

Sermon 27: Romans 4:13-21: Abraham's faith

OUTLINE

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The nature of Abraham's faith
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INTRODUCTION

Mary Baker Eddy, the mother of the cult of Christian Science has made some radical statements in regard to faith and healing: 'The sick are not healed merely by declaring there is no sickness, but by knowing there is none.'¹ 'We classify disease as error which nothing but Truth or Mind can heal.'² 'Science not only reveals the origin of all diseases as wholly mental, but it also declares that all disease is cured by the mind.'³ Her version of faith is to teach that all disease is the result of wrong belief but if you correct your belief and deny the existence of disease, this is the faith by which you are healed. This is just one example of an unbiblical view of faith. Today we are seeing a lot of people talking about faith, some merely mean being positive about the future found in many modern movies when someone says, 'just have faith'; some are referring to having a particular set of beliefs; some have been influenced Hindu notions of everything around you being an illusion; some mean a type of faith healing, positive thinking or auto suggestion. In an age where 'faith' can mean almost anything an analysis of some of the basic tenets of Abraham's faith becomes vital.

As we continue looking at Paul's discussion of Abraham being justified by faith in Romans 4 we are going to observe Paul doing three things. Firstly, Paul wants the truth that Abraham was justified by faith alone to be incontestably established. His method in doing this is to argue for this fact from three different angles all of which make faith not works the instrument of our justification. Paul has discussed that Abraham was saved by faith not works in 1-5. By works he means any sort of work whatsoever. Then in 9-12 he argued how Abraham was justified by faith apart from circumcision. Paul is now going to cap his argument by showing that not only was Abraham justified by faith, and not by works or circumcision, but also not by Law. Paul's method has been to begin with the broad category of works, and then to get more specific as he steals away all the hiding places and refuges of those who are clinging to a works mentality in the areas of circumcision and law. We will light upon Paul's arguments in v13-17. Secondly, and where we want to focus most of our attention in this message, Paul discusses Abraham's faith. Paul is not content to tell us that Abraham has been justified by faith alone but is concerned that we understand more about Abraham's faith. So Paul gives us two aspects of Abraham's faith in v18-21, the nature of

1 Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, ed. Ravi Zacharias, (Minneapolis, Minnesota, Bethany House Publishers:2003), p163.

2 Ibid., p152.

3 Ibid., p152.

Abraham's faith and the grounds of Abraham's faith. Here we will find much clear teaching that will help us understand what faith is and how it stands and is strengthened.

The timing of Abraham's faith

Paul in his desire to establish justification by faith alone moves from focusing on Abraham's individual salvation apart from works and circumcision to the question of how the nations are saved. The shift from faith being the instrument of Abraham's justification to the nations is found in verse 13, specifically through the ideas of Abraham's 'offspring' and him becoming the 'heir of the whole world.' 'For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.' Let's familiarise ourselves with this promise. When God called Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, we see God promising three things to Abraham, land, people and blessing. However as is often the case biblical prophecy each of these ideas of land, people and blessing are developed and expanded. These promises are also linked with Christ and the fulfilment will be Christ inheriting the world, the nations and bestowing salvation. Paul is implying that the time for the nations to be blessed through Abraham's Seed, Christ, has come. And if that time has come for the nations to receive the blessing of salvation they have to receive it by faith not by law, just as Abraham did. The question Paul is dealing with in these verses is this one: how is the promise to Abraham, the blessing of salvation to the nations fulfilled, by law or by faith?

Paul rallies his arguments to show that the promise of salvation to the nations is by faith not by law. Firstly, we have an implied historical argument. In v13 Paul highlights, just as he did with regard to circumcision the order of events, that the promise was given before the law was given. This is the way Paul argues in Galatians 3:17-18, 'This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. 18 For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.' However, Paul does not pursue this line of reasoning and meat it out he moves on to other arguments.

