

Faith in Romans (Rom. 4:13-25)
Bob Yarbrough

Rom 4:13 For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Rom 4:16 That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, 17 as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18 In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. 20 No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” 23 But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

This week I looked out my window and saw a beautiful butterfly fluttering past. But no sooner had it caught my eye than a blue jay grabbed it midair. The butterfly's life ended in the blue jay's beak.

In the last couple of years something similar has happened to many people's faith. They were fluttering along fine in their religion and church. But then the blue jays of pandemic and political strife and economic turmoil appeared. For many faith has taken a real hit.

Our Romans Scripture reading highlighted the faith of Abraham. In fact Romans 4:1 asks: **2 Rom 4:1** What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?

What *did* Abraham gain when he trusted God? *When* was that? And *why* should it matter to you? This PM/AM we take a fresh look at faith. Grace to you and peace from God our father and from our our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ, amen.

Let's look first at

1. The importance of faith, since it makes or breaks our present and our future.

Our Romans 4 reading was very dense, packed with important statements. We only have time to single out a few of them. But let me start with this: you have something deeply in common with Abraham, a man who lived about 2,000 years before Christ.

What you have in common is this: God made himself known to Abraham, as he I believe he does to every person. And when God offered a personal relationship with Abraham, Abram as he was known at that time said yes. We learn this in Genesis 15:6:

Gen 15:6 And [Abram] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

In other words, if we go back to the question in Romans 4:1:

Rom 4:1 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?

We see that the answer is righteousness. Gen 15:6 And [Abram] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

God appeared to Abraham. God asked for his personal trust and commitment. That's what we have in common with him. God has come or will come to every one of us. In response Abraham made the right decision. He received God's righteousness. These means a right standing before God and personal fellowship with God. The question is: have you made that choice and are you following up on it faithfully like Abraham did?

Now was Abraham in himself a righteous person? No, he was a sinner like all of us. But God prepared Abraham for a day when he would hear God's call to commit his life to this LORD. When the call came, Abraham handed over his life to the God who was calling him. He believed the LORD, and this LORD counted it to him as righteousness.

How could the LORD regard Abraham as righteous if he was a sinner? The short answer is that God gave his Son as a sacrifice for Abraham's sins. God did this 2,000 years *after* Abraham lived, just as he gave his Son as a sacrifice for our sins

2,000 years *before* we lived. God is not bound by time, you see. Christ's finished work on the cross echoes across all of time.

Jesus Christ died so that all, in any age, who acknowledge their need for God's forgiveness and new life might receive it through what Scripture calls faith-- placing all we have and are in Jesus Christ for God's purposes.

We are talking about Romans 4. But note what Paul has already written in Romans 3. Note how much of it pertains to faith:

Rom 3:21 . . . the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through FAITH in Jesus Christ for all who BELIEVE. For . . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by FAITH. This was to show God's . . . righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has FAITH in Jesus.

Faith is very important! What (or who) you place your faith in determines your future, because faith is a stance about the future and who is controls it.

People magazine in the July 5 edition had a nice cover story on the TV and film star Jennifer Aniston. Where is her faith? She's a famous person whom many admire and emulate. She is asked, "What does spirituality mean to you?" She replies, "I believe in humanity, even though there so much to discourage us from believing in it--but I do."¹

This belief controls her future. Because of her belief about humanity, and her experience with certain male humans, when she is asked about ever getting married again, she says, "It's not on my radar. I'm interested in finding a fantastic partner and just living an enjoyable life and having fun with one another. That's all we should hope for. It's doesn't have to be etched in stone in legal documents."²

That's a common faith today. A fantastic partner, enjoyable life, having fun. No long term commitment. No accountability to a vow. When the fun is done, say bye-bye and move on.

Our Lord Jesus sets forth a very different view: "'Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife,

¹ *People*, July 5, 2021, p. 48.

² *Ibid.*

and the two shall become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt. 19:4-6).

God offers more than fun with an enjoyable partner. The good news of the Son of God draws us into a permanent personal relationship with him, through faith, sealed by his promise and valid for all time and eternity. Let's see how it works.

2. The terms of faith: we receive God's righteousness through faith by grace.

Rom 4:13 For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of FAITH. 14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, FAITH is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Rom 4:16 That is why it depends on FAITH, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the FAITH of Abraham, who is the father of us all.

By the grace of God, Abraham listened when God called. He trusted in God. He became a part of God's saving work in the world. Romans 1 talks about the wrath of God. Romans 3 echoes the bad news that all humanity stands under God's judgment. Abraham too was just a man. Why did he find favor with God?

The answer is the same as for all God's people: there is no explanation. It came by grace not his merit. Abraham's acceptance "did not come through the law" (v. 13). It did not come by his attainment of personal high standing as the result of his moral excellence. Notice again v. 15: "the law brings wrath." We have all broken the law. Abraham was no exception. God's law says: you sin, you die. To look ahead to Romans 6: "the wages of sin is death," eternal separation from God.

But notice v. 16. God promises. He asks for a hearing, and he asks for your heart. In the faith transaction God offers grace we do not deserve in place of the condemnation that the law pronounces. God promises us, he bestows on us, the righteous status owned by one and only one human ever: Jesus the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ. His promise is guaranteed to all who share Abraham's faith. Abraham became a child of God by faith and so do we.

