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Romans

...who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be."
Romans 4:18

Hope is defined as a want or expectation of something, particularly when the thing seems likely or possible. Contrary to this premise, Abraham "in hope believed." In other words, Abraham placed his hope in something that wasn't likely and which was seemingly impossible. His wife was beyond the age of bearing and yet he accepted God at His word. This is specifically referring to Genesis 15:5 -

"Then He brought him outside and said, 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'"

The faith of Abraham wasn't misdirected faith even though the promise was otherwise unlikely. The reason is that it is "God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did." If the One speaking to Abraham is truly the Creator, then the word spoken from Him, even if it seems impossible to us, is actually more than probable (Matthew 19:26).

The word from God when properly handled contains the surest guarantee of all.

Life application: When reading the Bible, you are reading the very word of God to you. Its promises are guaranteed and what it states is absolute truth. But be careful to rightly apply it and to keep its words in proper context. One cannot claim promises to which they are not entitled. Through right interpretation, we will be built up in our faith and not disappointed when misdirected hopes are dashed.

And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb.

Romans 4:19

Abraham's faith remained strong despite the odds against him. He was given a promise that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky at a time when it seemed a bit more than improbable.

However, misunderstanding often comes into our thinking at this time concerning the wording of today's verse. The NKJV here states "He did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old)..." This is misleading concerning the issue. Here is another version for comparison, "And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb:" (KJV).

The issue isn't concerning the deadness of Abraham's body, but the "considering" of Abraham's body dead because of the deadness of Sarah's womb. There is nothing to suggest, and everything to refute, the thought of Abraham's body being dead. He was only about 100 years old and he would father many children before his death at 175. However, at this point in his life Sarah, his only wife, had no children. The consideration of Abraham becoming a father is tied to Sarah. This is the reason why later, in Genesis 16, Sarah gave Abraham her maidservant Hagar to bear a child.

This same consideration is to be seen 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." In this verse, as in Romans 4:19, the reckoning that Abraham's child-bearing was "as good as dead" is tied directly to Sarah. It shows us the moral uprightness of Abraham who was faithful to his beloved wife despite her inability to bear. This is the strength of Abraham's faith - that God made a promise and that it would in fact come about.

It was Sarah who proposed that Abraham go into Hagar and thus, because of her words, he agreed. Until she made the proposal, the belief was that his faithfulness to Sarah would be rewarded. And in a way it was - both through the begetting of Ishmael through Hagar and then later begetting Isaac through Sarah. Abraham walked in faith and was rewarded for his faith by God.

To God, who called the universe into existence and who raised Lazarus from the tomb, the miracle of life through Sarah's dead womb was His way of showing us that He has all things under control.

Life application: With God, nothing is impossible. When we see difficulties, God sees opportunity for His glory to shine forth all the more brightly. Let us stand fast and firm on the surety that if God has made a promise in His word, it will certainly come about.

He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God,... Romans 4:20

Abraham has been given as the prime example of fortitude in faith. He remained unwavering in his convictions concerning the promise of God. Unfortunately, he is too often maligned against this very premise when it comes to the account with Hagar. The man of faith is said to have weakened at that time, but this is not at all the case. Paul states very clearly here that "he did not waiver at the promise of God through unbelief."

What occurred with Hagar was simply a man not having all the information that God has. Because of this, his actions with Hagar were done in faith, not apart from them. It was Sarah who made the proposition and Abraham acted upon it, possibly assuming this was the divine plan God spoke of. In the end, all came about exactly as God intended. Ishmael was born to meet God's plans and later Sarah conceived Isaac, thus bringing glory to God.

Abraham's walk was continuously one of undivided faith. The Greek word translated as "waver" indicates a mental struggle concerning the issue. In Abraham, there was no such turmoil. God spoke and he believed unwaveringly. Abraham learned early and held fast to the truth that if one looks at the circumstances around them they will falter, but if they fix their eyes on the Lord their is only surety of purpose and resoluteness in determination.

