

Reformation: Sola Fide
November 12, 2017
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Romans 4:13-25 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.

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.” 23 But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

“A Clearer Picture of Faith”

The Sunday School children stared at their teacher. They could imitate the pictures in their lesson books and draw a picture of Moses. They had no problem imagining Jesus on the cross. Then it got tougher. Draw a picture of sin. It took them a while until they came up with little brothers using Barbie for combat or big sister sneaking their halloween candy. But faith? They had no idea what to draw.

That challenge isn't just limited to a certain age range. Even after moving on from Sunday School, faith is a tricky thing to define. Lifelong Christians struggle with competing images of what faith is. So the Apostle Paul gives us an example. He uses Abraham to paint a more accurate picture of faith for believers back then and curious souls today. In Romans chapter four we get a clearer picture of faith.

Faith Focuses on Promise

Faith is such a personal thing. You believe what you believe. And I'll believe what I believe. It is really more of a feeling. The information, the facts, are cold and boring. What really seems to matter is your sincerity. Be bold in whatever you believe. Hold to your convictions and don't let anyone criticize you or try to convince you your beliefs are wrong.

Let's compare that to the picture of faith we get in Romans chapter four centering on Abraham. This section starts out: **“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.” (Romans 4:13) The faith of Abraham is tied to something.

When God first called Abraham and directed his life, he gave him this amazing promise in Genesis 12: **“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”** (Genesis 12:2,3) He didn’t come up with it on his own. Instead of looking inside, faith focuses on something. Instead of being based on my feelings or my hopes for the future, faith focuses on the promises of God.

Faith Receives the Promise, It isn’t your working toward God

There is a friend of mine I would consider to be a person of faith. She had a challenging childhood, raised in foster homes. Her parents were Christians. But they were inconsistent in practicing their faith and being solid role models to put it lightly. As she grew up, her faith was very important to her. As she went to work and then put herself through school and then got into her chosen career, faith was what helped her through so many struggles. Marriage, family, children, then a painful divorce. Through it all, she kept her faith. She relied on her faith.

Like so many of us, she was shaken by the events that took place last Sunday inside a Baptist church in Texas. Like people of faith and people with no faith, she was hurting and searching for answers. It just seems like faith sometimes doesn’t work. I mean, if you can’t be safe going where God wants you to go and doing what God wants you to do, then what good is it? If you know the importance of God and faith, but that can’t spare you from senseless violence and unexplainable suffering, then does it really matter?

It doesn’t have to be Texas. It could be the next scandal that erupts from a trusted moral leader. It could be a collapse inside your own home. It shakes us at the very notion of faith and throws our beliefs into doubt. It’s because so often Christians have this concept of faith as a quality inside of us. Faith is our character that we work at and develop, cultivate and try to grow. And in return, our logic goes, God takes care of us. God gives us credit for our work in faith. You strive and you seek. Then God takes care of the rest.

Maybe we would never actually say it in this way, but we treat faith like one of those inspirational songs from children’s movies. A few years ago Dreamworks studios came out with an animated movie on the life of Moses called “The Prince of Egypt.” Along with the star-studded voice cast and visually stunning graphics came the requisite stirring songs. The biggest song “When You Believe” became a huge pop success. It says: “Who knows what miracles you can achieve; when you believe, somehow, you will; you will when you believe.”

When we look at the life of Abraham, we see the exact opposite. In fact, we see he did everything he possibly could to mess up God’s promise. His wife was a key ingredient in this promise. But when threatened, Abraham passed off Sarah as his sister. Not once, but twice. When the promise was slow in being realized, Abraham fathered a child with his wife’s maidservant. All of Abraham’s missteps and mess ups and manipulations of God’s timetable

only put God's promises at risk. So if faith is all about what you do with it, Abraham is in trouble. Romans summarizes this reality: **"For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void."** (Romans 4:14) Wherever God gives his laws, people will fail to obey them. Where this is failure and disobedience, there is only wrath and punishment, not rewards or prizes. When it comes to your ultimate meaning and ultimate hope, you have to have more than your faith in your faith, your sincerity or purity of belief.

When he put trust in himself, when he tried to do miracles, Abraham just made a miserable mess of God's promise. Instead, this is what Romans chapter four teaches us about the faith of Abraham: **"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."** (Romans 4:16) Abraham wasn't looking to himself. His faith didn't rest on what he could accomplish. It was based on the promise of God. Faith isn't even really about you. It's not about what your faith does or how hard you work in faith or the actions you bring about through faith. Faith is getting from God. Faith receives from God. Faith relies and trusts and holds onto God's promises.

Faith Receives Christ

God had promised to bless Abraham. He promised to bless all people of the earth through Abraham. The first step for any of those promises to become reality was a child for Abraham and Sarah. God stood by after Abraham made a mess of that promise by his own efforts. After Abraham was left feeling powerless and helpless, God showed him the true nature of faith. He waited until Abraham's body was about to give out and his wife was physically unable to produce a child. That's when he repeated the promise and made it sound as good as done: **"I have made you the father of many nations."** (Romans 4:17) Faith simply connects you to God's promise. God fulfilled that promise to Abraham. God gave him a child. That child enabled Abraham to be the father of many nations. From that child came the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to bless all nations through Abraham. Jesus came as a result of God keeping his promise.

Christian faith rests completely in God keeping his promises. The heart and core of a Christian's faith is that God handed Jesus over to death because neither you nor I nor anyone else in all the world can do anything to remove our wrongs from our record. God gave you something real, something solid, something in which you can put your faith when he raised Jesus back to life. Jesus had done the work necessary to clear your record. Romans tells us what was true for Abraham is true for you too: **"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."** (Romans 4:24,25)

The best way to think of faith is simply a connection. Faith connects you to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ earned your innocence. On the basis of the cross of Jesus, righteousness is your reality. God gives you the all-important acquittal, not on the basis of obedience or your actions in faith. But purely on the basis of what Christ has done for you. Romans explains using the example of Abraham: **"That is why his faith was 'counted to him as**

righteousness.” (Romans 4:22) By faith you embrace the acquittal earned by Jesus. By faith God registers that innocence to your account.

Faith is filled with the benefits of Christ

Without a connection to what Christ has done and without a confidence in the innocence he gives to you, faith can be a terrifying thing. Martin Luther describes his struggles: *“My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would [satisfy] him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him...Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that “the just shall live by his faith.” Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven... If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God’s heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love.”* (Bainton, p. 49,50) You are saved by God’s grace. It comes to you through faith. It is all on account of Jesus Christ.

When faith rests of God’s promises, it gives you confidence in an uncertain world. Romans lets us in on the inner workings of Abraham’s faith. God had promised him a son and a family and an entire nation. What God had promised to him seemed humanly impossible. But Abraham believed God on the basis of the fact that this was not a promise of some human. Abraham was aware of the very real and very physical obstacles standing in the way of God making good on his promise. He wasn’t naive. He was just a believer who had a deep, lasting trust in God’s promise. God was the source of that confidence: **“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.”** (Romans 4:20,21) Faith is a connection to God. Faith holds onto God’s promises. Faith receives God’s blessings in Christ. Faith is confidence in God himself.

Abraham is the ultimate example of faith: His simple trust rests in the promise of God that a Savior would come from his descendants. But if you want a clearer picture of faith, keep looking beyond Abraham. Look to the cross. Look to the empty grave. See Jesus, your righteousness, your innocence, your confidence. In Jesus all God’s promises are kept. Faith is filled with Christ. That’s the ultimate, the clearest picture of faith. Amen.

+ And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen. +