



## Not the Law but the Promise

Romans 4:13-17

*Rev. Fred Greco*

---

Our text this morning is Romans, chapter 4, verses 13-17, as we continue our journey with the apostle Paul. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is authoritative, the Word of the Lord is sufficient, because the Word of the Lord is completely without error. Romans, chapter 4, beginning at verse 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. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. 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, 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."*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, we come to you this morning because we need to hear from you in your Word. Lord, we need hope. We need strength, and that comes from you. Your Word teaches us of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, of his mighty work that he performed on our behalf, that we can obtain that righteousness by faith. So Lord, bless us this morning and encourage us. Point us toward Jesus. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

This morning, Paul is continuing his argument that justification is not by works but is rather by faith, and he is doing it using Abraham. We have seen Paul tell us that the righteousness we need comes from God himself in Christ, and he has taken as an example that great Old Testament hero, Abraham. He showed that Abraham was not justified by works but rather by faith. In doing so, in the beginning of chapter 4, he used a historical argument.

Paul reminded us that Abraham was not yet circumcised when he believed, that he had faith first and circumcision followed that. Now what Paul is going to do is show the fundamental difference between the law and the promise. It's all of the same theological theme...*How does one become right with God?* There are these two competing principles: the law and the promise, works and faith. Paul is going to continue to instruct us in this.

As we look at this text, I'd like us to ask ourselves three questions. First: *Why not the law?* After all, why *couldn't* we be saved by the law? Second: *Why faith?* Why is it that faith is what brings justification and righteousness

to us? Third: *Faith in whom?* That is, what kind of faith? Who is our faith in that brings this righteousness to us? Why not the law, why faith, and faith in whom?

## Why Not the Law?

Let's start by looking at our first question this morning... *Why not the law?* Once again, Paul is using the Bible to make his point. He's going to show us that the first reason the law doesn't save is the law cannot bring the inheritance to us. Look with me, if you would, at verse 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."

Paul is drawing on the Bible, on the Old Testament, in order to make his point. We should not ever just skip over that. As we see Paul making his definitive points, he is never shy about standing on the Bible, of teaching what the Bible teaches. He begins with this promise to Abraham, but actually, the word *promise* here is, in a sense, a collective noun. It doesn't always seem that way in English, but I think *here* it is, because as Paul speaks of the promise to Abraham, he's really referring to several promises God has given to Abraham, the reiteration of promises, the expansion of promises.

God has given promises to Abraham in Genesis 12, Genesis 13, chapter 15, again in chapter 17, and then as well in chapter 22. All of these promises culminate in what Paul calls the *ultimate promise to Abraham*, that he would be heir of the world. You see, all of these promises that came to Abraham were really just subsumed under the one great promise: the promise of the Messiah, the promise that Abraham, through his descendants, would be a blessing to all of the nations, that in him all nations would be blessed.

Abraham understood this to be the coming of the Messiah. He believed on the Messiah. This is the promise Paul is speaking about. That's why he can talk about Abraham being the heir of the world. This is a pretty tall-order promise. What does it mean, then, to be an *heir*? Paul uses this term throughout his writings to describe what the believer receives from God. The inheritance that is described in the Scripture comes to the believer because of the believer's relationship to Jesus Christ.

That's because it's Jesus who is the Son. Christ deserves the inheritance. He has fulfilled everything the Father has tasked him with. God has promised Abraham that he would be an heir through his seed, an inheritance beyond all his imagining. It would come to him through Christ. So how does one get to be the heir? The very nature of an inheritance is such that you cannot obtain it by works.

For example, I might decide that what I really need to do is to make my best effort to try to learn everything about Windows software and be the best computer maker I could be in the hopes that Bill Gates might make me his heir. That would make my life a lot easier. No more college bills to worry about. No more retirement funds to need to invest in. If I were Bill Gates' heir, my money problems would be solved forever. Of course, I'm not holding my breath for that, and you shouldn't either.

We both know I can't make Bill Gates make me his heir because of things I do. That's not how inheritance works. An inheritance is something you *give* away. The one who gives the inheritance decides who will obtain that inheritance. You don't place a claim on an inheritance. I can't walk up to the Gates' home next week and knock on the door and say, "By the way, I think you owe me a couple billion. I've been working really hard here." I'm not even sure he'd come to the door. He'd probably have his butler slam the door in my face.

