

Before we get to our text today in Romans... I would like for us to re-consider the astounding faith of Abraham. ... Prior to our verse-by-verse study of Romans... we were studying Genesis. ... You will probably recall how Abraham's life was a *journey of faith*.

It all started when God chose him from among the Chaldeans... (an idolatrous civilization nestled in the cradle of humanity.) ... No one knows why God selected this particular Chaldean. Joshua 24:2 tells us that Abram was an idol worshipper at the time... So God's selection of him was not due to any particular merit in Abram. ... But the Lord promised to give him a large parcel of land... a vast amount of descendants... and an everlasting blessing. ...So... the future patriarch traveled up the Tigris-Euphrates basin... over the crest of the Fertile Crescent... and down the Jordan Valley.

**40 years** Abram believed that he would be the father of many nations... but he and his wife Sarah did not even have a single son. 40 years he lived with no other indication that he would be a father.

But Abram trusted that God would make him the father of a great nation and numerous other people. ... It finally ***did*** happen... but none of that came about – for another **600** years... when Joshua led Abraham's descendants into Canaan to own it.

Abram (however) enjoyed *other* blessings from God... *during* his lifetime. Scripture declares in Genesis 13:2 that Abram was very rich in cattle... silver... and gold. But have you ever wondered **HOW** Abram... (a mere nomad in a land he did not own yet)... became so wealthy...?

Bible scholar... Donald Grey Barnhouse studied and wrote about Abram. He concluded that Abram wisely located himself in strategic locations along well travelled roads... where caravans of merchants with loaded camels would pass by... between Egypt and the region of Mesopotamia. Abraham dug wells wherever he settled along the roads.

Whenever the caravans of wealthy travelers would come from either the north or the south... they would stop at Abram's wells. ... Have you ever traveled down I-84 from Portland to Eastern Oregon and come upon the rest-stop called Biggs. Our own 97 (if you travel north long enough) also intersects with it. But on either highway... travelers who have been on the road for a long time... passing through no-man's land... suddenly see this oasis of gas stations... fast-food and formal-eating restaurants... 7-11 type stores... and a motel. (If you are heading to Los Angeles on I-5... Santa Nella... Kettleman City... and Buttonwillow are the same kind of oasis'.)

Apparently as a nomad... Abram would settle for a while and establish a Biggs... Santa Nella... or a Buttonwillow. ... And I would like for you to try to imagine the ancient day setting of this.

In the evenings it would be customary for the merchants to come to Abram's tent to pay their respects. The formality of the greeting was most likely the same... and was repeated thousands of times.

The merchant (upon entering tent) would inquire about their host. "*Who are you?*" ... "*How long have you been here?*" ... "*How old are you?*" etc. ... And somewhere in the introduction... Abram would be forced to give his name ("Abram") – which of course the traveler would know meant "*Father of Many.*"

And every time he gave his name... you and I can be ***certain*** of what their response would be. *“Oh... Father of Many”! Congratulations! And how many children do you have?”*

And then Abram’s answer would be so humiliating – *“none!”*

By now the snorting and laughter would fill the tent... and Abram’s servants all around the settlement would know exactly what caused all the raucous. (They heard it night after night!) *“Father of Many – Father of none! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”*

As those same servants carried out their morning responsibilities... and the refreshed travelers prepared to leave... Abram’s men would hear the travelers gossip among themselves... still chortling with laughter... *“I wonder if the sterile ‘Mr. Father of Many’ is really a full man...” [ P A U S E ]*

Would your faith remain strong under such continuous ridicule...? ...

Would your faith hold out... for **40** years of it... night after night...?

... .. [ P A U S E ... .. ]

Our passage in Romans today holds up the nature of Abram’s faith for us. In last week’s passage we were told to imitate it... (to walk in his footsteps.) This week’s passage will give us a deeper look at Abram’s incredible faith. Paul explains the nature of true faith... by describing what went on inside Abraham with regard to the miraculous birth of Isaac.