For this very reason, the Bible elsewhere implores us to "fix our eyes on Jesus" (Hebrews 12:2) and again to "fix our thoughts on Jesus" (Hebrews 3:1). When we look unto Him, there will be no time for mental distractions which cause us to falter.

But there is an important caveat which must be considered concerning our faith. Misapplied promises can only lead to unsatisfactory results. It is highly fashionable to take single verses out of context and make faith-based claims on them. This is both unreasonable and harmful. When quoting Scripture to build up faith, it must be taken in context and in the manner intended by God. Otherwise, it is no promise at all. Handle the word with care, especially when looking to its promises.

Life application: Who is being addressed in a letter or book? What are the circumstances of what is being said - time, place, person. Is the verse speaking directly to you or are you merely being allowed the privilege of seeing God's promise to someone else for learning, but not self-application. Knowing and applying these and many other rules of interpretation will keep one from becoming disillusioned by promises which were never intended to be used in your own personal manner.

...and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. Romans 4:21

Hebrews 11:1 defines what faith is - "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." It is something which one possesses, "substance" and "evidence." Roman's 4:21 takes this definition and describes it. Abraham was "fully convinced that what He [God] had promised He was also able to perform." This is the substance of Abraham's hope and it is the evidence of his faith.

Abraham's internal conviction that God was able to perform exactly what He spoke was looked upon as an act of righteousness by God. This is the foundation of the biblical pattern for such a reckoning and it will be broken down and explained in the next verses. And the Bible will never deviate from this premise - that it is by grace through faith that one is saved. Jesus' words confirm this precept and are worth remembering yet again -

"For God so love the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16

This is the model, this is the standard, and this is the truth of the word of God. We are to be fully convinced that what He promises He will also perform.

Life application: Have faith in God and His word. It is the only thing that you can ever do which will restore you to Him. He has done the work; now accept what He has done and the promises which accompany it.

And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness." Romans 4:22

"And therefore..." Paul sums up the thoughts of verses 9-22 (which includes an interim "therefore" that must be considered in this thought). Because of

everything he has noted, clearly laying out his defense of righteousness apart from works, he cites Genesis 15:6 - "It was accounted to him for righteousness." The word translated here is telling us that God was counting Abraham righteous because of his belief. The difference between "imputation" and "impartation" was previously detailed. Here is that difference -

Imputation: I believe the gospel and therefore I am counted as righteous.

Impartation: I believe the gospel and therefore I am righteous.

Abraham believed God and righteousness was credited to his account, even though he was still a fallible man. He knew that the Seed of the woman, promised at the fall of man, would come. Even more, he believed that He would come through him despite his circumstances. His unwavering faith in the promise of God was all that was necessary to justify him.

Life application: Take time to re-read verses 9-23 today and then store away this valuable treasure trove of information. If you have called on Jesus as Lord, then you are saved. Don't let anyone tell you that you're lacking something necessary to please God. Let your works result from your salvation and not be an attempt to somehow merit it.

Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him,
Romans 4:23

In 1 Corinthians 10:11, Paul says, "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." Jude's epistle says the same basic thing in verse 1:7. The stories of the Old Testament aren't just written for us to read without careful consideration. Instead they are written so that we have real examples of how God works in and through history and they are to be used in for our instruction and learning.

Having said this, it's important to understand that these are types and pictures and so care needs to be used when evaluating them. In the case of Abraham, Paul explicitly says that what is written about how righteousness was imputed to him wasn't "written for his sake alone."

We have the assurance that the pattern set down in Scripture concerning imputation was one that we can apply directly to ourselves and Paul will explain it in the next two verses.

Life application: When evaluating passages in the Bible for self-application, context is king. Understanding proper context takes an immense amount of study and contemplation. Be careful not to run ahead and attempt to apply verses or passages to your own life without understanding their full intent and purpose. Unless a concept, type, or shadow is explicitly explained, use great care in how you apply it.