



## The Hope of Faith

Romans 4:18-25

*Rev. Fred Greco*

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This morning we will be looking at the last section of Romans, chapter 4, verses 18-25. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely without error, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 4, beginning at verse 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.' 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. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was 'counted to him as righteousness.' But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we pray this morning that you would open up your Word to us, that by the power of your Holy Spirit our eyes would be opened, our ears would be unstopped, and our hearts would be tender to receive your Word. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We come now this morning to the last section of Romans, chapter 4. We have been looking in chapter 4 at the doctrine of justification; that is, being right with God by faith alone. Paul has said a great deal about faith. He has told us that we cannot be right with God by obedience to the law because that is impossible and that the law only works wrath upon us, so we have to look elsewhere, outside of ourselves. Then Paul was describing where we are to look is to the Lord and to his promise, and we do this by faith.

This, I think, raises a good question in our minds. If we are to look to the Lord by faith, what *is* faith? What does faith look like? How do I know if I *have* faith? What does it mean to trust God? How do I understand what faith is? Now Paul is going to show us what faith is. He's going to continue giving us the illustration and example from the life of Abraham, but now he's turning his attention to faith itself.

This morning I would like us to see three things about faith. First, as Paul discusses Abraham, he points out *faith in God's word*; that is, faith is directed toward the word of God. Secondly, he shows us that Abraham had *faith instead of doubt*, that faith replaces doubt. It is a trust we have in God that relieves our doubts and cares.

Finally, we see that there is indeed a connection between *Abraham's faith and ours*, that Abraham's faith is not just something we observe; it is something we act upon, that we must take for our own. Faith in God's word, faith instead of doubt, and Abraham's faith and ours.

## **Faith in God's Word**

Let's begin by looking at faith in God's word. The first thing Paul tells us about faith is that it is focused upon the word of God and the word of God alone. Last week we saw that Abraham believed God, and there were two reasons Paul gave to us why Abraham believed God. First, that God is the one who brings life to the dead. Secondly, he is the one who brings his will to pass. He is the one who calls things that are not into existence, and they are.

Now Paul is going to tell us what that belief looked like, and he starts with God's word. He opens our passage this morning with a difficult phrase in verse 18: "In hope he believed against hope..." At first glance, this doesn't make any sense. How is hope against hope? What are you saying, Paul? What does this mean? But if we can understand what Abraham hoped in, if we can see what God gave Abraham to *have* this hope, then we can see what Paul is saying.

Abraham believed what God said, and that gave him hope. Faith enabled Abraham to believe in the promise of God. All Abraham had was God's bare word, the promise that Paul summarizes in this way: "So shall your offspring be." What this means is that there was no reason, on a human level, that Abraham should have believed that promise. Nothing had happened, and nothing seemed *likely* to happen to make that promise come true.

There was no human hope. There was no human optimism Abraham would have, so Abraham had to hope against that kind of hope. He had to find hope in something other than his circumstances and reality, if you will. He had to hope in God and his word, because the only thing Abraham had was the spoken word of God, but that was enough for Abraham.

What a promise God had given to him. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of many natural descendants and that the nations of the earth would all be blessed through him. In that promise was found a promise that the Messiah would come from Abraham and that the blessing that would come to the world would come through Abraham.

So we might ask ourselves... *Where was the support Abraham had that he could look to for this promise?* Where could he find some backup, as it were? The answer is there *was* none. There were no examples of such old couples having children in Abraham's day, especially *many* children. Abraham himself had doubted this promise 14 years before. You may remember when this promise first came to Abraham in Genesis 15.

Abraham was old, about 85 years old, and he did not believe that God could bring this promise about through him and Sarah, so he tried to find a loophole to the promise by bringing in Hagar and trying to fulfill the promise himself through her. Now it's 14 years later, and everything is even more difficult. Everything around Abraham would say that this promise is crazy, that it's untrue, yet Abraham believed. Why? Just because God said it. That's the only reason he believed.