Secondly, in v14 he gives two reasons why it is impossible that the promise can be fulfilled by law. Law makes faith null and promise void, 'For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.' How then does law make faith null and promise void. Faith is about receiving righteousness, law has to do with offering righteousness. Faith in Christ means receiving a righteousness that you did not manufacture but Christ did, and law is to offer to God a righteousness manufactured by your own hands. Secondly, law also makes the promise void for, promise is God saying 'I will save,' law is saying 'I will save.' By this definition the 'Faiths' of this world, the world's religions are not 'Faiths' but 'Laws.' The Hindu Faith does not teach salvation as a gift by faith through promise but rather the spiritual evolution of a soul through the various levels of reincarnation by enlightenment and good deeds. Islam does not teach a full and free forgiveness of sin on the basis of faith by grace, but only an unsure possibility of an arbitrary deity who might forgive you if you have done enough good. And so we could go through every religion of this world and show that all man made religion has law at the centre by which we build our own stairway into heaven. It is only in Christianity that we

have this idea of our total inability to save ourselves and a holy God who is also gracious doing for us what we could not do for ourselves, making salvation possible through grace by faith as a gift; Jesus blood and righteousness providing for us a sacrifice sufficient for our sin debt and a righteousness to fit us for eternal fellowship with an infinitely holy God. Salvation is received by faith not worked for by law.

Next Paul highlights why the promise of salvation can never be realised by law, v15, 'For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.' The law brings wrath. How does the law bring wrath? Because we are all sinners and none of us can perfectly keep the law, the law exposes our sins and seals us as criminals who must be judged. It is the purpose of the law to expose sin, and since we are sinners the law can only ever bring condemnation not salvation. Romans 3:19-20, 'Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.' For this reason we do not tell our children to be good little boys and girls to get into heaven, we tell them to believe in Jesus and be good as a response of love for saving us but not as a means of salvation.

Paul continues with his arguments in v16-17. In v16 he tells us that if it is not by faith there is no fulfilment of the promise, 'That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring....' No faith no promise. If the promise has to be fulfilled by law, we would fail and guarantee no promise, but faith establishes the promise by grace. Grace is God doing it, law is me doing it. Grace is God giving it as a gift, law is me earning it as a wage. Grace is received by faith, law earns by work. Grace gives based on God's goodness, law earns based on my goodness.

Paul then adds that it is the gracious promise being fulfilled by grace through faith that guarantees salvation for both Jews and Gentiles. No faith no Gentile inclusion, no faith no Jewish inclusion. The promise to Abraham can never be fulfilled if it depends upon us fulfilling certain stipulations. The Gentiles would never be saved, and for that fact the Jew could never be saved either, for all must be saved by faith in Christ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

The nature of Abraham's faith

To the Jew Abraham was a man of obedience par excellence. His obedience to the law of God was the emphasis and the impetus for law keeping in the Jewish mindset. Wanting to salvage a true picture of Abraham that would encourage faith in Christ and not a works mentality Paul now goes about showing how Abraham was a man of faith. Paul does not speak about every aspect of Abraham's faith. For example he does not comment on Abraham's faith in the heavenly homeland mentioned in Hebrews 11:13-16 that Abraham was looking forward too. Nor does he discuss Abraham's faith in Christ which Christ spoke about in John 8:56. However, Paul gives us some excellent points about faith from Abraham's example.

Firstly, Abraham's faith was built on the promises of God. The words 'promise/promised' are mentioned 5 times in these verses. That is he based his faith on God's words not man's words. Today when we speak about faith the emphasis is on how strong our faith is, how unshakable, how convinced we are. Abraham's faith was not rock but built upon a rock. It is more about *what* Abraham believed as opposed to *how* he believed.

Secondly, Abraham believed in the word of God alone. There were no props or encouragements for his faith. He had to take God on the basis of his word alone with no other grounds for believing in the success of the promise.

Thirdly, he exercised faith not only without encouragements but in the face of discouragements. He was faced with the double death of his own body that was beyond its ability to bear children, and Sarah who was also unable to bear children. V18 puts it like this, 'In hope he believed against hope....' Or in v19, '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.' The opposite of this would be Peter who looked at the waves and began to sink. A positive example would be Mary who accepted the news about the virgin birth. This is very important to stress because there are version of faith going about that encourage you to pretend that sickness is not real, or confess it even though it isn't real. Abraham was a realist who acknowledged the problem he was facing. His faith was not an ignoring or minimizing of his problems but rather a sight of them compared with God's ability, power and will.

Fourthly, we are told of Abraham's faith having certainty and growing in strength in v20-21, 'No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.' The Hagar incident is glossed over a general description of Abraham's faith.

