

Romans: The Good News of God

The Characteristics of Faith

Romans 4:18-25

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February 3, 2008

The Characteristics of Faith

Scripture

The apostle Paul has been using the patriarch Abraham as an example of faith in Romans 4:1-25. Today, as we examine the final section of this chapter we shall observe the characteristics of true, saving faith. Let's read Romans 4:18-25:

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 distrust 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. (Romans 4:18-25)

Introduction

Today is Super Bowl Sunday. The New York Giants take on the New England Patriots in the match later today.

Tom Brady is the quarterback for the New England Patriots. He has already won three Super Bowls, and was twice named the Most Valuable Player in previous Super Bowls. He is arguably the best quarterback ever to play the position of quarterback.

He is often in the news for his superior ability as an athlete.

Unfortunately, Tom Brady has also made news for his disappointing personal life as well. This past year he fathered a child out of wedlock in a messy love triangle.

Prior to this tragic set of events, Brady shared some telling words in a *60 Minutes* interview.

He mused, “Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there’s something greater out there for me? I think, ‘God, it’s got to be more than this.’ I mean this isn’t, this can’t be, what it’s all cracked up to be.”

Steve Kroft, the interviewer, then asked, “What’s the answer?”

Brady replied, “I wish I knew. I wish I knew.”¹

Until we find our purpose in God, life will remain elusively meaningless.

The first question in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* is, “What is the chief end of man?” And the answer is, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”²

I would like to say to Tom Brady and you who wonder what life is all about that you will never find meaning and purpose until you glorify God. And you will never glorify God until you first come into a right relationship with him.

But how do you come into a right relationship with God?

You enter into a right relationship with God through faith.

But what is faith? What does faith look like? What are the characteristics of faith?

Lesson

Abraham’s faith is a case study for us. Let us observe seven key characteristics of faith that are true in the life of every believer.

I. Faith’s Object (4:18)

The first key characteristic of faith is its object.

The apostle Paul said of Abraham that **in hope he believed**

¹ *Leadership*, Summer 2006, p. 68.

² *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc. 1996).

against hope (4:18a).

The term **hope** is not the same as *faith*, although they are related. In this instance, **hope** is the desire for something to be true or to happen, whereas *faith* is the firm confidence that something is true and it will happen.

Abraham **believed** when, from a human point of view, there was no basis for **hope** at all.

The object of Abraham's faith was God, and in particular the promise **that he**, that is, Abraham, **should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be"** (4:18b).

God had called Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. After many years, when Abraham still did not have any descendants, God took 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."

And Abraham believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:5-6).

The object of true, saving faith is God.

True, saving faith saves because of its *object*. It is not the amount or sincerity of faith that saves. A person can have a great deal of faith or be extremely sincere in his or her faith, but that is not what saves a person.

You may have a great deal of faith and be extremely sincere in your faith that if you step off a 10-story building, you will reach the ground unharmed. The problem is not the amount or sincerity of your faith but rather with the object of your faith. You believe that the laws of gravity will be changed in order to allow you to float to the ground, unharmed. And, of course that will not happen.

No, the important thing is that the *object* of your faith must be placed in the right person: God.

Abraham was saved because his faith was in God.

And you are saved only if your faith is in God.

Therefore, is your faith in God?

II. Faith's Obstacle (4:19)

The second key characteristic of faith is its obstacle.

There are many obstacles to faith. Doubt. Ignorance. Misunderstanding. Temptation. Weakness. Persecution. And so on. These are all obstacles to faith.

True, saving faith however does not focus on the obstacles but focuses instead on God and his Word.

The apostle Paul said that Abraham **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** (4:19).

Abraham's original name was Abram (see Genesis 11:26ff.), which means "father of many." Yet when God called him while he was living in Ur of the Chaldeans (Genesis 11:28, 31; cf. Acts 7:2-4), the patriarch was childless, even though God had promised that he would make of Abram a great nation (Genesis 12:1-3). By the time he left Haran, after the death of his father, Terah, Abraham was seventy-five years old (Genesis 12:4) and still without children. Yet by faith he began the last part of his journey to the land God had promised to him.