This is a good example for you and me. Not that I want you to go home and wonder how many descendants you might have, but the fact is we have the same kind of wild promise. As sinners, we have no hope of forgiveness. Paul has just told us there is nothing we can do that will make us right with God. For many of us, we even have not experienced *human* forgiveness. The idea of forgiveness *humanly* speaking seems hopeless.

Perhaps you have wandered about for years, seeking reconciliation and forgiveness from someone else and have not found it, but God gives us the promise in his Word. Whoever believes in him (that is, Jesus) should not perish but have eternal life. What a wild, generous promise we have. Now, we have nothing apart from God's Word that we should believe that. As a matter of fact, we don't even know what eternal life is. We've never experienced it. We haven't talked to someone who can tell us all about it, but by believing God's Word alone, we can have eternal life.

It is faith in God's Word and God's Word alone, apart from all other supports, that we are called to. This is why the Bible is so important to us. It's not because the Bible has some kind of magical property that can change reality. It's because the Bible is God's Word to us. It is his promises to us. Faith believes what God has said in his Word is true, no matter how impossible it seems. Do you trust God's Word this morning? Do you trust that what he has said is true? Not just generically, not just for others, but for *you*, today? The promises of God in his Word are promises *you* can claim, and they are sure and steadfast.

The second thing we see about faith in God's word that Abraham exemplified is that he had a faith despite appearances. For Abraham, it was not just that he believed what God had promised. No. He did so in spite of the appearance of the whole world around him. From a human perspective, Abraham's situation was hopeless. It was bad enough, as we've said, in Genesis 15 when Abraham was 85 years old, but now by Genesis 17 he is, Paul tells us in verse 19, about 100 years old, just about dead, as it were.

Even more, God's promise did not allow Abraham to find a creative loophole. Sometimes we think we can find a solution if we just think hard enough and work hard enough. That's actually one of the things that was a main part of my life before I was in the ministry as I was a lawyer. One of the things lawyers do is we try to find creative solutions to problems, loopholes, as it were. We try to find ways around the problem.

Abraham had no such loophole, because not only was *he* old, God specifically told him in Genesis 17:16 that it was to be Sarah who was to bear the son. Stop and think about that for a moment. Not only was Sarah old

(not as old as Abraham, but close), but she had been barren for decades, well past the time of women bearing children. Everything Abraham could see said, "This is never going to happen."

So what does Abraham do? There's an interesting answer that comes to us, and it's highlighted by what we might call a *textual variant*. I'm going to take just a moment and explain this to you. In verse 19 we read, "He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body..." Some manuscripts of the Bible have the word *not* included here. "He did not weaken in faith when he did *not* consider his own body."

You may know that we have about 6,000 manuscripts of the New Testament. Just to give you an idea about how reliable that is, other authors that we take for granted all the time are people like Caesar (250 copies), Plato (200 copies), the history of Thucydides and the Spartan War (100 copies). We have many, many copies of God's Word, and all of these copies agree in 99-point-something of their word and word order.

This happens to be one of the problems. It's one-word difference in some of the manuscripts. Why I'm taking the time to show you this is I want you to see that the problem is no problem at all, because in this instance, whether or not you have the *not*, the meaning is the exact same. Either Abraham didn't think about his body at all and looked to God or he looked at his body and saw it was a problem and looked to God. Either way, it's the same point.

Abraham is not staying on the here and the now. He's not fixing his eyes on himself but fixing his eyes on the Lord. The point is Abraham did not get wrapped up in the so-called reality of the situation. He looked past everything. He looked past everything that was in the way between him and God. He didn't grow weak and doubt, but instead, he grew stronger in faith, Paul tells us in verse 20. He grew stronger in faith because he looked to God's word. As we look to God's word, our faith grows and is strengthened.

This is a model of faith for us, because if you think about it, there are people around you all the time who will seek to drag you down, to make you take your eyes off of the promise of God, to tell you what reality is and what you *should* believe and why you *shouldn't* trust the promise and why you *shouldn't* have hope and why you *should* be discouraged and depressed.

