

The Distinctive Nature of Saving Faith

Romans 4:13-22

"That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace..."

Introduction: For those of us who grew up with a fear of heights (or for the more refined, those who are "height adverse"), you know the dread that captured your heart at the local pool. It was not learning to bob, to tread water, to back float, or the free-style, it had everything to do with the aptly named "High Dive". The low board was no problem, since it did not attach possible pain and death with it, but the high dive, and later the platform, possessed the ability to maim any participant who dared climb the eternal ladder. But without fail, there would be the frightened first time adventurer leaving the confines of solid ground and attempting to defy death and take the leap of faith. Encouraging and well-meaning parents would shout encouragements, and someone trusted would call out the words: *"Trust me! You will be ok. Just jump."* Sadistic advice? No, but definitely a test. Leap confidently and you will gain the knowledge that heights maybe are not as scary as you thought, and that you can trust those who are given charge over you. Invariably, however, there were those who would turn around and climb down (which in my opinion was SCARIER), or would jump without confidence, clipping the board or landing on their back causing the pain they hoped to avoid, or having to have someone go up and push them off. The high dive was an expression of the difference between belief and faith, and is a great illustration for what Romans 4 describes.

We've taken some time away from Romans, so it's good to refresh ourselves in the persuasive arguments Paul has made in the chapters and verses leading up. The flow of thought went like this: all of mankind is sinful and are by nature rebels from birth. In this rebellion, we gladly and willingly exchanged the truth of God for a lie, worshipping the creation rather than the Creator, and that lead to a spiraling of sin, both in frequency and depth. Because of this condition (1:18-21; 3:10-18), we all stand before a righteous judge with nothing in our hands excepts some feeble attempts at righteousness, either by living up to artificial standards we created or by keeping the law that God lays out, which some have had knowledge of. God is the ultimate judge, and He is both vindicated and just to deliver the verdict, that because we have sinned and fallen short of His glory (3:23) and standard of righteousness, we DESERVE His wrath. But it is here, at this exact reality, where the glorious nature of the gospel shines brightly: though we deserve wrath and have nothing in ourselves to merit salvation, God declares us righteous (1:16-17; 3:24-26) through the righteous life and death of Jesus Christ, who **substituted** Himself on the cross for us, where God treated Him like He should have treated us, and whose blood was the payment price of our redemption. This perfect death did two monumentally significant things: **paid the price so we could receive forgiveness, and gave us a foreign righteousness so we could have a reconciled and restored relationship with God.** This is the righteousness of God revealed, and how God could welcome back guilty, condemned, and deserving of wrath sinners to Himself as justified (declared righteous), holy, and restored!

Now, this is what Paul will continue to hammer home, but in the rest of chapter 3:27-31 and 4, he continues to reiterate that no person can be saved by **works** and that the **Law or observance of Old Testament signs given to the Jews** can make us righteous. We've said repetition is helpful to lock things in our memory, but it is also needed because the gospel is **counter-intuitive AND counter-cultural**, since by nature we want to add something to mix, we want to DO something to earn, and we want to pay back something given for free. At a core of our nature, we are all works-driven, so the gospel has to take deep root in our hearts and minds to allow us to break free from the bonds and lies that false gospels tell us.

This brings us back to our text this morning, as we consider the nature of faith that justifies. Remember, there is a difference between belief and faith. I can believe something is stated or real, but I may not agree with it. I may believe something and agree that it is true, but I may not trust my life to it. This is the difference between a belief that there is a God or Jesus or gospel and exercising faith. Many will say they believe in Jesus, but God will tell them to depart (Matt. 7:21-23). They are like those who understand that a high dive exists, and agree that it is real, but who refuse to jump off with confidence. **Saving faith includes all of these:** *a knowledge of the truth, an assent to agree with it, but a TRUST in that knowledge that moves us to rest or entrust ourselves to the object of our faith.* This understanding frames the rest of Romans 4.

One more thing before walking through this text. Look down at 4:20-21 and read it with me:

"No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised"

We will gear up to these verses today and try to apply this to our lives next week, since it reveals the nature of true saving faith and how we move out of apathy into vibrancy. So we will look at the first two parts of this whole text today, and seek to apply this the way Paul did in Romans 4:23-25.

Faith Alone is the Basis of Receiving God's Promises (13-15)

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. 14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Abraham is the father of the Jewish nation, but because of his faith, he truly is the 'father of us all' (4:16). Paul used Abraham since he was well known among his Jewish audience and non-Jewish audience alike, but it was not ethnicity but rather His response to God's promises that unites us as his offspring. It was NOT adherence to the Law or moral ceremonies that would create heirs, but rather those that similarly believed and trusted God's promises. For sake of context, let's do a quick review of Abraham's life and the promises given to Him and the time between each one.

Genesis 12:1-3 – God called a nobody from nowhere to leave his country, home, and family and follow God's call. He was promised a great progeny, name, and that all the families of the earth would be blessed by and in him. Now, step back for one moment and consider this. We take for granted what this all meant, but this was leaving all for an unknown promise (which he would actually never attain in his lifetime – Heb. 11:13). We know he was **75 years old** at the time (12:4), which means he had an awful lot to lose.

