

Intro: "If power is measured by impact on people's lives, (he) was the most powerful man in history. The wars and revolutions and political campaigns he led left no one untouched in a country of hundreds of millions. His quixotic crusades may have killed more people than the mass exterminations of Hitler and Stalin combined. In his lifetime, he was worshiped as a god and his books sold better than the Bible. After his death, he was demystified and dethroned. Today, he is the object of a pop culture cult."

Who was he? He is the man the U.S. News & World Report highlighted in its cover story of October 10, 1994. His name was Mao Zedong (above quote, p. 48). Mao was the communist leader who ruled China with an iron fist for 27 years, until his death in September 1976. When Mao died, an urgent message was sent from the Politburo to Mao's personal physician who was at his deathbed, "The chairman's body is to be permanently preserved (p. 56)." In addition, a wax dummy of the leader was produced to preserve his legacy. Thousands of visitors a day would file past his crystal casket to pay respects to their infamous leader.

Mao's personal doctor, Dr. Li, has recently written a memoir, The Private Life of Chairman Mao, which will be published by Random House this month. An excerpt from that book (taken from US News, 56) reveals these shocking words from the pen of the man who served at Mao's side for 20 years, "Mao Zedong was not supposed to die. To hundreds of millions of Chinese, he had been not a man or even an emperor but God. For almost two decades, the slogan wishing him a life of 10,000 years had so dominated daily ritual that to many Chinese the words had become fact. Mao's image was everywhere and so was the slogan. To suggest that Mao was mortal was to risk being labeled counterrevolutionary."

But the man known as "Chairman" was mortal. In his life, his rhetoric was powerful, his intimidation unnerving, his promises bold. Though his successors tried to make him look alive, in the end, the words of Hebrews 9:27 prevailed. "It is appointed unto man once to die, and after this the judgment."

In contrast with Mao, consider the impact another man left behind. He was a man of God. In fact, he was a spokesman for God. He had access to royal dignitaries, and personally delivered God's Word to the kings. Unlike Mao, he was a man of faith. He used his influence for God. In the end, he too died. He was buried in a tomb in the Middle East. Yet his godly influence lived on after he was gone. His name was Elisha.

The story is related in 2 Kings 13 that some Moabite raiders invaded Israel some time after Elisha had died. On one occasion, some Israelites were burying a man when, suddenly, they saw a band of raiders coming. They had no choice but to throw the man's body into Elisha's tomb. Do you know what happened? 2 Kings 13:21 says

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(NIV), "When the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet." Wow! Now that's what I call leaving an impact after you're gone!

God is in the business of making the dead live again! Romans 4:17 says, "God gives life to the dead, and calls those things which are not, as though they were." God transforms lives. God makes the dead live. If it were not so, we would be without hope. But it is so. How do we know? We have the promise of God.

This morning, we're going to talk about promises. The world is full of people, like Mao, who make brash promises and claims. But the promise of God is unlike the promise of men. How do we know? We'll find out in Romans 4:13-17.

Proposition: In Romans 4:13-17, we are going to discover two characteristics which stand out about God's promise.

- I. God's promise is revealed (13-15).
 - A. God gave His promise to Abraham.
 - 1. It's not received through the Law.
 - 2. It's received through faith.
 - B. God gave His promise to us.
- II. God's promise is reliable (16-17).
 - A. It's guaranteed by grace (16).
 - 1. To Jews
 - 2. To Non-Jews
 - B. It's guaranteed by God (17).
 - 1. He gives life to the dead.
 - 2. He calls things that are not as though they were.

Concerning this section, Stuart Briscoe wrote (102), "The somewhat tedious nature of this part of the Epistle has led some people to avoid it. This is unfortunate because great and powerful truths are to be found in it." Let's read vv 13-17.

Notice the first characteristic of God's promise.

I. God's promise is revealed (13-15).

V 13 says, "For the promise that he should be the heir of the world was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith." The first thing to notice is that the promise of God is revealed. God revealed His promise. To whom? First of all...

A. God gave His promise to Abraham.

What is "the promise"? In the Greek language, there are two words which mean promise (Barclay, 68). The first word (huposchesis) means a promise which is entered into upon conditions. For example, "I promise to wash your corvette if you'll let me drive it." That's a conditional promise. The second word (epaggelia) means a promise made out of the goodness of someone's heart quite unconditionally. Which of the two words do you think the apostle Paul used in v 13? The second. God's promise to Abraham was unconditional.

