



David Biebel, the author of *Men of Integrity* wrote: “I still don’t understand, nearly 10 years later. At least I don’t understand why the Lord allowed my sons to be afflicted with infantile bilateral striatal necrosis. I don’t understand why Jonathan died or why Christopher lived. Today he’s 16 and nearly totally recovered.

“All I understand is this: life is a riddle, which God wants me to experience but not necessarily solve. When I was struggling to solve it, I found 1 Corinthians 13:12, which only makes sense in the original Greek: ‘For now we see (or understand) through a mirror, in a riddle,’ the apostle Paul wrote, ‘but then face to face.’

“Modern Christians sometimes rush to put God’s truth into little boxes, neatly systematized, categorized, organized, and principle-ized, when God’s perspective on suffering is too big for any of that. While for some ‘spirituality’ is defined by what you know, God may be more concerned with how you handle what you cannot know.

“A riddle loses its mystery and its power, even perhaps its significance, once it is solved. By keeping us in our riddle (every person’s riddle is unique) God is helping us learn to walk by faith, and not by sight.”

I’ve been thinking all week about that one line: God may be more concerned with how you handle what you cannot know. When I think about my own life—my anxieties, frustrations, and worries—they all tend to center on my fear of the future, that which I cannot know.

What about you? How do you handle what you cannot know? Does the future and the unknown make you tense and anxious? If God truly is helping us walk by faith, what does that look like? How does faith help us to deal with the unknown? The writer of Hebrews defines faith as *“the confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see”* (Heb 11:1). The word “faith” or “believe” is used 485 times in the New Testament. Faith is so vital for the Christian life, Apostle Paul spends this entire chapter of it, using Abraham as an example. Today we are going to dive deeper into the life of one of the greatest men of faith, Abraham. Using his life as an example, we are going to look at questions like, What does it mean to have faith and believe God? and, What does true faith look like? Romans 4:17-25 will help guide us to those answers.

Five Lessons about Faith From the Life of Abraham

In these verses, I want to highlight five lessons about faith from the life of Abraham.

Faith Lesson #1: Faith is only as good as its object

To understand what I mean by this, let me give you some background on the early life of Abraham. His story is found in the book of Genesis, chapters 11-25. Abraham’s father, Terah, lived in Ur of the Chaldeans and later they moved to Harran. Both cities were in ancient Babylonia, modern day Iraq. Ur and Harran were important centers of worship for the moon god cult. It is very possible, probably certain, Abraham and his family worshipped the moon god (Joshua 24:2-3). So, God speaks to an old, childless, idol-worshipping couple in the wrong location and invites them on a journey of faith.

But to do that, Abraham would need to shift the object of his faith away from worship of the moon god to the worship of the one true God, Yahweh. Paul, commenting on this says in verse 17,

“As it is written: ‘I have made you a father of many nations.’ He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.”

The object of Abraham’s faith was centered on God. And not just any God, but the One who gives new life to something that is dead. The One who creates something out of nothing. Abraham believed in a God who could infuse life when there was none by his resurrecting power. Abraham believed in a God who could do the impossible.

So, when we talk about faith, it’s not the amount of faith that matters the 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, 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. He believed a person, not a principle. He put his trust in God, not himself or his own faith. Is your faith centered on a big God or a small God? Are you learning and growing in your knowledge of him? Do you believe he can do absolutely anything? If you want your faith to grow, your vision of God and who he is must grow as well. Faith Lesson #1: Faith is only as good as its object.

Faith Lesson #2: Faith doesn't ignore the hard facts

This leads us to the next few verses where Paul describes the nature of Abraham's faith in verses 18–19,

“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.”

Faith does not run away from the realities of the situation. Abraham didn't fantasize. He faced the facts, “I'm 100 years old and impotent. My wife is 90 and barren. But God says he's going to bless us!” Faith doesn't ignore reality. Faith is not blind or ignorant to what's really going on. Instead, faith faces the truth and is still not discouraged. Abraham looked beyond the circumstances and didn't allow his feelings or the opinions from others to get the best of him. That's what Paul means when he says, “Against all hope...” Faith begins with a kind of death, the kind of death that says, “This is a humanly impossible situation. There is no solution. I can't fix this.” But then it moves beyond that to trusting in the God who can do what's humanly impossible. So our own inadequacies actually become the arena in which God's power can be shown instead of the place where our faith collapses.

Faith Lesson #3: 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 in verses 20–21,

“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.”

In Romans 4 Paul is saying that we are starting to understand faith when we walk in the footsteps of Abraham, the father of faith. Faith implies obedience to a promise. In Abraham's case it was the promise of blessing. The blessing of a promised land and the blessing of a promised son who would be a blessing to all nations. This promise goes all the way back to Genesis 12:1-4, *“The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.”*

After 300 years of silence, the Lord suddenly speaks to Abraham and tells him to leave his country, his people, and his father's house to a land that God would show him. Abraham would have to leave his country, the only place he's ever known, his people, which was his identity, and his father's house, those he loved and

cared for. Abraham would have to leave all that was familiar to him and set out for a place he's never been. This meant leaving the financial and physical security he had grown accustomed to. Abraham was a very wealthy man, living in a modern city. His family, traditions, and his old ways of worship would all be left behind. What God wanted Abraham to do was risky, costly, and dangerous. He was placing his family's survival and their future in the hands of the Lord. If Abraham obeys, God promises to bless him with both land and with a son. This son will begin a new nation under the rule of God. And through this nation, all the peoples of the earth will be blessed.

