

Main Idea: In Romans 4:18-25 we see Abraham leaning into the promise of God. We also learn three lessons about the kind of faith that leans into God’s promises.

- I. Faith begins with a discovery (18-19).
 - A. The problems of life are big.
 - B. God is bigger.
- II. Faith involves a decision (20-21).
 - A. I choose to fix my attention on the promise of God, not the problems of life.
 - B. I choose to fix my attention on the glory of God, not the glory of self.
 - C. I choose to fix my attention on the power of God, not the ingenuity of man.
- III. Faith makes a difference (22-25).
 - A. What? (22-24)
 1. It affected Abraham's standing with God.
 2. It affects our standing with God.
 - B. How? (25)
 1. It depends on Jesus' death.
 2. It depends on Jesus' resurrection.

Making It Personal: When we face challenges in 2018, let’s lean into God’s promises.

Scripture Reading: Romans 4:13-25

I want to preach a message this morning to prepare us for something we’re going to face this year, and something we’re going to do this year as a church. We’re going to face problems. That’s inevitable.

So we’re going to do something to prepare for those problems. We’re going to fill our minds with something God has given us to enable us to glorify Him when the problems come.

We’re going to memorize Scripture again this year, one passage each month. But these aren’t random passages. These are divine promises. This year I want us to memorize twelve promises that God has given us in His Word. And I want us to put our weight into them as we face the problems as they come.

This may be a new approach for some of us, but it’s certainly not a new practice for the people of God. The Puritans loved the promises of God, and lived by them.

Let me give you an example. In 1650 Pastor John Owen preached a sermon before the House of Commons. In his message he implored the leaders of England to pray and then send gospel preachers to Ireland. Why? He had in mind a massacre that happened in Ireland nine years earlier in 1641 in which 40,000 Protestants were said to have been slaughtered. Owen asked the question, “How is it that Jesus Christ is in Ireland only as a lion staining all his garments with the blood of his enemies; and none to hold him out as a lamb sprinkled with his own blood to his friends?”²

So what could rescue his nation from the bloody path it was on? As Owen addressed his audience that day, he entitled his message, “*The steadfastness of the*

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ This sermon has been adapted from a sermon preached earlier at WBC in October 1994 as a part of an expositional series through the book of Romans.

² http://johnowen.org/media/haykin_owen_bio.pdf

promises, and the sinfulness of staggering.” The text he chose for his message is the same text I’ve chosen to launch this year’s initiative.

Romans 4: 20-21, which says, “He did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised.”

He, is Abraham. Owen was challenged by how Abraham put his weight into the promise of God, and believed that’s what he and the people of England needed to do as they faced a national crisis involving Ireland.

I believe the same holds for us. We too are facing challenges. In our nation and around the world. In our families. In our personal lives. In our churches. Which means it’s a perfect time for we, the people of God, to put our feet into the footprints left by our forefather Abraham.

Here’s where we’re going today. In Romans 4:18-25 we’re going to look at Abraham leaning into the promise of God. We’re also going to learn three lessons about the kind of faith that leans into God’s promises. After the message, we’ll quote this month’s passage together. Then we’ll come to the Lord’s Table and remember our worthy Savior and what He did for us.

I. Faith begins with a discovery (18-19).

Romans is a wonderful book about God's salvation. It's a doctrinal book. If you are not a Christian, it tells you what CAN happen in your life. If you are a Christian, it tells you what DID happen in your life, so we can appreciate more fully what God did, and communicate more clearly what God did. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

In Romans 4, we learn that a person is saved by faith alone, just like Abraham was. Abraham was a man who exhibited faith in his life. Abraham believed the promise of God. Abraham is a model of faith.

Do you consider yourself to be a person of faith? How can our faith become stronger so that we truly are people of faith? Abraham can show us the way.

Romans 4 highlights the case study of Abraham. For Paul, Abraham is exhibit A of the premise he asserted in Romans 3. The premise is that a person is justified (brought into a right standing with God) by faith apart from works (3:28). Abraham was not a perfect man, but he was a man of faith. How did he get to be a man of faith?

His faith began with an important discovery, which we, too, must make. Actually, it’s a two-part discovery, and it starts with this.

A. The problems of life are big.

Think about the problems in Abraham's life, as revealed in verses 18-19. “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’¹⁹ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead.”

