

Romans

Justification by Faith - Part 4

January 25, 2015

I. Paul's mini sermon about Abraham's faith

- A. Last Sunday we looked at the first 17 verses of Romans 4. Today, we will give most of our attention to vs 18-22, because in these verses, Paul preaches a mini-sermon on faith, and there are several valuable lessons in these five verses that we ought to seriously consider.
- B. Romans 4:18-22 . . . In hope against hope [Abraham] believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "So shall your descendants be." [19] Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; [20] yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, [21] and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. [22] Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness.
- C. In these 5 verses, Paul presents three examples of Abraham's faith.
 1. First, Paul says that in hope against hope Abraham believed (vs. 18).
 2. Second, Paul says that without becoming weak in faith, Abraham honestly acknowledged the human or natural – or as we might say today – the scientific truths about his situation (vs 19).
 3. Third, Paul says Abraham did not waver in unbelief, but rather grew strong in faith – giving glory to God (vs 20).
- D. Prayer
- E. Romans 4:18 . . . In hope against hope Abraham believed.
 1. Abraham was 75 years old when God first promised to make him a great nation (Gen 12:1-4). And Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born (Gen 21:5). The point is that there was a 25 year interval between the promise made and the promise fulfilled.
 2. For most of us, 25 years would be a long time to wait, let alone faithfully and patiently wait, for God to begin the process of making us a great nation of people. And as if having to wait 25 years were not enough, there were other impediments that could have discouraged Abraham's faith and patience.
 - a. At the time the promise was made, Abraham was 75 years old and his wife was 65 years old. Naturally and scientifically, that

is at the upper end of male fertility for producing a healthy child, and it is above the age for females to bear a healthy child, if she is even fertile at that age.

- b. Add to that the fact that Sarah was barren and therefore unable to conceive any child at all.
 - c. And add to this the fact that 24 years later Abraham still had no son, his wife still was barren, and she was 89 years old.
3. When we combine these natural limitations with their increasing age and with having to watch 24+ years come and go without Sarah getting pregnant, we begin to understand why Paul speaks of Abraham's faith as hope against hope.
- a. But what does hope against hope mean? It means that in spite of all the natural or scientific reasons why God's promise could not come true, and in spite of the fact that 24+ years had passed without a single sign that God's promise was coming true, Abraham still confidently believed it would come true.
 - b. Or to put it another way, Abraham remained confident that God would fulfill His promise in spite of the seemingly overwhelming reasons to lose hope and forsake his faith.
4. What would you do if you were in Abraham's shoes? And when you ponder how you would have handled the same situation, remember that we tell 24+ years of Abraham's story in five minutes, which can make it seem easier to faithfully and patiently wait than it really is.
5. But there is another side to this story that is worth considering. Without question, human and earthly factors can significantly affect any situation, but their potential effect is never greater than God's ability to fulfill His word or accomplish His purposes. For example:
- a. Getting approximately 3 million men, women and children across the Red Sea is humanly impossible without some sort of bridge or boats. Add urgency due to an advancing army. Yet God got Israel across the Red Sea while keeping the Egyptian army at bay until the last Israelite was safely on the other side.
 - b. The walls of Jericho were thought to be impervious to human attack, but they were not impervious to God's power, for He made them crumble so the Israelites could enter the city and destroy those who lived inside the walls.
 - c. Giants are deadly combatants against normal sized humans, but by God's power, David defeated Goliath in battle.
 - d. Fire burns, but God prevented Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from being burned in the fiery furnace.

- e. Lions eat human flesh, especially when they are hungry, but God kept Daniel from being eaten in a den of lions.
- f. In our day, evangelizing Muslims is a very difficult task, yet we know of Muslims who have come to faith in the one true God and in Jesus Christ, through visions and dreams.
- g. My point is, God has repeatedly done what we humans think is impossible. Therefore, patient faith is not just wise, it is reasonable in the face of the most daunting reasons to lose hope.
 - (1) Now it is true and possibly more common than we would like that God's timing can be slower, and sometimes far slower than we prefer or think necessary. And the natural or scientific reasons why God cannot do what He says He will do can seem daunting.
 - (2) However, even though something seems humanly impossible, and even though you have already waited longer than seems reasonable, trusting God is always the wisest and the most reasonable choice to make.
 - (3) Why? Because there is nothing that can deter or defeat God so as to keep Him from fulfilling His word and keeping His promises.
- h. Are you facing a situation that seems impossible for God to resolve, or bring to a good end, or produce an outcome that fits one of His promises?
 - (1) If you are, how long have you been waiting for God to act?
 - (2) Are you still looking to God and trusting in God to work all things out for good in regard to this situation, or are you losing hope, or maybe even giving up hope that God will act?
 - (3) Look to Abraham as an example of patient, confident faith in the face of what seems to us humans as impossible. In hope against hope, keep believing, keep waiting, keep praying, so that you remain faithful in your faith.

- F. Romans 4:19... Without becoming weak in faith Abraham contemplated his own body and the deadness of Sarah's womb.
- 1. The point Paul is making is that Abraham was honest about his situation, from a human perspective, without weakening his faith, or without growing careless in living according to the faith he had in God's promise, or without giving up.
 - 2. In other words, being honest about the situation did not discourage Abraham or weaken his faith.

