

THE FAITH OF OUR FATHER

by Ray C. Stedman

This morning we are going to talk about faith -- a simple thing, but hard for many to comprehend. Many people are confused on the subject of faith.

Some think that faith is nothing but a mental assent to a truth -- that if you believe a thing is true, then you are exercising faith. But faith is more than simply believing something is true.

Some people believe that faith is a feeling, a feeling of confidence. If you happen to have confidence, you have much faith; if you do not have confidence, then you have little or no faith. Your faith depends upon how much feeling you can generate. But that is not true faith, and that kind of definition of faith deceives many people.

There are some who think that faith actually is a type of self-deception. Somebody has said that faith is a way of believing what you know is not true. There are people who actually try to believe something that they know is not true. They talk themselves into believing it and call that faith.

If you really want to know what faith is, you have to see it in action. That is why the Apostle Paul, in Romans 4, brings in Abraham, the man of faith. He is by no means the only man who has faith, but he is pre-eminently qualified as a man of faith. Looking at Abraham you can learn what faith is.

In the first part of Chapter 4 we looked at the righteousness of Abraham -- that gift of self-worth, that essential element which every one of us desperately needs in order to function as a human being. We found that it comes as a gift from God when you believe. That is what the word "righteousness" really means. Abraham obtained righteousness by faith. Today we are going to look at the faith of Abraham.

There are four things that the Apostle Paul points out about Abraham's faith:

1. First, we will look at the opposite of faith -- what faith is not. Sometimes the best way to learn what a thing is, is by learning what it is not.
2. Second, we will look at the effects of faith -- what faith does, what it accomplishes.
3. Then we will look at what faith actually is -- the nature of faith.
4. Last, we will consider the beneficiaries of faith, or whom faith helps.

Let us begin with Verses 13-15, which deal with what faith is not.

It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. {Rom 4:13-15 NIV}

Here Paul tells us that faith is not trying to obey and fulfill some kind of law. It is not doing your best to try to live up to a standard that you think you ought to live up to. That is the law, and no matter what the law is or where it came from, trying your best to live up to it is not faith. In that case, Paul points out, you are not living by faith, you are living by works. Faith is not expecting God to accept and love you simply because you have tried your best to obey some standard. In fact, if you live on those terms, you will find that you cannot receive what God wants to give you. Abraham is proof that this method will never bring you the gift of righteousness. If you think that God is going to accept, love, and forgive you because you have tried hard to do what you think is right, you are on the wrong track. It will never work, and Paul tells you why.

First, notice that Abraham received the gift, the promise of righteousness, long before the Law ever was given.

"It was not through the law," Paul says, "that Abraham and his offspring received the promise." In fact, if you look at Galatians 3:23-29, you find that Abraham received the gift of righteousness 430 years before the Law was given. So righteousness could not come by law, that is clear.

Second, the Law renders the promise worthless. "For if those who live by the law are heirs [of the promise], faith has no value and the promise is worthless." Now let me help you to understand that. If there is anyone here who is quite athletic, I would like you to do something to demonstrate this for us. I want you to stand here before the pulpit and jump up and touch the ceiling. If you do that, I promise I will give you a thousand dollars. I might have to borrow it, but I will give it to you. Are there any volunteers? I'll even let you stand on the platform. No volunteers? Why? Because, you say to me, "Look, your promise is worthless! You are asking something that no one can do. No one can jump up and touch the ceiling by their natural strength. Your promise is worthless." Even though I sincerely mean it, it has no value to you because you cannot do it. This is what the Scriptures tell us.

What does the Law require of man? Basically, it requires something that he cannot do. It asks us to love. That is all that the Law asks. It asks that we love God with all our heart and strength and mind, and our neighbor as ourself. That is all the Ten Commandments ask, that you act in love all the time, without fail. Very simple, isn't it? Jesus said that love is the fulfilling of the Law. When you love people, you are doing what the Law asks of you. Don't say that by not being angry with them or not hurting them you are loving them. Love is a positive thing. Love is reaching out, and the Law requires that you reach out in love.

Now, if you cannot do that, the promise that comes with the Law is useless. The promise is: "Do this and live." If you obey the Law, God will accept you as righteous -- worth, value, and approval will be given to you because you earned them by doing what the Law demanded. But if you can't, then the promise is worthless. And we can't. We can't love everybody, and we don't. We can't love God like we ought. It is not only that we won't, but we can't. Therefore the Law is worthless in obtaining the promise.

