

Prayer

Lord Jesus; You bring true compassion into a world of selfishness and materialism. Remind us of Your love for the lost, the poor, the weak and the disadvantaged, and open our eyes to their need. Inspire us to follow Your example of living for others and not for self, and give us a heart of service. In this way, may greed and inequality be overcome by the truth and justice of the Gospel we declare. Thank You Lord Jesus: AMEN.

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Ask the Holy Spirit to come on you afresh this day, to show you new things and lead you in new pathways. Expect Him to do just this.

On-going prayers

- **Pray about waste in our world.** *Pray about the waste you see around you, paper, food, packaging etc. Pray for those who have to clear it up*
- *Give thanks for medical technologies that can save lives*
- *Pray for those who work in border controls in your country*

Meditation

I was wondering when the Lord might speak to me; and then it happened:
I was working at my desk, and He said 'Follow me';
I was in the middle of a meal, and He said 'Share with the poor';
I was thinking about myself, and He said 'Love your neighbour';
I was checking my bank balance, and He said 'Give sacrificially';
I was telling a friend about my work, and He said 'Share the Good News';
I was relaxing at home watching the news, and He said 'I am the truth';
I was enjoying a drive in my car, and He said 'I am Lord of all';
I was living life to the full, and He said 'I died for you';
I came to a stop, and He said 'follow me' ... again.

Bible passage – Romans 4:13-25

¹³ The promise that he would inherit the world with his descendants was not made to Abraham through the law, but through being made right with God by faith. ¹⁴ Now, if the people of the law are to be the heirs, then faith is invalid and the promise is meaningless, ¹⁵ for the law brings wrath. But where there is no law, there is no disobedience.

¹⁶ The promise depends on faith, so that it may be a matter of grace. In this way it is guaranteed for all Abraham's descendants, not just for those who keep the law, but those who are of the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of us all; ¹⁷ as it is written 'I have made you father of many nations'), before God in whom 'he believed', who gives life to the dead and whose command creates things that do not otherwise exist.

¹⁸ Against all hope, Abraham believed that he might become the 'father of many nations' according to what God had said to him; 'Your descendants will be numerous'. ¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he thought that his own body was as good as dead (being about one hundred years old) and also that Sarah's womb was barren. ²⁰ He did not doubt the promise of God but grew stronger in faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. ²² His faith, therefore, was 'counted to him as righteousness'.

²³ Now the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴ but also for us. It will be 'counted' to us who believe in Him who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead, ²⁵ who was handed over because of our sins and was raised in order to make us right with God!

Bible Study

Review

Romans chapter 4 is certainly a taxing passage, and it is not easy to read or understand today because it is a detailed discussion of things like circumcision and the law. Most Christians feel that the church has long since grown away from those things that reflect its Jewish roots. We must not forget, however, that we do not practice circumcision or keep the ritual details of the Old Testament Law within the church today largely because Paul's argument here in Romans proved successful, and was accepted by the church. This is very important, but if we look at the passage closely, it is not all about detailed arguments from Scripture about the Jews. In our passage today, Paul encourages all God's people to copy Abraham's faith (4:18f.), and look at his life story for inspiration.

To begin with, Paul continues the detailed legal arguments of the first half of the chapter, and insists that Abraham found a right relationship with God by faith before he was circumcised (4:13). This enables him to argue that the Jewish people cannot therefore be the sole heirs of God's covenant, because their faith is based on keeping the Law, not on the righteousness granted to their forefather Abraham through his faith (4:14).

This sounds extraordinary, for the whole of the Old Testament speaks of God's love for His people and their covenant relationship with God. However, Paul is not saying that Jews cannot inherit God's promises, only that God's love is bigger and broader than their heritage. God's gracious covenant includes Gentiles who respond to God in faith, and who are uncircumcised, just like Abraham when he first had faith. This is the true fulfilment of God's first promise, to make Abraham the *'father of many nations'* (4:17, see Genesis 12:2,3). Paul's point is powerful, and to this day, Christians accept Abraham as their ancestor not just because Jesus was a Jew, but because Abraham was the very first person to respond to God by faith.

