

Romans (20): Our Father Abraham (part 4)

Introduction:

We have considered how the Word of God sets forth Abraham as the spiritual father of all true believers in Jesus Christ. God had given great and gracious promises to Abraham and his heirs. Believers are heirs of God's promises to him. Today we will consider more fully what kind of faith Abraham exhibited in his life, which teaches us the nature of true saving faith.

The apostle Paul called upon Abraham, the patriarch of Israel, to set forth a scriptural and historical illustration of how God deals with people of faith. We have seen the following spiritual truths addressed:

I. God had justified Abraham through faith alone (4:1-8).

II. Abraham is the father of all who have true faith, whether Jewish or Gentile (4:9-12)

Let us read this section of Paul's argument.

⁹Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. ¹⁰How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. ¹¹He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹²and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Rom. 4:9-12)

One point that I did not make about this paragraph that I wish I had, is the stress that Paul makes in verse 12 on the nature of saving faith. Faith is defined as believing or trusting God. But true faith always leads the believer to live out a life of faith. Let us read again verses 11 and 12.

The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹²and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but *who also walk in the footsteps of the faith* that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

The point is this, that Abraham governed his life according to his faith in God. All true believers, who have the same kind of faith as Abraham, will also "walk in the footsteps of faith." Today we will learn more clearly how this played out in Abraham's life.

Last week we considered...

III. The promise of God to Abraham and his offspring is realized through faith (4:13-15)

We saw this spiritual truth last Lord's Day in Romans 4:13-15. There we read:

¹³For 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. ¹⁴For if it is the adherents of the law who are to

be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Here Paul contrasted faith, that is, trusting God to be gracious and true to His promise, to the alternative, someone meriting God's favor through obedience to God's law. But Paul argues that if people were to come into the favor of God by keeping God's law, then the role of faith would be negated and the blessing of God according to His promise would not be possible. But the law of God is incapable of bringing blessing, but rather it ensures God's wrath upon lawbreakers. But if you remove the role of the law from the equation, then there will be no registered transgressions that would condemn the believer.

Today we will see more clearly that...

IV. Faith secures God's promise to all of Abraham's spiritual seed (4:16-25)

¹⁶That 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, ¹⁷as 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. ¹⁸In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." ¹⁹He 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. ²⁰No distrust 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. ²²That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." ²³But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

In this last paragraph of Romans 4, we learn more clearly the nature of the faith that characterized Abraham through his life. We first read a statement about the nature of God (vs. 16f). Then we read of the nature of Abraham's faith (vs. 18-21). Lastly we read of God's response to Abraham's faith and His promise to us who believe (vs. 22-25). Let us take these in turn.

A. A Statement about the nature of God and His dealings with people (4:16, 17)

¹⁶That 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, ¹⁷as 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.

The subject of **verse 16** is the pronoun "it"—"it depends on faith." Every pronoun has a noun as its antecedent within the context. Here, "it" refers to God's *promise*; that is, God's promise of inheritance depends on faith. The promise of God must be extended to sinners through faith alone, and Paul gives two reasons. *First, "in order that the promise rest on grace."* If God is going to receive the sole glory for the salvation that He bestows upon people, then it must be through faith alone. God alone is responsible for people becoming saved from their sin. The one who is saved is indebted to God's grace, for he believes God for who He is and for what He has promised to do. The one who believes God is passive. God is the one who is active in saving His people.

Faith in God brings glory to God, and it is a fitting manner in which God deals with our fallen race. When God first made Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden, God gave them His word of instruction. We read of God's word to our first parents in **Genesis 2:15f**:

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Of course Adam and Eve rebelled against God. Their failure was essentially a failure to believe what God had said to them. They had dishonored God when they had believed the devil’s lies rather than God’s Word to them. It is fitting, that God would save sinners by His grace through faith, requiring His people to exhibit trust in Him to be true to His promise that He gave them. He would save His people through their believing His word of promise to them.

