

Verses 4:16-17, then, supply an important implication arising from Paul's contention regarding the inability of the Law to grant the promised inheritance, that implication being that the receipt of what is promised must therefore come by *faith* entirely apart from the operation of the Law and a person's performance under it. In turn, verses 4:18-22 provide an overview of how this truth was manifested in the life and experience of Abraham. Specifically, Paul here addresses the fulfillment of God's promise of a descendant, which promise lay behind the declaration that "*Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness*" (ref. 4:3, 9, 22 in relation to Genesis 15:6).

But the promise did not end with Isaac; it simply began there. Beyond that single descendant God promised Abraham that he was to be the father of many nations, and Abraham's confidence that God would fulfill His oath was grounded in his knowledge that the One who promised is the God who "*gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist*" (4:17).

Paul's contextual thesis is that Abraham's faith was the basis for his receipt of what had been promised to him, and 4:18-22 prove out that thesis by considering the circumstances surrounding the birth of Isaac. At the same time, it is important to reemphasize that Paul's concern was not simply with Abraham, and much less with the particular historical episode he was recounting. Rather, his overarching concern was the *gospel* of righteousness by faith, and his consideration of Abraham was intended to serve that end.

- It does so first by presenting Abraham as an exemplar of the truth that right relation with God and the inheritance of His promises depends solely on faith, and not personal works and/or one's relation to law.
- But even more, Abraham played a crucial role in redemptive history as the father of all who have faith (ref. 4:9-16). Abraham's status as *father* was not that of a figurehead, but of a *progenitor*. That is, he is not simply an ancient exemplar of faith, but the spiritual ancestor of all throughout history who share his justifying faith.

Most importantly, this connection between "father" and "offspring" is shown by Paul to be entirely *Christological*, being provided through the covenant promise God gave to Abraham, which promise found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. As Christ is the Seed to whom the Abrahamic promise ultimately pertained, so it extends through Him to all those - Jew and Gentile - who have a share in Him (Galatians 3:1-29; cf. also Ephesians 2:11-3:6). *It is Abraham's profound redemptive-historical significance that lies at the heart of Paul's argument concerning faith and promise*, so that to miss this orientation and emphasis is to entirely miss his point. Even worse, it is potentially to reduce his instruction to that of *moral example*, with Abraham's faithful life simply providing a biblical model for Christians to apply themselves to emulate.

- 5) Although Paul could have drawn upon several events and circumstances in Abraham's life to prove his thesis concerning him, he chose the conception of Isaac. This event certainly demonstrates the psychology of Abraham's faith in an effective way. But as observed above, the obvious reason for Paul selecting it is its relation to God's promise to Abraham and the reckoning of his faith as righteousness. In the Genesis account it is specifically God's promise of an heir, and beyond the one seed the promise of a vast, multinational progeny that Abraham believed. And the Scripture records that it was his faith in God with respect to these particular promises that was reckoned to him as righteousness.

At the same time, Paul was not merely seeking to maintain the Old Testament contextual framework for the verse he cited, namely Genesis 15:6. Again, it cannot be overemphasized that his ultimate concern was with the redemptive-historical significance of Abraham's fatherhood as it implicates the person and work of Christ and all those joined to Him. Accordingly, while verses 4:18-22 specifically describe Abraham's trusting patience as he waited for the conception of Isaac, Paul was careful to indicate that Abraham's faith was more directed toward the larger promise that he would be the father of many nations (ref. 4:17-18). Abraham understood that the fulfillment of God's promise to him would begin with the one son Isaac, but it would culminate with an innumerable host of descendants drawn from every tribe, tongue, nation, and people. The promise would find its true fulfillment in the *gospel blessing* to come upon the whole world (Galatians 3:1-9).

- a) As Paul considered Abraham's faith the first thing he noted about it was that it was characterized by hope: "*in hope against hope he believed*" (4:18a). This unusual prepositional expression serves as the focal point of the verse, and provides crucial insight into the psychology of Abraham's faith. Yet its contribution does not so much pertain to Abraham's faith as such, *but to the kind of faith that God reckons as righteousness.*

Although the expression has been understood in various ways, the context shows that Paul was speaking of a hope that exists where there ought to be none. It denotes a hope that exists in spite of the fact that everything argues against it; it is a hope *against* hope. This stands as Paul's introduction of the concept of *hope*, and by it he showed the vital and necessary linkage between hope and *faith*.

Biblical faith always expresses itself in biblical hope. The reason is that authentic hope is hope *against* hope - it is hope that present circumstance argues against. This being so, such hope finds its source, impetus and strength only in *faith*, for faith is the "*assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen.*"

This insight by the author of Hebrews shows clearly the reciprocal relationship between faith and hope: because faith is confidence grounded solely in God and His promises, it exists and operates independently of, and even *contrary* to, the things that are seen. For this reason it necessarily manifests itself in unflappable hope. For if a person *believes* the promise of God in spite of what meets the eye, then he will also live in the settled *hope* that he will receive what has been promised to him. Conversely, where such hope is absent it betrays a weakness in, if not a complete lack of authentic faith. This linkage is foundational to Paul's argument, and is pressed forward from Abraham to his spiritual descendants in the succeeding context (5:1-2; cf. Galatians 5:1-5; Colossians 1:19-23; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 5:1-10; 1 Peter 1:17-21; etc.).

- b) The second thing Paul revealed about Abraham's faith was that it was *purposeful* and *directed*. It had its object in God, but specifically God's faithfulness to fulfill what He had promised (4:18b). Abraham firmly believed and therefore lived in the confident hope that he would indeed be the "father of many nations"; his faith was directed toward the promise, and the result was that he received the thing promised. He did not live to see all fulfilled, but he did receive the foundational promised heir.