From verse 18 onwards, Paul goes through some of the details of Abraham's life and draws out his faith. Of course, at the point Abraham 'believed' God, the issue at stake was his childlessness. Abraham had no son and heir, and it seemed that the great wealth with which God had blessed him would be taken by a distant relative (see Gen 15:2), and the idea that Abraham and his barren wife Sarah would bear a child seemed far-fetched. Paul prosaically describes Abraham as thinking that *'his own body was as good as dead'* (4:19), and also mentions the well known fact that his wife Sarah was barren. Of course, Abraham was childless because Sarah was barren, not because he was unable to have children (he was indeed able to produce a son named Ishmael through his servant girl Hagar – Gen 16). Because of this, some have criticised this passage of Scripture as inaccurate, but Paul is more concerned here with the barrenness of the couple rather than which one was fertile! His message here is simple. Abraham's faith was rewarded, and even though Scripture clearly reports him as stumbling along the way (especially in dealing with Hagar), he eventually *'grew stronger in faith'* (4:20) until his son Isaac was born (Gen 20).

Reading to the end of this passage, Paul reports this story not merely to pick up on one feature of the long and complex story of Abraham's life. Rather, he presents it as the single most important thread that runs through Abraham's life, and he encourages us to believe in God like Abraham. Paul finishes by saying that Abraham's faith is the same faith possessed by Christians when they *'believe in Him who raise our Lord Jesus from the dead'* (4:24).

It may sound odd that Paul makes this gigantic leap from the earliest books of the Old Testament to the Gospels. But remember that the very last act of Abraham's life recorded in Scripture is his sacrifice of a lamb in place of his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, a story with strong connections with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Ultimately, faith in God is faith in Him who raised Jesus from the dead!

Going Deeper

This passage is largely about the life of Abraham, so we will look at this in more detail, but each part of the text takes Paul's theme of faith further:

- New words and phrases found in this passage of Romans
- The great promises made to Abraham
- The example of Abraham's life

Going Deeper

New words and phrases found in this passage of Romans

The whole of this passage describes the quality of Abraham's faith, and it does this by using a series of references to Abraham's life as found in Genesis. Also, a number of new and significant ideas are introduced into Paul's description of the Gospel in this passage; these are 'grace' (4:16), 'hope' (4:18), and growing 'stronger in faith' (4:20). Each of these are important for the rest of Romans, and we will find the next famous chapter of Romans (chapter 5) begins with a powerful description of the way that faith grows within the mature Christian (5:1-5)

In the middle of our text, we can find some verses of praise to God (4:17). Then, if we read on to the end of the passage, we find something similar (4:25). On the first occasion, Paul seems to break off from the flow of his argument to offer praise, and it comes at the point where he first mentions the fact that Abraham's faith was rewarded by the birth of a son and the creation of future generations, making Abraham a 'father'. The second time Paul praises God (4:25) comes after his mention of the famous event when Isaac was saved from death on Mount Moriah. It may be that in his day, Paul was used to saying words of praise to God at the mention of certain significant features of Jewish faith, this being one.

For us who read this today, these verses reads like affirmations of faith, '*who gives life to the dead and whose command creates things that do not otherwise exist*' (4:17), and '*to us who believe in Him who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead, who was handed over because of our sins and was raised in order to make us right with God!*' (4:24,25) Words such as this are often called a 'doxology' (meaning 'words of praise').

The great promises made to Abraham

The promise that Paul speaks of in verse 16 is the promise of God that Abraham would 'inherit the world', and is quoted in the previous verses (4:13-15). This promise is a combination of the three promises made to Abraham on the occasions God appeared to him when directing his life, and the fourth great promise made to him and his son Isaac after he had passed the great test of faith on Mount Moriah. Because of the importance of these passage I will quote them here;