What promise did God give to Abraham? V 13 says, "that he should be the heir of the world." The Phillips Modern English paraphrase says that the promise to

Abraham and his descendants was "that they should eventually possess the world." The message of the Bible can be summed up in one sentence. God is forming a people for Himself. The Bible tells us how. God created mankind to serve Him in this world. But Adam rejected that plan, and plummeted the human race into destruction. God's plan was to undo what Adam did. How? He chose a man, named Abraham. Through that man, He formed a family, comprised of Jacob and his 12 sons. Through that family, He formed a nation, Israel. Through that nation, He sent into the world the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Through the Messiah, God is forming a people for Himself, a people that will love and serve Him throughout eternity.

It all goes back to the promise God gave to Abraham. God promised Abraham that he would be the heir of the world. "Abraham, I'm going to restore the world to Myself, through you. That's a promise."

But how did Abraham enter into the benefits of this promise?

1. It's not received through the Law.

In the Greek text, the first word of v 13 is "NOT." "Not through the Law was the promise to Abraham." The Rabbis taught that the promise was made to Abraham on the basis of his fulfillment of the Law. That is, he earned the right to receive the promise of God.

Is that true? No. We learned in Rom 3:28, "We conclude that a man is justified by faith." In Rom 4:2, "For if Abraham were justified by works, he has something of which to glory, but not before God." Abraham was not saved by circumcision (as we saw in vv 9-12, he was justified at least 14 years before he was circumcised). Neither was Abraham saved by the Law. The Law was not even given until 400 years after Abraham! He didn't enter into the benefits of God's promise through the Law. As Warren Wiersbe put it (525), "The Law was not given to save men, but to show men that they need to be saved."

How then did Abraham enter into the benefits of God's promise. The same way we do. The promise of God is received through faith.

2. It's received through faith.

V 13 "But through the righteousness of faith." Righteousness, that is, a right standing with God, comes by simple faith.

I want you to see the specifics of this promise to Abraham by looking at the record of Abraham's life in Genesis. What was God's promise to Abraham? The details are revealed in Gen 12:2, "And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing." The promise is elaborated in Gen 13:15-16, "For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth." Then in Gen 15:5, "Look now toward heaven and count the stars if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be."

God's promise to Abraham contained four details--I will give you a great name, a great land, and a great people. It will all happen through a great son, a son of promise.

Think of what that promise sounded like to Abraham, "Your seed will be as numerous as the stars you see in the night sky!" At the time, Abraham was in his 80's. He was childless. They had tried for years, but now he was beyond the age at which men naturally become fathers. And his wife was certainly beyond the age of motherhood. The facts shouted, "No way! It can't happen. It's impossible."

Yet Abraham believed God. The text says in Gen 15:6, "And he believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness." F. F. Bruce made this observation about Abraham (114), "Having nothing to go upon but the bare word of God, he relied on that, in the face of all the opposition indications which pressed upon him from every side." God gave the promise to Abraham, and Abraham received it, not by the law (not by his own merit), but by simple faith.

B. God gave His promise to us.

V 13 says the promise was also to Abraham's "seed." Who is Abraham's seed? V 11 says that Abraham is the father of all them that what? Believe. We may participate in the benefits of God's promise the same way Abraham did. By faith.

Why is the promise not linked to keeping the Law? You need to be aware that there is a movement which began in the 1960's known as "Christian Reconstructionism." It's also known as "Dominion Theology," or "Theonomy" (a combination of two Greek words--"Theos"/God and "nomos"/law). This movement asserts that all of society is to be brought into obedience to the Mosaic Law ("Christian Reconstructionism," Renald Showers, Israel My Glory, Dec 1990/Jan 1991, pp. 17-20).

This teaching asserts that in the Old Testament, Israel was God's covenant people. But Israel rejected God, so God excommunicated Israel. God replaced Israel with a new group as His covenant people. That new group is the Church. The Church is the new "spiritual" Israel. What's more, the Church has inherited the Law that God gave to Israel. What does that mean? For them it means that the duty of the church is "to conquer the world for Christ"; "to work for the creation of a one-world Christian order"; "to work for world dominion under Christ's lordship"; "to impress heaven's pattern on earth"; "to Christianize culture worldwide"; "to transform every nation into a Christian nation (p. 18)." How? By enforcing the Mosaic Law worldwide.

How should we view the Law (Torah)? Look at vv 14-15, "For if they who are of the law be heirs, faith is made void..." What's true of the Law? I notice 4 things. It came after Abraham. It does not produce righteousness. It brings wrath (a consequence of disobedience). It reveals sin (it underscores our desperate need for help).

How then do we participate in God's promise? Not by the Law, but the same way Abraham did, by faith. "Faith" is a word we use all the time but often misunderstand. We tell people, "You need more faith." People tell us, "My faith is too small." But what's the problem? Stuart Briscoe suggests (105), "The object of faith is that which really matters more than anything else. Some people who had strong faith in thin ice never lived to tell the tale but died in faith. Others who had weak faith in thick ice were as safe as if they stood on concrete. Abraham's faith is not exemplary because of its strength or lack of it, but because its object was God."