There are temptations even in our own circumstances that make us think they're so bad we have no hope at all. We think to ourselves, "There is no way my marriage can be saved. It's hopeless." "There's no way my children will ever walk with the Lord. I see the situation. I see the handwriting on the wall. It's hopeless." Some of you younger people might say, "There's no way I could ever have the kind of relationship with Jesus that my parents and grandparents had. It's hopeless."

What Paul tells us is that faith stands with the word of God and it trusts him, even when the evidence appears to the contrary. Abraham did not focus on himself and his own infirmities and his own problems. He looked, instead, to the Lord, because a person of faith is not someone who never doubts; a person of faith is someone

who *overcomes* doubts. Faith doesn't avoid doubts; faith overcomes them. That's what we see in the example of Abraham.

If you don't think Abraham shook his head some evening and said, "I wonder how this is all going to work out," you don't know much about people, but at the same time he said, "I'm not going to dwell on that. God said it, I believe it, and I'm going to trust him." Now, all of this talk about Abraham's faith could actually be a bit discouraging. We think Abraham had faith where we have doubt. We think, "Abraham's faith is a big faith, a firm faith, but mine isn't. I'm not Abraham. I don't have the kind of faith Abraham had."

This would be discouraging to you if it were true, if it were true that faith depended on the one believing, but Paul tells us that it doesn't. Paul makes clear that the strength of Abraham's faith was not in *him* but, rather, in God as he looked to him. Abraham's faith was a faith in a worthy God, in a God who was worthy of being trusted.

### **Faith Instead of Doubt**

How could Abraham's faith be so strong? Paul tells us it didn't grow weak through circumstances (verse 19), and he didn't waver through unbelief (verse 20). This word *waver* is sometimes translated *stagger* or *to hesitate* or *to be of two minds* or *to go back and forth*. Abraham did not go back and forth because circumstances were hard against him. Instead, he grew strong. How did he grow strong? Paul tells us he grew strong as he gave glory to God.

I want you to see here there is a difference in prepositions. Abraham did not just look *to* God; Abraham looked *at* God. Abraham's gaze was focused on God. He was contemplating the one who had made the promise. He was considering who God is. That's what had the great effect on Abraham. He would have started, I think, by looking at God's attributes. Who *is* God?

He might have first thought about the *eternality* of God, that God is without beginning and without end, that he is not created, that he's not dependent upon anyone, that God is completely sufficient in himself. He might also think about the *majesty* of God, that God has created all things and that he upholds all things by the word of his power. He might have thought about the *holiness* of God, God's perfection and his purity.

In short, Abraham believed in the hope that God had put before him because it was God who put it before him. As we give glory to God, we grow strong in faith. That's the nature of faith. It looks outside of itself to another. Faith is trusting another, not myself. Notice what Paul says. It was *as* Abraham gave glory to God that he grew strong in the faith or, we might say, instead of *grew strong* he was *enabled* in his faith.

His faith became more capable as he looked to God. It was something that happened *as* he looked to God. Do you want stronger faith? Do you want to fight the doubt in your life? Then the answer is not to convince

yourself that you are able; the answer is to look to God. He is the one who is worthy of your trust. There is no one else like him.

Abraham also fought doubt by contemplating God's *ability*. He had not only a faith in a *worthy* God; he had faith in an *able* God. There is an element of faith that Abraham had that goes beyond being strengthened. We're told in verse 21 that he was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. The word itself means to be completely confident, certain of something. It is also often translated *fully assured* or *fully persuaded*. Abraham was completely persuaded and fully assured that God was able.

Now, how would he be able to do this? I think once again he has to look at God. He might think about the attribute of God as being *omnipresent*, that God is everywhere, that there's nowhere you can go that is beyond the reach of God. You don't need to worry this morning whether you've been left on your own because God is busy in China or in Uganda. You don't have to be concerned because you move from one place to another that maybe God has forgotten where you are, that he's busy with so many other millions and millions of people. No. The nature of God is that he is omnipresent. He is always with you.

