

- d. The fourth and final point of contrast in this context spans 4:16-22. Here Paul contrasted *faith* and *sight* as the two principles for living. Once more Abraham serves as his exemplar, and Paul appropriately drew upon the historical incident associated with God's reckoning of Abraham's faith as righteousness. As seen, that occasion was God's promise of a descendant (Genesis 15:1-6), and in verses 4:18-22 Paul recounted for the Romans the outworking of the promise in Abraham's life. In the end, his goal in interacting with the content and psychology of Abraham's faith was to unfold the redemptive-historical, *Christological* significance of God's promise in relation to Abraham and his faith (4:23-25).

Paul's transition into his recounting of Abraham's receipt of the promised heir is important, both in the way in which it concludes the previous context and the way it introduces that which follows. With respect to the former, verses 4:16-17 raise a crucial implication that arises naturally from the truth that the Law brings about wrath (ref. 4:14-15). This implication, in turn, provides the transition into Paul's discussion of the principles of faith and sight and how it was that they operated in relation to Abraham's obtainment of the promised inheritance (4:18-22).

- 1) Paul's point in 4:14-15 is that, given the universal domination of sin, the Law's interaction with men yields only wrath. And this being so, the presence of law - in whatever form - in relation to divine promise serves necessarily to nullify the promise and render faith void. If law plays any role in the reception of God's promise, no one will ever receive it. The result is that faith in the promise becomes a foolish delusion. Ultimately, law precludes both divine promise and the faith that looks to the promise.

For this reason, if there is to be such a thing as *realized* promise, it must stand upon faith apart from law for its reception. And if the inheritance is gained solely through faith in the One who gives His pledge, then it must also be according to *grace* (4:16a). For faith does nothing but believe God concerning what He has promised; it is neither meritorious nor determinative toward obtaining the promised inheritance. In both its granting and its fulfillment the promise stands entirely upon God's purpose and good pleasure; it is purely a matter of divine grace.

- 2) And if the reception of the promised inheritance is according to grace, it is *absolutely certain to all the descendants*. Regardless of whether they have the Law or not, all who participate in Abraham's faith are his heirs, and therefore those who will most surely receive the inheritance (4:16b; cf. 4:1-12). This distinction is central to Paul's larger argument regarding the gospel of justification by faith. Whether arguing from the vantage point of the human condition and predicament (1:18-2:5), God's justice and impartiality (2:6-16), the Jews' failure under the Law (2:17-29), God's singular, unchanging redemptive plan (3:21-26), or the role of Abraham in redemptive history (4:1-25), the goal is the same: *human righteousness and the obtainment of the inheritance depend solely upon faith in Jesus*.

Here Paul has contended that *personal relation* to the Law brings wrath, and therefore precludes the obtainment of promise. This alone is sufficient to prove his point, but his second argument goes even further, revealing that the *mere reality* of the Law of Moses shows it to be independent from the promise.

- a) The reason this is so is that God's promise of a descendant looked beyond Isaac to a multitude of descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky (Genesis 15:4-5). Even more, this multitude was to be multinational and multi-ethnic; God promised that Abraham would become the father of many nations (4:17a; cf. also Genesis 12:1-3, 17:1-7). In him all the peoples of the earth were to be blessed, and this reality of worldwide blessing introduces a vital implication to the role of the Law of Moses and its relationship to the obtainment of God's promise to Abraham.
- b) Because God promised *global* blessing tied to a *multinational* offspring, it cannot be constrained to those under the Law. The simple reason is that the Law of Moses was the unique property of Abraham's physical seed. Constraining the promise in this way means that the promise itself must be altered. In other words, *if the Law is necessary to the obtainment of the promise, then the promise must be limited to those under its jurisdiction, and this limitation itself contradicts the nature and scope of the promise given to Abraham.*
- c) But the fact that the promise is according to *faith* allows it to apply to those who don't have the Law, while not necessarily excepting those who do. It acts to delineate the referents of the promise as all those who have the faith of Abraham, both those under the law and those without the law. In this way the promise is shown to be according to *grace* apart from any human obligation or contribution; all who *believe* are sons and, therefore, heirs.