God had made a promise to Abraham. He told Abraham, "I'm going to bless you, Abraham. I'm going to give you a great land, a great name, and a great son, through whom you will become a great nation." But Abraham had a problem, didn't he? His wife

was barren. She was 90 years old. He was nearly 100. Humanly speaking, it was impossible to have a child.

So what did Abraham do? Here's the second part of faith's discovery. Abraham said, "I don't live my life 'humanly speaking'. I live my life 'divinely speaking'. I live by faith." What did Abraham discover? True, the problems of life are big, but...

B. God is bigger.

Have you ever felt like the odds were against you in life? Abraham did. But enabled by God's grace, he learned to live, not by his feelings, but by faith in what God had said.

The text says that Abraham "against hope believed in hope" (18). He knew that God was bigger than his problems. He believed "against hope" (that is, when it didn't make sense to believe). He believed "in hope" (for he knew God was in control).

So did Abraham have a blind faith? Absolutely not. Upon what did he base his decision to believe God, according to verse 18? "According to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be."

The Word of God. God had spoken. That settled it.

By the way, having faith is not the same thing as being naive.³ Verse 19 says, "He faced the fact that his body was as good as dead...and that Sarah's womb was also dead." Abraham didn't play mind games. He faced the facts, head-on. "I am too old. My wife is too old. My wife's womb is dead. Those are the facts."

So no, Abraham was not gullible. He looked at his problem, then he looked at the promise of God, and made this discovery, "One promise of God outweighs one thousand obstacles. My problems may be big, but my God is bigger. Therefore, I choose to believe God."

Are you wrestling with problems in your life? Of course, our biggest problem is that we each enter this world cut off from God by sin—by Adam's original sin, and by our own sins. We are spiritually dead, enslaved to our sinful bent, unable to remedy our hopeless condition.

But in His Word God says He provided a remedy. He tells us that He sent His own Son into the world to take our place and die for our own sins. He conquered death and God now offers to forgive us of our sins and give us eternal life if we will repent and receive His Son as our Savior and Lord.

That is what God says. That is His promise. The question is, do we believe Him? Do you? Do you believe that God sent His Son Jesus Christ to be your Savior and King?

My friends, yes we have problems and this is our biggest. But we have a bigger God and He has spoken directly to our situation. This is the first lesson Abraham learned. Faith starts with a discovery.

II. Faith involves a decision (20-21).

Abraham was no superman. In fact, he blew it in some pretty significant ways in his life. Remember the lying episode in Egypt, and the Hagar incident? Yes, Abraham was a real person just like us. But God was merciful and faithful and patient. And in time His servant learned to live by faith, faith that involved a very specific decision.

³ In verse 19, the KJV says, "And being not weak in faith, he considered NOT his own body..." Actually, the second "not" shouldn't be in the text (at was apparently added by later copyists).

Notice verses 20-21, “Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.”

There’s the decision of faith, and it’s the decision we too are called to make day by day. If I am going to become a person of faith, like Abraham, I must choose to fix my attention on three things.

A. I choose to fix my attention on the promise of God, not the problems of life. The AV puts it this way in verse 20, "He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith." The word "stagger" means "to be divided, to waver," and is sometimes translated "doubt" (James 1:5). When we doubt, we vacillate back and forth. We stagger. We waver.

A word of caution. Doubts are not necessarily bad. Think about this observation by Martin Lloyd-Jones, "There are some people who think that, because they are assailed by doubts, they have no faith. That is a complete fallacy. To be entirely free from doubts does not always signify faith, it may mean presumption or the kind of psychological state that the cults often produce. There is a sense in which we can define faith as that which enables a man to overcome his doubts and to answer them. Some of the greatest saints that the Church has ever known have testified to the fact that they have been attacked and assailed by doubts to the end of their lives. But they were not weakened, they did not give in; they mastered their doubts, they conquered them, they overcame them."⁴

How did they do it? How did Abraham overcome his doubts? Simply put, he made a decision to fix his attention on the promise of God, instead of the problems of life.

Of course, you can’t fix your attention on something you don’t know. That’s why we’re going to be memorizing twelve promises this year. Let me give you a taste of the promises we’ll be hiding in our hearts this year.

2018	Promises for Living
January	Romans 4:20-21
February	Romans 10:9
March	Matthew 6:33
April	Proverbs 3:5-6
May	1 Corinthians 10:13
June	James 1:5
July	1 John 1:9
August	Galatians 6:9
September	Romans 8:28-29
October	2 Corinthians 12:9-10
November	1 John 5:14-15
December	Revelation 21:3-4

So in the decision of faith, I must choose to fix my attention on the promises of God rather than the problems of life. Secondly...