It's not just that. God is also *omniscient*. God knows all things. Not just more things than you, not just more things than us put together, but he knows *all* things. That means God knows all your needs. He knows what's best for you. He knows you better than *you* know you. How's *that* for confidence building? Then, of course, God is *omnipotent*. There is nothing God can't do. There is nothing beyond his power. God is not slack. He's not shortsighted. He's not unable.

Knowing this, what was Abraham fully convinced of? He was convinced that God not only had promised to him but that he was able to keep his promise. He looked to the Lord and saw that the Lord does not make promises lightly or thoughtlessly. We know what *that's* like, don't we? This happens all the time in families. I do it all the time. I make promises that I'm not certain, I haven't thought through if I can fulfill them, and then you have this kind of discussion with children.

The penultimate argument a child uses in this case is something like this: "But you promised!" Your response has to be something like, "Well, I know I promised I would take you out driving so you could learn how to drive, but I didn't look at my calendar. I didn't realize I had an appointment. I can't keep that promise."

"But you promised you'd help me with my homework."

"Yes. That was before you told me it was math homework. That's beyond my ability. I may have promised it, but I can't deliver. I'm not able."

"But you promised!"

"I didn't think through that enough. I didn't ask enough questions. I didn't figure this out."

This is what we do all the time. God never does this. He knows all things. He is able to *do* all things. He always delivers on what he promises. He never promises without the intention of delivering, and he is always able to deliver. Weak faith looks at ourselves and *our* ability to deliver. Strong faith looks to God and to *his* ability to deliver.

Let me give you an example from the pages of Scripture. Do you remember the scene in Matthew 14 where Jesus is walking on the water and he calls Peter out to come to him? Peter looks at Jesus, the text tells us, and he goes out onto the water. He's walking on water as well, going with his eyes fixed on Jesus. But then what does Peter do? He begins to look down. I imagine he looks at his feet and realizes he's not the most stable of foot.

The sea begins to lap at his legs. He sees that, and he thinks, being an experienced fisherman, of all of the incidents at sea that he has seen or heard about, all of the people who have been hurt and died at sea. That begins to crowd into his mind. He begins to understand, "I can't do this." The truth is Peter can't. When he's focused upon himself, he begins to sink. He takes his eyes off Jesus.

This is exactly how the Bible describes faith in Hebrews, chapter 11. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for." When it says that, it doesn't mean some sort of vague and uncertain thought, but it means an actual substitute reality. One way to define the word *assurance* is to speak about it like a guarantee of ownership, a title to a car, a deed to a house. It's something certain that lets us know that what we possess is ours and it is real. That's what faith is.

Faith is the assurance of the promise God has given to us. It also calls faith the "conviction of things not seen." This is the proof or the test that has been passed. The word *conviction* here is used to describe a cross-examination that is done to prove a case. Faith proves that the promises of God are true and trustworthy. Faith is not believism, where we persuade ourselves that we're going to believe something. Rather, faith is from the heart and takes in the whole person. We trust the Lord.

It is wrong to think about faith apart from its object. Paul makes that clear here. Abraham looked to God, and because of *that* his faith was strong, and because of *that* it was counted to him as righteousness. It was the object of Abraham's faith. The Lord is calling *you*, today, to faith. Not some sort of vague notion that everything will be all right. No, he's calling you to a very specific trust in him and in his promises, that he is the true promiser and is able to keep his promise. *That* is your hope.

### **Abraham's Faith and Ours**

Finally, Paul wants us to know that Abraham and his faith are applicable to us. This is not just some nice story. It's not so we can look upon Abraham and be glad for the victory he won. We can't ignore this and say,

"Well, Abraham's circumstances don't apply to me." No. Abraham's faith and our faith are to be one and the same. There is only one way to trust in God.