But Paul does not stop there. He says there is another reason why you will never be able to gain righteousness by trying to meet the requirements of the Law. The Law brings wrath. It actually subjects you to punishment if you don't make it. And this is what we find. The Law brings wrath. Wrath is defined in the very first chapter of Romans. It is God's removal of all divine protection -- you can do what you want. Wrath is the removal of restraints from human beings. Three times in Chapter 1 the apostle said, "God gave them up... God gave them up... God gave them over..." {cf, Rom 1:24, 1:26, 1:28}. That is wrath. That is God saying you can have your own way.

C. S. Lewis said, very wisely, that the whole world consists of just two kinds of people: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God is saying, "Thy will be done." That is wrath.

When God removes the restraints, we begin to fall apart. Therefore wrath always results in the disintegration of the human personality. Emptiness, meaninglessness, loneliness, and worthlessness possess us because we feel abandoned and lost. We do not know where to turn, and despair and depression press down on us heavily. That is always the case when wrath comes in. The Law brings wrath.

Paul amplifies this by saying, "Where there is no law, there is no transgression." He is explaining why the Law brings wrath. Where there is no law, people do not deliberately disobey God; they disobey in ignorance.

There are a lot of people today who fall into this category. I find many young people who are living in immorality, living together without marriage, in all innocence of any transgression. I actually believe that many of them have no idea that there is anything damaging or destructive or wrong about this. Some of them are so ignorant of reality that they actually think that it is not hurting them or anyone else. This attitude is widespread in our day. What these people lack is light. They have not yet learned that what they are doing will cause them to fall apart. They don't see that it is destroying them in many subtle and effective ways and that ultimately it will lead them into death and hell.

What Paul means when he says, "Where there is no law, there is no transgression," is that death and hell are taking their toll on men whether they know it or not.

He will expand this idea in Chapter 5, but here he says that sin reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not yet transgressed (according to Adam's transgression). By that he means that they were acting in ignorance, and yet they were falling apart. When the Law comes in, it makes you aware of what is wrong. In one sense, that only makes it worse, because then you deliberately begin to disobey what God says. But the Law also brings hope, because when things get bad enough, you are ready to turn to the way that can deliver -- faith in the work of Jesus Christ. That is why the Law will never bring us righteousness. Faith is not works.

Next, let us look at Verses 16-17, which tell us what faith does:

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring -- not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." {Rom 4:16-17a NIV}

Here is faith in action. If law cannot achieve righteousness, what does faith do?

First, the promise comes by it. You actually obtain what you are desiring, this sense of being approved and loved and wanted and accepted before God himself. You are a part of his family and you are forgiven of all the past. All that is achieved by faith, not by seeking to earn it. The promise comes by faith. What works could not do, faith does. That is a fantastic promise.

As we have already seen in Verse 13, the promise includes not only this personal self-worth before God, which Abraham achieved, but it also makes you the heir of all the world. In First Corinthians 3:23, the Apostle Paul says, "All things are yours... and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's," {cf, 1 Cor 3:22b-23 RSV}. The promise also says you will be indwelt, as Abraham was, with the Holy Spirit of God. Galatians 3 makes clear that Abraham received that promise by faith, and we receive it the same way Abraham did. So faith obtains the promise.

The second thing that faith does is to introduce the principle of grace. Law and grace are opposed to one another in certain ways. They do not cancel each other out, they simply do two different things. We need both; we need law and we need grace. Do not ever say, "I am under grace, therefore I have no need for law." The Bible never takes that position. It is Law that helps you come to grace, and without it you never would come. But law and grace do not have the same functions. It is grace that lays hold of the promise.

Now what is grace? There are many ways to define it. I love the one that says it is enrichment that you don't deserve: God's Riches At Christ's Expense. It is all the richness of life -- love, joy, peace, and the fulfillment of the heart's longing -- all that enriches your life and that you do not deserve. It is given to you, therefore it is a gift. There is an old hymn that puts it well:

"Do this and live!" the Law demands,
But gives me neither feet nor hands.
A better word is "Grace doth bring."
It bids me fly, but gives me wings.

The Law condemns; grace enables. When grace comes in, it guarantees the promise. If you and I had to earn the standing that we have before God -- not only at the beginning of our Christian life but every day through it -- we would certainly fail somewhere along the line. If it depended upon us, somewhere we would blow it and lose the whole thing. But if it comes by grace, if it is purely a gift and it does not depend upon us at all but upon God alone, then it is guaranteed to us -- because he is not going to fail. That is why Paul says, "Therefore the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring -- not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham." There are offspring of Abraham to whom this guarantee is made. We will see more of that in just a moment.

Now we come to the heart of the passage in Verses 17-20. We are ready now to consider what faith actually is.

He [braham] is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed -- the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

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," {Rom 4:17b-20a NIV}

Paul gives us three things that tell us what faith is:

1. First, he says the key is the object of faith. Don't miss that.
2. Next, he shows us the obstacles to faith.
3. And then he tells us the objectives of faith -- where faith will bring us.

