

How Faith Operates

A Study on Romans 4:16-25

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Faith is one of the most misunderstood words in the world today. Everybody is talking about it; people write about it, but few really understand biblical faith. For some, faith is simply believing in oneself, an attitude of self-confidence. Others are more nebulous and say faith is just believing anything, right or wrong. The modern day liberal theologian would tell us that faith is believing in God, the father of all mankind; thus, faith is having a positive attitude towards God and men, fanning the spark of divinity within us. How very little men really understand faith. Have you ever asked yourself, “What is faith?” Romans 4:20-21 gives us an accurate description of how true biblical faith works.

In the first part of Romans 4, Paul used Abraham as the supreme illustration of how a person is justified (declared righteous) before a holy God. Abraham was justified by grace through faith. All he did was believe the promise that God made to him. The promise was that he would have a seed or son, and that from this seed would spring a great nation that would possess the land of Canaan forever (Gen. 12:7; 15:5; 15:18). Abraham had no son at the time the promise was given, and he was about seventy years old. But he believed God’s promise, and his faith was counted for righteousness (Gen. 15:6). When Abraham believed God, God justified or saved him.

Abraham became the father of the Jewish race because he was the first Jew; the Jews are the physical seed of Abraham. But because he is the chief example of one who was justified by faith, he became the father of all, whether Jews or Gentiles, who believe in God and his promise. All who trust in God alone for salvation through faith are the spiritual seed of Abraham. Thus, Abraham is the father of all who believe, as we saw in our last lesson. With the declaration of the fact that Abraham is the father of all who believe, Paul moved into a short discussion of what it means to believe, or how faith operates, again using Abraham as an example.

FAITH TAKES GOD AS ITS OBJECT — Romans 4:17

“As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations.” This is a quote from Genesis 17:5. God changed Abraham’s name from Abram (high father or father of many) to Abraham (father of multitudes).

Some fourteen years before the time his name was changed, Abraham had been justified when he believed God’s promise. At the time his name was changed, God

reaffirmed his covenant promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations. Many years had passed since God had made the original promise, and Abraham still had no heir. Paul does not tell the whole story, but we should mention that Abraham did have a son, Ishmael, by a slave, which shows us that genuine faith in God can at times become very weak and do stupid things. When his name was Abram (father of many), he had no son, which was quite an embarrassment for an Oriental. It was the desire of every great man to have an heir, and Abram and Sarai had been childless in Canaan ten years. So, they took matters into their own hands, thinking they would help God fulfill his promise. The result was Ishmael, a son born by Sarai's Egyptian handmaid.

Abram may have been proud of this son, but Ishmael could never be Abraham's heir. Ishmael was part Egyptian, and archeology tells us that the Egyptians are descendants of Ham who was cursed by God. He was a son of the flesh, and God's people have paid for this sin of Abram, for the descendants of Ishmael are the present-day Arab nations. These nations are predominantly Muslim, and they have always persecuted Christianity and the true people of God. From this we see that a Christian can have a lapse of faith and fall into sin, but he and others may pay for that folly for generations. How easy it is for Christians to do things in the flesh instead of waiting on God.

The reason the promise was reaffirmed to Abram is that he had to know that this son of the flesh, Ishmael, was not the son of promise. God would send another son to be the promised heir. God changed his name to "father of multitudes" and renewed the promise, but Abraham still had no son of promise.

"Before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were." This was an impossible situation. Abraham was pushing 100 years old, past the age of procreation, and Sarah was about ninety, physically unable to have children. But Abraham had faith in God to do the impossible. He believed in an all-powerful, miracle-working God. Faith is nothing more than trusting in God's faithfulness. So, after the promise was reconfirmed, Abraham's faith was even stronger.

Abraham believed in a God who "makes alive the dead," a direct reference to the fact that he and Sarah were dead sexually, and possibly an indirect reference to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Abraham had no physical seed, there could be no Messiah because Messiah had to come through the promised line and no other.

Abraham believed in a sovereign God with a sovereign plan. God knows the end from the beginning, and when he promises something, it is sure to come to pass. Abraham knew his God and realized that God would fulfill his promise in every detail, that he "calleth those things which be not as though they were."