Kent Hughes wrote:

*It is as if Paul was able to unfasten the wing nuts holding down the top of Abraham's head and give us an intimate look at the inner workings of this great man of faith. As we consider the example of*

*Abraham, each of us will come to a better understanding of faith. First, we will see Abraham's perception of the object of his faith. Second, we will see Abraham's perception of the obstacles of his faith. Third, we will see Abraham's perception of the objectives of his faith.*

I will be following Dr. Hughe's outline of the passage for today... as well as several of his observations. #1. is... the **object** of true faith... #2. is the **obstacles** of true faith... and #3. is the **objective** of faith?

The first one... (the object of true faith)... is very easy to spot. It is right here in Romans 4:17... the first verse of our study today.

### **Romans 4:17**

It is essential that we have the right focal point at the center of our faith. We see here that Abraham had a **massive** God as his. In the center of Abraham's faith was a God Who could raise the dead back to life... and can create something from nothing.

Although there are no recorded resurrections from the dead before or during Abraham's time... Abraham believed that God could do that. In Genesis 22... we read that is what made him so willing to sacrifice his only son... when God asked him to. (He understood that God could resurrect him back... if Isaac died.)

The massive God that Abraham focused on... was also a God Who calls into being... that which does not exist. ("*Ex Nihilo*" is the Latin term that theologians use... which means "*something out of nothing.*") God is the only being Who can create "*Ex Nihilo*" (something from absolutely nothing.) Mankind can only take elements that already exist and re-arrange them... or add to them... or subtract from them... and that is the extent of our

creativity. But not God. He creates something totally out of nothing (no pre-existing materials.) ... So Abraham believed that God could create life in the organs of his and Sarah's bodies. ... [ P A U S E ] ...

Many believers worry that their faith is too weak. But let me tell you... do not worry about its strength... until you have zeroed-in ON THE RIGHT **OBJECT**.

So take clear note of this: (This is REALLY important!) God was the source of his faith. The exemplary nature about Abraham's faith was NOT the strength of it. God did not reward Abraham because his faith was so strong! That had nothing to do with it. (LISTEN!) The exemplary nature of Abraham's faith... is the gigantic **object** of his faith.

Some rock-climbers have a strong faith in their equipment and so they climb up massive cliffs... but do not live to tell about it. They die by their faith. ... On the other hand... I can tell others how I lived by my **weak** faith.

When I was a young driver... growing up in the Central Valley of California... during January and February the Tule Fog can roll-in very quickly... and you cannot even see your hand at the end of your outstretched arm. One night I got caught in it... about 30 miles from my home. I remember a very frightful drive home on highway 99... with my driver's door open and my body leaning way out of the car... staring at the pavement to make sure that I was still on the road. I thought (for sure) that I was not going to make it... but my weak faith took me home... even though I could not even see the hood of my car.

The strength of our faith means NOTHING! What is important is the object of our faith.

(A few months ago... I used this illustration... but I need to use it again.)  
Robert D. Wilson was one of the great professors at Princeton Theological Seminary... back in the day... when it used to have a Godly mission. One of his students had been invited to preach in Miller Chapel twelve years after his graduation. Old Dr. Wilson came in and sat down near the front. At the close of the meeting, the old professor came up to his former student, cocked his head to one side in his characteristic way, extended his hand, and said:

*"If you come back again, I will not come to hear you preach. I only come once. I am glad that you are a big-godder. When my boys come back, I come to see if they are big-godders or little-godders, and then I know what their ministry will be."*

His former student asked him to explain, and he replied:

*"Well, some men have a little god, and they are always in trouble with him. He can't do any miracles. He can't take care of the inspiration and transmission of the Scripture to us. He doesn't intervene on behalf of his people. They have a little god and I call them little-godders. Then, there are those who have a great God. He speaks and it is done. He commands and it stands fast. He knows how to show himself strong on behalf of them that fear him. You have a great God; and he will bless your ministry."*

He paused a moment, smiled, said, "God bless you," and turned and walked out.

How big is your God? Are you tossed about by the waves of circumstance in a sea of chaos... or do you understand that God has every matter under His divine control... and that He has a purpose for every event you encounter?

Do you accept the finality of impossibilities... or do you allow God to have the final say in those matters?