Not only do the principles of grace and faith permit the obtainment of what was promised, they *insure* it. For they reveal that the promise and its fulfillment depend entirely upon divine prerogative, power, and determination. Thus God articulated His promise as if it were already realized: "*a father of many nations have I made you*" (4:17a). Again, the very substance of the promise - the fact that it pertains to many nations - shows that it is not according to law. And because it is of *grace*, its fulfillment is certain to all the Abrahamic descendants who share his faith. Conversely, were the promise tied to anything except grace and faith it would stand no chance of fulfillment in the life of anyone. The end result is that, for either Jew or Gentile to receive the promised inheritance, it must depend entirely upon grace apart from the Law.

- This is the case for the Jew under the Law for the simple reason that the Law only brings wrath.
- It is also the case for the Gentile, because he has no relation to the Law (ref. 2:11-16).

Consequently, whether one considers the promise in terms of personal performance under the Law or the mere possession of the Law as identifying the people of God, the conclusion is the same: *“the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith.”*

- 3) Because the inheritance is not through the Law, it belongs to Abraham’s multinational offspring exactly according to God’s promise to him. For this reason Paul declared that Abraham is *“the father of us all in the sight of Him whom he believed”* (4:17b). The grandeur of this statement lies in its connection of Abraham’s global fatherhood with God Himself. The Abrahamic promise and its pertinence to all the families of the earth find no basis in human design, estimation, effort, or accomplishment. Abraham’s paternity is purely a matter of grace according to God’s good purpose: divine intent, divine accomplishment, and divine reckoning. It implicates men only insofar as they entrust themselves with confident faith to the God who promises and graciously fulfills His word.
- 4) Thus Paul appropriately concluded this transitional passage with two related participial phrases that are pointedly significant in their description of God and His power: He is the One who *gives life to the dead* and *calls into being that which does not exist* (4:17c). Interpreters approach this compound statement in various ways:
 - Some believe that Paul’s primary thrust was toward God’s calling the promise into existence purely in accordance with His own sovereign, eternal will.
 - Others see the emphasis as lying more comprehensively in the general principle of God’s power to create *ex nihilo*.
 - Still others view Paul as looking particularly to God’s “creation” of the nation of Israel out of one man.

But what appears clearly evident is that the first phrase has reference to the *physical conception of Isaac*, whose life proceeded out of the “deadness” of Abraham’s body and Sarah’s womb (4:19). This being the case, the second phrase - which is tightly connected with the first - is best understood in terms of God calling into being Abraham’s multitudinous offspring out of a barren household (cf. 4:16-17 with Genesis 17:1-6).

This description of God as the sovereign Creator who brings all things into existence is crucial to Paul's argument. First, it gives important and necessary insight into the dynamic of Abraham's faith; but even more, it provides the framework for discerning how it is that faith can exist and stand firm in the face of contrary realities that meet the eye.

- a) Abraham's settled belief that God would fulfill His promise was grounded entirely upon what he knew to be true about *Him*, and not because of any other consideration. He trusted in and looked eagerly toward God's promise of a son precisely because he knew that the One who promised is the same one who is fully capable of bringing to pass all the things He had pledged.
- b) In fact, Abraham's faith in God and His promise was *staunchly opposed* by what he knew to be true about himself and his wife; his confidence and patient faith demanded that he look beyond everything that presented itself to his rational understanding and temporal circumstance. The principle of *sight* told him that God's promise could not possibly be fulfilled, yet despite his own aged condition and the barrenness of Sarah's womb Abraham had the full assurance of *faith* that God would give him a son through Sarah. And having that confidence, he further believed God that his posterity would eventually fill the earth; he would indeed be the father of many nations just as the Lord had promised.

Abraham's faith in God and His promise was unflappable for the simple reason that he knew Him to be a God who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not presently exist. The same God who created the natural order out of nothing, who later purged the earth by calling forth its waters, and who preserved a remnant according to His watchful lovingkindness; this God was able to bring forth the promised seed in whom the inheritance would be secured to all the heirs taken from all the earth's families.

It was this same confidence that later enabled Abraham to take the son of the covenant and offer him to the Lord on an altar (Genesis 22:1-18). As much as faith was required to wait patiently for Isaac's conception, it was much more needful in light of God's demand that Isaac - the promised heir in whom all of God's covenant promises to Abraham were bound up - be slain in an act of worship. *For how could God possibly honor His promise to give Abraham a multitude of descendants when the one through whom those descendants were to come was to die childless?* As before, Abraham fully believed that he served the God who gives life to the dead: *"he considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead"* (Hebrews 11:17-19). In the end, faith and sight must be mutually exclusive, and it is for this very reason that faith expresses itself in *hope* (Romans 8:12-25).