This is sometimes how we view an inheritance, but it's not biblical, and it's not even common sense. The way we earn an inheritance is by not earning it at all. The whole history of mankind shows and makes clear that no one is capable of earning this kind of inheritance, not even Abraham. He himself fell short. He sinned. He failed to do what God had commanded him to do. The whole history of Israel is a history of failure and falling short. All we need to do is look at people around us or even, yes, in the mirror to see that *we* fall short.

Paul is taking us back in summary to what he has already been saying, that the only way to receive the promised blessing is by faith. The law can't bring us an inheritance, because we do not deserve it, but Christ *does* deserve it. The only way we can inherit is by receiving what Christ gives to us by faith. Paul then goes on to explain why the law cannot bring this inheritance to us. It's not just that there is a different way God chose not to implement.

It's not as if God was thinking one day, "Well, salvation could be by works. They could inherit by works or they could inherit by grace. I wonder which one I'll pick. Oh, I think I'll pick by grace." No, that's not how it goes. Instead, it is really about the nature of an inheritance, and the nature of the law and of works. It's the law principle that gets in the way here. The law principle actually makes the promise of God useless, Paul says. Vain and empty.

We need to understand what Paul means by the use of *law* here in verse 13. As we've seen over and over again, Paul can use the word *law* in different ways. There is a hint here, if you know Greek or your pastor explains it to you, that the word *law* here does not have the definite article in front of it. It's not *the* law, actually, in Greek in verse 13; it's just *law*. We often do that when we speak of a principle or a generality. We take the *the* away from it and we generalize.

But I don't think you need to know Greek to get Paul's point here. I think the English works just fine. What Paul is saying is that the law principle of obedience is what goes against the promise. He's not talking about *the* law, the Mosaic law, and the reason we know this is because he's talking about Abraham. You recall last week we remembered that Genesis 12 comes before Genesis 17. Well, here's some *more* chronology: Genesis comes before Exodus by 400-some-odd years.

Paul can't be talking about the specific Mosaic code, because that wasn't even around when Abraham was given the promise. Yet Abraham is still pointed to the promise and not law. You see, the law principle

transcends the book of Leviticus, the book of Numbers, the book of Deuteronomy. The law principle is in us, that we think we can do what God has commanded.

Now, the Mosaic code *is* the best expression of this principle. It is very detailed. It has a detailed set of requirements and punishments, so the Mosaic code is the best illustration of this principle of law, but the principle of law is bound up in our hearts. I don't want you to look at this text and pit one part of the Bible against another.

Some look at this and say, "Oh, well, the Abrahamic administration is different than the Mosaic administration. In Abraham's time people were saved by faith, but in Moses' time people were saved by works, and then they changed it up again and went back to faith." No. Paul is telling us that we're always saved by faith, because he's telling us no one can ever be saved by law. No one can ever inherit according to the law.

What Paul is saying to us is something that's quite easy to understand. If we try to live by the law principle, hoping to get the promise by what we've done, we actually empty the promise of any meaning. What would be the result if God had said, "I promise to save you if you do such-and-such"? That promise would be worthless. All that it would depend upon is what we do. It would be empty to promise something where you require obedience, but Paul has already shown us that no one can keep the law.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts it this way: "The law means failure. Therefore, if the promise had been made through the medium of the law, what God was giving, as it were, with his right hand, he would have been taking back with his left hand. There would have been no promise at all; it would have had no value whatsoever." Paul is telling us that if we want the promise, we have to give up and abandon the law.

He wants us to see this through the clarity of the fact that inheritance is by faith and that works is a completely contradictory principle. You cannot mix the two. They are mutually exclusive. The same is true of the law and promise. It is also true of works and faith. If we choose law and works, we know we have to set aside the faith and promise. The promise cannot operate under law. It passes away. It becomes void.

We need to hear this, because so often we want to mix the two. We want to work, but we want God to grade on a curve, easy for us. We want the credit, but we want credit for something we don't deserve. We want to mix these principles of law and faith, works and grace. Paul tells us you can't have it that way. You have to abandon the law, you have to abandon works, and you have to run to the promise and faith.

He presses that point home with a third problem from the law, that the law brings wrath. Far from bringing blessing and inheritance, instead, the law brings wrath to us. Look at verse 15. "For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression." Why does the law bring wrath? Well, the basic principle of the law is, "Do this, and if you *don't* do it, this is the punishment that follows." That's the way the law works.