I recognize that some of you... listening to me right now... are faced with titanic-like circumstances. ... maybe you have health problems... or colossal financial burdens... perhaps your marriage is suffering and you are fearing what is going to happen when you get tired of hiding it (which could be any day now...) or maybe its your job... or a friend has placed annoying expectations on you. ... If you take the time to develop the right object of your faith... your approach to life would be a lot different... wouldn't it...?

Whatever your stresses are... are they that big... because the object of your faith is a Little-God... Who is wringing His hands with you and saying "*Oh what are we going to do...?*"

Like Abraham... get the right object of faith. ... Then... second... once you have the right focus... you are not "*out of the woods yet...*" Because normal faith has obstacles. So we come now to the second point of our passage today. The first concerned itself with the OBJECT of our faith... and the second is concerned with the OBSTACLES of our faith.

The object was easy to see in verse 17... and the obstacles are just as easy for us to recognize. They are seen in verses 18-19.

### **Romans 4:18-19**

Abraham had the promise from God... and yet he also had the clear biological impossibility of Abraham and Sarah having offspring. ... He was

impotent... and Sarah was barren. After all... Sarah was ninety and he was almost 100 when God reaffirmed the promise of a son.

Some people are under the impression that when a person has "faith" he inwardly agrees to ignore the facts. They see faith and facts as mutually exclusive.

Faith without reason is called "*fideism*." Reason without faith is called "*rationalism*." ... But Biblical belief is a composite of reason and faith. Abraham did not take an unreasonable leap of faith.

How did Abraham come to such a massive exercise of faith? He weighed the human impossibility of becoming a father... against the divine impossibility of God being able to break His word. Abraham decided that if God was God... nothing is impossible.

Applying this to ourselves... if God is Who He says He is (and He definitely is!)... none of His promises will fail because He forgets us... or because our situation is beyond His power.

(But let's be honest...) The problem is... that many of us keep in the back of our minds foggy suspicions... that... what we say we believe about God's power... is not really true. ... For all our lip service about trust in God... we rely (chiefly) upon what we can do (ourselves.) ... Some of us need to take deeper possession of the truths that we have already believed about God. ... A good measure of how much spiritual truth we REALLY DO believe... is... how long is our worry list?

... .. [ P A U S E ... .. ]



We need to have the right OBJECT of our faith... and we need to stack-up the overwhelming OBSTACLES of our faith... against the even more-immense OBJECT of our faith. ... Now our passage has a third element to true faith. And that is... there must be a proper **OBJECTIVE** (if our faith is to be like Abraham's.)

### **Romans 4:20-22**

You saw what the objective is... didn't you? It is right there in the final phrase of verse 20... "*as he gave glory to God.*" ... Before we even read his verse... I can imagine that if I were to ask what you thought the objective of our faith was... you would have said "*to glorify God!*" And you would have been right. (The reason God authors faith in us... is so that we would glorify Him.)

But... our head knowledge does not always match... what we (so often) try to use our faith FOR. ... We often treat our faith (only) as a means to gain something favorable from God. "*God I am trusting that You will see me through this crisis... I need relief*" ... "*Lord... I want You to heal my friend...*" ... "*OK God... Look... See(?)... I have all this faith... now please give me what I want...*"

The way that we practice and exercise our faith... very often has the wrong objective. The proper objective is God's glory. ... So much more of our praying ought to have a stronger focus on God receiving the greatest amount of glory in the way that it is answered... Ask... in order that His glory will shine brighter. Make **that** your biggest desire.

... [ P A U S E ] ...

Now verse 20 (also) says something that seems a little *troubling* at first. Is it really true that Abram never waivered in unbelief...? ... What about a little incident that we see in Geneis 15...? (You may remember that I spoke about it last week.)

**Genesis 15:1-3 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> *After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."*

<sup>2</sup> *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?"* <sup>3</sup> *And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."*

It sounds to me that Abram was wavering here... UNTIL I stop and think a little more deeply. Abraham... in this passage... was trying to figure out how God's promise would be fulfilled. That is not wavering. That is not doubt. ... (LISTEN!) Doubt and wavering will stop looking for fulfilment (altogether) ... until the doubt passes. ... [ P A U S E ] ...

