

Sermon for June 25, 2017 – 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 4:18-25 (Evangelical Heritage Version)

Theme: Saving Faith

- 1) *See it in action*
- 2) *Consider its result.*

<sup>18</sup>*Hoping beyond what he could expect, he believed that he would become the father of many nations, just as he was told: “This is how many your descendants will be.”* <sup>19</sup>*He did not weaken in faith, even though he considered his own body as good as dead (because he was about one hundred years old), and even though he considered Sarah’s womb to be dead.* <sup>20</sup>*He did not waver in unbelief with respect to God’s promise, but he grew strong in faith, giving glory to God* <sup>21</sup>*and being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.* <sup>22</sup>*This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.”* <sup>23</sup>*Now the statement “it was credited to him” was not written for him alone,* <sup>24</sup>*but also for us to whom it would be credited, namely, to us who believe in the one who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead.* <sup>25</sup>*He was handed over to death because of our trespasses and was raised to life because of our justification.*

“Faith” is a word you hear all the time. When going through a rough patch, someone might tell you to have faith that things will get better. A baseball coach might tell a nervous batter: “Don’t worry, I have faith in you.” People talk about having faith in our government, military, police and medical services. Finally, when it comes to religion, the Bible tells us that faith in Christ saves.

Faith is a word we hear all the time, but what exactly does it mean? The Oxford dictionary defines “faith” as having complete trust or confidence in someone or something. Faith in God, therefore, is living in complete confidence that the LORD will do everything he promised to do.

Faith is a vitally important concept to understand – especially when it comes to our relationship with God. Why? Because, as we will learn in today’s sermon, we are saved through faith. With the example of Abraham as our guide, let us consider this truth, under the theme: **Saving Faith** 1) *See it in action.* 2) *Consider its result.*

Part One: See it in Action

Our sermon text, is found in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans. In the previous 3 chapters, the Apostle Paul showed how all people (Jew and Gentile alike) stand condemned under God’s law. Why? Because no one on this earth can perfectly keep God’s law the way he wants it to be kept. God’s purpose in giving the law was not that it should be a means for us to earn heaven, but to show our utter sinfulness so that we would stop relying on ourselves and look to him alone for forgiveness, life and salvation. “*There is no difference,*” Paul writes, “*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.*”<sup>i</sup> In other words,

*“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”<sup>iii</sup>*

Faith in Jesus’ sacrifice for our sins saves; but how? How does saving faith exhibit itself in a person’s life? Using the example of Abraham, the apostle Paul answers both these questions.

He writes: <sup>18</sup>*Hoping beyond what he could expect, [Abraham] believed that he would become the father of many nations, just as he was told: “This is how many your descendants will be.”*

Let me explain what Paul is saying in this verse by offering a little background information about Abraham. For a long time, Abraham and his wife Sarah were childless. They resigned themselves to the fact that they would never have children. But one day, when Abraham was 75 and Sarah 65, God appeared to Abraham – promising him descendants. Given his age, this was far more than Abraham could ever hope for – let alone expect. And yet, impossible as it seemed, Abraham believed God’s promise would come true. Why? For two reasons: 1) the LORD himself promised it and 2) the LORD also promised that, through his offspring, all nations on earth would be blessed. In other words, together with the promise of many descendants, God promised Abraham that the long-awaited Savior from sin would be an offspring from his own body. This aspect of the promise gave Abraham the greatest joy – moving him to take God at his word. Despite how impossible it seemed, Abraham believed that God would give him a son, through whom the Savior would come into the world.

But here’s the thing: God did not fulfill his promise for Abraham right away. No, he made Abraham wait 25 years – periodically reminding Abraham of the promise when he was tempted to doubt. Can you imagine what that would have been like for Abraham? 25 years of waiting? I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I could have waited that long without becoming somewhat skeptical.

But not Abraham: *He did not weaken in faith, even though he considered his own body as good as dead (because he was about one hundred years old), and even though he considered Sarah’s womb to be dead.*

Abraham was not naïve. Everything he knew about natural law told him that God’s promise was impossible. Humanly speaking, Sarah and he had as much chance of bearing children as if they were dead! And yet, in the face of these blatantly obvious facts, [Abraham] *did not waver in unbelief with respect to God’s promise, but he grew strong in faith, giving glory to God and being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.*

Notice what gave Abraham his confidence: It was not merely the fact that “he believed,” but it was God’s specific promises. Without those promises, Abraham’s faith would have been meaningless. But because the LORD himself promised Abraham a son – through whom all nations on earth would be blessed - Abraham believed. The more he reflected on both the promise and the LORD who made it, the stronger he grew in his faith. And that faith showed itself in how he lived his life: as a mere pilgrim on this earth, who was *looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*<sup>iii</sup>

Brothers and sisters in Christ: take note of Abraham and understand what faith is and how it is strengthened. Saving faith is not merely a wish or uncertain hope that God loves us. No, to have saving faith is to have complete confidence in God and all his promises. But how do we get such a conviction? I mean, I feel temptations to doubt every day. The media, secular science, society and even my own sinful reason tell me that I am a fool for believing everything the Bible says. “It’s been almost 2000 years since Jesus gave his ascension promise to come again soon.” they say, “Where is he? How can you be sure God exists? And if he does exist, how can you be sure that what you believe is true? Do you really think God would just forgive your sins without having you do anything in return? How can you be sure you will go to heaven when you die?”