Abraham's faith was fully centered on the God who keeps his promise. Abraham was “fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.” Do you know all the things God has promised us? There are hundreds of them and we can find every single one in the Word of God. The problem is so often people say they have faith in God but they are believing God will do things he has never promised to do. Often people say they have faith in God about a difficult situation they're in. And that's good. But when I begin to ask questions about that I find they're believing God will do things he's never promised to do. But once you accurately nail down what he has in fact promised, you can bank on that. 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 always promised to deliver us from hard situations, but he has promised to give us the strength we need to face any situation. And he'll give us that strength not **before** we need it, but **when** we need it. Abraham believed God would keep his promises because of his power. And he knew God would do so because of his faithfulness. He reflected on both the power and character of God. His hope was based on God's Word. It was based on a promise. Abraham had no reason to believe, yet Abraham, in hope, believed. In this passage, faith and hope sort of blur together and are almost the same thing. Abraham “believed in hope” means he trusted God to fulfill his promise.

Do you want more faith like Abraham? You find it in God's Word. Romans 10:17 says, *“Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”* Sometimes people will tell me, “I want more faith.” So I ask, “Are you reading your Bible? Going to church? Are you attending a small group? Are you having a quiet time?” Their answer is typically, “No.” Then how do you expect your faith to grow? How do you expect to stand on God's promises? Faith comes from the Word of God and it's based on the Word of God. Abraham's hope was based on a promise. If you want more faith, you need to go to God's Word, his book of promises. Our faith is to be in the promise of God which brings me to lesson four...

Faith Lesson #4: Real faith endures over the long haul

Paul says “he didn’t waver through unbelief” and he was “fully persuaded” God would do what he’d promised. But if you know his story, you know his faith wasn’t very impressive all the time. Abraham questioned God’s plan almost immediately (Genesis 15:2); he lied about Sarah being his wife while in Egypt (Genesis 12:10-16); and he tried to bring God’s promise of a child to fruition on his own by sleeping with his servant, Hagar (Genesis 16). Abraham and Sarah then had to wait 25 long years to see God finally come through on his promise.

Here’s how I see what Paul is saying. Though Abraham’s faith wasn’t perfect, it was never extinguished. Though his faith had temporary lapses, it remained over the long haul. Like a woman running a marathon, she may have times during the race when she tires and slows down, but when it’s all over you can say of her, “She was steadfast. She persevered through the whole race.” The phrase, “He didn’t waver” in the original language means to have two minds or opinions. The word was used when a man would argue with himself. It means he didn’t stagger. When you are walking, you walk straight. When you stagger, you go back and forth, you’re double minded. Over the long haul, Abraham didn’t waver in faith, instead he strengthened his faith. So through all of his adversity, his trust in God’s promise became stronger. That means the challenges and difficulties we face can actually make our faith stronger. And this gives God glory. Preserving faith honors God.

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. As we experience over time, the faithfulness of the God who called us, as we learn sometimes the hard way, not to trust in our own abilities and throw ourselves entirely on God, God is glorified. Faith glorifies God because it knows that life must be lived in complete dependence on him. Real faith endures over the long haul. The final lesson on faith...

Faith Lesson #5: Faith in Christ results in being credited with righteousness

Let’s read Paul’s concluding thought in verses 22–25,

“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.”

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. Up until

this chapter, 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. Now Paul turns his attention to us, his readers.

Notice again the object of our faith is the God of the impossible who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. Notice also we’re to believe the promise that both his work on the cross and his resurrection can save us. The result of our faith is justification. It’s really interesting Paul says, “he was raised to life for our justification.” This is the same thing Paul says in 1 Corinthians 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 on the cross that is 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” and approval of 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 and 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 important than this. Because if you don’t have this, you’re still at odds with God and you have no hope beyond the grave. And just like with Abraham, it’s not easy to maintain this faith. So for us, faith in Christ results in being credited with righteousness.

Let me summarize the five lessons about faith:

1. Faith is only as good as its object.
2. Faith doesn’t ignore the hard facts.
3. Our faith is to be in the promise of God.
4. Real faith endures over the long haul.
5. Faith in Christ results in being credited with righteousness.

The hero of this story isn’t Abraham; it’s God. Abraham’s dad, Terah, might have had stronger faith, but he put his faith in the wrong gods. Abraham put his faith in the right God and followed him with complete trust. It was better for him to put little faith in a big God than big faith in a little god. This is good news. This is why Jesus says you only need faith the size of a mustard seed. Why? Because it is not about the size of your faith; it’s about the size of your God.

I love this quote from scholar James Dunn: "The character of Abraham's faith is determined by the character of the God in whom he believed." His hope is not in how strong his faith is; his hope is in God. What God? The God who calls into being things that are not. The God who created all things. The God who called the dead to life. Abraham's old body and Sarah's old womb are pointing to a Son, to Jesus, the object of our faith.

So what problems are you struggling with today? Place your faith, your belief, your trust in the right place—Jesus Christ. It's only then can we look at our problems in light of God's promises. Jesus promised you rest (Matthew 11:28–30). Burdens are lifted at the cross. Jesus promised abundant life to those who follow him (John 10:10). Jesus promised eternal life to those who

trust him (John 4:14). Jesus promised his disciples power from on high (Acts 1:8). In this power, they "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). Jesus promised that he will return for us one day and we too will experience resurrection (John 14:2–3).

Look at your problems in light of God's promises. Look only to Jesus. Galatians 3:29 says, "***If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.***"

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

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