Genesis ____ – God reiterates the covenant promise, and says, *"And he believed the LORD, and it was counted to him as righteousness"*, along with promises of land (Gen. 12:3-7; 15:18-21)

Genesis 17 – The chapter begins with a marking of Abraham's age: **99!** That means 24 years of waiting for the promise that God had given him, without seeing the tangible fruit of that promise. No child, but only growing age. But for 24 years he trusted, even though there were blips of unbelief along the way. In chapter 17, God reiterates his covenant, which was **eternal or everlasting** (17:7, 13, 19), and finally God says that a son from Sarah's womb would come, which prompted Abraham to fall on his face and laugh, since he was 100 (ish) and Sarah was 90! (17:17).

Now, why is knowing this sequence so important? Abraham was NOT justified by the sign of circumcision, since he walked by faith for 25 years before. Abraham was not marked by pure obedience, since he wavered in trying to make his line work through Hagar and Ishmael. No, Abraham was marked by a sincere, full, and assured faith in the **promises of God**, which lead him to entrust himself to them. Notice what Hebrews 11 says about his faith during this time:

Hebrews 11:8-10 *"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God"*

Hebrews 11:13-16 *"These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city"*

So when Paul speaks in Romans 4:13-14 about Abraham's offspring and heirs of the world, it WAS NOT about keeping the Law, but by exercising trust and faith in the promises of God. Even though he never possessed or planted himself in the land of promise, he believed there was something far better that was ahead. Paul's point is that if it was through law or effort or morality that made people **heirs of promise, FAITH ITSELF WOULD BE MADE NULL and the PROMISE VOID**. It was faith alone that saved Abraham, and anyone after him that was saved by faith alone is his offspring and heir to the same promise.

Now, there is an interesting and challenging statement made by Paul in v. 15: *"For the Law brings wrath, and where there is no Law there is no transgression."* Let's look at three important points and implications of this verse:

- 1) The **Law**, which came on the scene under the care of Moses, **only brings wrath, not righteousness**. We've already seen that the Law brings knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20), brought about an increase of sin (Rom. 5:20), and though it is holy (Rom. 7:12-13), it cannot justify. In what way does the Law increase sin? The same way a "No Trespassing" sign reveals and invokes sin. Is it wrong to trespass? Yes. Is it multiplying sin to by trespass AND violate what is written? YES.
- 2) **There was SIN before the Law**, but people were only held to what they knew: *"for sin was indeed was in the world before the Law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no Law"* (Rom. 5:13). One does not have to read very far in Genesis to realize sin existed before the giving of the Law. We see anger (Gen. 4:6), murder (4:8), and revenge killing (4:23) that brought swift and sever consequence from the Lord. We also see a world without a formal Law devolving to the point where *"the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually"* (Gen. 6:5), eliciting God's wrath with a universal flood. What they were NOT held into account was what was written in the Law, but they still had a law written on their hearts (Rom. 2:15-16)
- 3) **The problem with the Law is NO ONE can keep it.** In other words, it's not JUST the fact that no one does, but it lies in the fact that no one CAN. Because we are born into sin as sinners from

conception, the Law is holy but a problem, since it does not and cannot save. That means no amount of goodness, effort, moral desire or comparative ethical standards can save.

This is vividly illustrated in the interaction with the **rich young ruler** in Mark 10:17-22. Here was the perfect candidate for salvation by works. He, in both his mind and most likely upbringing, kept the Law consistently (10:20), meaning he was a good, moral, exemplary kid that turned into an exceptional young man in the culture. When he asked Jesus, “**Good Teacher, what must I DO to inherit eternal life?**”, he believed Jesus was lobbing up a softball. Jesus pointed to the Law and commandments – particularly #’s 5-10 – the young man answered the question like he had ALWAYS answered: “*That’s it! Done! I’ve kept ALL of those*”, with the implication he had done so perfectly. What he did not realize is that he FAILED the test, missed the point, and misunderstood the Law. Jesus was trying to show him that he was sinful ---- and he missed it, thinking his goodness and obedience would save him. So Jesus called him to love the Lord with all of his heart and soul by selling all his possessions and follow him, which sent the man away saddened since he was wealthy.

The point for us is simple and eternally profound. **There are only two ways forward to inherit the promises of God and becoming an heir to this world: trusting ourselves, our goodness, and moral ability, OR instead, laying all of that down, turning from it, and trusting Jesus with our whole heart and mind, entrusting ourselves to Him and His righteousness.** So simple, yet missed by so many.

