

Sermons through

Romans

In Hope Against Hope

Romans 4:18-22

With Study Questions

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...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.”¹⁹ 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.²⁰ He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God,²¹ and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.²² And therefore “it was accounted to him for righteousness.” (Romans 4:18-22).

Introduction

I’m not quite sure what Abraham was up to for the first seventy-five years of his life, but I tend to think it had to be at least moderately misspent youth; the Chaldeans were pretty rough and pagan people (Job 1:17; Habakkuk 1:6); this was Abraham’s ethnic and national lineage (Genesis 12:31). His initial name, Abram, meaning “father is exalted” did not likely refer to God the Father of the holy trinity but a father deity of a moon god in the moon cult of Ur¹ which was followed by Abraham’s father, Terah (Joshua 24:2).

When God changed Abram to Abraham (Genesis 17:5) it signaled a clear cut from his past to his future and the great promise that from him all the world would be blessed; Abraham meaning “father of a multitude.” For seventy-five years, formative years, Abram lived in a world of pagan idolatry before God called him out of his country, out of his father’s house to a land that would typify deliverance from death to life, from bondage to freedom (Genesis 12:1). So I think it is safe to say that Abraham wasn’t raised in a Christian household—enjoying the benefits of a Christian family and Christian church or anything

¹ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (11). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

resembling a Christian culture; yet he is often trotted out as the archetype of faithfulness.

Abraham's Faith

Paul uses words in this passage to describe Abraham's faith which appear to run, as their chief design, the engines of an inferiority complex to those of us who harbor much less impressive examples of piety. Yet even a cursory reading of the exploits of Abraham in Genesis 12 through 25 (though not as treacherous as many other Old Testament characters) yield something less than what one might consider pristine faithfulness.

Twice Abraham lied about being married to Sarah for fear of his own life (Genesis 12:12, 13; 20:2) and received a rebuke from pagan kings for putting them in this awkward predicament. Had God not appeared to Abimelech in a dream and threaten him with death (Genesis 20:7) Sarah could have been absorbed into Abimelech's harem and the promise of offspring would have ended right there.

We also read of Abraham offering some doubt as to whether God would actually give him children in Genesis 15:2, 3:

But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"³ And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir" (Genesis 15:2, 3).

This is followed by one of Abraham's greatest lapses with Sarah's handmaiden, Hagar:

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar.² And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And

Abram listened to the voice of Sarai (Genesis 16:1, 2).

This faithless and ill-devised plan of Sarah's but "listened" to by Abraham created a rift in the Middle East that exists to this day! There are other imperfections, it would appear, in Abraham's faith. Some believe his laughing when God said he and Sarah would have a child at 100 and 90 was a laugh of mockery (Genesis 17:17). The simple point I am seeking to make is that Abraham when it came to faithfulness, Abraham (though his example of faithfulness in his willingness to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, was beyond remarkable) was not without some defect.

Yet in this passage, the Apostle Paul uses a brief series of verbs to describe Abraham's faith as an impenetrable fortress. He begins by informing us that Abraham was not **"weak in faith" (Romans 4:19)** seeming human enough. But he then goes on to explain that Abraham **"did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief" (Romans 4:20)**. To waver *diekrithe* means to be in strife with oneself, to doubt or hesitate. Now it certainly seemed like there was a little of that going on with Abraham. Finally Paul offers that Abraham was **"fully convinced" (Romans 4:21)** *plerophoretheis* meaning, at least by one definition, having "perfect certitude." What are we to make of this apparent conflict?

The conflict only arises if we confuse the faith of Abraham with the faithfulness of Abraham—even his psychological faithfulness, i.e. what was going on in his own mind. If Abraham's hope were resting upon his own successes—if at the close of the day he were to seek to find respite in his own psychological, emotional, verbal and active obedience he would have only wept himself to sleep in a pool of despair.

No, this is not Paul chronicling a life of unsullied faithfulness but a life which characterized by the basic pattern of Abraham's life—that thread of God-given faith which ever pulled Abraham in one direction with one true hope. On any given day, or moment, any one of us may be asked if we are being a faithful Christian which may result in an answer peppered with reflection and hesitation. But at the same time if asked (as with our membership vows) in whom do we believe? In whom do we trust?

We, if we understood those questions accurately, would not hesitate to name our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

A close and critical friend at that point may lovingly point out our failures, (failures from which we should repent, no doubt). But the answer to this criticism is that our hope is not in ourselves, but in Christ. It is the very failure that one observes (and I hope this is not construed as a license for sin for I am not currently speaking of our walk of faithfulness, which Paul will shortly address, but the object of our faith) that ever drives us to a hope which lies outside of us.

Strengthened in Faith

It would appear that Abraham's willingness to acknowledge that his hope was outside of himself (in a moment we will address the notion of hope) that served to function in the strengthening of his faith. When Paul writes that Abraham **"was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God" (Romans 4:20)** he presents for us a connection between the two things.

