

Saving Faith

Romans 4:16-21

It must have been really hard to be Sarah. Can you imagine?

Her husband says, “Sarah.” “Yes Abraham?” “Pack your bags, we are leaving.”

“What? What do you mean we’re leaving? Your 75 years old! We finally paid off the house!”

“Well, God told me we have to live as pilgrims now.”

“Well, where will we have the mail forwarded?”

“He hasn’t told us yet.”

“Great!”

As they are walking westward, again: “Sarah.” “Yes Abraham?”

“I am going to be the father of many nations.”

“Really?” “Yes.”

“What is going on with you, Abraham? Are you having crazy dreams of greatness?”

“No – he said I am going to have a huge family.”

“Really? And how is that going to happen? It’s been a little quiet in the bedroom, as you know.”

“Hmm – yeah. Well, maybe Hagar???”

“What?”

“And oh, yeah, when we go down to Egypt – can you say you’re my sister, because you kinda are, and you’re so pretty.”

“Thanks Abraham. Did God tell you to do this?”

“No but I think He would approve.”

“Sarah?” “Yes Abraham.”

“God says you are going to be a mom!”

“Ha, ha! Now that is a good one, Abraham! I’m 90 years old now! I call you Lord, but this is too much.”

“Sarah?” “Yes Abraham?”

“I have been told to have all the males of our household circumcised.”

“What? That sounds crazy! Have you told them yet?”

“No but God has commanded this as a sacred rite.”

“Well, okay. I think this is going too far. I suppose if God told you to sacrifice our son, you’d do it.”

“Well, Sarah, I need to talk to you about that!”

Without the God of the Bible, and faith in that true God, most of the Bible reads very strangely, doesn’t it!

But our passage today beautifully and powerfully presents a very different story.

Paul in Romans 4 has given us three “**nots**” – by faith, *not* works; by faith, *not* circumcision; by faith, *not* law. But now as he has cleared some ground, true saving faith comes into the clear.

And what is faith? Immediately Paul is takes us, with Abraham, to what faith is all about. Faith is all about the Lord and having a relationship with Him by grace.

There are four “P’s” in English which Abraham found – *promise, presence, power, purpose.*

First, faith is not some empty, flighty absurd leap. No, God Himself is the ground of our faith, since God is the ground of all reality, and especially so when it comes to salvation.

But it is not God loosely, but God presented in the Bible. Faith is in Him according to how He has revealed Himself. As Calvin put: “We enjoy Christ only as we embrace Christ clothed in his own promises.” Institutes, 2.9.3

Abraham believed in the *presence* of God – vs. 17. What did he believe in particular? That he would be the father of many nations. This is the first time the word “promise” is used in Romans – v. 16.

But it is not an empty promise but a promise joined to God Himself, who always stands behind His unbreakable Word.

So these two things – the promise and the presence of God – are the two doors that open our passage. You cannot have faith apart from God, and you cannot believe without the Word, by which faith comes!

Are you trying to seek God without faith? Are you trying to walk by faith without God? Are you trying to fellowship with God without the Word? Are you replacing a Christ-centered, Word-based, gospel life with anything else?

Abraham's faith was found in the delightful presence of a revealed God, who promises great things, calls for great things, does great things.

These two great things then, walking through the doors of promise and presence, bring us to two pillars: the power of God and the purpose of God. Here is the God who makes all things out of nothing, who creates life, and who even gives life from the dead!

What good is a faith in a weak, a lifeless, little God?

God is, God speaks, God is the Lord of life, God calls out of nothing things that are not as though they are!

The power to give life and the power to create are joined together – it is the soil in which the faith of Abraham was planted.

Again, not power apart from his purpose – we don't say, "God can do anything," so I will trust Him to do anything. No, we are gladly tied to His will.

And neither do we worship a God who has a purpose but no power to accomplish what He planned. He is faithful to bring to pass all He has decreed.

And this covers everything in life, including the most troubling and fearful parts of life.

John Stott says: "Nothing baffles us more than *nothingness* and *death*. Nothingness has been the subject of 20th century [anxiety]; the dread of the abyss; 'why is there something and not nothing?' asked one modern philosopher. And death is the one thing we cannot escape –

taxes we can escape, but then we won't escape our prison cell. But death is the inevitable for those made from dust.

But these are not problems with God. Your God is God over the abyss and over death. He is the God who creates out of nothing, and He is the God who raises the dead – 'Lazarus, come forth!'

This greatness of God, His power and His purpose, is illustrated in the birth of a son to a couple whose combined age nearly reached 200 years! They were the age not of grandparents but great-grandparents!

Was it tough to be Sarah? No, it was impossible to be Sarah, apart from God, His presence, His promise, His power, and His purpose.

¹¹ By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. (Heb 11:11)

This is real faith in the real God of Scripture, and not a flight of fancy away from real problems. This leads to our next point:

Our second point touches on what faith *overcomes*, and that by the presence and power of God.

Abraham had a bunch of real problems between himself and his becoming the father of many nations.

He and his wife had to do something they no doubt tried to bring about many times without faith, and had been disappointed with no children.

And now God calls him at 75; but not until 25 years later is he enabled to conceive, along with his wife!

Talk about the patience of faith!

Here are two great impossibilities then standing before Abraham:

The greatness of the obstacles – he being as good as dead and Sarah’s womb being no producer of life, with their advancing age. They are, as some have said, two days older than dirt!