Paul couldn't make this any clearer than he does in verse 23. "But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also." The culmination of Abraham's story in chapter 4 is that his faith was counted to him as righteousness. That's the point Paul has been building up to from the beginning of the letter. All sinners need a righteousness before God, and Abraham's life shows us that it is by faith that that righteousness comes.

Now Paul is applying a principle he'll use later in this letter in chapter 15, as well as in 1 Corinthians 10 and other places, that these things that are written were written for our instruction. If we are to have righteousness, it can only come by faith, and we must believe the Word of God, and we must not be pulled aside by the ways of the world. We must not be drawn astray by circumstances. We must see that God is able to keep his promises to us and that he is worthy to be trusted. Faith causes Abraham and it must cause *us* to act.

There are two great truths of the Bible that we cannot compromise and we cannot forget. The first is that we are saved by faith alone. Paul makes that point in Romans. He makes that point clearly in Ephesians, chapter 2. It is found all throughout the pages of Scripture. Saved by faith alone. Secondly, the faith that saves is never alone, because true faith causes us to act in accordance with real reality. We begin to see the world as it is, so we act in accordance with it.

We see this in the example of Abraham. He was told, you may recall, to change his name from *Abram* to *Abraham*. *Abram* means father of many. You could just imagine what it would be like to go decade after decade and be childless and your name is "Father of many." You could imagine the good-natured ribbing he would get from everyone around him. Now God comes to Abraham and says, "You need to change your name."

"Okay, God. What should it be? Faithful one? What should it be? Follower of the Lord? What should it be?"

"No. Father of a multitude of nations."

"What?"

You could just imagine how people would respond to *that*. They would have thought he was crazy. They would have mocked him. But what did Abraham do? He changed his name, even though everything around him said that was crazy. He changed his name because he acted in accordance with the promise of God.

Something as simple as a name, but if you think about it, that's something Abraham would have had to live with every single day. Every time he walked up to someone and they said, "Hi, what's your name?" he'd have

to say, "I'm Abraham," and they'd say, "Oh, do you have 10, 15, 20 kids? How many?" "One." Can you imagine that? But Abraham trusted God, and he lived his life in light of that.

Do *you* trust God? Are you living *your* life in light of the promises of God? Are you living not for this world but for another city, a heavenly city, whose builder and maker is God? That is what faith is calling you to today: to live in accordance with faith. Now, this living by faith is not just about what I do here and now. Yes, that is important, but it is about more than that. It is about my relationship with God.

We see here at the conclusion of our passage the mature expression of faith. Everything Abraham believed was because of his faith in the Lord, and his faith was in the Lord because of who God is. He trusted God because God is trustworthy and because Abraham desired to be *with* God, but the thing is the actual, most mature expression of faith is not Abraham's. Abraham believed God's promise that he would be a blessing to the nations, but he didn't know exactly how that would come about. He didn't understand how that would be fulfilled.

Hebrews 11 here is helpful to us. Verse 13: "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." What Paul tells us is that *we* have the most mature expression of faith, not because of who *we* are but because we have received the most mature revelation of the promise.

We believe in God, the one who raised Jesus from the dead, Paul says. We believe in God who delivered up Jesus Christ for our trespasses. Jesus died for our sins, and we believe that Jesus was raised for our justification. That is, he was without sin, he defeated sin, and because of that, sin could not hold him. That kind of faith is the faith that saves.

In conclusion, Abraham is not just a nice story. He's not even a hero we should copy. He wished he had seen the day that we see. He wished he had seen the full nature of the expression of the promise of God fulfilled in Jesus. You *have*. Do you believe the Lord? Do you believe that Jesus has done all that is necessary for your sins to be forgiven and for you to stand righteous before God?

Trust in the Lord, and look to him, and your faith will be strong and your hope secure in spite of all of your trials, all of your troubles, all of your circumstances. God does not take away all of your problems in a moment, but he *does* tell you that there is hope for you. It is the hope that is found in Jesus.