FAITH BELIEVES THE IMPOSSIBLE — Romans 4:18

“Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations; according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be.” This was certainly a humanly impossible situation. He believed God when there was absolutely no hope for fulfillment. Abraham did not find in the realm of his senses, feelings, or sight any basis for hope. He looked beyond himself and his circumstances to God, and accepted God’s Word (promise) as the basis of hope. Faith is believing God to fulfill His Word when we see no outward or visible evidence:

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1).

“For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

An old African-American woman had so much confidence and trust in the Lord that someone said to her, “You have so much faith that if the Lord told you to jump through a stone wall, you would start jumping.” She replied, “If the Lord told me to jump through a stone wall, it would be my business to jump, and his business to make a hole in the wall.”

FAITH LOOKS BEYOND THE CIRCUMSTANCES — Romans 4:19

“And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah’s womb.” Abraham sized up the situation and concluded that he and his wife were dead as far as producing a child was concerned. The circumstances were against them, but he was not weak in faith. He believed in a miracle-working God, a God for whom nothing was too hard to accomplish. He faced the obstacles squarely, and by faith trusted God to get him over the circumstances.

FAITH IS UNDIVIDED — Romans 4:20

“He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief.” The word “staggered” means “wavered,” and conveys the idea of being divided in mind, of doubting. Abraham had no mental struggle; he looked at the situation from a divine point of view. Until a person gets a divine point of view towards life, he will always be frustrated. He must look at life through God rather than through human circumstances.

“But was strong in faith, giving glory to God.” Abraham believed God for the impossible, and throughout the episode he was praising and worshiping God. Until Christians can give God the glory in impossible situations, they will never see deliverance from them.

FAITH RESTS IN GOD’S PROMISE — Romans 4:21

“And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.” Abraham had absolute confidence in God, and rested his case there. He relied on the fact that if God promises something, he surely is able to perform it. If God promises, he must produce, for he cannot lie and he cannot go back on his Word. Abraham did not “push the panic button.” He was fortified with faith in a sovereign, omnipotent, miracle-working God.

FAITH IS TO BE EXERCISED BY ALL — Romans 4:22-25

“And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness.” When God first called Abraham and Abraham believed God’s promise, God declared Abraham righteous before him. But Abraham had not one shred of physical evidence that this promise would be fulfilled; he had only God’s promise. His saving faith lapsed at one time and produced Ishmael, the son of the flesh, but it was not extinguished. After 14 years his faith was revived when God reaffirmed his covenant. This shows that the faith he originally exercised was genuine faith.

“Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also.” These things about Abraham were recorded for all men that all might know the way to be justified before God.

“To whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead.” As an example for us, Abraham believed God and was declared righteous. To be justified today a person must also believe the promise of God, which includes the full revelation of the crucified and resurrected Christ who alone can forgive sins. It is not enough just to believe in God. One must believe in the God who put Christ to death for sin and raised him from the dead.

“Who was delivered for our offences.” God put Christ to death to be the sin bearer. In his death, Christ made a complete and perfect sacrifice for sins, and there is none other that can forgive sins.

“And was raised again for our justification.” Christ died to pay for the sins of his people, and his resurrection makes their justification possible. There is no forgiveness of sin,

no justification, no eternal life, no heaven, and no hope for the one who has not exercised faith and made the death and resurrection of Christ personal in his or her life. Without Christ, there is only separation from God in time and separation and eternal punishment in eternity.

CONCLUSION

For the Christian: God has made some seven thousand promises for the child of God. Abraham had a promise from God and believed it. He shall see its fulfillment because he knew his God and did not lose faith. The Bible is God's Word for us today, and God has given promises that we must trust by faith. When a Christian does not trust God's Word, frustration and confusion result. In short, the Christian must learn to take God at His Word!

For the non-Christian: God has promised salvation to anyone who will trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour from sin and Lord of his life. But you must come to Christ and receive him by faith. He alone can forgive sin and fill the vacuum in the human heart. Here are some promises that should encourage the unsaved to turn to God in faith:

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30).

“Then spake Jesus again unto them saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12).

“I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture” (John 10:9).