Then the greatness of the promise – you will have a huge family, and nations will come forth from you; like the sand of the seashore, like the stars of the sky!

How can this be? Well, the God who made the stars, who calls them all by name, and directs their courses – He can do all of his pleasure.

The God who spoke and it came to pass, who counts the sands of the sea, who not only counts the seeds in the apple, but the apples in the seed, has spoken! It must come to pass!

This is the strength and life then of true faith. It believes that the things of this world are not at all ultimate; God is. What is seen is *never* so important as what is not seen!

Men live in and for this world. There’s human history for you, rejecting God and saying I can live by bread alone.

But after all the failures of this effort, we find we are at rest only when we find our rest in God and God alone.

So Abraham does not just close his eyes to his troubles – v. 19. No – he either contemplated his own body, or did not consider his own body.

He could not hope in his own flesh generating what it could not produce – that is the “against hope” part.

But by the God of promise, greater than himself, he hoped by faith; faith engendered hope, even against hope!

Now let us face it here. There are greater obstacles to be overcome than childlessness.

There are Godward obstacles, of God being against us, of God being our judge, our accuser, our enemy because of sin, and our wretched state.

But God has leapt over all to provide life and peace, from what was dead, from what was not!

We read a similar account of faith overcoming in the Gentile woman of Matthew 15. Do you remember her?

Her daughter was demon-possessed and she cried for help; and Jesus did not reply, and his disciples tried to send her away. And even when Jesus said that the food on the table is not for the dogs, she said, yes, but even they get the crumbs!

See how faith perseveres, knowing it has found Him who can give life, true life, true wholeness, even a little crumb of what is His is worth the whole world combined!

So coming back to Abraham, we see the greatness of the promise is also a staggering matter, as well as the greatness of the obstacles.

Here are the incredible riches of the promise – is this not too good to be true? That is the question often thrown against us.

And the answer is yes – it is impossible; it is unbelievable, based on the flesh.

But when God Almighty and His glorious ways are brought into the picture, these hesitations and stumbling of the flesh should all melt away! God has spoken!

This should remind us of a statement by the early church father, Tertullian. In the light of the world's outlook and belief, or rather, in the darkness of the world's view of things, our faith is absurd, bizarre, ridiculous. And this church father recognized that the first reaction of human nature to the gospel is hatred.

There is no middle ground between light and darkness. Rather there is a great divide between faith and unbelief. He challenged us: what does Athens have to do with Jerusalem? What concord between the Greek Academy and the Church? Between heretics and Christians?

We will see how perfectly relevant this is to our own walk with the Lord next time, when Paul shows us this same principle in the death and resurrection of Christ Himself and how we are vitally involved in this as the very center of life in Christ.

And we will go on to see the rich fruits of faith in chapter 5 – peace with God, access to God, hope in God, overcoming joy in tribulation, and enjoying the love of God – we who were once helpless, and enemies of God!

But let us follow what Paul does here in 20-21 as we wrap up on this very central part of the Christian life.

First, faith *in the Word* is crucial – living on the promises of God. The promises are the riches of the covenant of grace. They are like the checks written out to us, and we need to receive them by faith and cash them for our lives. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. Are you growing? Is your faith engaging with the living Christ of the living Word? Or are you just floating, or just getting by?

Notice that our obstacles are overcome, not by having less obstacles, but by faith. Think of the example of Peter on the water. He began to sink and Christ helped him when he cried out. When they were in the boat, Jesus did not say Peter was wise to be afraid of all the waves. No, he said ‘O you of little faith!’

Second, unbelief is an enemy of your soul – verse 20. Unbelief should not be seen as a harmless or benign thing, but a sin. Without faith, you cannot please God, and it is sin not to be pleasing God!

We are prone to trust in ourselves. That how sin works – we close off into our own private room of self-trust. But Jesus has called you out of yourself and into Him. “Believe God’s Word and Will rather than your own thoughts or feelings.” Rutherford

Third, faith is the means by which we glorify God. Think of all that faith does, as our eyes! By faith, we see Him, and know Him. By faith we trust Him as a God of faithfulness, promise, truth, power, goodness, wisdom, and greatness. Faith ascribes to the true God what is truly His. We cannot add to His glory but by faith we reflect His glory when we come to Him in Christ, and walk by faith. Faith in God and His Word always honors, always glorifies Him.

Fourth, there is advancement in faith, in maturity in our walk. Abraham was once for all justified, but the strength of faith can increase. Growing strong in faith is what we should be doing.

Abraham came to believe that the Lord was able even to raise his own precious son not only from the dead but from the ashes.

Do you believe this? Well, you must! You believe the Lord will raise your dust from the ground, don't you? Or your ashes from cremation, or your body from being disintegrated in the sea.

You anticipate new bodies in a new heavens and new earth!

Lastly, we need a word on the assurance of faith. Faith is not a maybe. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. Faith is not dwelling in the slums of fear and maybes and hope so's.

This really is the nature of hope; hope is not a hope so; the world hopes for the best but the Bible gives the best hope. Hope is the foretaste of the heavenly banquet, and faith is the fork that reaches to that table spread by Christ.

Up with faith then! There is nothing brought to your soul for your benefit that does not come by real living faith. Faith especially grows the wings of hope and confidence and full assurance.

And such assurance is, as one old author has called it, a second heaven; a living in the suburbs of your everlasting paradise.