Romans 4:20 is such a great verse. It actually points us to the way we grow faith. ...

Here is the way D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it in his commentary on Romans 4:

If you are anxious to know how to have a strong faith, here is the method. It means thorough and deep knowledge of the Bible and of God through it; not suddenly taking up an idea and deciding to "go in" for faith. If you want to have strong faith, read your Bible; go through it from beginning to end. Concentrate on the revelation that God has given of himself and of his character. Keep your eye especially also on prophecy, and then watch his promises being fulfilled. That is the way to develop strong faith—be grounded in all this. Then read the historical portions of the Bible, and the stories of the great heroes. That is why the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews gives that gallery

of portraits of these great saints in the eleventh chapter. He says, Look at these men, who were men like yourselves. What was their secret? It was that they knew God, they gave glory to God and relied utterly upon him and his word. Turn that over in your mind, keep on speaking to yourself about it; meditate upon it... Then, finally, you apply all that in practice to particular cases as they arise in your own life and experience. "*He staggered not, but gave glory to God.*" That is the secret of faith. It is our ignorance of God that constitutes our main trouble.

That is really some practical advice... isn't it...? ... But let me get even more practical. Here in Romans 4:20 there is a (worth-while) principle that the Greek grammar reveals. When Paul wrote this verse... he used a literary device known as "apposition." ... "*But he grew strong in his faith*"... and the phrase immediately after it ("*as he gave glory to God*") are in apposition to each other. That simply means they have the same meaning. The second phrase defines the first one. ... So the verse is saying "Abraham did not waver – **because** he gave glory to God.

Do you realize the very practical truth that this verse gives us...? It let's us in... on how to grow a faith that does not waiver. ... Abraham disciplined himself to think about Who God is... and what God is like. (You see) to glorify God... is to rehearse His attributes over and over in our minds. It is to rejoice and thank Him for them. Faith is proportional to our actively acknowledging Who God is.

This would suggest that when we go outside and observe His marvelous creation that we set our minds on crediting Him for what we see. (*That giant Ponderosa tree over there... wow! My God made that!*. And in our homes. "*This food that is on my table... My God has provided it for me...*")

And in our hearts. “*These problems that I am facing right now... are opportunities for me to see God work...*”)

... .. [ P A U S E ] ... ..

Abraham put his faith in God’s promise to make him the father of many people (when it was a human impossibility.) What we are to put our faith in has a lot of similarity. We are to put our faith in God who raised up Christ who died for our sins and was resurrected for our justification.

### **Romans 4:23-25**

That which Abraham believed and that which we are to believe are very similar. One Bible scholar put it this way: “*When we believe in Jesus as 'put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification,' we believe in the God 'who gives life to the dead.'"* In other words... to believe in Christ as described in verses 23-25 is to also believe in the stupendous God of Abraham.

Today’s passage leaves us with three questions... that we need to answer.

#1. How do we perceive the *object* of our faith? Hopefully as “*the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were*”—the God of the Resurrection.

When you pray... do you shy away from asking God to accomplish big things... or do you trust that He is not only able... but very likely willing to dramatically and supernaturally act on your behalf?

The size of your God has everything to do with your answers. Who is directing your future — no matter what your age — a puny god with no imagination and little power? ... Or do you serve an infinitely creative... immensely powerful... gigantic God? ... Let me challenge you to become a “big-godder.”

#2. How do we perceive the *obstacles* of our faith? ... Hopefully with realism and reason... weighing human impossibilities against the divine impossibility of God breaking His word... and thus deciding that God is God and through Him nothing is impossible.

#3. How do we perceive the *objectives* of faith? Is it (actually) to glorify God? ... Is it to see and appreciate His wonderful attributes...? Or is the objective of your faith merely to exercise enough of it... to get into Heaven... and maybe to use a little in prayer to obtain some earthly pleasures or relief...?

Paul has recited all of this about Abraham’s faith – as our instruction! This is **OUR WAY** to have righteousness counted to us... as well. ... It is as we place a faith -- like Abraham’s - in this BIG GOD.