As Abraham stood looking at the starry sky and was promised, "*So shall your descendants be*" (Genesis 15:5), it was obvious that this promise had its initial referent in his physical offspring descended from the promised child Isaac (Genesis 12:2, 13:14-16, 15:12-16, 17:15-16). At the same time, God was adamant that Abraham's fatherhood and covenant blessing were to extend to *all the families* of the earth. Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants constituted the first-level fulfillment of the "seed" promise, but not the ultimate fulfillment. In the end, God's promise pertained to a progeny determined by participation in Abraham's faith, which faith is reckoned as righteousness because, like Abraham, it believes God concerning the promised Seed and the covenant blessing to be realized in Him. This is the sense in which Paul spoke of Abraham as the father of many nations (ref. 4:9-16), and it is this perspective that enabled him to conclude chapter four with a Christological crescendo, and then immediately attribute Abraham's faith and hope to all those who have been justified by faith in Christ (5:1-2).

- c) Paul's next statement that extends through verses 19-21 shows more particularly how it was that Abraham "hoped against hope." As he considered his own body and that of his wife Sarah he found only *deadness*. God had promised that a child would come forth from both of them, but did not life proceed only from *life*?

How could life possibly proceed out of *death*? Indeed, everything pertinent about the circumstances confronting him railed against hope in the promise, yet Abraham believed God: “*with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief*” (4:20a). Despite the two physically determinative and humanly insurmountable obstacles in front of him -the deadness of Sarah’s womb and his own body - Abraham hoped “against hope.”

Quite the opposite of giving himself over to disbelief, “*he grew strong in faith, giving glory to God*” (4:20b). So far was Abraham from any doubt, that his contemplation of the things that should have debilitated his faith and robbed him of all hope only served to strengthen his confidence that God would prevail to keep His word. For was He not the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not presently exist (ref. 4:17)? Though his eyes saw only two greatly aged bodies, a dead womb, and a servant for an heir, the patriarch never wavered in his conviction that he was indeed *Abraham* - the father of many peoples.

The radical and comprehensive *theocentricity* of faith is punctuated in the closing phrase of verse 4:20. In a set of circumstances in which Abraham’s faith should have been weakened and even incapacitated, it only increased in strength. *The reason was not his hope in altered circumstance, but his confidence in the God who is the Lord of circumstance.* Because he knew his God to be the One who effortlessly triumphs in every circumstance, Abraham waited with all confidence for what was promised, all the while “*giving glory to God.*”

Douglas Moo comments:

*“In what sense did Abraham’s faith ‘grow strong’? In the sense that anything gains strength in meeting and overcoming opposition - muscles when weights are raised; holiness when temptation is successfully resisted. So Abraham’s faith gained strength from its victory over the hindrance created by the conflict between God’s promise and the physical evidence. And in this strengthening of his faith, Abraham gave ‘glory to God.’ In his faithful response to God’s word, Abraham therefore accomplished what the idolaters of 1:21 failed to do.”*

Thus Paul presented a marked contrast between men in their fallen faithlessness - those who suppress the truth and refuse to glorify God and give thanks to Him - and those who glory in Yahweh, trusting in His word of promise with an attitude of humble, devoted, confident, and grateful dependence.

And whereas the *result* of Abraham's growing strong in faith was this posture of humble and thankful worship, the *reason* Paul gave for his strengthening was his full assurance that what God had promised, "*He was able also to perform*" (4:21). Once again the essential theocentricity of faith is emphasized. Throughout the context Paul has repeatedly testified that Abraham's faith had its source, substance, and power in his true and compelling knowledge of God. Like Paul himself, Abraham could affirm: "*I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able...*"

*"We do not sufficiently exalt the power of God, unless we think it to be greater than our weakness. Faith then ought not to regard our weakness, misery, and defects, but to fix wholly its attention on the power of God alone; for if it depends on our righteousness or worthiness, it can never ascend to the consideration of God's power. And it is a proof of the unbelief, of which he [Paul] had before spoken, when we mete the Lord's power with our own measure."* (John Calvin)

More specifically, Abraham's confidence was in the God *who had promised*, which promise Paul will show to have pertained to and have been fulfilled in *Jesus Christ*. Faith in God is faith in His word of promise, and Christ is Himself that word. *It is for that reason that faith in God is faith in the One whom He has sent and given*. To disbelieve Jesus is to disbelieve God; to live in faith in Christ is to believe and "give glory" to God (cf. John 5:19-23, 6:26-29, 45, 8:12-19, 31-42, 12:26, 14:1-9, 15:18-16:3; etc.).

- d) It was this faith - well aware of very real and seemingly insurmountable obstacles to the promise, yet unwavering in full confidence, strengthened by grace, and manifested in settled hope - that was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness (4:22). For in every aspect and every degree his faith acknowledged God's veracity and power, with the result that all other considerations became eclipsed in the blazing light of His redeeming glory.

And as it was for Abraham, so it is for all his offspring. The faith that justifies is not the faith that *works*, but the faith that *believes* in Him who justifies the ungodly (4:4-5). John Calvin has expressed this truth as well as anyone: "*Let us also remember, that the condition of us all is the same with that of Abraham. All things around us are in opposition to the promises of God: He promises immortality; we are surrounded with mortality and corruption: He declares that he counts us just; we are covered with sins: He testifies that he is propitious and kind to us; outward judgments threaten his wrath. What then is to be done? We must with closed eyes pass by ourselves and all things connected with us, that nothing may hinder or prevent us from believing that God is true.*"