Think about every law you know. When was the last time you got a check in the mail from the state for obeying the speed limit? Or have you gotten a bonus at work for not stealing? No, I don't think so, because that's not how the law works. The law tells us what we must do, and if we fail we are punished. All the law can do is condemn. It has no power to enable a person to do its commands, and that's what's so hard about trying to live according to the law.

It's not just that breaking the law brings consequences, but the law itself is no help in obeying. Now, this doesn't mean the law is evil. It's not the law's fault that we sin. Paul is going to make this point in great detail in Romans 7. Let me put it to you this way: Don't blame the mirror if your face is dirty. It's not the job of the mirror to wash you; it's the job of the mirror to reflect the state of your face.

What is this wrath, then, that the law brings? Paul gives us an answer in this odd phrase in verse 15. "Where there is no law there is no transgression." When we first hear this we might think, "Well, perfect. Get rid of all of the laws. If there's no law, there can be no transgression, there can be no sin. We'll be perfect. Right?" No, that's not what Paul is saying.

What Paul is doing is in a summary form just telling you what he has been telling you in chapters 1 and 2. He's saying there's a sequence. The law exists. We transgress the law. That transgression provokes God's wrath. That's what happens every time. If we think about it, our nature shows this. This is the way we operate with law.

Let me appeal to the moms for a moment. I bet almost every single mother here has done something like this. You have a young child, and at dinner you put a vegetable in front of them, say, broccoli. The child doesn't want to eat the broccoli, doesn't want to pick up the broccoli, so what do you do? You say something like, "Don't eat that broccoli. No, no, no. I don't want to see you touch that broccoli. Don't you dare eat that broccoli in front of me."

What does the kid do? He picks up the broccoli and eats it. Why? Because you told him not to. That's what is bound up in his heart. That's the way we look at the law. We see a law, and we want to transgress it. To be honest, when we drive around, do we really think about whether or not we're going to drive over the speed limit or whether we're going to drive just enough so no one will stop us with a radar gun? This is how it works. Our sinful nature delights in transgressing, in breaking boundaries, in sin.

### **Why Faith?**

So we can't count on the law to bring this promised blessing, because it actually does the opposite. It eliminates the promise and brings in its opposite: wrath. But Paul doesn't leave us without hope. His point is not to make us despair entirely but to make us despair of the law. He is driving us now to our only hope, to faith. In

verse 16 he picks up. "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring..."

That is why it depends. For this reason, what I've just said, the fact that the law doesn't work and can't work and will never work...that's why it depends on faith. You have to turn to faith, because faith and the promise go together. This shouldn't surprise us, because the promise is a gracious act of God. He did not have to give us the promise. Think about the example of Abraham. There was nothing that made God call Abraham. There was nothing that made God give this promise to him.

Apart from grace, the path is always law, transgression, wrath, but grace breaks that cycle. Faith and grace belong together. Faith works *with* grace. This makes sense, because the law tells us to *do*. It points to our behavior, to our actions. You can't think about the law without thinking about works, but grace is the unmerited favor of God. We might even say, better, the *de*-merited favor of God. It's the favor of God that we emphatically do not deserve.

Grace can't have anything to do with works. It's the exact opposite. It's getting what we *don't* deserve. Now how can we possibly receive this promise that God has given by grace? The only way, Paul says, is by faith, by believing in the one who has promised, by giving up all of our works so we can embrace grace. There is a reason faith is consistent with the promise. It is the only way we can get ourselves out of the way and receive what we do not deserve.

There are many so-called gurus today who will tell you you need to look inside yourself to find your best *you*, to find your own happiness. Don't believe them. The Bible tells us not to look inside ourselves. The Bible tells us to look outside of ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ who did what we cannot do and purchased for us in his life and death what we could not obtain. That gives us hope. I don't focus on *my* failure, on *my* needs, on *my* shortcomings. I focus on Jesus, and I know he has already accomplished everything.

In verse 16, Paul says not only that it depends on faith so that the promise can rest on grace, but he also says it depends on faith so that the promise is guaranteed to all his offspring. So faith also guarantees the promise. Even if you disagree with Paul from what he said earlier (and you shouldn't)... If you disagree with Paul that the standard of the law is perfection, absolute perfection, there is still another reason to cling to faith instead of to the law. This, again, gets back to the principle of the law.

Those who seek to be right with God by obedience to the law have one key commonality. They all make perfection something that is not required, because they know they can't reach it. This makes sense. We have that age-old saying, "Nobody is perfect." But even if we granted that you didn't need perfect obedience, how much obedience is needed? How much of the law do you need to keep to receive that blessing? Ninety-nine percent? Eighty percent? Sixty-five percent? Fifty-one percent? How much? How will you know?