⁴ Martin Lloyd Jones, p. 217.

B. I choose to fix my attention on the glory of God, not the glory of self.

Listen to the conclusion of verse 20, "But was strong in faith, giving glory to God." A person of faith places a premium on the promise of God, and the glory of God. What does that mean? In part, it means that AHEAD OF TIME I must make a decision. Abraham did.

In the text, the participle "giving glory" modifies the verb "was strong." A key to Abraham's strength was that by faith, while he was still childless, he resolved that when God acted, he would give God the glory. I like the paraphrase of the Living Bible, "But Abraham never doubted. He believed God, for his faith and trust grew ever stronger, and he praised God for this blessing EVEN BEFORE IT HAPPENED."

What are the implications for us? If we are to be people of faith, we must decide right now that we are going to live for the glory of God, not the glory of self, no matter what happens. It's amazing to me how quickly people turn to God when they are in trouble, yet how quickly they forget God when the troubles are gone. A person of faith is not that way. A person of faith lives by 1 Corinthians 10:31, "Whether therefore you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God."

As Calvin said, "No greater honour can be given to God than by sealing His truth by our faith."⁵

Who do you give the credit for your successes in life? You say, "I try to honor God." Okay, good, but how about in the trials of life? Our trials are often opportunities the Lord is preparing for the display of His glory. Is that how we see them?

So a person of faith chooses to fix his attention, first, on promises of God rather than the problems of life, secondly, on the glory of God, not the glory of self. Thirdly...

C. I choose to fix my attention on the power of God, not the ingenuity of man.

Notice how verse 21 begins, "Being fully persuaded." Abraham was fully persuaded. Of what? "That God had the power to do what He had promised." Or as the AV puts it, "That what He (God) had promised, He was able to perform."

So what truth gave Abraham the confidence that he could depend upon God's promise? *God is able.*

Let those words sink in. God is able. What He promises, He is able to do. The word translated "able" is the Greek word "dunatos" which elsewhere is appears as the word "power." God has the power to do what He promises.

A person of faith, like Abraham, fixes his attention on the power of God, not on the ingenuity of man. Abraham learned that the hard way. There were times when Abraham tried to finagle his way out of problems, and when he did, he got himself into deeper problems. But the change came when he learned to fix his focus on the power of God. Abraham's faith was not a passive "Let's see what happens" thing. He didn't have fatalism. He had faith. So must we. The key to confidence is power. The key to power is faith. The key to faith is a right view of God.

So here's the second lesson. Faith involves a decision. If we are to be people of faith, we must choose to fix our attention on the promise of God, the glory of God, and the power of God.

⁵ Cranfield, 95

At the beginning I mentioned a sermon Pastor John Owen preached when his country was facing great turmoil over a bloodbath in Ireland. His text was this text, Romans 4:20-21, and his title was, "*The steadfastness of the promises, and the sinfulness of staggering.*"

Towards the beginning Owen made this bottom-line observation, "*All staggering at the promises of God is from unbelief.*"

That's vital to see. If I am wavering in my treatment of God's promises, the problem at its core is *unbelief*.

Then Owen said, "Men are apt to pretend sundry other reasons and causes of their staggering: The promises do not belong unto them, — God intends not their souls in them, — they are not such and such, — and this makes them stagger; when the truth is, it is their unbelief, and that alone, that puts them into this staggering condition. As in other things, so in this, we are apt to have many fair pretences for foul faults. To lay the burden on the right shoulders, I shall demonstrate, by God's assistance, that it is not this, or that, but unbelief alone, that makes us stagger at the promises."⁶

Unbelief is major problem. Unbelief shortcircuits the intended benefit from the promises of God. Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God; for anyone who comes to God must believe that He exists and rewards those who diligently seek Him."

We're learning today from Abraham about the kind of faith that leans into God's promises. Three lessons. One, faith begins with a discovery. Two, faith involves a decision.

III. Faith makes a difference (22-25).

Which leads to two important questions. The obvious first question is "What".

A. What is the difference faith makes? (22-24)

Listen to verses 22-24, "This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness."²³ The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone,²⁴ but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."

The text begins, "This is why." In the AV, "And therefore." "Therefore" indicates a result or implication. Faith does make a difference. Notice two implications highlighted by the apostle.