Think about something. Abraham was 75 years old when God gave the promise to Abraham. He was 100 years old when Isaac was born. Why did God make him wait 25 long years for the promise to be fulfilled? For several reasons, perhaps, but the most striking to me is this--to show that God is in the business of doing the impossible. The promise was fulfilled supernaturally, not naturally.

The first characteristic of God's promise is that it is revealed.

II. God's promise is reliable (16-17).

We can depend on God's promise. We can trust His promise. For two reasons.

A. It's guaranteed by grace (16).

V 16 "Therefore, it is of faith, that it might be by grace, to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed." Notice the promise is "sure," and that this certainty is linked to grace. To whom does this guarantee of grace apply? To two groups.

1. *To Jews*
2. *To Non-Jews*

V 16 says, "Not only to that which is of the law (those who possessed the Law, that is, the Jews), but also to that which is of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (including non-Jews)."

That's the way grace is. God shows favor to people who deserve wrath. He chooses and forms a people who come to Him on the same terms, through faith in Christ alone. His promise is guaranteed by grace.

Listen to what Martin Lloyd-Jones says about the significance of grace (198), "There is nothing for man to boast of, not even his faith. If you boast about your faith, if you boast about the fact that you have believed while someone else has not, it is no longer grace; and it is no longer to God's glory, but the credit goes to your belief. It has to be either of works or of grace; and if you claim merit even for your faith you are turning your faith into works, and you are taking from the glory of God, you are taking from the principle of grace and the freeness of God's gift. It is altogether from God; and it is of faith that it might be by grace, in order that God might have all the glory."

There are no heroes at the foot of the cross. We are all saved the same way, by grace alone, through faith alone. You may have been brought up in a Christian home, and you have passed through the church doors every time they've been opened. Or, perhaps you grew up in family that didn't honor God. In either case, you are saved the same way, by faith in Christ alone.

The promise of God is reliable because it's guaranteed by grace.

B. It's guaranteed by God (17).

V 17 "As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations." There's the promise. What makes this promise so reliable? It's guaranteed by God. God's promise depends on God. Notice two things God does.

1. *He gives life to the dead.*

V 17 "God, who gives life to the dead." You remember well that story of Gen 22. God told Abraham to offer up his son Isaac. Abraham was obedient, even though

it didn't make sense to kill the son of the promise. What enabled him to believe and obey when the stakes were so high? Heb 11:19 says that Abraham knew "that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead."

God gives life to the dead. He did it for Abraham. He does it for us, too. Eph 2:1 says, "And you hath He made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins."

Notice a second activity which guarantees the promise of God.

2. He calls things that are not as though they were.

That's what v 17 says. In the beginning there was God, and nothing else. But God spoke. God called into existence things that were not. God's command brings into being what did not previously exist. To God, the future is just as certain as the past. He sees those who will be born 100 years from now as though they are.

What does that mean for us? It means you can believe God's promise. There is nothing outside of Him that can alter His promise. He will do what He said He would do. The promise to Abraham, and to us, is guaranteed by grace and by God Himself.

Application: The promise of God is revealed and reliable. What difference should that make for us? Stuart Briscoe tell us (103), "These truths, when applied, lead to the discovery that there is one thing God is looking for in the confused and convoluted world of human religion, tradition, and culture. Is that man in the midst of all the accumulated weight of the Jewish tradition a humble believer in the God who justifies the ungodly? Is that Muslim who professes to pray five times a day, to give to the poor, to visit Mecca, to observe Ramadan trusting in his ritual or in the God who justifies freely by His grace? Is the Buddhist who in his quest for enlightenment endeavors to practice the right views, right desires, right speech, right conduct, right mode of living, right effort, right awareness, and right meditation really trusting in the eightfold path or in a God who through the blood of Christ freely forgives our straying from His path? The same can be said for Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, all denominations...what are they looking to for salvation?"

What have you done with the revealed, reliable promise of God? Can you echo the following words? (from Lloyd-Jones, 206)

"A debtor to mercy alone, of covenant mercy I sing;

Nor fear, with Thy righteousness on, my person and off'rings to bring.

The terrors of law and of God, with me can have nothing to do;

My Savior's obedience and blood hide all my transgressions from view.

The work which His goodness began, the arm of His strength will complete;

His promise is Yea and Amen, and never was forfeited yet.

Things future, nor things that are now, not all things below or above,

Can make Him His purpose forgo, or sever my soul from His love.

My name from the palms of His hands, eternity will not erase;

Impressed on His Heart it remains in marks of indelible grace.

Yes, I to the end shall endure, as sure as the earnest is given;

More happy, but not more secure, the glorified spirits in heaven."