Paul gives a *second* purpose of God for saving people through faith. The promise depends on faith so that the promise may *“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.”* Here Paul includes among Abraham’s “offspring” the one who is an adherent of the law, in other words, the Jew who has faith in Jesus, and *“also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham”*, meaning the Gentile who has faith in Jesus.¹ If it were not through faith, then it would not have been a matter of God’s grace. If it had been through the law, it would have obligated God to bestow it upon the ones who kept the law; which would mean that no one would be saved, “for the law brings wrath” (v. 15).

When Paul again mentioned the name of Abraham toward the end of verse 16, it gave him occasion to once again describe him as the one “who is the father of us all.” In **verse 17** he cites the Old Testament reference that substantiates this once again: *“as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations.’”* This is a quotation of Genesis 17:5.

Paul then added a word about God who made this declaration to Abraham. **Verse 17b** reads, *“--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.”* Paul described God in two ways that are related to one another. *First, God is one “who gives life to the dead.”* God gives physical life to physically dead people. God also gives spiritual life to spiritually dead people. The immediate context will show that God is able to give life in that He was able to bring forth life from Abraham, who was “dead” in his physical ability to father a child. *Second*, God *“calls into existence the things that do not exist.”* This hints of his power to *create* something where there is currently nothing.

Now, we know that when God brings a sinner to salvation, God puts forth His power in a manner in which both works of God are performed.

1. When God saves a sinner, He brings him from a state of spiritual death unto spiritual life. Salvation is, therefore, likened to a *spiritual resurrection*. This is clearly shown in several places in Scripture. We read in **Ephesians 2:1-7**,

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- ³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵*even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved--* ⁶and raised us up with

¹ “Paul has forcefully stated that the true descendants of Abraham are those who believe (vv. 11-12); and when he uses the word ‘seed’ here [translated ‘offspring’ in the ESV], it must be with this spiritual meaning that he has given to the word. Moreover, the phrase ‘out of faith’ [translated as ‘depends on faith’ in the ESV] rules the entire verse and must be carried over to this latter part of it. The meaning, then, is that the promise is for the Jew who is part of the seed through faith.” Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1996), p. 278f.

him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph 2:1 ESV)

Our Lord Jesus taught His disciples in John 5 of both a *spiritual* and a *physical* resurrection.

²¹“For as the Father raises the dead and gives life to them, even so the Son gives life to whom He will. ²²For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, ²³that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him. ²⁴Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. ²⁵Most assuredly, I say to you, ***the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.*** ²⁶For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, ²⁷and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. ²⁸***Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice ²⁹and come forth-- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.***” (John 5:21-30)

Here the Lord Jesus speaks of both a spiritual and a physical resurrection. The *first* resurrection that is mentioned in **verse 25** is ***the spiritual resurrection*** when the Lord Jesus issues the command so that a sinner who is spiritually dead comes into state of spiritual life. Jesus said that “the hour is coming and now is” that He performs this work of resurrecting the spiritually dead to spiritual life. The *second* resurrection mentioned in **verses 28** and **29** speaks of ***the general resurrection*** at the end of the age. This is the bodily resurrection of the dead. This is clear for in verse 28 Jesus identifies these dead people as ones who are “in the graves. Interestingly, Jesus says instructs His disciples, “Do not marvel at this”, that is, with respect to the bodily resurrection of the dead. He intimates that the real “wonder”, that which should really illicit wonder among us is when the spiritually dead hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear live.

2. When God saves a sinner, He creates a new life where there was none existing.

Paul speaks of the Christian’s participation in a new kind of existence when he becomes united with Jesus Christ. He is a new creation.

¹⁶Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. ¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, ***he is a new creation***; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. (2 Cor. 5:16f)

When we are saved by God’s grace, we become members of a new community, God having created us anew so that we may enjoy this new life in Christ.

But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵***For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.*** ¹⁶And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. (Gal. 6:14-16)

In **2 Corinthians 4** Paul described the power of God to create new life in one He has brought salvation.

⁵For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. ⁶***For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts*** to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. ⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” (2 Cor. 4:5-7)

Just as God had originally created light on the first day of creation, which was the beginning of His creative week, so He manifests the same kind of creative power when He brings a sinner to salvation. Due to sin, we are ignorant and powerless, unable to know Him and unwilling to respond to Him, until He first performs this act of creation, illuminating our hearts and minds to the truth that is in Christ and moving us to respond to that light that He gives His people.

