

“Hope Against Hope”
Romans 4:13-25
December 4, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

Paul has been making the case that our salvation is by faith and not by works. We have summarized that by saying that the main verb of Christianity is receive, not achieve. When we think of the great faith chapters of the Bible, most people think first of Hebrews 11. We should add Romans 4 to that list, since faith is mentioned sixteen times in these verses.

The first few verses of the passage expand on the point made earlier, that justification is by faith and not works. God gave righteousness to Abraham not by obedience to the Mosaic law, but by faith. The Mosaic law resulted in the judgment of exile for the people of Israel. So instead of law, God’s promises come to us by simple faith. It’s been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. In today’s passage, Paul gives us a picture of faith, this receiving from God, from the life of Abraham. We could summarize Abraham’s faith with the words of verse 18: “In hope he believed against hope.” In other words, Abraham had hope in a hopeless situation.

This theme of hope is a prominent one in Romans because it is a central feature of the gospel. You may have noticed that I have been using the same benediction during our study of Romans, a benediction that comes from this letter. **“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope”** (Romans 15:13). I can tell you that in my pastoral counseling, one of my primary goals is to bring people to a place of hope. If hope is at a low ebb, positive change is almost impossible. The despair of hopelessness is paralyzing and deadening. In extreme forms, it is literally deadening. Hope is as essential to life as water and oxygen. Let’s consider Abraham’s faith by viewing it through this lens of hope.

I. Hope that Burns Low

This phrase of hoping against hope suggests that there are two kinds of hope. There is hope that is based on our circumstances, and there is hope based on God’s promises. Abraham placed his hope on God’s promises and not on his circumstances. As it relates to having a child through Sarah, things didn’t look hopeful. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of a multitude. This promise came to Abraham for the first time when he was 75 years old and his wife, Sarah, was 65. They were already old and had been barren for the entirety of their marriage. If I were Abraham, I think I would have expected that Sarah would become pregnant shortly after God first made

this promise. It would be hard for a 65-year-old woman to endure the rigors of pregnancy and childbirth. But God could strengthen her for the task that he had called her to.

As it turned out, Sarah did not get pregnant immediately after that promise. One year passed, and then two, and still no pregnancy. The years turned into decades, and now over two decades had passed, and there was still no pregnancy. In year 24 after God's original promise to Abraham, God visited Abraham again with the same promise. He changed his name from Abram, which means "exalted father," to Abraham, "father of a multitude." For the first time, God gave Abraham a timetable, telling him that Sarah would become pregnant and give birth a year from that time.

Our text tells us of Abraham's response to what God had said. **"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"** (4:19). Notice that the word "considered" appears twice. Abraham considered his own 99-year old body and Sarah's dead womb. The word means "to observe carefully, to see and assess." Abraham was a realist, and he didn't deny the challenges he was up against with respect to the fulfillment of this promise. He didn't start asking around if anyone had ever heard of a 90-year old woman giving birth. In cold, sober reality, he acknowledged that a pregnancy at this point of his marital life was an impossibility, humanly speaking.

Hope burns low for us when there are only human resources to be brought to life's challenges. In hope, Abraham believed against hope. If the first hope is left out, the hope in God's promise, and we are left with only the second hope, the one determined by human resources, then hopelessness and despair will inevitably come. If all we have is the hope that comes from human resources and our own circumstances, we will attempt to avoid despair by such things as denial. "It's not that bad," we may tell ourselves. But there are times when it is that bad, and Abraham was in such a time as that. It seems that God deliberately delayed the fulfillment of this promise until the situation was hopeless from a human perspective. If Sarah had gotten pregnant and given birth at 65, we might remark, "how unusual!" But at 90 we would say, "That's humanly impossible."

We share Abraham's condition, often finding ourselves in situations that are hopeless from a human perspective. Though God has promised us immortality, bodies fail us and the mortality rate, the last I checked, was 100%. God promises to sanctify us, but sin still has such great power in our lives. In hope, we believe against hope. There is more going on than is visibly apparent. Life may be one big mess, but we don't lose hope when we remember God's promise. That's what we are going to consider next.

II. Hope that Burns Bright

The kind of hope that burns bright, even in circumstances where the data is against us, is hope that is grounded in God's promises. Paul says it like this. **"No distrust 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"** (4:20-21). Verse 17 states what Abraham believed about God, that he **"gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."** To Abraham, the promises of God were more certain than even his own experience. He was like the blind skier I remember reading about several years ago, who could only do so with the aid of a guide. As he hurtled down the mountain, his guide would be right beside him telling him every move to make. Our situation is not unlike that. There is so much we can't see about life, but God sees all. We can't see the bigger picture of the present, absolutely nothing of the future, and only a small bit of the past. But God sees all of this. So when God says, "Do not fear, for I will never leave you or forsake you," our hearts are filled with hope as we believe that.

