

Romans 4:13-25 God's Promise through Faith

¹³For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

¹⁶For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as 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. ¹⁸Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." ¹⁹He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²²Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." ²³Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Grace, Faith, the Chicken and the Egg

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Text: Romans 4:13-25

In whom do you put your trust? I once belonged to a religious fraternity. As a part of its initiation rite, early, before you could really begin, initiates were asked that question: In whom do you put your trust? At the time, the initiate is dressed in a linen robe and is kneeling blindfolded. Someone behind him whispers: In whom do you put your trust. The correct answer, which was almost always given correctly was: I put my trust in God.

But one evening a man, let's call him Jack was being initiated. Jack, in whom do you put your trust? Kneeling in the dark, unsure of who surrounded him or what would befall him, Jack was a observably uneasy and cautious. He turned his head from side to side, as if he might catch the scent of his interlocutors, or maybe be lucky enough to see around the blindfold. But, alas, there was no intelligence to be had. Finally, Jack mumbled, "Can you repeat the question?" "Yes." a little louder this time, as if hearing were the problem, "Jack, in whom do you put your trust?" Finally, Jack hesitated one last time and said, "I put my trust in my mother-in-law." Amidst the muffled laughter, the questioner whispered, "Jack, how very wise, but the answer tonight is God."

Jack illustrates a problem about belief. There are some things that are reasonably easy to believe. Everyone who understands the rules of arithmetic believes that two plus two equals four. We say of someone who is illogical that she can add two plus two and get five. It's easy to believe that you are sitting in a pew in church right now in Porter Square on this Sunday morning. It's easy to believe that this winter was a record setting winter for snow and cold. The weather man will give you the numbers. And if those don't convince you, ask Vinny, or have Barbara show you the gas bill. Some things are easy to believe. In a certain family situation it may be easy to know that your mother-in-law calls the shots. It may, in fact, be a less risky belief than the belief in God is.

The best philosophers of the ages have concluded that God cannot be proven. There is no real evidence. There is no air tight argument. Based on the lack of hard evidence or logical necessity, when my eldest son was about thirteen, he came to the conclusion that belief in God was rather foolish. He announced this blasphemy at the supper table one night. His younger sister, not yet plagued either by doubt or teenage rebellion, was incredulous. Glon toyed with her like a fish on a line. Well, Emma, I will be glad to believe in God. Just show him to me. Or if you are a feminist, show her to me."

"Daddy," she cried, "Glon just called me a name." "It's okay Em, a feminist is a good name." "Okay, daddy, but Glon says he doesn't believe in God; that's not a good thing."

Glon now jumped back into the conversation. "What do you mean disbelieving in God isn't a good thing? Don't you think it's a bad thing to believe in things that don't exist? Do you

think it would be a good thing if I believed in UFOs and aliens? Do you think it would be a good thing if I believed I could fly? What if I believed I could walk on water?"

"Of course you shouldn't believe in those things, Glon; they aren't true."

"Well, Emma, I'm waiting for you to show me God."

"Glon, I can't show you God. God is invisible; you know that."

"So, now you want me to believe in invisible things."

Finally Emma gave up the proof and turned to family values. "Glon," she said in her sternest tone, "That's not how you were brought up." Then she smirked, "Glon, I do believe you can walk on water. Let's go out in the middle of Spy pond and give it a try."

I will always treasure this theological debate between my two oldest children. In part I delight in it because it takes me back to those wonderful years. In part I love the innocence they both argued with. And in part I smile at it because even among adults I hear the same themes. On what basis do we believe in God? Over the years I have talked with many adults who struggle with what they believe. And many who wish they had faith. And many who worry that because they have doubt they aren't good people. In the end, your mother-in-law may be a more certain and less troublesome thing.

And I have to say that the Bible doesn't seem to help very much those who are worried about their doubt. This morning's passage from Romans is an example. It looks back to the old patriarch Abraham and lifts him up as the exemplar of a full and unwavering faith.

¹⁸Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what [God] said, "So numerous shall your descendants be."
¹⁹[Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. ²²Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness."

Abraham believed in God. Abraham believed that he and Sarah would have children, even though they were both in their old age. And because he believed, "his faith 'was reckoned as righteousness.'" It seems that Abraham's faith, Abraham's belief was what made him stand out, maybe what made him righteous. It sounds as if Abraham is praised and rewarded for his faith. Lesser men and women, doubters, would be failures and unworthy in God's eyes. That seems to be how the apostle Paul understands Abraham's faith; or is it?

Before we go down that road, let's take a closer look at Paul's theology, for Paul generally believes that it is impossible for human beings to earn their way into God's favor. It would be very unusual if Paul thought that Abraham earned God's praise because Abraham was a good solid believer. In fact, Paul believes that human beings do not have it in them, by themselves, to do things right or to believe. Paul sees human beings to be utterly incapable of doing what they ought to. It is actually impossible, in Paul's reasoning, to think that Abraham was a good man of strong faith and was, therefore, rewarded because he had such a strong faith. Paul is actually saying something else altogether, something 180 degrees in the other direction. Paul points to Abraham's faith as exactly the kind of faith that a human being could not possibly have on his own. Paul wants to say that Abraham's faith is extraordinary precisely because

Abraham could never have developed it on his own. In the end, Paul is saying not very much about Abraham. Paul is pointing to God's grace that allowed Abraham to have this amazing and unswerving faith, even in the face of impossibility, hope against hope, as the text says. Abraham's belief was not something he chose. It was not a sign of his internal strength. It was not a sign of his upstanding and religious character. For Paul, Abraham's faith is remarkable precisely because it is not from Abraham. According to Paul it couldn't have been.