Even if we admit that there's a sliding scale, you can never be sure if you've done enough. This is not just abstract theology. This is how every theological and philosophical system operates. There is absolutely no assurance of salvation, because I never know if I'm over the hump. I never know if I've fulfilled, if I've passed the test, if I've done what's sufficient. I have no way of knowing, ever.

As a matter of fact, every other theology and philosophy outside of the Scriptures doesn't *want* you to have assurance. It tells you assurance is bad, that you need to be afraid so you do more, and when you think you've done enough, do some more, and when you've done some more on top of some more, guess what: do some more. What kind of a life is *that* like?

It's like living on a treadmill, and not only can you never get off but somebody is behind you constantly cranking up the speed. There's no hope in that. The beauty of faith is that it receives the sure and certain promise of God. It doesn't depend on our standard. It doesn't depend on our obedience. What the promise of God depends on is God who is sure in his Word (he never lies) and who is sure in his actions (he is always powerful enough to bring about his will).

So this morning let me ask you...*Do you struggle with doubt?* Are you worried that you may not love God enough or read your Bible enough or obey enough? The solution is to give up on any form of works and to trust in Christ by faith. He *has* done enough. He has earned a sure salvation. He has given you his sure promise.

The final thing Paul tells us about faith in verse 16 is that faith opens the promise up to all his offspring. This would be of great importance to the mixed church in Rome with Jews and Gentiles, but it's also, quite frankly, of great importance to us today, because the vast majority of us would be what Paul would term *Gentile Christians*, so we want to know that we can obtain the promise of Father Abraham. Paul tells us that faith brings that promise to all, that Abraham is the father of all who believe. Abraham is the father of all who share his faith.

If somehow the promises were limited to those who kept the law, then there would be an obvious limitation. It wouldn't even just be those who *kept* the law. *Others* would be left behind, those who never got the full expression of the law. How would someone be expected to keep all of the law when he didn't even know what the law was? It's hard enough to do what we know, but how we can anticipate what we're supposed to do? Remember, the standard of the law is perfection. There is no lessening.

Theoretically, if we are driving over the speed limit, we all like it when the police officer comes up and we say, "I'm sorry, Officer; I didn't realize this was a 35-mile-an-hour zone," and the officer says, "Well, that's okay. I'm just going to give you a warning. You didn't know." But that's not how the world works, is it? You try that with *other* things. "Officer, I'm sorry. I didn't realize robbing a bank was against the law. I thought it was just a convenient place for me to go in and take as much money as I wanted. I'm sorry, Officer, I didn't realize it was against the law to shoot someone. I just thought I could do what I wanted."

What does the law say? No, ignorance of the law is no excuse. If we don't *know* all of the law, how can we keep *all* of the law? Again, not just the major parts of the law or the highlights of the law, but the standard is *all* of the law being kept to perfection. The good news is that faith works on the exact opposite principle. It's available to everyone who hears the promise. There is no working involved at all. Paul makes sure we know that the faith principle applies to everyone, first to the Jews, the adherent of the law, in verse 16, and second, to the Gentiles, to the one who shares the faith of Abraham.

In verse 16, Paul *is* referring to Moses' law. The article is there. You can trust me on that. But it also makes sense, because he's speaking to the Jews, those who know the Mosaic law. What he's saying is, "The faith principle applies to both of you." He's really just summarizing again what he has been saying for the past three and a half chapters.

Paul set forth that all were condemned under sin and that those who had followed the Mosaic code, those who tried to follow a moral code, those who didn't know either... All of them failed. Now he says, "God has opened up salvation in the same way to everyone. Just as everyone is condemned by sin, so salvation is open to everyone by faith. Whosoever comes will not be cast out." That is why the promise to Abraham is that he would be the father of many nations, as Paul points out in verse 17.

### **Faith in Whom?**

There is one last final and brief point for us to see. Paul has told us that the law cannot save, that it only brings wrath, and he has told us that faith is the means that we lay hold of the promise of God. Now he gives us a picture of what that faith looks like. Notice what Paul *doesn't* do. He doesn't talk about the strength of faith. We might expect that. Right? "Paul, just how much faith do I need to have to be saved?" This is our tendency. We want to *do*. Even with faith we want to *do*.