Abraham, Paul says, believed God. God is the object. The quality of your faith depends upon the object in which that faith has placed its trust. The amount of faith you have has nothing to do with it. That is why Jesus told us that even if we have a little tiny faith, like a grain of mustard seed, it will work. The object of your faith is the important thing.

You may leave this service this morning and go out to the parking lot with the utmost faith that when you get into your car and drive down the driveway and into the street your car is going to work just as it was working when you parked it there this morning. But maybe, while we were sitting here this morning, someone took off the hubcaps and removed the lug bolts from the front wheels of your car, and then put the hubcaps back on so you cannot see any difference. That may have happened. And though you have the utmost confidence that your car is going to work properly, when you get onto the street and turn the corner, sooner or later the front wheels are going to fall off. You might end up dead -- killed by faith! On the other hand, some of you who have been worried a bit by what I have just said may go out to your car after this service and take off the hubcaps and examine the lug bolts to make sure they are there. And even then, not too confidently, you may start your car and drive it rather timidly down the driveway, still thinking that something might go wrong and it may fall apart. But if no one has tampered with it, you are perfectly safe -- even though you have little faith -- because the object of your faith is strong. That is why you should not talk about *your faith* ; talk instead about *the God in whom your faith is fixed!*

That is what Abraham looked at. It is not a question of how little or how big your faith is; it is a question of how big your God is! What kind of a God is he?

There are two things about this God that helped Abraham tremendously:

- First, he is the God who gives life to the dead -- the God who makes dead things live, who takes things that once were alive, vibrant, and full of life, but have died and become hopeless, and brings them to life again; and
- Second, he is the God who "calls things that are not, as though they were." He calls into existence the things that do not exist. He is a creative God.

In the book of Genesis, it is recorded that God said, "Let there be..." and there was. Over and over, for a week, God said, "Let there be..." and there was. Until, after six days, he rested. That is the kind of God that Abraham had: The God who gave life to the dead and who called into existence things that did not exist. It was that God in whom he fixed his faith.

Now let us look at the obstacles to faith. Whenever you have faith or are called to exercise faith, there are obstacles. Abraham teaches us this. There are horrendous obstacles, and Abraham faced two of them. First, there were hopeless circumstances. "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed..." But it also says in Verse 20, "Yet he did not waver [or stagger] through unbelief regarding the promise of God..." That is, the promise itself was the second obstacle to faith because it had such staggering possibilities. It was too good to

be true! It was beyond belief that God would make him heir of all the world and give him a standing before God that he didn't deserve. It was too good to be true, so it was an obstacle to faith. Isn't that interesting? There are two obstacles to faith: hopeless circumstances and staggering possibilities. Let us see what Abraham did with them.

What were the hopeless circumstances Abraham faced? Paul tells us there were two: Abraham's body and Sarah's womb. Abraham's body was a hundred years old and was sexually dead. The promise of God hung on the fact that there must be a child born to Abraham and Sarah. Through that child would come all the descendants from the nations of the world that would be blessed by Abraham. And, more important yet, through that child would come the Seed, which was Jesus Christ, whom Abraham saw and rejoiced in, and who would make possible the gift of righteousness. Everything hung on the birth of a baby.

Abraham looked at the circumstances and saw his hundred-year-old body and the barrenness of Sarah's womb. She was ninety years old and had never had a baby. They had been trying for years and years, and no baby had come. These were the hopeless circumstances.

Now, here is the beauty of Abraham's faith. Paul says that he faced the facts. I love that. In this translation it says that "without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact..."

Many of us think that faith is evading the facts -- escapism, some kind of dreamy idealism that never looks at facts, a kind of unrealistic adventuring in which you hope everything is going to work out. It is never that!

Abraham looked at the facts. He faced them head-on. He considered his dead body and the barrenness of Sarah's womb. He sat and thought about it, and he saw how hopeless the situation was. There was no chance at all! His body was a hundred years old and Sarah's womb was ninety years old and had never borne children. She was far past the age of childbearing. It was hopeless.

There was no hope, yet Abraham believed in hope. How? Because when he looked at his dead body he remembered that he had a God who raises the dead. And when he thought about Sarah's barren womb, he remembered that he had a God who calls into existence the things that do not exist. That would take care of everything, wouldn't it? And so, against all hope, he believed in hope, because of the God in whom his faith was fixed.

