

“ABRAHAM’S FAITH AND OURS”

I. Introduction

- A. Several years ago, a movie was made that told the extraordinary story of a family of four who survived the deadly tsunami that struck Indonesia in 2004.
 - 1. The movie was titled “The Impossible” because the prospect of a safe reunion of the entire family was highly unlikely after they were separated when the tsunami hit.
 - 2. The notion of ‘the impossible’ figures prominently in the verses that we have just read from Romans 4.
 - 3. As Paul continues to explain the doctrine of justification by faith alone, he stresses the fact that faith makes a way for us to lay hold of something that is impossible for us to secure by our works.
 - 4. Faith trusts in God to do that which is impossible from a human point of view.
- B. As we study this passage today, we will see that it teaches us three things about justifying faith.
 - 1. We are heirs through the righteousness of faith.
 - 2. Faith persists in the face of evidence to the contrary.
 - 3. And faith has as its object the risen Lord.

II. Heirs through the Righteousness of Faith (13-16)

- A. The passage begins by saying that the promise to Abraham that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

1. In this context, Paul is using the terms 'law' and 'faith' to describe two diametrically opposed ways of relating to God.
 2. While it is true that the law is used by Christ to govern and guide his redeemed people, the law can never be the basis of our salvation.
 3. The phrase translated "the adherents of the law" in verse 14 literally reads 'those of the law' in the Greek.
 4. It describes those who seek God's approval by the duties that they perform.
 5. Being "of the law" is set in contrast to "the righteousness of faith", which describes the righteousness that God imputes or credits to those who have faith in Jesus Christ.
 6. The only thing those who are "of the law" can expect to receive from God is the wages that they have earned by their sin-stained works.
 7. But those who are of faith receive the freely given gift of being counted righteous by God.
- B. Paul keeps emphasizing this point because the Jewish rabbis taught that the promises were made to Abraham on the basis of his fulfillment of the law.
1. They even saw Abraham's faith as a meritorious work on his part.
 2. But if that were really the case, God's promise to Abraham would have been voided by the fact that he did not perfectly fulfill the law.
 3. Abraham's faith would have counted for nothing if it was a work that merited God's favor.
 4. Anyone who has read the book of Genesis knows that both Abraham's faith and his obedience were far from perfect.

5. The promise cannot be based on merit because the law works wrath.
 6. The fact that no one keeps the righteous requirements of the law means everyone is under the curse of the law.
 7. If God's promise of salvation is in any degree dependent upon the merit of man, it is unstable and unattainable.
 8. In the words of Charles Hodge, "Unless we are saved by grace, we cannot be saved at all."
 9. And as Paul explained earlier in Romans 4, grace describes something that is not earned but is freely given.
- C. Paul describes the content of God's promise to Abraham as the promise that he would be "heir of the world."
1. This tells us that God's promise to give Abraham and his offspring the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession was typological.
 2. It pointed to something far greater than a narrow strip of land on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea.
 3. It was the promise of having an inheritance in the new heavens and the new earth, the world that God is creating anew in Jesus Christ.
 4. This is why the author of Hebrews says that Abraham was looking for a heavenly country, a city that has foundations, a city whose designer and builder is God.
 5. Every Christian has a share in that glorious inheritance.
 6. As Peter writes in the opening chapter of his first epistle, God "has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be

revealed in the last time." (1 Pet. 1:3-4)

7. Those verses are worthy of hours of meditation.
8. Amid all of the disappointment, heartache, pain, and sadness of this life, the Christian knows that something glorious lays ahead of him.
9. Though nothing in this world is permanent, the Christian can rejoice in the fact that in Christ he possesses something that will last forever.

III. Faith in the Face of Evidence to the Contrary (17-21)

- A. Paul continues his description of justifying faith by referring to the God in whom Abraham believed as the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."
 1. God is able to do things that are utterly impossible for us.
 2. He can give life to the dead.
 3. He can create things out of nothing.
 4. In putting his trust in God, Abraham believed that God would do what he had promised, even though that promise was impossible from a human standpoint.
 5. This is what Paul means when he says "In hope he believed against hope, that he should be the father of many nations, as he had been told, 'So shall your offspring be.'"
 6. God told Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.
 7. At the time when that promise was given, Abraham and his wife had no children at all, and Sarah was far beyond childbearing years.