So we want to know, "How much faith do we need?" But you'll notice Paul doesn't talk about that at all. What Paul talks about is the *object* of faith. He says that Abraham believed in God, and he believed in God not just because of the content of the promise but because of the character of the promisor. God had given him a great promise, but it was because Abraham knew God could keep his promise that he believed. Abraham had faith in God. Let me see if I can give you an illustration of this.

A few weeks ago, my car broke down. Thankfully, I was only about 20 feet from a parking lot. A hose blew, and that caused all of my coolant to empty out, and my water pump went, as well as some other things inside. I was able to get the car parked. I was able even to start the car back up again. What do you think would have been the result if I would have said, "I have tremendous faith that this car is going to get me back to Katy. I'm getting back on I-10 right now. No one believes stronger than me. I love this car. I have faith. No one has more faith than me in this. I'm going to get home"? I don't think I would have made it 15 feet.

Let's fast-forward to the repairs done on the car, the coolant replaced, the water pump put back in, a new hose, everything fixed, checked, double checked. I pick up the car. I go home. What happens if I say, "Ooh, this car failed on me. I'm not sure I should go to work, because I don't know if the car is going to make it. I have so little faith that this will happen." Does that mean the car is going to fail? No. What's important is the *object* of the faith.

I could have tremendous faith in a broken-down car, and it's going to get me nowhere, and I could have the smallest faith in a perfectly serviceable car, and it'll drive me all over town. You see, that's why it's not about the amount of faith you have; it's about the one you have faith in. Isn't that a comfort? You don't have to worry about how much faith you have. You have to worry about how big a God we have faith in, and that's no worry at all, because God can fulfill his promises.

We can have faith in his promises even when we are weak, even when we are faltering, because it's God who fulfills his promise, not our faith that fulfills his promise. We see this here in the way Paul describes Abraham's faith. He says he has faith in God who gives life to the dead. Abraham lived this. He was called upon, after he was given all of these promises, to take his son Isaac up on Mount Moriah and sacrifice him.

I think we often have a picture that as Abraham and Isaac were walking up the mountain, Abraham was saying to himself, "God is going to send a ram. God is going to send another sacrifice. I'm not going to have to do this." The reason we think that is because God *did* substitute a ram, but do you know what's interesting? That's not what the Bible tells us. The Bible actually tells us that Abraham was *not* expecting a substitute, that he was absolutely expecting he was going to have to kill his son.

So why would Abraham do this? It's because Abraham had the promise of God that all nations would be blessed not only *from* Abraham but *through* Isaac would the promise be fulfilled. So Abraham did a mental faith calculation. He said, "God has made this promise. God can never lie. God will do whatever he can to keep a promise.

If the only thing he could do was raise Isaac from the dead, that must be what he's going to do, because even though I've never seen somebody get raised from the dead, even though I've never known anybody who got raised from the dead, it is much more likely for someone to be raised from the dead than God to be a liar."

We know this because Hebrews tells us this in chapter 11. "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." This is the God we believe in.

The second thing we learn about this God who promises is in the second half of verse 17. He is the God who "calls into existence the things that do not exist." What does this mean? It means that faith trusts God and

trusts what he says, not because we find it believable but because we know the one who's doing the speaking. Faith doesn't say things like, "I can't believe in a God who would do that." Faith instead says, "I believe and I trust God; therefore, what he says is true."

God calls things into existence that do not yet exist. This could refer to God's great act of creation, making all things of nothing, but I think it's something more than that. I think what it means is that God has determined something, and he has spoken of it. It has not yet been fulfilled or in existence, yet it is so certain of fulfillment that we believe it already exists.

We see this in the language of the Old Testament. There is a thing in the Old Testament in Hebrew called the *historic prophetic future*. What that means is things will be prophesied, "Thus saith the Lord," and although they're future, they'll be described in the present or even the past tense because it's so certain of fulfillment. We never doubt what God is going to do. If God calls something into existence, if God tells us his will, it *will* come to pass.

I'll give you one example from the Scriptures. Jesus tells us that he *has* prepared a place for us. How many of you have seen it, lived in it, walked around in it? I tell you right now that place is more certain than that chair there, because God has declared it. He is the one who speaks, and things that are not yet in existence *are*. He is the promisor.

We *can* trust in the Lord, and we *can* believe the promise just as if it were right before us. Do you trust the Lord this morning? Do you hear his promise? Faith in the true and living God is your only hope, but it is the surest hope you will ever experience. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ now, and you will be released from the treadmill of the law and know the sweetness of the promise of God.