1. firstly when he came into Canaan for the first time '*I will make of you a great nation ... in you all the families of the earth will be blessed*' (Gen 12:2,3);
2. secondly when God promised Abraham that he would have a son '*your own son will be your heir ...look to the heaven and count the stars ... so shall your descendants be*' (Gen 15:4,5);
3. and thirdly when Abraham was given the rite of circumcision thirteen years later when Sarah finally became pregnant '*I will make my Covenant with you ... you shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations ... I will establish my covenant ... to you and your offspring after you*' (Gen 17:2-7).
4. The great Covenant blessing given to both Abraham and Isaac; '*I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.*' (Gen 22:17-18)

All the way through our passage today, there are references to different sections of these great promises, but any attempt to summarise them must surely conclude that it was God who was acting through these promises to make something of Abraham. God was successful not because Abraham was any better than other people; indeed, he made many quite devastating mistakes including trying to have a son and heir outside of God's promises (resulting in the birth of Ishmael - Gen 16); but because Abraham first had faith (15:16) and was consequently obedient to the call placed upon his life. For this reason, Paul said that the promise dependant on faith was a 'matter of grace' (4:16). God's grace means His undeserved favour, which rests upon those who respond to Him in faith, and this passage is the first in Romans in which we get a glimpse of the famous contrast of 'law versus grace', which Paul uses in many of his letters to teach people about the meaning of faith in Jesus Christ.

The important thing to see in these promises is that it was always God's purpose to bring a blessing to the whole world through Abraham (sometimes referred to as 'many nations' - see promises 1,3 and 4 above). This blessing has only ever meant one thing, and this is the blessing of a relationship with God restored after the breakdown of the 'Fall' (Gen 3). If God accepted Abraham's faith as sufficient to restore this relationship, then this is a clear indication that faith was always intended to be the key that unlocks the door for all people to have a relationship with God. What God did through Abraham was to build a nation through whom He would work to show the world this truth, this 'light' (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6), and eventually this was achieved in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. But it all started with Abraham, and this is why all Christians can value Abraham as their ancestor 'in faith'.

The example of Abraham's life

In this passage of his letter, Paul both quoted from the specific promises of God to Abraham, but also gave a general example of Abraham's faith. The whole story of Abraham in Genesis 12 to 23 is well worth reading

because it contains a number of stories from which we can learn a great deal about faith, even today, in a world that is so different from that in which Abraham lived. Paul focussed on what is probably the most important feature of the story, which is the struggle Abraham and Sarah had to conceive a child and thus make real the promises of God.

Paul spoke of the faith of Abraham by which he believed God would give him a son even though he and Sarah were well past the age of childbearing (4:18-20, Gen 15:1-6). This son would be the means whereby God's relationship with Abraham would be passed on through the generations to others, and thence to the whole world; so the bearing of a son was very important. However, Scripture records Abraham as having difficulty in sustaining his faith, for immediately after receiving the promise, Abraham attempts to obtain a son and heir by Sarah's maidservant Hagar (Gen 16). We should not be too hard on Abraham for taking this course of action, because it was quite normal amongst ancient nomadic tribes-people of that time; but God made it clear during this episode that it was not His way, and He told Abraham directly that the mother of his son and heir would be Sarah (17:15f.). This was not simply a racial matter, preserving the 'true blood' of the ancestors of Terah in the godly line of Noah's son Shem (Gen 11:10-31), it was also evidence of the value God placed upon the primary relationship of a man and a woman, united in Him. God's desire was to keep the testimony and Covenant of 'faith' pure, not simply in a racial sense, but also morally. Despite some difficulties, and some sharp words between God and Abraham, and also between Abraham and Sarah (Gen 21:10f.), both of them learned through the whole experience and undoubtedly grew in faith throughout their lives, and successfully brought their son through childhood into adolescence (Gen 22,23,24).

This whole story is what Paul talked about when he praised Abraham's 'hope against hope' (4:18), and his strength of faith (4:19,20) by which he 'gave glory to God'. We could say that Paul was a little optimistic in saying that Abraham 'did not doubt' God (4:20) given some of what we know happened (see above!), but from the perspective of the whole story, Abraham's problems were a passing phase. His life was not characterised by doubt but by faith, and this is what was 'counted to him as being right with God'. In other words, the faith that Paul described in Abraham was a faith that was tried and tested in the crucible of life; it was not a one-off reaction to God's graciousness, as in Gen 15:6 alone. That was the starting point, and faith grew in Abraham throughout his whole life.