1. It affected Abraham's standing with God.

Verse 22 "It was imputed to him for righteousness." This is the second time Paul quoted this verse in Romans 4 (see verse 3). He's quoting Genesis 15:6. What was the result of Abraham's faith? It affected his standing with God. When Abraham took God at His word, when Abraham heard the promise of God, and said, "So be it! I believe it!", God credited it to him for righteousness. God declared Abraham to be righteous. God announced that Abraham was acceptable in His sight. All because of his faith.

But this isn't just for Abraham. Notice a second implication.

2. It affects our standing with God.

⁶ <https://www.monergism.com/steadfastness-promises-and-sinfulness-staggering-romans-4-20-john-owen>

Verse 23 says, "Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him, but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed..." So God didn't preserve the account of Abraham as a mere history lesson to put us to sleep. It's a paradigm to jolt us into action! God hasn't changed. He works the same with us today as He did with Abraham.

How are we made right with God? By doing something for God? No. By faith alone in the One who raised His Son from the dead.

Do you know what makes Abraham's example so amazing? Wiersbe rightly observes, "He did not have a Bible to read; he had only the simple promise of God. He was almost alone as a believer, surrounded by heathen unbelievers. He could not look back at a long record of faith; in fact, he was helping to write that record. Yet Abraham believed God. People today have a complete Bible to read and study. They have a church fellowship, and can look back at centuries of faith as recorded in church history and the Bible. Yet many refuse to believe!"⁷

The point is this. Faith makes a difference. It did for Abraham, and it will for us. Faith in Christ makes us acceptable before God. Which leads us to a second question.

B. How does faith make a difference? (25)

We find the answer in verse 25, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."

Listen carefully. Faith itself doesn't save a person. The demons have a faith of sorts, but aren't saved. Other religions promote and call for faith. But faith isn't what saves us. What does?

Only Jesus Christ saves a person. Saving faith, that is, faith that results in God declaring a sinner to be righteous in His sight, depends on Christ plus nothing else. Specifically, saving faith depends on two activities which Jesus Christ accomplished.

1. It depends on Jesus' death.

V 25 "Who was delivered for our offenses." The word "offenses" means "false steps, trespasses." Man's problem is that he went his "own way," says Isaiah 53:6. We all are guilty of trespassing on God's earth. What was the penalty for our crime? Death.

Yet here's the amazing truth. Christ was delivered over to death for our sins. He went to the cross to take care of our sins.

So saving faith depends on Jesus' death. Do you believe that?

Yet there's more. To say that Christ died for our sins is only half the gospel. The cross would mean nothing without the empty tomb, would it? Lots of great men have lived and died. What made Jesus different? He conquered death. And faith that saves is a faith that depends on Jesus' second activity.

2. It depends on Jesus' resurrection.

Verse 25 concludes, "Who was raised again for our justification." This is the rest of the good news. In His crucifixion, Jesus took care of our sin. In His resurrection, He took care of our need for righteousness.⁸

⁷ Wiersbe, 526.

⁸ F. F. Bruce cautions (119), "We must not interpret the two clauses so woodenly as to suggest that His resurrection had nothing to do with the atonement for their sins and His death nothing to do with their justification."

Dear friends, the payment for every sin I have or ever will commit was made at the cross. And every bit of righteousness that I need to stand before a holy God was secured for me in Jesus' resurrection. That's what God's Word says.

So what do I need to do, then? I need to put my weight into what God has said that Jesus has accomplished! Saving faith depends upon Jesus' death and resurrection.

So I want to ask you again to consider an important question. Have you ever taken God at His Word for salvation? His promise is true, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Rom 10:13)." Have you put your weight into that promise?

If so, the Lord has saved you, by His grace. And He has also given you an example of how He wants you and me to live. By leaning into His promises.

For instance, another of His promises says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart...and He will direct your paths (Prov 3:5-6)." Are you trusting Him right now for you daily affairs? If you have not been, make a commitment today to do so.

Remember, when we were hopelessly stranded in sin, God sent His own Son on a mission of mercy to rescue us. Now He invites us to trust Him, to live by faith in Him alone. What God promises, He performs.⁹

So faith begins with a discovery. Faith involves a decision. And true faith makes a difference. Let's discover His promises this year, and let's make decision to affirm those promises, and experience the difference they make, for His glory.

Making It Personal: When we face challenges in 2018, let's lean into God's promises.

Scripture Memory Song: Romans 4:20-21

Communion

Praying with our Deacon Care Groups

⁹ Wiersbe, 525