John Newton knew about faith and grace. He was born in 1725 and died in 1807. He was a slave trader, a pursuit known to be vile and despicable. But it was also profitable, so it was an international industry in its time. Newton was in his own

words a libertine--some who broke God's law flagrantly. But God convicted him of his sin.

He eventually turned from his life of human trafficking. He repented of this sin. He put his faith in the good news of God's Son. He preached this good news to others. Eventually he joined forces with William Wilberforce. The African slave trade was abolished in the British Empire. Three generations later it was abolished in these United States.

One of the ways John Newton preached was by song. He had a church member named William Cowper, a poet. They composed many hymns that extolled the gospel of Jesus Christ. One had this ponderous title: "Faith's Review and Expectation." It was a hymn about faith. It came to be known by its first two words: "Amazing Grace." Hear these lines from that hymn:

T'was grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

We're talking about the terms of faith: we receive God's righteousness through faith by grace. It happened to John Newton and to William Cowper. Their hymn describes it: "How precious did that grace appear/The hour I first believed," their hymn states.

Let's step back from Paul writing in AD 57 and Newton in the late 1700s to here and now. When did that grace appear to you? When was that hour you first believed?

For some it's not an hour but a longer interval. A few weeks ago my wife Bernie and I were hosted a weekend visitor named Sydney Park. Today she teaches Greek and New Testament at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, AL. But like Abraham, like John Newton, she had to embark on the journey of faith. Here's the core of Dr. Park's published testimony³:

Although I grew up in a Christian home, attending church every Sunday (Presbyterian), I proclaimed myself an atheist in college and only came to faith in January of 1987, a year and a half after college graduation. My conversion was different from many "coming to faith" stories I've heard

³ From Sydney Park and Kenneth A. Mathews, *The Post-Racial Church: A Biblical Framework for Multiethnic Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011), 266-70.

through the years. I came to confess Jesus Christ as my Savior after thinking about the process of photosynthesis and ecology, which ultimately led to a reconsideration of creation and evolution. The entire process took approximately four hours on one cold January afternoon in my apartment in Evanston, Illinois.

Everybody who has faith has a story. Abraham's story is told in Genesis and retold 2,000 years later in the New Testament, where his name appears 72 times. When faith arises it changes the direction of our life forever. Jesus said this about Abraham:

John 8:56 “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” (NAS95)

Abraham saw Jesus' day by hearing God's promise. I saw Jesus' day by what I heard an evangelist preach when I was 9 years old. Abraham's life was changed and so was John Newton's, and so was Sydney Park's, and so was mine. What about yours?

We've talked about (1) the importance of faith--it makes or breaks your present and future. We've talked about (2) the terms of faith--by grace God credits Christ's righteousness, his sinlessness and his union with the Father, to us who believe.

We could put it this way. Do you like chocolate milkshakes? Let's say you do. Christ is the chocolate milkshake; faith is the straw that we drink with. Our faith is not what we believe in: we believe in Christ who saves by God's grace. Faith is how we partake.

In closing let us take a glance at **(3) the effects of faith**. Note the closing verses of our Romans 4 reading:

20 No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” 23 But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

We see here five effects of Abraham's faith, his wholehearted "yes" to God's promise.

- (1) Faith is active--it grows (v. 20: lit. "he grew strong in his faith").
- (2) Faith is a conviction about God not about ourselves (v. 21: "fully convinced that God was able"). Remember the milkshake and the straw.
- (3) Faith is firm not fleeting (v. 22: That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness": it did not waver, come and go, prove fickle. Abraham didn't just look at the chocolate milkshake: he slurped it all down. He actually and wholly trusted God. He proved what God promises [Rom 9:33; 10:11/Isa 28:16]: "whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.")
- (4) Faith is contagious (v. 23–24: the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also). Abraham's faith was passed on. The good news he heard continues to echo around the world today. It is directed at you and me too.
- (5) Faith is a sure promise. God stands behind these words of vv. 24–25:

It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

We have looked at the importance of faith, the terms of faith, and the effects of faith. If like Abraham you have received God's righteousness through his promise fulfilled in Christ, I have two words for you: rejoice, and persevere.

If you have not received God's righteousness through his promise fulfilled in Christ . . . there's a word rock climbers use. The word is "exposed." When you're climbing a rock face and are not tied in, if you slip there is nothing between you and the ground below. Without faith, you are exposed. Faith is the top rope God throws down to us to grab hold of. With that tie he draws us toward him. Without faith you have gravity's drag: an unenviable future in this world and the next.

The God who called Abraham is loving, wise, and kind. He calls us away from ill-advised faith by which I mean, for example: faith in ourselves, faith in humanity, faith in meditation, faith in politics, faith in wealth, faith in sports, faith in pleasure, faith in school, faith in children, faith in grandchildren, faith in romance, faith in skepticism, faith in work, faith in partying, faith in unhappiness and self-pity, faith

in the zillion things within us and around us that are less than God and other than God.

Abraham heard from God what Peter told a corrections officer who was about to commit suicide late one night: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." He did, and he was.

Blessed is the man, the woman, the teenager, the child, who heeds God's call to faith.