Faith Alone Produces Hope & Righteousness (16-22)

¹⁶ *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,* ¹⁷ *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.* ¹⁸ *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.”* ¹⁹ *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.* ²⁰ *No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,* ²¹ *fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.* ²² *That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”*

Paul has leveraged the example of Abraham to show how justification by faith alone, but now he wants to show the nature of that faith, what it actually looks like and produces. Notice that he has referred to Abraham as “our father” (v. 12), “the father of us all” (16), and “the father of many nations (17, 18). Whatever marked Abraham’s faith should also mark ours (see v. 23-24). This is vital because Paul advances the argument in chapter 5 with what RESULTS from this type of justifying faith. So what marked Abraham’s faith:

- 1) **It was a faith that rested on GRACE alone** (v. 16) – The problem of pointing to faith alone for salvation without also acknowledging the foundation of faith is that we can somehow think faith is a work that we can conjure up on our own. But if that were true, we’d be in the same dire straits as pointing to our works. No, grace is a work of God alone, a gift given (Rom. 3:24) that is undeserved and that overrides our sinful condition and wrath filled state. Grace is lavished on us, given to us in all wisdom and insight, full of God’s riches and the mystery of His will, according to His purpose which He set forth in Christ (Eph. 1:7b-9). Grace is the guarantee for all God’s offspring since it is what “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (4:17)

2) **It was a faith that clung fiercely to HOPE** (v. 18) – Here Paul uses the idiom that Abraham “*in hope he believed against hope*”, signifying that he clung to the promises of God as a possibility, even though from a human perspective it was impossible. Faith is the foundational part of belief, but hope is faith in a future tense. Hope trusts in future grace that will be given and that promises would be fulfilled. Here Paul said it was his hope in the promises of God that made him the father of many nations.

I think sometimes we/I view stories in the Bible out of normal reality, as if somehow it was easier for Abraham to believe and hope and act because God spoke to Him, not realizing that we have so many more advantages than Abraham and we STILL find it hard to believe. *What was Abraham up against in his fight to believe and hope in the promise of God?*

He was promised to be that father of many nations and people like the sand of the sea and stars of the heaven.... but there were a couple of glaring problems: **his body was as good as dead, being 100 years old** (v. 19), and his wife’s womb was **dead** (v. 19), being unable to produce children. Now, in your mind, try to match that promise with the reality of the situation. A great promise, but from a human perspective, a laughable set of circumstances. But this is where **faith and hope cling**. God operates outside of human expectation and our contrived wisdom. He conducts Himself to confound the wise of this world and to have His people operate NOT in human philosophy or cultural norms, but in ragged faith that holds fast to the impossible. It’s important to point out that Abraham was NOT trusting that God would do something **outside** of his promise! He was not hoping in a house, or better health, or different government, but was clinging to what God had explicitly stated, which came to a showdown on Mount Moriah.

Genesis 22 tells one of the most remarkable stories of faith in all of Scripture. In it, God tells US that he wanted to **test Abraham and his faith**, so He struck where Abraham was most vulnerable: *the son of promise*. After waiting 25 years of what was promised and 100 years to have a child with his beloved, God blessed with Isaac – with God making alive what was dead and calling into existence the things that did not exist (Rom. 4:17; Genesis 21:2). So God commanded Abraham to take his only son, of whom the promise would come, and **sacrifice him on the mountain on the altar he made with his own hands**. As he was ready to plunge the knife into the back of his son, the angel of the LORD stopped him and said,

Gen. 22:12 “*Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me*”

God provided a substitute there, a ram in the thicket to replace Isaac on the altar, which would become the place where David would build an altar to stop a plague (2 Sam. 24), where Solomon would build his Temple (1 Kings 6), and where the veil of the Temple would be rent from top to bottom at the crucifixion of Jesus. It was here that God tested Abraham, and in passing the test, strengthened his faith – the reason why God would test us. This is, we can acknowledge, extraordinary faith. But it is the same faith that is produced by the grace of God in our lives. Go back now to Romans 4 as we close.

4:20-22 “*No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²² That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”*

Unbelief is the core of every sin and what keeps us from trusting the Lord fully. It looks at what can see, figure out, and clutch. But Abraham's faith looked at a different object: the promises of God. That is why he could say:

Hebrews 11:17-19 *"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, 18 of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back"*

Abraham believed through the tension of trusting the promises of God when it went against his conventional wisdom, emotions, and mental ability to grasp. So he believed to the point of obedience -- even if it meant killing his own son --- that God would raise him from the dead. It was not like he had ever heard about that, experienced it, or was promised it. But he passed the test God laid out by exercising deep trust and faith in a God who knew and provided more than he could imagine. It is THIS faith and justifies, a faith founded on grace, with the object being the promises of God. **Next week we will look at the application of this faith, but for now, we remember this:**

Abraham trusted that God would provide for Him to fulfill His promises, even to the point that God would raise his son from the dead. WE believe that God already has raised HIS SON from the dead. This is the object of our faith. This is what we grow in. Not our own earning, but growing strong in trusting the Lord. We live a life that is **fully convinced, assured** that God will always keep His promises even when it makes no logical sense. So we jump off the high dive. Not a leap of faith into darkness, but trusting our God and hoping that He saves, and we trust, He provides, we receive, He lavishes, we enjoy.