



Last week we looked at the first half of Romans 4 where Abraham is used as an example of a man declared righteous before God by faith. This morning we're going to continue to learn from the example of Abraham, and specifically we'll learn what it is faith really looks like. Have you ever wondered that? What does true faith look like?

I think faith has a public relations problem. The word is so over-used it has a hollow ring to it, and it's associated with a lot of really bad ideas. It's funny how the meaning of words change over time. *Large* used to mean, well, large. But if I go into Starbucks and ask for a large coffee they look at me like I'm from outer space. They have different words for large — Venti.

Now it's one thing to shift the meaning of a word like large, but when you start messing with words like **faith** you get into trouble. Even a movie as old as *Miracle on 34th Street* reveals a misunderstanding of faith. Do you remember the definition given by Kris Kringle? He said, "Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to." What do you think about that? It sounds kind of like faith is completely irrational, contrary to experience and logic. It's like the old joke about the kid whose mom asked what he learned in Sunday School. He answered, "We learned that faith is believing what you know isn't so." But all of that's only true if the God of the Bible doesn't exist. If the God of the Bible exists, common sense says he can do anything.

This is the dilemma Abraham faced because, as we'll see, God promised to do something impossible according to the laws of science and logic. But Abraham chose to believe it because of who he believed God to be. So let's take a look at Abraham's faith and discover what real faith looks like and what it means for us today.

Faith is Only as Good as Its Object

We pick up the story of Abraham halfway through verse 17 of Romans 4. Paul says, "**He (Abraham) is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed.**" Then he goes on and talks about this God in whom Abraham believed. The reason he does that is because faith is only as good as its object. He says a couple of things about the object of Abraham's faith. He says this God in whom Abraham believed "gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not." In other words, he's the God of both resurrection and creation; he's the God of the impossible. When you think about it, two things silence human beings: nothingness and death. How do you make something out of nothing? How do

you create life in a womb that's barren and empty? Abraham believed God could do that. But then there's also death. Later, Paul says Sarah's womb was dead. How do you bring life out of death? What's dead is dead. We don't like that but we accept it. Like Woody Allen said, "It's not that I'm afraid to die; I just don't want to be there when it happens." But nothingness and death are like simple arithmetic to God. Theologians say he created the universe *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). Today, even atheists like Stephen Hawking believe the universe was created out of nothing. God is bigger than nothingness. He's bigger than death as well. Out of death he raised up Jesus. The creation and resurrection are still the two main manifestations of God's power. Jeremiah prayed, "**Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you**" (Jer. 32:17). Abraham believed that. He also believed God could raise the dead. The writer of Hebrews says that's why, when God tested him, he was willing to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. He says, "**Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead**" (Heb. 11:19a).

So when we talk about faith, it's not the amount of your faith that matters most, but the object of your faith. When you step on an airplane you might have a lot faith in the plane or a very weak faith in it; it doesn't really matter. What matters is the plane itself! What matters is the object of our faith—God! Abraham believed in the God of the impossible. Do you? In this sense, faith isn't unreasonable or illogical. If this is who God is, then faith makes total sense. So, in order to feed our faith, we should seek to know God better. Instead of just reacting to our circumstances, we should engage in measured reflection on the person and nature of God. I can imagine Abraham out there under the night sky thinking, "If there is a Creator God, and I believe there is, there can be no limit to his power. He must also know everything about me. He knows Sarah and I are old, but he's the One who hung the sun and moon and scattered the stars. How ridiculous for me to believe God is limited by our age." Faith begins with thinking well about God. And we have more to go on than Abraham did. We know God sent his Son and we can learn about God by learning about Jesus. We also know God raised his own Son to life. Abraham had none of that.

Faith Doesn't Ignore the Hard Facts

This leads us to the next few verses where Paul describes the nature of Abraham's faith.

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised (verses 18–21).

There are several things to notice about the nature of his faith. First, Abraham’s faith didn’t ignore the hard facts. Paul says he faced the fact his body was as good as dead. He was an old man with an old wife. No pharmaceutical company could help him. Faith isn’t running away from the realities of a situation into a world of fantasy; it faces the facts. But here’s the key: while faith doesn’t ignore the hard facts, neither is it limited by them. Real faith will triumph over the difficulties it fully understands. That’s what Paul means when he says, “Against all hope...” Faith begins with a kind of death that says, “This is a humanly impossible situation. There’s no solution. I can’t fix it.” But then it moves beyond that to trusting in the God who can do what we cannot. So our own inadequacy becomes the arena in which God’s power can be shown instead of the place where our faith collapses.

Our Faith is to Be in the Promise of God

Notice something else about the nature of his faith: His faith was in the promise of God. Paul says his faith didn’t waver “regarding the promise of God” and he was fully persuaded “God had power to do what he promised.” So twice we hear about the promise of God, which for Abraham was the promise of a son with Sarah and ultimately to become the father of many nations. Faith doesn’t mean just to believe anything, but to believe God’s promises, which are all found in his word. We should get to know more about God’s promises in his word and act on them, even when it’s hard! Often people say they have faith in God about a difficult situation they’re in. That’s good. But when I begin to ask questions about that I often find they’re believing God will do things he’s never promised to do. But once you accurately nail down what he’s in fact promised, you can bank on it. Why? Because not only is God powerful, he’s also faithful. He could never make a promise he doesn’t keep. It would be against his nature.