- a. It did not weaken his resolve to do what was necessary to remain faithful to God as he waited for God to act.
 - b. He was just as committed to obeying God in the 24th year as he was in the first year.
 - c. How do we know? Because Abraham and Sarah proved the genuineness and strength of their faith by continuing to do their part in making conception a reality in spite of the human or scientific reasons why such efforts were useless.
3. What about you?
- a. Are you able to honestly face the known or presumed facts about your situation without growing weak in faith? Or does such honesty motivate you to lose hope and give up?
 - b. When you feel reasonably certain about God's leading or about having received a promise from God, is length of time hearing and receiving a factor in the steadfastness of your faith?
 - c. When natural reasoning or science infers that it is past the time for doing what needs to be done, does your faith grow weak and your hope in God fade?
 - d. Do you give up praying about things when it seems God is not doing enough or working fast enough to fix or change it? Do you grow cynical about God's willingness to care for you when it appears His care is less than what is currently needed or unequal to the task? Do you give up on patiently waiting for God to act when the same problem or frustration or hard ship comes at you again and again and again?
 - e. Look to Abraham as your example. He remained committed to trusting God in spite of the evidence and circumstances that would motivate many others to stop trusting in God.

- G. Romans 4:20 . . . With respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God.
- 1. We've seen how Abraham "in hope against hope" still believed, and how Abraham was honest about his situation "without becoming weak in faith."
 - 2. Here in vs 20, Paul is telling us that Abraham's faith grew stronger and stronger, to the point that in spite of the reasons not to believe, he publicly confirmed his confidence that what God promised, God would do.
 - 3. This is an important lesson for us, because too often, too many Christians start thinking less of God and begin speaking ill of God

when they are convinced that what God ought to be doing, He is not doing. This was not the case with Abraham. His faith grew stronger rather than weaker, and he spoke of God in relation to God's promise in ways that made God look good rather than bad, trustworthy rather than untrustworthy, and loving rather than neglectful or unkind.

4. Now there is no doubt that our faith in God is often challenged by hard times, powerful temptations, fears for our safety, concern for our well-being, and having to wait – sometimes a long time – for God to answer prayer or come to our aid.
 - a. In times like these, we have two options: (1) grow stronger in faith so as to remain faithful in waiting on God to act, or (2) grow weaker in faith so as to move toward discouragement and despair, and eventually give up.
 - b. The direction you go is up to you. And the important truth here is that the direction you take will not change God, but it will change you.
 - c. James put it this way: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, [3] knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. [4] And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4).
 - d. Paul said it this way: “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; [4] and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope (*confident faith*); [5] and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Romans 5:2-5).
5. May we follow Abraham's example in pursuing stronger faith when our faith is challenged, and in those times, may our speaking of God give glory to God.

II. Beyond these three lessons on faith from Abraham, there are two more that I want to emphasize today.

- A. First, we read in Hebrews 11:8 that “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.”
 1. Paul makes it clear in the first 2½ chapters of Romans that there is an inseparable union between obedience, justification, and the gift of eternal salvation. Here in Hebrews 11:8, we see that there is a clear link between faith and obedience.

- a. This should not surprise us because Abraham's story, as told in Genesis, shows Abraham working out and validating his faith through obedience to God's commands.
 - b. You see, Abraham's faith was not separate from the way he lived. His faith manifested itself in how he lived, and especially in how he lived in relation to who God is and what God said.
 2. And this is important because we know from Romans 4 that it is Abraham's kind of faith that God credits as righteousness – resulting in justification and the gift of eternal salvation. If you uncouple obedience from faith, whatever faith is left is not saving faith.
 - a. Jesus made this clear when He said that the failure to DO the will of God will result in not being known by Jesus, which will result in condemnation and eternal damnation (Matthew 7:21-23).
 - b. The writer of Hebrews 5:8-9 put it this way: "Although [Jesus] was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. [9] And having been made perfect, He became to all those WHO OBEY HIM the source of eternal salvation."
 3. By faith Abraham obeyed, and it is the one who faithfully obeys that God justifies and gives the gift of eternal life.
- B. Second, Abraham not only believed God's promise was true and then acted accordingly, he believed in God as a living being – with the result that he interacted with God and trusted in the character of God.
1. Abraham's faith was built on more than facts and truths. It was also built on a living and active relationship with God, himself. And it was Abraham's relationship with God that anchored his trust in the character of God. And it was his anchored trust in the character of God that motivated him to turn to God, to rely on God, to patiently wait for God, and to confidently hope in God.
 2. This should not surprise us because in various places and in various ways, the Old and New Testament not only ties together faith in God and obedience to God, it ties together faith in God and relationship with God, and fellowship with God, and love for God For example–
 - a. God's word tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). This shows the importance of faith.
 - b. Jesus said that "This is eternal life, that they may know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John

17:3). And to know God in this way is to combine an intellectual knowledge of God with a relational knowing of God. This shows the importance of relationship with God.

- c. The first great commandment says you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength (Mark 12:30). This shows the importance of love for God.
 - d. Jesus said, “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him” (John 14:21). John affirms this in 1 John 5:3 . . . For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. This ties together obedience to faith in God, relationship with God, and love for God.
3. The point I am making is that Christian faith includes intellectual assent to certain facts and truths, and it equally includes a living and active relationship with God – a relationship that from our side is built on faith, obedience, and love, and from God’s side is built on love, faithfulness, mercy and goodness. This Christian faith is the same as Abraham’s faith. And this is the faith that justifies. Therefore, if we want to live forever with God, this must be our faith as well.

III. Conclusion

- A. Let us press on toward faith that is strong even when we think all hope is lost; toward faith that does not weaken when we are honest about our situation or the surrounding circumstances; toward a faith that does not waver but instead grows stronger and stronger to the point of giving God glory regardless of the challenges to our faith. And may we, by faith, cling to the conviction that what God promises, God will do.