Fifthly, Abraham acted upon his faith. Lloyd-Jones highlights this aspect of Abraham's faith in his owning and announcing his new name to his household (Gen 17:5). You can just imagine the scene. Abraham who had a household that had more than 300 fighting men would have known something of the promise God made to Abraham. They would have seen Ishmael and the whole Hagar debacle. Imagine Abraham coming out to address his household one morning and telling them that God has promised to make his descendants a great multitude and that God has changed his name from Abram which embarrassingly meant 'father of many' to Abraham which more embarrassingly meant 'father of a nation.' For a 99 year old man who is past the ability to bear and only has one child to his name, the owning of this name would have been an active way in which Abraham would have demonstrated his faith.

The ground of Abraham's faith

Now there may be some who are thinking, 'Abraham sounds like a great guy but I am a failure!' What we need to do now is analyse not the faith of Abraham, but the God of

Abraham's faith. You see we are told that Abraham's faith grew and strengthened, how? We are given to reasons firstly, he gave glory to God (v20). Secondly, He was fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised (v21). Here then is our central concern. For it is not about the strength of our faith, but the strength of our God. Our faith will grow or shrink in direct proportion to our knowledge of God.

Paul takes pains to stress the God centred nature of Abraham's faith, he does this in several statements:

'...who gives life to the dead....' (v17)

'...and calls into existence the things that do not exist.' (v17)

'...he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God.' (v20)

'...fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.' (v21)

Abraham was able to exercise faith, not because he was natural mystic with a personality that tended to being spiritual. No he was able to believe on the basis of a promise, with no props for his faith, with obstacles to faith that were insurmountable for him to overcome, to have assurance, grow and act in faith not because of an innate ability within all men to believe, but by the Spirit he was taught to see who God is and what He can do. Christian faith is not a natural confidence every man has the potential for within his own nature. It is not a self-deceiving outlook that pretends sickness or sin do not exist. It is not an attempt to try and create the reality of wealth or health by the exertion of the power of our own wills as if we were mini-gods. It is not a confidence in our own potential and ability to do something that needs lots of positive words from others to keep its levels up. To put it in the words of Paul, Christian faith is giving glory to God. In other words, to see God as He has revealed Himself, in the fullness of His power so that we see there is nothing He cannot do; in the fullness of His truthfulness so that we see He will never lie or break a promise; in the fullness of His gracious goodness so that we are assured that He does indeed do good to those who have not earned it and are sinners. The strength in Christian faith is not in our natural abilities, dispositions or exertions in believing but in the object of our faith. The more we see Him in the fullness of His glory the more our faith will grow.

Doubt results in a forgetfulness of God and faith results when we remember who God is. If we fixate upon the problem then we will not see clearly to see the solution in God.

Abraham was looking at God not the problems. He was not ignoring the problems and pretending they were not there, but he looked at his problems in light of who God was. So when it came to God making the promise that Abraham was going to have children.

Abraham looked at his body and his wife's body, saw the realities of the situation, but then he looked at the God who promised and realised that if God can make man from dust He can make children from a dead womb. If He can make stars He can make descendants.

Paul tells us that these were the types of thoughts that he was thinking in v17 where it says, 'who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.'

Abraham was convinced that God was able to do what He promised, this implies more than ability but willingness as well. He believed that God would not deceive him or lie to him, and that He could be trusted as perfectly truthful.

Saving faith has these basic ingredients. We believe that God gives life to Christ raising Him from the dead, and that in His death and resurrection we are guaranteed new life. We believe that God causes a new creation to take place inside of us by the power of His Holy Spirit. We believe that God is trustworthy and keeps His promises, promises such as: John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.'

Matthew 11:18-30, 'Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

John 6:37, 'All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.'

If we put our faith in Christ we will receive eternal life; if we come to Christ we will find rest; if we come to Him He will never cast us out. These and many others are precious promises that we hold fast to for salvation. Our confidence, like Abraham's is built on the fact that God does not lie.