Paul concluded his example of Abraham by declaring that God's promises had now been fulfilled. They had been given to Abraham, but delivered to the rest of the world through the life and death of Jesus Christ our Lord! (4:24,25) God was therefore asking all people to see in Jesus, His Son, the truth about His love and His desire to have a relationship with all. The only requirement for this to become a reality for anyone, was faith; faith that Jesus was indeed God's Son and that His life was what those who witnessed it claimed it to be; which was that of the Messiah not just of the Jewish people, but of all peoples for all times. This is what the church declares to this day.

Application

Faith is something that starts, grows, and comes to a completion in Jesus Christ. This is what Paul says here in our passage today. It is a matter of God's truest grace that it starts in the life of an individual at all; and anyone who feels the touch of God, or hears His voice, or responds to a call from God, will know that it is authentic because what has happened to them is undeserved. Neither does it depend upon how good anyone is, which is what Paul means by contrasting this 'grace' with the 'law' in verse 16. This remains an important matter, for people still believe, even within the church, that some deserve the answers to their prayers, for example, because they are observed to be 'such good people'! When will we learn! God's favour is undeserved and we can pull no strings to obtain His benefits by being 'good'; no, we trust Him because he loves us, with a trust that lasts our whole life long.

It is very important for us to accept that the proof of faith comes in a lifetime of living it. Of course, a young person who has lived the faith for a few years is no less a Christian than one who has lived the faith for many decades. But for both, the testimony which counts is a testimony of faithfulness, that is, the evidence that they have borne faith through the trials of life, whatever they are, and faith that has been tested is faith that God can use in the work of His kingdom. The difficulty many Christians face today is that because many people do not talk about their faith, the bearing of it alone through life's trials can quickly become intolerable. We all need help to understand how faith works when life is tough, just as Abraham needed the voice of his wife when he could not face what was happening (as in Genesis 21 when Abraham found it hard to accept Isaac as his heir because he loved his first son Ishmael). Without sharing and mutual support, faith can become difficult to sustain, and the first thing that a church fellowship can do to help its people grow is to enable them to share their faith and support one another. In this way, a mature and confident faith can grow amongst people, a faith that truly shows the world the evidence of God's love in Jesus Christ His Son! This is our aim.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group the different things that all of God's people can learn about faith from the life of Abraham.
2. Why was it necessary for God to test Abraham's faith in the way described in our passage? Why does He test our faith today?
3. Do you personally feel that your own faith is 'counted' by God as placing you in a 'right relationship' with Him? How did this happen?

Personal comments by author

The discussion of faith in scripture is extensive, and yet these chapters in Romans are regarded as some of the most complete. It is my experience that people have very mixed views about faith, if you can help them feel free to truly express their opinions. Despite hearing much preaching about faith, many Christians are not sure about what it really means, or whether their own experience counts as what the preacher on Sunday calls 'faith'. We need to help people examine whether they genuinely trust God in the cut and thrust of their daily lives, because it is all too easy to offer lip service to 'faith', but not experience what it really means. Christian friends, who talk with us about what faith really means, give us the best help.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *As an exercise of faith read through the story of Abraham in Genesis 12-22 (perhaps using the studies available on the website), and for each chapter, ask yourself what can be learned about faith.*
- *Pray for those who find it hard to accept the principle of faith as the way God wants us to respond to Him. There are some who feel that 'faith' is too abstract for them, and they seek other more concrete experiences of God before they are willing to 'believe'. Pray that God's people may accept the evidence of scripture.*

Final Prayer

Listen to us, Lord Jesus, and help us listen to You. Speak to us, Lord Jesus, and help us speak to You. And then, when we really begin to communicate, share with us the deeper things of faith and of the Kingdom of God, so that we might live our lives to the full and for Your praise and glory. Thank You Lord Jesus, AMEN.
