could raise the dead, we have in our hands the record of an event which shows that God has done just that! The object of our faith is not only the God of Abraham. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who, as Paul put it, was not only "delivered over to death

for our sins,” but who also “was raised to life” to set us right with God. And that, sisters and brothers, is why we’re Christians. Your assignment for this next week is to study chapter 5, verses 1-11.

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With gratitude to Stuart Briscoe for his inspiration.