Do you see how our own predispositions cause us, sometimes, to see in the Bible what we think is there. We worry about doubt. We believe that it is we who are responsible to overcome our doubt. And so we think that's what Paul is saying about Abraham's faith. But the truth is, Paul is saying the opposite thing. Paul is saying that Abraham could not have possibly on the strength of his own character or willpower developed such faith.

For those of us who find ourselves struggling with belief, who find ourselves worried about our doubt, who wonder if we are failures in God's eyes, Paul may be how we spell relief to paraphrase the old antacid commercial. One's ability to believe, it turns out, is not the measure of the man or the woman. Had Emma been up on her Paul, she could have told her brother that his attitude was perfectly normal for an ordinary human.

So, if Abraham's faith says little or nothing about Abraham himself, what does it say something about? Abraham's faith says something about the extraordinary impact that an encounter with God can have. The encounter with God convinced Abraham that God was a God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." Abraham encountered God, and Abraham knew, because of something in that encounter, that the extraordinary promises of God were true, that God could bring new life even where old age would make it impossible. For Paul, the encounter with God in the risen Christ works the same way. Something in that encounter is convincing, and the new life promised us in that encounter, rings with truth. The encounter with the risen Christ is an encounter with the living God parallel to Abraham's encounter long ago in the desert.

So, first, the encounter itself with God or Christ is convincing, causes faith. But then, also, the reality, the fulfillment of the becomes evidence, and reinforces that faith. Abraham becomes the patriarch of the people Israel through the birth of Isaac when Abraham and Sarah were way too old, and this is evidence of the broader claim, evidence of a God creates something out of nothing. And here, too, Jesus' resurrection is parallel. For Jesus' breaking of the bonds of death, as Paul says elsewhere, is the first fruits. Jesus' resurrection is evidence of the larger claim, evidence of a God who will raise all of us into a new, a resurrected form of existence.

Now, of course, all of this is preposterous. Abraham and Sarah having a child at a hundred. Jesus being raised from the dead. If we don't reject these stories out of hand, as moderns we often reach for a metaphorical explanation at this point. We want to render the stories a little more tame. We want to say that the story of Abraham and Sarah tells us to be open to surprises. We want to say that Jesus' resurrection is best understood as the possibility human beings have for renewal. And, of course, those things are true. But the stories are saying more than that. Abraham and Sarah were beyond child-bearing. Jesus was really dead. If you don't believe it, as Fred Craddock says, "Ask the soldiers, the Galilean women who followed him to Golgotha, Mary his mother." The stories are more than allegories. They are saying that God makes real possibility out of real impossibility. The stories are saying that true faith will allow us

to look the truly hopeless situation in the face and see hope. Allow us to look a dead end in the face and see the end of death. Allow us to look a broken heart and a casket lowered into the ground in the face and see not death but life, see not just an end but also a beginning. Good friends, this is not tame stuff. This is such extraordinary stuff. This is impossible stuff. And there is no way in the world that we can see it or believe it on our own.

This brings us, then, back to where we began. What are we to say about faith and belief? How are we to find them? And maybe we should ask ourselves if we even want to find them. How do we come to believe in the impossible, and do we really want to?

First, the how. Martin Luther struggled with the same question. If faith comes by grace and not buy our own effort, what role, if any do we play in the process? Others, Calvin, for example, thought there was no role for us to play. It was the luck of the draw, or more technically, whether we were among God's elect or not. Luther wasn't quite such a fatalist, and I think he was more on the mark. Luther agreed that faith came through God's grace, that it was not something we could manufacture or will for ourselves. Faith starts with God's action on us, but we can and often do get in the way of it. For Luther, human beings were required to empty themselves of their own striving, their own sense of control, in other words, they were required to get out of God's way a little so that God's grace could do its work.

Faith, then, comes from the encounter with God, and it comes only as we become empty enough to let it do its work. In some real sense God is always at our side, pouring out grace, looking to encounter us. So, how do we make ourselves open to the encounter. Worship, Bible study, prayer, meditation, the practice of humility, these are some of the ways in which we become open to the encounter with God. Worship and Bible study engage us with the stories. We read them, we reenact them (think of communion), we meet Abraham and Jesus and many others along the way. They inspire us; they alert us to the possibilities; they open our hearts and our minds.

In prayer and meditation, along with the practice of humility, we clear our minds of our self-serving certainties and our need to control things and our need to have the answers. Think how often in the Gospel stories the Pharisees, the scribes, and even Jesus' own disciples were plagued primarily by the limitation of their own rigid perspectives and plagued by their inability and unwillingness to see beyond their own desires and categories. Prayer, meditation, humility – these help to clear space in the mind. In this clear and more neutral state, we begin to get out of our own way and let God's grace do its work.

So, in a real sense, if we are concerned about our faith and our doubt, if we don't have the faith of Abraham, the problem may not be that we aren't trying hard enough; it may more likely be that we are trying too hard. What a freeing realization that is.

But it may be a frightening one, too. And that brings us to the question, do we really want to go down this path? Consider well your answer. For there is much to lose. When you make space for the encounter with God, you will find yourself suddenly bereft of things that yesterday were certain. The things you put your faith in – worldly power, wealth, military might, your own sense of rightness – all of these become as thin as a drifting smoke. If you are willing to let these things float away, then allowing the encounter with God is a good idea. In whom do you put your trust. Jack said it was his mother-in-law. There are many other things on this earth that many of us would answer if we were to answer honestly. But the right answer, though not a

safe answer, the right answer is God, by whose grace we may come to faith, and by which faith we may ourselves join the great cloud of witnesses who have seen the impossible be true. Amen.

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