Then he did one other thing. It is not mentioned here, but this has always intrigued me. He told Sarah what God said. I have often wished I could go back in history and observe certain times, and this is one of them. I would have loved to have been a bug on the tent wall when Abraham came in to tell Sarah this news! Can you just imagine it? He came in and she said, "Well, dear, your eggs are ready. What have you been doing?" He said, "Oh, I've been having devotions, and what a wonderful time I had! God told me something." She said, "Well, what was it?" Abraham said, "Well, I don't really know how to put this." "What do you mean?" Sarah asked. "Well," he said, "you'd better sit down. God told me something very startling that is going to happen to us." "That's interesting!" she said. "What is it?" Then, like a man, he just blurted it out. "You're going to have a baby!" And Sarah said, "**What?**" Abraham said, "That's what God said. You're going to have a baby." "What, *me*?" "Yes, you!" "Why, how can it be? Abraham, did you stop at the wine shop on your way home this morning?" And Sarah laughed. It says so in Genesis. Sarah laughed, "Ha! God said that I'm going to have a baby?" {cf, Gen 18:12}.

But then Sarah did something else. God had said something to Abraham that applied to Sarah and Abraham must have told her. And I am convinced that Sarah must have made a little plaque and put it over the kitchen sink and meditated on what God said. He said: "Is there anything too hard for God?" {cf, Gen 18:14}. When God says that he will do something, is there anything too hard for God? And you know, when Sarah began to feel pregnant, her faith laid hold of that promise again. And when the baby came, Sarah was a woman of faith, because she had been thinking of the God for whom nothing is too hard.

There is the faith of Abraham. How did he deal with these staggering possibilities? It is unbelievable that all nations should be blessed through them. He would be heir of the world, he would be called the friend of God. Could it be? But Abraham remembered that he had a God who gives life to the dead and a God who calls into

existence things that do not exist. And so he believed.

In Verses 20-22 you find the objectives of faith. The first is in Verse 20:

... but [he] was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God," {Rom 4:20b NIV}

His faith was made strong. Faith grows. Jesus said it would. If you have faith like a tiny little grain of mustard seed, but the object of your faith is trustworthy and has promised to do something, then exercise your faith and it will grow. Obey. Abraham did; and as he believed and obeyed, he was strengthened in his faith and he gave glory to God. Faith never glorifies man; it glorifies God. It is God who acts, not we. What is accomplished is not something we do on behalf of God; it is God who does it by us and through us, on his own behalf. God, therefore, is thanked; and God is glorified. So faith grows, and faith glorifies.

In Verse 21 Paul says Abraham also was,

... fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. That is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." {Rom 4:21-22 NIV}

Faith grounds us on the truth, as it did Abraham. He was fully persuaded. This is the faith that was credited to him as righteousness. Faith grasps the promise. Faith lays hold of what God has offered. As Abraham's faith grew, he grasped the promise and found himself loved and accepted by God, a friend of God.

Finally, Verses 23-25 deal with the beneficiaries of faith:

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. {Rom 4:23-25 NIV}

Isn't that interesting? This happened two thousand years before Paul, but Paul says God did not write those words for Abraham alone. For whom were they written then? For us, today. We look at the faith of Abraham and say, "That was extraordinary faith." Paul says it wasn't; it was ordinary faith. Anyone can exercise such faith if they want to.

You can have righteousness too. You can be a friend of God, accepted before him, with worth and value in his sight -- not just once as you begin your Christian life, but every day, taking it fresh from his hand. You are forgiven of your sins, restored, every day afresh and anew -- a thousand times a day if you need it. All that Abraham had -- the promises of the world, the indwelling of the Spirit -- all are ours as well.

This verse says the gift of righteousness is for those "who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." He is still the God of resurrection, the God who can raise from the dead. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." So we live by his death and by his life. Now if we believe in the God who raised Jesus from the dead and we are ready to live on the basis of his death and his life for us, we, like Abraham, are heirs of all the world. All these things are yours, Paul says. The indwelling of the Spirit is granted to us moment by moment, and day by day, all our life long. And we, like Abraham, are the friends of God.

If you have a God who can raise things from the dead and who can call into existence the things that do not exist, you are going to be a very exciting person to live with. You will never know when a thing that is dead and dull and lifeless may be touched by the grace of God and brought to life again. When something that you cannot possibly hope for -- something which does not now exist, but which will be called into existence by the God who calls into existence the things that do not exist -- when such a thing is promised by a God like this, life is an adventure.

That is faith, when all things are yours.

Do you have that kind of God?

You can settle that now in your own heart as we bow in prayer.

Prayer

Father, how we thank you for this example of Abraham. What a tremendous example of faith he is. How richly he has endowed us! By the example of faith, he has taught us how to trust against the circumstances that surround us, when we have a promise to oppose against it, the promise and a God who says he will do something and who cannot fail. May our eyes therefore be fixed upon that God. May we take from his hand this morning the gift of righteousness which we need daily. Lord, may we grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ our Lord. We pray in his name, Amen.

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