In his novel, *Jayber Crow*, Wendell Berry provides us with a great illustration of this kind of hope-filled faith. Jayber was a small-town barber. After years of plying his trade in a barber shop in town, a government inspector shut him down for non-compliance of some code. Jayber had a cabin in the woods, and his customers decided to follow him there. He could no longer charge for his services, but they made "donations" to the upkeep of his cabin. Jayber then made the point that "their coming...is an act of faith because in this house on the river I have no mirrors on the walls. Here, I am the sole judge of my work... They have to be willing beforehand to be satisfied with what I can do with scissors." This illustrates a life of trust in God. We put ourselves in his hands without knowing what he's doing, trusting that he knows what he's doing. This also illustrates a lack of trust. We sometimes want mirrors. We want God to explain himself and tell us what he's doing.

When Abraham trusted God like this, the text says that he "gave glory to God." When we trust God's word, we trust God's person and character. Doing so is a way to honor God. Unbelief dishonors God by treating him as undependable, perhaps even a liar. There is a deep connection between trusting God and worshiping God.

Hope comes as we learn to believe in and trust the promises of God. Our grasp of this is deepened as we apply it, so let's do that now. We are in a similar situation as Abraham. He was in a hard place, a childless man with a name that meant "exalted father." And he stayed in that hard place for decades, while being confident of the fulfillment of God's promise to him. He was a man of faith, and as children of Abraham we are all called to be people of faith. That's who we are. Some of you look at the direction our nation is headed

in morally, and fear has become your dominant emotion. Don't forget the promises of God. Jesus said that he will build his Church, and not even the gates of hell shall prevail against it. Not even the most ferocious assault from the powers of darkness will be able to thwart God's purpose to build his church.

Others see troubling signs when they look at the church, and such signs are not difficult to see. Church planting in our denomination, the PCA, has been halved in the last three years. Prior to that, we started on average 50 churches per year. That number has now dropped to 25. Across our nation, more churches are being closed than are being started. Lifeway Research reported last year that in 2019, 4500 Protestant churches closed while only 3000 new ones were started. Those numbers have certainly not improved during the COVID years. Do we respond to these gloomy statistics in despair or in trust? What does it look like to be people of faith in a time such as ours? It looks like being one of Jayber Crow's customers, getting a haircut without mirrors and trusting the hand that wields the scissors. God will build his church, but he hasn't shared with us the details of how he is going about that. We simply trust him and remain faithful in our service to him in the church.

Let's apply this at a more personal level. Imagine someone in a difficult marriage, to the point that they are tempted to pull the plug on the marriage and get a divorce. What does it look like to trust the promises of God in this situation, to be a person of faith like Abraham? Unless there are biblical grounds for divorce, it looks like persevering in the marriage and trusting God to do his good work in the meantime. God doesn't promise to restore every broken marriage, but he does promise to heal every broken person who comes to him. And he even uses things like broken marriages that may stay broken to bring about the sanctifying work he promises to do. Many times, too, he does restore the broken marriage. Dan Doriani reports one marriage expert who studied intensely unhappy couples who were ready to divorce. He asked them, "Are you willing to give this one more try?" If they were, not only did 75 percent stay together, most of them said, "We are happier than ever" two years later. Being a man or woman of faith often just looks like persevering.

Will you apply this personally? What is a situation in your life where you are battling despair and hopelessness? Whether it's financial, relational, health-related, job-related, or just general frustration, remember the promise of God and be filled with hope in that. By God's grace, your challenge is a wonderful opportunity to grow in faith as a child of God. Life is not about not being messy, but about trusting God in the messes we have.

III. Hope that Burns Forever

The passage concludes by stating again the truth of justification by faith. Paul applies Abraham's experience of believing God, with the result that his faith **"was counted to him as righteousness."** Paul then says that the same will happen to us as we believe as Abraham believed. What we believe is that Jesus **"was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification"** (v. 25). Trusting God will stand the test of time. It's good now, and it will be good forever.

I notice that Paul begins this section by mentioning **"the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world."** This is an implication of God's promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations. We too are covered by this promise as we believe. The world is promised to us, the redeemed world that Jesus is working to restore. This promise comes not by works but by faith.

When it comes down to it, hope depends on which story you are living in. Paul outlines two possibilities here: the story of faith and the story of works. Or as we have worded it in the past, the stories of the verbs receive and achieve. Are you living out of the story of the verb "achieve?" If so, I can tell you something about yourself. You battle inner messages such as "I am not enough; There is something wrong with me; I am bad; I don't matter." Abraham teaches us to live out of a different story, a story dominated by the verb "receive." This is the verb that brings hope, because the important thing in this story is not what we do, but what God has done for us in Christ.

CONCLUSION:

In closing, let's review what this chapter says God has done for us in Christ. This is the promise we receive, the promise that brings hope against hope. We can summarize it with the theological term "double imputation." Though we don't read the word "imputation" in this chapter, we do read the word "count," which is a synonym. It's an accounting word that means to log something on to a ledger sheet as a credit or a debit. Two things are said to be imputed here. First, our sins are imputed to Christ. **"Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin"** (v. 8). Second, Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. The righteousness of Christ will be counted to those of us who believe (v. 24). Because of this double imputation, the dominant inner message of your life is no longer, "I am not enough" but "Since Jesus is enough, I have every reason for hope."