B. The nature of Abraham's faith (4:18-21).

Let us now return to our Romans 4 passage, and consider **verse 18**, where we read further of God's grace in bringing Abraham to know Him. We read of Abraham, "*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.'*"

"In hope he believed against hope." Abraham was too old to father children, but God had promised him that he would be fruitful and would have many physical heirs. And so, against the hope that any ordinary man might have that he would father children, Abraham, for Abraham had no such hope in his own ability, he nevertheless believed God would bring to pass His promise. And so, Abraham based his hope on God's promise to him.

Hope is the grace that God gives to His people to sustain them through their difficulties. Hope is that which gives believers strength. Discouraged people are hopeless people. But believers who are encouraged to face their trials boldly and with peace are ones who have the hope of God sustaining them. Where does the believer obtain this hope? Hope is based on the faith that one has in God that He will bring to pass what He has promised. *Hope is ours when we possess a certain anticipation of what most assuredly will occur.* Because the Christian believes what God has said concerning all that is promised to him through Christ, he is infused with hope, the deep-settled certainty that all the good that God has promised will most certainly come to pass. This joyous anticipation changes the believer's outlook toward all that he faces. He sees what he is enduring is temporary and that a glorious future awaits him. This anticipation of the realization of God's promises is what strengthens him to endure, yes, even rejoice through his present trials.

This is what encouraged and sustained Abraham through his many years of waiting on God. He believed God and continued to believe God, even though years passed and God's promise had not been fulfilled in his life. But his certain hope sustained him. "*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.'*" He believed that God would be true to His word that He had given to him.

We also read that Abraham's faith in God did not grow weak, but rather he continued to believe God in spite of all evidence suggested to him that he would never father a child. We read in **verse 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.*" Abraham's faith was based wholly on the veracity of God to His promise.

Abraham believed in God as the God who could raise the dead. He believed in the God of the resurrection, so to speak. He did not falter in his faith, but his faith governed his life for many decades, from the day that God had revealed Himself to him in Ur, until the day that he died. Even when he was dying, Abraham knew that God would yet fulfill all His promises to him. We read in **verses 20 and 21**:

²⁰No distrust 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.

We may read elsewhere in the Holy Scriptures of Abraham's faith. In **Hebrews 11** we read of the nature of Abraham's (and Sarah's) faith.

The Faith of Abraham and Sarah in Hebrews 11:8-22

⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; ¹⁰for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. ¹¹By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude-- innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

¹³These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. ¹⁴For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. ¹⁵And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

In this Hebrews passage we learn of some aspects of Abraham which are not evident in some of the other passages of Scripture that we have considered. First, we see that Abraham's faith led him to be obedient to God's call and leading. **Verse 8** reads, "***By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.***" Abraham's faith led to his obedience. He left Ur, where he was raised, not knowing where he was going. His inheritance was "unseen," but based on God's word to him, he believed (obeyed). God told him to do something and Abraham believed Him. And so, the **first** way that Abraham exhibited faith was in **his willingness to leave Ur.**

We then read of Abraham's faith after he had arrived in Canaan. **Verse 9** records, "***By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise...***" Once Abraham arrived in the land which was promised him, he did not settle down, he lived in tents, temporary dwelling places. The promised land was not his true home or inheritance. **Verse 10** explains why he did not regard Canaan as his true Promised Land, his place of sabbath rest: "***for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.***" This is why Abraham lived as a sojourner in the land of promise; he "saw" that the in which he was dwelling in tents was foreshadowing something as yet "unseen," which was the New Jerusalem, a city in which he and all of his promised children would dwell in fellowship with God. For the writer to the Hebrews, the Old Testament saints lived because of promises which we under the new covenant now enjoy; however, we, too, live with the anticipation of a future realization of what has been promised to us. In summary, the **second** way in which Abraham exhibited faith was in the way that **he lived once he arrived in Canaan.**

We next read of Sarah's faith, of which Paul was silent in Romans 4. In Hebrews 11:11, the writer described her faith: "***By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.***" What Paul attributed to the faith of Abraham in Romans 4, the writer here speaks of Sarah; however, Abraham remains in view. Although Sarah was past the age of bearing she believed God's promise, because of her faith she was enabled to conceive a child.