What should we do when these questions and temptations to doubt enter our mind? Do what Abraham did: focus on God’s promises. Meditate on what he says in his Word about himself and our salvation. Focus your attention on Christ, and God will strengthen your faith in him. He will help you – not by removing all temptation to doubt from your life – but by giving you the conviction that God will keep his promises. Why? Because God does what he promises. God’s Word alone convinces us of this fact. This is why it is of the utmost importance to constantly remain in the word – ever learning and meditating upon God’s wonderful Gospel promises as Abraham did in childlike faith. The LORD promises to bless us as we do this. How so? By granting us the very things he promises, as we will learn next.

## Part Two: Consider its result

What was the result of Abraham’s unwavering faith in God’s promise? The Bible tells us: “*it was credited to him as righteousness.*”

What was credited to Abraham as righteousness? Was it merely his faith in God’s promise to provide him a son? More than that: it was Abraham’s faith in God’s promise that one of his descendants would be the Savior, who would take away the sins of the world. This is what God credited to Abraham as righteousness.

Now, what does it mean to “credit” someone with righteousness? First of all, let us define what righteousness is. To be righteous is to be 100% “right” – that is, perfectly sinless and holy. Our sins prevent us from ever being righteous on our own. But here is the amazing thing: as Abraham’s example shows, God credits believers with his own righteousness, so that we might receive everything he promises.

To help understand how God credits righteousness to the believer through faith, imagine for a moment that I was a known billionaire and wrote a million dollar check to each and every one of you, to help you pay off all your debts. If you believe the check is real and cash it, then the money I promised you would be credited to your account. But if you didn’t believe the check is real, then you wouldn’t cash it. Would the money that I had in my bank account do you any good? No. Why? Because your refusal to believe separated you from the money I saved up for you.

If you can picture this scenario, then maybe you can understand what it means that righteousness is credited to the believer through faith. We should not understand this to mean that our faith is

the cause of our righteousness; rather our faith receives the righteousness God offers us as a gift – the righteousness Jesus won for us through his perfect life, innocent death and glorious resurrection. Through faith, the once and for all payment Jesus made on the cross for our sins gets credited to our account. Because of this fact, we are confident that God acquits us of all sin and that we will go to heaven when we die.

This is what Paul means when he says: <sup>23</sup>*Now the statement “it was credited to him” was not written for [Abraham] alone, <sup>24</sup>but also for us to whom it would be credited, namely, to us who believe in the one who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead. <sup>25</sup>He was handed over to death because of our trespasses and was raised to life because of our justification.*

I have one last illustration that I want to share with you regarding faith. Imagine you were sick, and needed a shot of medicine to save your life. After receiving the shot, would you say: “Thank God for needles; they saved my life!” No. And why not? Because the needle didn’t save your life; the medicine administered through the needle did.

What is true regarding the relationship between needles and medicine is also true regarding the relationship between faith and God’s grace. Sin is the mortal disease of the soul with which all humanity has been infected. Without treatment, we would die eternally. God’s grace centered in the forgiveness Jesus won for us through his cross is the medicine which God uses to save us from eternal death. And how does the Holy Spirit administer this medicine? Through the needle of faith in God’s promise that Jesus paid for our sins in full. Our faith is not the cause of our salvation. It is merely the channel through which God’s promised grace is received and applied.

And where does this faith come from? Later on in Romans, Paul writes: *Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*<sup>iv</sup> In other words, only the Gospel of what Christ did to save us creates and strengthens faith in our hearts to receive God’s salvation – just as it did for Abraham. Such faith changes our lives because through it God forgives our sins – giving us the eternal life, righteousness and salvation Christ won for us.

Therefore, brothers and sisters in Christ, ask God to help you be like Abraham – clinging to Christ in faith. Be strengthened in this faith by meditating on God’s Word, and, like Abraham, you will see the fulfillment of everything God promises you – all to the glory of his name. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Romans 3:22-25 NIV84

<sup>ii</sup> John 3:16 NIV84

<sup>iii</sup> Hebrews 11:10 NIV84

<sup>iv</sup> Romans 10:17 NIV84