

11. Faith against all odds

June 22, 2008

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

It is true that faith is trusting that God will bring about what we don't yet see. But faith is not putting on rose-colored glasses. It's not a "great attitude" that denies the pain and struggle of waiting. Faith often has to wrestle and cling and hold on for dear life – it has to persist and endure.

Last Sunday we learned that it is not the religious rituals that make a person righteous with God. Rather it is the faith in God Himself. That is why God imputed to Abraham for righteousness.

I am sure that you remember the meaning of his first name "Abram". It means "Exalted Father." Sound good, huh? There is only one problem with that name. Abram had no child. When he was seventy-five, God told him to leave his homeland to go to a new land where the Lord would make him a great nation with his descendants.

Ten years later, still no child and no nation. But God reminded him that he would have a nation. Abram trusted the Lord's promise but he didn't know how God was going to pull this off. So he got a son – Ishmael through Sarah's handmaid Hagar.

Thirteen years later, this time the Lord appeared to Abram again and changed his name to "Abraham" – "Father of multitude." By now, Abraham was thinking, "God, forget the multitude. I would settle with one." Finally twenty-five years after God's first promise, he had a son whose name was Isaac which means "Laughter".

Faith is not a pleasure ride. It demands patience and perseverance. Most of all, faith requires vulnerability – trusting a God we can't control, relying on His timeline, not ours. But believing that, no matter what, our God is good and He keeps His promise.

A. THE law THAT COULD NOT BRING FORTH FAITH

Romans 4:13-15 For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, 15 because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.

God made His promise to Abraham four hundred years before He gave His holy law to Moses. In other words, the promised blessings did not depend on Abraham's performance, but God and His generosity. God's promise was unconditional, one-sided – not a contract imposing conditions that Abraham had to keep in order to receive due blessings from God.

The law of God was not given to men to save them, but to show men that they need to be saved. Let me put it this way:

If we don't have a crime law, nobody would think it is bad to murder one another. It is just something people would do when they want to take away something from someone else or don't like that person.

That is what the animal kingdom is like. Do you see a gorilla cop arresting a lion and reading his Miranda Rights because he just murdered a deer? "OK, spread your paws, Leo. You are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law..." They don't do that, because they don't have a law that shows them murdering is wrong and they cannot comprehend it is wrong. But humans are different.

Adam and Eve became disobedient by taking fruits from the tree of good and evil, their eyes were opened. And from that moment, they became accountable to the law God put in their hearts.

When Moses received the Ten Commandments from the Lord at the Mount Sinai, the Lord simply put what men already knew in writing, it was not anything brand new.

B. JUSTIFICATION ACCORDING TO GRACE THROUGH FAITH

Romans 4:16-17a Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all 17 (as it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations") in the presence of Him whom he believed

I'd like to point out a very important aspect here about faith and grace.

Faith is related to grace in the same way works is related to law. Grace and law are the principles, and faith and works are the means by which we pursue those principles for our relationship with God. To speak theologically, we are not saved by faith. We are saved by God's grace, and grace is appropriated by faith.

Salvation comes from faith in Christ Jesus, nothing else. We can only receive salvation by the principle of grace through faith. Grace cannot be obtained through works, whether they be past, present, or promised because by definition grace is given without regard to anything in the one who receives it.

If salvation strictly depends on work and performance, there is no way anyone can know and assured that he or she has secured their salvation. That is why the Jehovah's Witness people are so eager to evangelize to get their salvation. They really don't know if they are going to make it to their so-called 'paradise'.

"Those who are of the law" are Jews, and "those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all" are the Gentiles like us who put our hope in God. We are also considered as the descendants of Abraham spiritually.

So some of you are thinking, "OK, preacher, what does this have to do with me?" If you depend on your religious experience – baptism, communion, praying to some dead people, helping poor or whatever, your wish to be in heaven will not come true. There is the only one way to get to heaven. It is by receiving Jesus Christ into your heart as the Savior and Lord.

C. THE LIFE GIVING POWER OF GOD

Romans 4:17b-18 who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; 18 who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be."

Can you come up with one reason why God waited 25 years until Abraham became 100 and Sarah 90 years old? I believe that God delayed in sending Abraham and

Sarah a son was to permit all their natural capability to decline and then disappear. It was unthinkable that a man 99 years old could beget a child in the womb of his wife who was 89 years old. From a reproductive point of view, both of them were dead.

But Abraham did not walk by sight. He walked by faith. God gave life to the deadness of Sarah's womb and call into being a child and a nation which did not exist.

What God promises, He performs. All we need do is believe His promises.

- Are you financially strapped? God promises that He will meet all your needs, not caviar and lobster tail.
- Are you fearful and agitated? God promises that He will give you peace that passes all men's understanding that will guard your heart, if you just believe.
- Are you ridden with guilt? God forgives you of your sins. If you come to Him and confess your sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive your sins and cleans you from all your unrighteousness. And He will even forget your sins and don't remember them anymore.

D. ABRAHAM'S HOPE

Romans 4:19-22 And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. 20 He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, 21 and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. 22 And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness."

I am sure that when the friends of Abraham found out that Abraham and Sarah still believed that they are expecting a son from God, they laughed their heads off. It would be impossible for a 99 years old husband and a 89 years old wife. Against all odds, they kept their faith in God who created heaven and earth, not on the circumstances.

If you believe that God actually created heaven and earth with His words, then what you and I are requesting should not be impossible to Him. You don't need to explain to God how difficult your situation is. But remind yourself how great our God is and believe it. That is what Abraham and Sarah did.

Matthew 19:24 But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

That kind of faith, the faith that endures over the long haul, gives glory to God. It trusts in God's truthfulness, and it hopes in His goodness. It is not blind faith, period. The real blind faith is believing that there is no God; the real blind faith is believing the evolution theory; the real blind faith is believing what Oprah Winfrey says in her talk shows and magazines; the real blind faith is believing that you are a god. There is one true God and you are not Him.

E. ABRAHAM'S FAITH AND US

Romans 4:23-25 Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, 24 but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25 who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.

What apostle Paul taught us through the history of Abraham is not just a page from a history book. It is a God's story – His story that is still going on in your life and my life as we live by faith in Him.

Like Abraham, when we believe in the One who gives life to the dead – as God raised Jesus from the dead and as He raises us from spiritual deadness – and the One who calls into being that which did not exist – a holy kingdom made of justified sinners like us – then we have put our faith in the right place. Not in works, not in ceremonies and rituals, not in rule keeping. But in the all-powerful and always faithful God, through His Son, Jesus Christ, who has redeemed us with His own blood and raises us to new life by His resurrection.

The resurrection of Christ is the proof that God accepted His Son's sacrifice, and that now sinners can be justified without God violating His own law or contradicting His own nature.

F. APPLICATIONS

1) Faith isn't something to take pride in like a human work or merit. Rather, it produces humility and gratitude.

2) Having faith is not about how much faith we can muster but about how much we can count on the Lord.