For example, God hasn’t promised to deliver us from hard situations, but he has promised to give us the strength we need in those situations. And he’ll give us that strength not **before** we need it, but **when** we need it. Oxford professor John Lennox tells a story about an encounter with a Russian follower of Jesus who spent years in a Siberian labor camp for the crime of teaching his children the Bible. He described to Lennox things no one should ever have to see. As Lennox listened he thought how little he

really knew about life, and wondered how he’d have fared under his circumstances. As if he’d read his thoughts, the man suddenly said: “You couldn’t cope with that, could you?” Lennox was embarrassed, but agreed with him. The man then grinned and said: “Nor could I! I was a man who fainted at the sight of his own blood, let alone that of others. But what I discovered in the camp was this: God does not help us to face theoretical situations but real ones. Like you, I couldn’t imagine how one could cope in the Gulag. But once there I found that God met me, exactly as Jesus promised his disciples to prepare them for persecution.” Lennox adds, “We can be confident, then, that the Lord will give us a sufficient amount of grace to handle whatever comes our way, whenever it comes our way—and not necessarily a moment before!” His faith wasn’t that he’d be released. Why? Because God never promised that, but he did promise to give him the strength he needed. Isaiah 41:10 says, *“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”*

Faith is Steadfast Over the Long Haul

Another thing about the nature of Abraham’s faith: His faith was steadfast over the long haul. Paul says “he didn’t waver through unbelief” and he was “fully persuaded” God would do what he promised. But if you know his story, you know his faith wasn’t very impressive. Right after God promised he’d bless the entire human race through Abraham’s offspring, Abraham and Sarah traveled to Egypt. One day he said to Sarah: “You’re a beautiful woman, and I know these Egyptians. Someone will want you as a wife, and he’ll kill me to do so. So let’s tell them you’re my sister so they won’t kill me. If one of them wants you, they can have you, but at least I’ll live.” It doesn’t seem like Abraham is trusting God.

Then after 11 years of waiting for a child, Sarah says to Abraham: “We’ve been waiting a long time. Why don’t you have a child with my servant girl, Hagar?” He didn’t say, “No, Sarah, let’s trust God.” He said, “Sounds like a plan. Bring her on!” But it was a disaster. His faith is so weak he pretends Sarah isn’t his wife, and then he impregnates a servant girl. Later, he even laughed at God. But Paul says he didn’t waver in his belief; he believed against all hope and was fully persuaded of God’s power. Did you skip over that part of the Bible, Paul? But Paul was a rabbi. He knew Abraham’s story backwards and forwards. So what’s he thinking?

Here’s how I see it: Though his faith wasn’t perfect, it was never extinguished. Though his faith had temporary lapses, it persevered over the long haul. Like a guy running a marathon, he has times during the race when he tires and slows down, but when it’s all over you say, “He was steadfast. He persevered through the whole race.” Notice what Paul says about Abraham, and this may be the key: Instead of wavering, “he was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God.” Another translation says, “he grew

strong in faith, giving glory to God" (NASB). So through all of his adversity, his faith became stronger. That means the challenges and difficulties we face can actually make our faith grow. It's like people who nervously board an airplane but then settle down halfway through. The longer they sit in the plane and it stays up, the more they learn it's worthy of trust, and so they trust more. Their faith is strengthened through the ongoing experience of the faithfulness of the plane. And that gives glory to God. As we experience over time the faithfulness of the God who called us, as we learn not to trust in our own abilities and throw ourselves entirely on God, he's glorified. Faith glorifies God because it knows life must be lived in complete dependence on him.

An Example of Steadfast Faith in God's Promises Over the Long Haul

Maybe a modern-day example will help see what this faith looks like. My wife and I have a long-time friend named Tess. Tess was a successful consultant in Silicon Valley. She and her husband had two kids. Her youngest, Matt, was best friends with our son, Matt. In July 1998, her Matt came home from basketball camp with a limp. Everyone was shocked when the diagnosis came back as bone cancer. Devastated but diligent, Tess and her husband sought a solution. Unfortunately, to arrest the cancer, Matt needed to have his leg amputated and required rigorous chemotherapy. After the amputation she shuttled Matt to the hospital for treatment over the next 13 months. It was a difficult time for Tess and her family, but as the treatments ended, they were optimistic Matt was cured. But their hope was crushed when five months later the cancer came back. Matt had to endure more surgery, chemotherapy, and even experimental drugs. You can imagine how this tested Tess's faith. She wrestled with God, wondering, "How could God allow an innocent child to suffer so much?" She bonded with the other mothers of children at the hospital who also had sick kids. Together, they asked, "What if the stories in the Bible are just myths? What if there's no heaven?"