8. From a human point of view, the prospect of Abraham becoming the father of a great multitude was impossible.
 9. But Abraham believed what seemed beyond hope because he trusted God to keep his word.
- B. This does not mean that faith is a leap in the dark.
1. Faith believes in spite of evidence to the contrary because it is convinced that God is trustworthy.
 2. God can give life to the dead.
 3. God can create the world out of nothing.
 4. When this God tells you that he is going to do something, you can count on him to do it.
 5. As it says in the book of Numbers, "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Num. 23:19)
 6. Consider Martin Luther's thoughts on 'believing against hope':
"Man often breaks his promise (because he does not have the power to fulfill it, or because he is unstable), even if such breach of promise goes counter to his will. Man often cannot do what he has promised, because something intervenes which prevents it, since it lies beyond his power. But that cannot happen to God... He who believes God, recognizes Him as true and faithful, and himself as a liar; for he mistrusts his own thinking as false, and trusts the Word of God as being true, though it absolutely contradicts his own reasoning."
 7. Faith believes that God will keep his promises, even when all the evidence suggests otherwise.
- C. Paul also says that Abraham did not waver or weaken in his faith.

1. This does not mean that Abraham never doubted God or that he never took matters into his own hands instead of trusting God.
 2. We know for a fact that that was not the case.
 3. There were the times when Abraham jeopardized his marriage by lying about the fact that Sarah was his wife.
 4. There was the time when he took Sarah's advice and sired a child through her servant Hagar.
 5. Yet in spite of these and other failures, Abraham's faith grew stronger.
 6. He persevered in faith to the end of his days.
 7. Paul could say that Abraham's faith never wavered because it was not something that Abraham himself generated but something that he was given.
 8. This assures us that the faith that God works in our hearts is a faith that will persevere to the end of our days.
- D. Paul says that Abraham gave glory to God by trusting him to do what he had promised.
1. We honor God when we trust him to keep his promise in the face of all sorts of evidence that speaks against that promise.
 2. We are confronted by such evidence all throughout our lives.
 3. This is why Calvin points out that "the condition of us all is the same with that of Abraham. All things around us are in opposition to the promises of God: He promises immortality; we are surrounded with mortality and corruption: He declares that he counts us just; we are covered with sins: He testifies that he is [favorable] and kind to us; outward judgments threaten his wrath. What then is to be done? We must with closed eyes pass by ourselves and all things connected with us, that nothing may

hinder or prevent us from believing that God is true.”

4. Justifying faith keeps on believing that God will be true to his word, regardless of how things appear at any given moment.

IV. Faith in the Risen Lord (22-25)

- A. This passage makes it clear that there is only one way of salvation in the Bible.
 1. Abraham and the other Old Testament saints were saved by faith in God’s promise, a promise that looked forward to the coming of Christ.
 2. We are saved by looking back to what Christ has already accomplished.
 3. As we have noted in previous sermons on Romans, the phrase “his faith was counted to him as righteousness” does not mean that faith itself is meritorious.
 4. Faith is only the instrument of justification, not its ground.
 5. Faith justifies because it appropriates God’s promise to accept as righteous all who rely upon the mediation and merit of Jesus Christ.
- B. In explaining Christ’s redemptive work, Paul says that he “was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”
 1. This tells us that justifying faith rests upon Jesus’ atoning death on the cross and upon his bodily resurrection from the dead.
 2. It is a denial of the gospel to deny the propitiatory nature of Christ’s death or to deny the bodily nature of his resurrection from the dead.
 3. Both the cross and the empty tomb are essential to our salvation.

- C. The cross is essential because Jesus died on the cross for our trespasses.
 - 1. He died in our place.
 - 2. He died as the substitute for all who look to him in faith.
 - 3. He made propitiation for our sins, satisfying the demands of God's holy justice and removing the divine wrath.

- D. Yet Christ's redemptive work did not end with his death.
 - 1. His death for our sake was followed by his resurrection, which was also for our sake.
 - 2. His resurrection was necessary because it proved that his atoning death was accepted by God.
 - 3. The resurrection assures us that God is fully satisfied by Christ's death and that in Christ we are fully accepted by God.

- E. The resurrection was also necessary to secure the continued application of the benefits of Christ's death to our lives.
 - 1. We need a mediator who is able to make continual intercession for us before God.
 - 2. A dead mediator cannot do that.
 - 3. As the writer of Hebrews explains, "The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but [Jesus] holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." (Heb. 7:23-25)
 - 4. A dead savior would be no good to us, because death would have triumphed over him and held him captive.

5. But in Christ we have a living Savior.
6. We have a Savior whom God has fully vindicated and accepted.
7. We have a righteous Savior who continually presents his righteousness before God on our behalf.

V. Conclusion

- A. If we know ourselves at all, we know that righteousness is something that we do not possess in ourselves.
- B. If we know God at all, we know that righteousness is the thing that we need more than anything else.
- C. And if our faith rests upon our crucified and risen Savior, we can have unwavering confidence that our sins are covered and we really are counted righteous in him.