The result of faith is stated in **Hebrews 11:12**, "***Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude-- innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.***" Abraham had been "dead" as far as his ability to bear children; nevertheless, he received what God had promised him because he believed God's promises. These include the promises of God contained in these verses:

Genesis 15:5. "And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'"

Genesis 22:17. "Blessing I (God) will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which *is* on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies."

We then read in Hebrews 11:13-16 of the **city of God which is the true homeland of the faithful**. What moved these people to persevere in faith was the prospect of what they would inherit one day. Their hope was not fixed on anything earthly, rather they looked for a heavenly city.

¹³These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. ¹⁴For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. ¹⁵And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

"These all" refer to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob. Even death did not discourage these people of faith for they foresaw that God was faithful who promised; even death would not prevent God from fulfilling His word. In the same way we should view ourselves as "strangers and exiles" in this life on this earth. We are citizens of another realm. It is imperative that a child of God to walk as a citizen of heaven.

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." (Phil. 3:17-20).

We might consider the last words of the Patriarchs as they dealt with their own mortality. Abraham spoke to the sons of Heth, in whose land he was staying, "I am *a foreigner and a visitor* among you. Give me property for a burial place among you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight" (Gen 23:4). And Jacob in his old age spoke these words to pharaoh, "The days of the years of *my pilgrimage* are one hundred and thirty years; few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in *the days of their pilgrimage*" (Gen 47:9).

The Hebrews' writer explained why the patriarchs lived in faith as strangers in this world. **Hebrews 11:14**, "For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland." The commentator **F. F. Bruce** pointed out, earthly Canaan was no more their home than was the wilderness for those who would later come out of Egypt.

Lest any of his readers misunderstand his meaning that they lived anticipating the promised city of God, he recorded in **Hebrews 11:15**, "*And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return.*" If they had desired to live in an earthly city, they would have stayed in their hometown of Ur in the region of the Chaldeans. But they had no thought of returning there. They were living in faith to what God had promised them to be realized in the future, after their lifetime pilgrimage journeying in faith from this world unto the next. They took God at His word and He would not disappoint them.

"The earthly Canaan and the earthly Jerusalem were but temporary object lessons pointing to the saints' everlasting rest, the well-founded city of God."² "Words could hardly make it clearer that the patriarchs and the other men and women of God who lived before Christ have a share in the same inheritance of glory as is promised to believers in Christ of New Testament times."³

² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 305.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

We read more of the faith of Abraham in **Hebrews 11:17-22**.

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, ¹⁸of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,” ¹⁹concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

Abraham’s faith was tested, just as, by the way, was the faith of the readers. Abraham obeyed God in offering Isaac; it was an act in which he exhibited faith. It was through Isaac that God had promised to bless Abraham, but he was told to offer Isaac. Abraham trusted that God would take care of His end, he was to obey. He believed that God could raise the dead. This is another way that Abraham exhibited the truth of Romans 4:17 that he had believed in God, “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” In Romans 4, it was his faith that God could bring forth life from his dead body, enabling him to father Isaac in his old age, but here in Hebrews 11:19, his faith in God’s ability to raise Isaac from the dead that must occur if God is to be true to His promises to him. Abraham received Isaac “in a figurative sense.” Isaac was received back as a “type” of Christ who was raised from the dead. In Isaac, Abraham “saw” Christ; Abraham rejoiced to see Christ’s day (cf. John 8:56).

Let us now return to Romans 4 for the conclusion of the passage. We read of...

C. God’s response to Abraham’s faith and His promise to us who believe (Rom. 4:22-25).

²²That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” ²³But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in Him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, ²⁵who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

When we believe on Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, believing that God will be faithful to fulfill to us all His promises that are bound up in Jesus Christ, believing that God had raised Him from the dead, God counts us as righteous. We have been justified through faith alone. Whether you are Jewish or Gentile is immaterial. It is by God’s grace alone, through faith in God the Father who has wrought salvation for us through Jesus Christ alone, that we are justified before God by God.

“Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Heb. 13:20f)