She says, "I had fear, anger, and pain. So did my family. Counseling helped, but in the end I found there was no place to turn but to God. I scoured the pages of scripture for answers. Nowhere did I find God promising to exempt His followers from pain and suffering. What I did find was His promise never to leave or forsake me, His promise that nothing could separate me from His love - not death or cancer - and His promise that His grace would be sufficient for me. And indeed, His grace was generously sufficient."

Her faith was also bolstered by Matt's faith. She believes God prepared Matt for his battle with cancer. From a young age, it was clear he loved God. At age four, when the family was discussing what to have for Christmas dinner, he suggested five loaves of bread and two fish "because that was Jesus's favorite food." From that day forward, bread and fish became part of

their family Christmas meal. One depressingly rainy day when Tess was driving Matt home from the hospital, the sun briefly appeared. He immediately yelled, "Praise God for the sunshine!" Tess opened the sunroof of her car. She says, "It was such a happy moment. We began to sing, and Matt was sort of dancing in his seat as we enjoyed the sunshine." Tess came to call such moments "smooches from God." Matt's second grade class, which my own son was a part of, presented him with a beautiful quilt they'd made. The quilt had drawings of what were special to Matt, including swimming and street hockey, puppies and Pokemon. Matt's eyes focused, however, on what was in the corner of the quilt. He burst out, "Thank you for the cross!"

Matthew's love for God profoundly affected Tess. That's why she calls Matt's cancer years "the worst and the sweetest" of her life. Matt died in August of 2000 at age 8. I had the privilege of performing his memorial service. Before he died, Matt passed along to his family a special experience. "In his final hours," remembers Tess, "Matt spoke of heaven and angels singing the Hallelujah Chorus. There's no doubt in my mind that heaven exists and that is where my son is and where I am going."

Faith in Christ Results in Being Credited with Righteousness

The reason why Tess can have hope is because of what Paul says next.

This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification (verses 22–25).

As we've seen, Abraham's faith resulted in God crediting him with righteousness. He was given a righteous standing before God so he could stand before God holy and blameless. Remember, Paul has been talking about how we're justified before a holy God. Abraham was made righteous not by his righteous deeds or circumcision or keeping the law, but by faith, by believing God's promise.

Paul applies this to us in verses 24–25. Notice again the object of our faith is the God of the impossible who raised Jesus from the dead. Notice also we're to steadfastly believe the promise that his work on the cross and his resurrection can save us. The result of our faith is justification. It's quite interesting Paul says, "he was raised to life for our justification." This is the same thing Paul says in 1 Cor. 15:17, "***And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.***" Normally, we say it was simply the death of Jesus that's the basis for our justification, because on the cross he paid for our sins. But Paul says more was necessary—if Jesus had stayed dead, we can't be justified. Why? Because the resurrection of Jesus is God's "yes" to the work of

Jesus on the cross in paying for our sins. It's like the resurrection of Jesus is the reward of his sacrifice. It's the proof of how perfect and all-sufficient his sacrifice was. So if God doesn't give the reward, if God does not say yes to the sacrifice, it's because the sacrifice is defective, our faith is futile, and we're still in our sins.

All of this tells us that when it comes to faith in the promises of God, the central promise, the highest promise, is the promise of forgiveness and eternal life with God through faith. There are a lot of promises in the Bible that are important to believe, but none more than this. Because if you don't have this, you're still alienated from God and you have no hope beyond the grave. And just like with Abraham, it's not easy to maintain this faith. John Calvin wrote, "Let's also remember, 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're surrounded with mortality and corruption: He declares that he counts us just; we're covered with sins: He testifies that he's 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 God is true."

The good news is God himself will sustain us in our faith. In his classic book *The Pilgrim's Progress* published in 1678 John Bunyan gave a powerful illustration of this truth. Bunyan's central character named "Christian" meets a helper named "Interpreter." Interpreter's job is to teach Christian crucial truths he'll need for the journey of faith. Interpreter shows Christian a fire that's burning against a wall and how someone was standing by the

fire constantly trying to put it out by pouring water on it. But the fire didn't go out; it just burned hotter.

So Christian asks, What does this mean? Interpreter explained the fire is the work God does in our hearts to produce faith in Christ and love for him. But the devil is constantly trying to put out this fire by pouring on it the water of temptations and worries and trials.

Then Interpreter wants to show Christian how the fire kept burning hotter. He took him around to the back side of the wall where he saw a man with a jar of oil in his hand which he poured continually into the fire. So Christian asked again, "What does this mean?" And Interpreter answered, "This is Christ, who continually with the oil of his grace maintains the work already begun in the heart; by the means of which, notwithstanding what the Devil can do, the souls of his people prove gracious still. And in that you saw that the man stood behind the wall to maintain the fire; this is to teach you that it's hard for the tempted to see how this work of grace is maintained in the soul." If all we see is the flame of our faith, and the water the Devil is pouring to put it out, we can easily despair and give up. But now and for the rest of your life Jesus will continue to pour into your flame all the oil you need—not just so your faith continues, but so it burns higher and hotter."

What does faith look like? Faith steadfastly believes in God and his promises, despite appearances. And Jesus himself will sustain our faith until the end.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.