Abram's faith was truly astounding, in spite of the obvious obstacle of **the barrenness of Sarah's womb**. For at least twenty five years before it was fulfilled, Abram believed God's promise to give him an heir. Abram trusted God to make him the father of a great nation and of a multitude of people, although there would not be a nation in the usual sense of that term until nearly 600 years later, when Joshua would lead the Israelites back into Canaan.

In his commentary on Romans, commentator Donald Grey Barnhouse, writes insightfully of Abram:

Now Abram was an Oriental. He was used to the palaver of the Orientals. Furthermore, he was strategically located athwart the roads of the camel caravans that carried the commerce of the ancient world between Egypt and the North and East. He owned the

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wells, and his flocks and herds were great. The Scripture says that “Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold” (Genesis 13:2). When the caravans of the rich merchants came into the land, either from the north or from the south, they stopped at Abram’s wells. The servants of Abram took good care of the needs of the camels and the servants of the traders. Food was sold to the travelers. And in the evening time the merchants would have come to Abram’s tent to pay their respects. The questions would have followed a set pattern. How old are you? Who are you? How long have you been here? When the trader had introduced himself, Abram would be forced to name himself: Abram, father of many.

It must have happened a hundred times, a thousand times, and each time more galling than the time before. “Oh, Father of many! Congratulations! And how many sons do you have?” And the answer was so humiliating to Abram: “None.” And, many a time there must have been the half concealed snort of humor at the incongruity of the name and the fact that there were no children to back up such a name. Abram must have steeled himself for the question and the reply, and hated the situation with great bitterness.

. . . Father of many—father of none. The possibilities were varied, and I believe that it is possible to detect in the psychology of the narrative the fact that there was much gossip about it. The servants who heard the jokes and who saw Abram’s embarrassment repeated the details with embroidered variations. It was a world of cloth and goat skins, where all lived in tents, and where there was little privacy from the eyes and none in the realm of the ears. There must have been many conversations on the subject—who was sterile, Abram or Sarah? Was he really a full man? Oh, he was the patriarch; his word was law; he had the multitude of cattle and many servants, but—he had no children, and his name was “father of many.”³

And yet, in spite of the obstacle, Abraham believed God.

You may be facing an obstacle to your faith. You may be facing doubt, or temptation, or uncertainty, or weakness, or whatever.

Let me encourage you to look past the obstacle and believe God and his Word.

³ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *God’s Remedy: Romans 3:21-4:25* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954), 311-12.

True, saving faith, as someone once said, is dead to doubt, dumb to discouragement, and blind to impossibilities.⁴ But it is alive to God and his Word!

III. Faith's Growth (4:20)

The third key characteristic of faith is its growth.

True, saving faith always grows. It does not always grow in a straight linear line. There is progress and there is regress. There are ups and downs. Nevertheless, the trajectory of faith is growth—upward and forward.

The apostle Paul said of Abraham that **no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith** (4:20a).

Abraham's faith did not waver. He trusted **the promise of God**. He believed that God would do what he said he would do. His attitude was, "God said it; therefore, I believe it, even though I don't understand it."

But, exactly *how* did Abraham's faith grow?

The apostle Paul said that Abraham grew strong in his faith **as he gave glory to God** (4:20b).

That is extremely significant. Christians want to know how to grow in their faith. Well, here is the key to growth in faith, namely, to give glory to God.

But how does one glorify God?

I love the first five questions of *The Children's Catechism*. Here they are:

1. Question: Who made you?
Answer: God.
2. What else did God make?
Answer: God made everything.
3. Why did God make you and everything else?
Answer: For his own glory.

⁴ John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2006), 190.

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4. How can you glorify God?

Answer: By loving him and doing what he commands.

5. Why should you glorify God?

Answer: Because he made me and takes care of me.

The answer to fourth question tells us how you can glorify God: *By loving him and doing what he commands.*

Basically, that means that you must apply the Bible to your life. Whether in personal devotions, group Bible study, or the worship service, apply the teaching of the Bible to yourself.

The brother of Jesus, James, wrote in James 1:22-25, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.”

Do you want to be blessed by God? Do you want to grow in your faith?

Then glorify God by loving him and doing what he commands in his word. Let me encourage you that every time you open or hear the Word of God that you will consciously seek to apply one truth to your life, based on that portion of God’s Word.