Thomas Schreiner makes the observation that Abraham's faith was strengthened "by giving glory to God... by acknowledging his ability to carry out his promises as the resurrecting and sovereign God." Schreiner observes that Paul had already presented that the fundamental sin of humans beings is their failure to give glory to God (Romans 1:21-23) and worship the creature rather than the creator (Romans 1:25). "But the supreme way to worship God" Schreiner writes, "is not to work for him (r:4-5) but to trust that he will fulfill his promises. Abraham's faith did not stem from his unusual abilities (cf. Rom. 4:19). Its origins lay in contemplating the power of God (cf. v. 17), for he surely has the power to accomplish what he has promised."²

It may be easily argued that it is man's lack of faith that God can and will do what He has promised that has become the innovatively dark fountain from which multitudes of great evil flow. For it can escape our notice that worshipping the creature

² Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (238-239). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

rather than the Creator includes the elevation of human endeavors as the source of our hope. It is precisely here that Abraham provides an example of faith that is comforting to our troubled hearts and profitable to humanity's well-being. And here we will look at the phrase **"hope against hope" (Romans 4:18 NASB)**.

Hope Against Hope

When Paul writes that Abraham **"contrary to hope, in hope believed"** he is not suggesting that Abraham abandoned all reason. This continual and bedraggled accusation by the modern atheist that the Christian faith is an affront to reason is itself a shallow and unreasoned assertion. There is nothing contradictory or self-refuting with the notion of an all powerful, eternally self-existent God who can bring something into existence from nothing or give life to the dead. That the creature can't create *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) does not provide logical argumentation against the existence of a God who can. In fact it is the unreasonable creature of fantasizes that he himself is not a creature at all but somehow sprung himself into existence with his bag of unexplained absolutes.

"Hope" *elpis* in this passage is not synonymous with wish, as it is so commonly used today, but should be understood as a confident expectation of a yet future or promised event. If one had a terminal disease for which there was no cure, it might be said that they have no hope (at least in terms of a temporal cure). But imagine that research and development finds the cure and the patient is informed that it now exists. They now have hope—even if the cure had not yet been administered.

When Paul writes **"hope against hope"** (one in the accusative and one in the dative) he is pitting promise of God against the observable power of man (in this case the power of man being his own body's ability to have a child). But hope against hope can easily form a thing for the entirety of the Christian's life. Calvin writes:

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... but experience proves, that nothing is more uncommon, or more difficult, than to ascribe to God's power the honor which it deserves. There is in deed no obstacle, however small and insignificant, by which the flesh imagines the hand of God is restrained from working. Hence it is, that in the slightest trials, the promises of God slide away from us. When there is no contest, it is true, no one, as I have said, denies that God can do all things; but as soon as anything comes in the way to impede the course of God's promise, we cast down God's power from its eminence. Hence, that it may obtain from us its right and its honor, when a contest comes, we ought to de termine thus, — That it is no less sufficient to overcome the obstacles of the world, than the strong rays of the sun are to dissipate the mists. ³

The deadness of Abraham's body and Sarah's womb provide a supreme example of unilateral nature of God's promise. As we see the promise unfolding in the Old Testament then culminating in Christ, we see a series of events revealing man's inability to contribute to what God has promised—from the barren womb of

³ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 4:18-22). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Sarah to the virgin birth of Mary it is all hope against hope and all attributed to the loving power of God.

Imputed Righteousness

One might ask at this point why Abraham (not to mention all of Scripture) was so obsessed with having a child. As difficult as it might be for some parents to accept God's closing of the womb, is it worthy of so much text? We must recognize that it was not that Abraham merely wanted to be a father, but that he, at some level, recognized that his own hope of eternal life rested in something/someone who would come forth from his progeny.

In Galatians we are told that the gospel was preached to Abraham, saying "in your all the nations shall be blessed" (Galatians 3:8). At a very significant level Abraham would be included in the accomplished work of redemption only to wrestle with the notion that his contribution was no contribution at all, since he was in a state of death to contribute (his body being past contribution).

As the story of the accomplished work of redemption unfolds, we see that it is all of God—the Father, the Son and the Spirit—with man contributing nothing, but his own sin. Jesus is born of a virgin, (no help from man) and He is crucified while the apostles scatter (no help from man). It is all of God, we have nothing to contribute. Abrahams' faith was strengthened as he grasped this. And we should recognize the same is true, not only with the accomplished work of redemption, but with the applied work of redemption as well. By outward observation you have Jesus being born of Mary and Joseph as descendants of Abraham and Sarah. But further analysis reveals it is all of God. By outward observation we have men and women calling on the name of Christ and receiving the inheritance of heaven, but further analysis reveals this is these activities and this faith being all of God.

Abraham did not believe in himself or his own power to deliver. His faithfulness had its high and low points. But what did exist in Abraham was the God-given knowledge/faith/belief that God had made a promise He was **"able to perform" (Romans 3:21)**, and it was through the instrument of that faith—faith in

Christ and His righteousness—the gospel—that the righteousness of Christ was imputed to Abraham.

This is the heart of grace. To “impute” means to credit to one’s account. Jesus knew no sin but became sin, bearing the full charge of our debt before God. At the same time our account, our ledgers, before God are filled to overflowing with the righteousness of Christ, which is how we are seen by God. With this thought before us, let us now turn to the Lord’s Table.

Questions for Study

1. What do we know about Abraham’s first seventy-five years of life (page 2)?
2. Discuss Abraham’s faith. What verbs does Paul use to describe it? Is there a difference between faith and faithfulness (pages 3, 4)?
3. How was Abraham’s faith strengthened (page 5)?
4. Define “hope” as its used in the Bible (pages 5, 6).

5. Does “hope against hope” mean Christians should not exercise reason? What does it mean (pages 5, 6)?
6. Why was Abraham so obsessed with having a child (pages 7, 8)?
7. What is imputed righteousness and how is it received (pages 7, 8)?