For the believer this means that Abraham was not a Liberal. The church is facing attacks on various fronts. There is the attack of ceremonialism where ceremonies in the church take centre stage and are seen as saving at the expense of the Gospel. There is the attack of worldliness where the Church gets bogged down in loving this world and distracted from holiness and missions. And then there is the attack of liberalism. Liberals are those who claim to be Christian but who believe that the Bible is a mix of divine and human ideas. They do not believe in the soul, hell, God's wrath, miracles or the inspiration of the Bible. They believe that the Bible is full of errors and you have to take out of it what you think is God's word throwing the rest away as a product of culture. There are many things that we need to say to people who are gripped by liberal teaching, and I think there are many in NZ churches who are sitting under this teaching since it is one of the greatest enemies that has taken a lot of ground in NZ. However, I would like to point out that Abraham was not a Liberal. He banked his future on the word of God, he did not doubt it, take only part of it or think that it was unreliable in any way but trusted in a God who does not lie or deceive His people.

I would like to share with you a recent situation I have found myself in where a confessing Christian has imbibed liberal teaching and as a result strayed into lies. I have been corresponding with a young man recently who has written a circular letter to church in NZ telling us about his story of coming out of the closet as a homosexual and how God condones this. What is terribly sad about his letters are the liberal tendencies that he has towards the Scriptures, his forced way of taking what he wants out of the text deciding which laws can and can't be taken literally. I would like to apply Abraham's faith to this very touchy subject of those who feel that they are born as homosexuals and that they are doomed to live a homosexual life because this is what they are.

Firstly, the Bible is very clear in the OT and the NT that homosexuality is a sin. We have studied Romans 1:18-32 and demonstrated that Paul sees the pervasive bent towards this 'unnatural' sin as a sign that God is judging society for their godlessness.

But I would like to talk a little about what the bible promises to those who are burdened by these lies and the liberty that it promises. God made men and women, there are only 2 legitimate categories for sexuality. Every person sitting in this room is either a boy or a girl, there is no in between category. However, since the fall we have all been afflicted with a bent away from God's law. We tend away from God's law whether it is a natural law or a revealed law. Due to aggravating factors such as personality dispositions and circumstantial factors there will be those whose particular blend of nature and nurture issues will give an extra push in a certain direction, but it is our sinfulness that willingly inclines away from the truth of what God has made us to be. So then, here is a radical conclusion and I stick by it, there is no such thing as a homosexual, only sinful fallen men and women struggling with contrary desires. Paul calls them 'contrary to nature.' Even those who are born with an birth abnormality in having both genitalia, there is a chromosome test that can be done to determine what the true sex of the child actually is and corrective measures can be taken.

Paul holds out hope for those who were engaged in the addictive sexual lifestyles that go along with these sins. In 1 Cor 6:9-11 he says, 'Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, 10 nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.' Look especially at v11, washed and sanctified, this means forgiven and set apart by the power of the Holy Spirit for a life of good works. Paul tells us more in Romans 6:6-7, 'We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For one who has died has been set free from sin.' If you are truly born again, not only have your sins been forgiven but God has made a new relationship towards sin take place in your lives. You have died to the power of sin. You have been filled with the Spirit, and now by the power of the Spirit as He applies the resurrection life of Christ to you, we are now able to gain victory over the flesh and put addictive sins to death, Rom 8:12-13, 'So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.' We will not be perfect in this life, we will always struggle with temptations and indwelling sin, but God has enabled us to be free from the enslaving power of sin.

Now there is much that needs to be said to someone who has converted from the lie of homosexuality. There is a road that needs to be walked with the person and a deep process of renewing the mind is essential. They will need to see the objective truth of who God has made us to be, they will need the support of a community, they will need non-sexual interaction with the same sex to orient them to normal ways of being with the same sex, they will need to deliberately cultivate the sex God made them to be, they will have to turn away from the lie of defining their humanity by their sinful sexual inclinations, etc. But the one thing I want to highlight is this one: homosexuals, drunkards, gamblers, nymphos, those addicted to drugs, pornography, eating, or any sort of enslaving lifestyle. Do you

believe the promise that you have died to sin in Christ? Do you believe the promise that God by the Spirit puts our sinful desires to death and replaces them with the fruits of the Spirit? Do you believe that God is renewing us in the image? Ephesians 4:17-24, 'Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. 19 They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. 20 But that is not the way you learned Christ!--- 21 assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, 22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.' We need not be tyrannized by the old man, God has restored us and called us to take up our new identity in Christ by the renewing of our minds. Is God mighty? Does God lie? You are weak but He is strong and this is the liberty that He has brought His children into.