IV. Faith’s Conviction (4:21)

The fourth key characteristic of faith is its conviction.

Abraham was **fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised** (4:21).

Leighton Ford said that “faith is not belief without evidence but commitment without reservation,”⁵ or, as James Kok said, “Faith is the capacity to trust God while not being able to make

⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

sense out of everything.”⁶

Abraham certainly did not understand God and his ways. He could not make sense out of how a 90-year-old woman and a 100-year-old man could give birth to a child. But he was **fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised** (4:21).

Jerry Bridges reminds us that “the promises of God are nothing more than God’s covenant to be faithful to his people. It is his character that makes these promises valid.”⁷

Faith’s conviction is that God’s promises are utterly trustworthy.

V. Faith’s Result (4:22)

The fifth key characteristic of faith is its result.

The apostle Paul has spent the entire fourth chapter showing that Abraham believed God. He trusted God and his promises. **That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness”** (4:22).

Abraham was justified by faith. Abraham believed God’s truth, God’s promise, and he was declared “Not guilty” by God.

VI. Faith’s Example (4:23-24a)

The sixth key characteristic of faith is its example.

The apostle Paul wants us to understand that Abraham’s faith is an example to us. Therefore, he said that **the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also** (4:23-24a).

We are saved on exactly the same basis as Abraham. Abraham was saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

And we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 509.

VII. Faith's Essence (4:24b-25)

The seventh key characteristic of faith is its essence.

The essence of true, saving faith is Jesus who died and rose for our salvation.

The apostle Paul said that faith **will be counted to us who believe in him**, that is, God, **who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification** (4:24b-25).

I want you to notice two aspects about the essence of faith.

First, Jesus died for our salvation. Jesus had no sin. But we are sinful from the moment of our conception (Psalm 51:5). We sin because we are sinners. And we have mountains of violations against God and his law. We cannot pay off the penalty of these violations by ourselves if we want to get into heaven. So, God sent Jesus to earth, **who was delivered up for our trespasses**. He paid the penalty for all of our sin—past, present, and future. And the first aspect of the essence of saving faith is believing that Jesus **was delivered up for our trespasses**.

And second, Jesus was raised for our justification. Jesus did not die and rise again just for himself. He died and rose again from the dead to ensure that we could be justified by God. His resurrection is proof that the Father accepted his sacrifice as a sufficient payment to settle the penalty for our sin. Therefore, God declares us “Not guilty” on the basis of the finished work of Jesus Christ, which is credited to our account and received by faith.

Conclusion

Even though he had a strict religious training in his youth, education at Oxford University, and missionary service in the new colony of Georgia, Charles Wesley (like Tom Brady) had no peace or joy in his heart and life.

Returning to London after a discouraging time in America,

he met with a group of Moravians in the Aldersgate Hall and came to realize that “salvation is by faith alone.” In his journal of May 21st he wrote: “At midnight I gave myself to Christ.”

Two days later, Charles Wesley began writing two hymns. Both of them told of his conversion. At first he wasn’t sure that he should finish them. Was it pride, he wondered to talk about his experience? But then, he said, “I prayed to Christ to stand by me, and finished the hymns.”

Yes, it may have described his own experience, but it also described the experience of all those who have been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Charles Wesley wrote 6,000 hymns during his lifetime. But this hymn stands as his most powerful and profound hymn. It is titled, “And Can it Be?”⁸:

And can it be that I should gain
an int’rest in the Savior’s blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

He left His Father’s throne above,
so free, so infinite His grace!
Emptied Himself of all but love,
and bled for Adam’s helpless race.
Amazing love! How can it be
that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

No condemnation now I dread;
I am my Lord’s and He is mine:
Alive in Him, my living Head,
and clothed in righteousness divine.
Amazing love! How can it be
that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

⁸ William J. Petersen & Ardyth Petersen, *The Complete Book of Hymns* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2006), 472.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the gift of faith.

Your word says that it is by grace that we are saved through faith. And this faith is not our own doing: it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

I am so thankful that we are not justified by our works, but rather we are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Enable us to trust you and your Word. Help us to trust you in spite of obstacles that come our way. Help us to grow in our faith by glorifying you by loving you and doing what you command.

O God, grant us the faith to believe that Jesus was delivered for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

And all of this I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.