

A New Look at an Old Way

Romans 4:13-25

March 20, 2011

Last week we left in the middle of Paul's argument that even Abraham, the friend of God and father of the Jews, was justified before God by his faith and not by anything he had done—certainly not by the covenant he had with God. This week we pick up as Paul is explaining that idea and filling it out some more.

It was not only justification and righteousness that Abraham received through faith, it was also the fulfillment of the promises God had made to him. Our text begins, *“It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.”* (v.13) Faith is not only important to righteousness and the foundation of our relationships with God, it is equally important to every aspect of our relationships with Him. There is no way in which our lives intersect with God which is not absolutely dependant on **faith**. Who we are depends on our faith in God. Whether or not we are right with God depends on our faith in Him. What we do should even depend on our faith. We must live our lives obedient to God and trusting that He will keep His promises in His way and at His times.

As he begins to make this point, Paul says, *“For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.”* (vv.14,15) For Abraham, the great promise was that this old man who had a barren wife would be the father of

many nations. Much of Abraham's life revolved around this one theme, even when it didn't make sense.

“Abram” means “father.” This was his name when he entered the story, and it was ironic because he had no children. Despite decades of marriage his wife, Sarah, had never borne him a child, let alone a son. He loved her dearly, but had resigned himself that there would be no one to carry on his legacy. All “father's” possessions would be passed down to his slave.

Even worse, when God enters the story He starts talking about all the children this childless old man was going to have. God made many grandiose promises about Abram's children being as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore or the stars in the night sky. In the midst of this God changed his name to “Abraham” which means “father of many.”

This is the grand promise God made and which Abraham trusted—that he would be the father of many and that nations would descend from his children. And God brought the promise about. Many years after he should have had children, many years after Sarah was past child bearing age, they had a boy named Isaac. Isaac was the first of many heirs of God's promise to Abraham. The Jews were very aware that they were the descendants through whom God carried this promise He had made to Abraham. Paul's question is how all this came about. Did Abraham see the fulfillment of God's promises—the birth of Isaac and of Isaac's children—because of his obedience to the covenant or because of his faith? As we saw last week—it's faith.

Paul tells us that, if being an heir to the promise is based on the law, if it is based on obeying the covenant,

then faith has no value and the promise is worthless. These are pretty strong words. They are based on the truth that the law cannot save. We have said many times that the law can only point out our sin and make us more aware of it. It does nothing to help keep us from sin. It does not change our hearts. It points out our evil. It does not give us strength. It demonstrates our weakness. It does not bring us into the love of God. It brings God's wrath down on us, and rightly so. If we depend on the law to lead us into right relationship with God, then faith is useless. If we are convinced that it all depends on our behavior, that leaves no room for God's grace and our faith-filled response. It is that faith, and nothing else, that makes us righteous and opens the way for God's promises.

Paul then said something that seems odd. "Where there is no law there is no transgression." I have heard people take Paul to mean that those who have not received God's law are saved. This seems to be an attractive option, but everything else about the scripture and Paul denies it. We have already looked at Paul's argument that everybody stands guilty before God—both the Jews who have God's law and the Gentiles who don't. We have already looked at the fact that one of the clearest themes in scripture is that we all stand guilty before God. Even those who do not have God's written law have His unwritten law in their consciences and we are all in violation of it.

So, Paul does not mean that those who do not have the law are not guilty of sin. What, then, does he mean? It's just another way of saying that having the **law** makes our condition worse, not better. Everybody who has ever

lived has stood guilty before God and deserving of His wrath because of their sin. This statement does not back off of that. Paul is pointing out that when we have the law, the clearly stated rules and principles by which we are to live, sin becomes worse. At least those who have not heard can say, "Yes, I knew it was wrong, but nobody told me." Where there is no law there is still sin, but that sin is not a willful disobedience against a clear command. The law adds that second layer of offense. This is why the law brings more wrath rather than providing a way out of God's wrath.

Paul goes back to his main point and summarizes with the next statement. *"Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham."* (v.16) Just like justification and righteousness, God's promise comes by faith. All of our interaction with God is based on His grace. This was true of Abraham even though the Jews had forgotten it. It is God's grace that guarantees the promise to all of Abraham's offspring. It is faith, and not law, that defines who those offspring are.

God promised to make Abraham the father of many nations. While several nations have descended from Abraham through the law and his bloodline, Paul points out that those who have Abraham's faith are far more numerous and in God's sight they are Abraham's children whatever nation from which they hail. Seeing this, look with me for a moment at the extent to which Abraham is the father of "many nations." In the Revelation of Jesus Christ, the apostle John had a vision

of the throne room of God. Look with me at what he saw there. *“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’”* (Revelation 7:9,10) “A great multitude that no one could count” sounds a lot like the grains of sand on the seashore or the stars in the night sky. John saw in his vision the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham. Abraham wasn’t to be the father of a lot of people in a few nations. Through his example of faith Abraham is to be the father of countless **people** from every nation. That’s a fulfillment of a promise!

Abraham’s faith was in, “. . . *the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.*” (v.17) I love this description of God. He is sovereign. There is nothing out of His control. He rules over the world and He knows what the future holds. We have to accept this for both what we perceive as good and as bad. God rules over the earth and the wind and the waves. It is His decree that keeps the waves on the shore. It is also His decree that brings earthquakes and tidal waves. If we are going to have a God who is powerful enough to save us and provide for us, we must also accept that He chooses to allow things like the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, and even bring them about. While we cannot say that God brought that on those people as a punishment for any specific sin, it is a stark reminder that we all are guilty and deserving of

God’s wrath. We may tell ourselves that nobody deserves that, but the truth is that death and destruction are what we all deserve.

God is not a monster for allowing the devastation and suffering. He is incredibly gracious in that He rescues anybody from destruction and saves them. It is God, and no other, who brings the dead to life. He is a living God and He is God of the living. Death has no power over Him. It does not even have power in His presence. Time and again in the scriptures we see life being restored where disaster has taken it away. We are not promised that those who die will be returned to life here. We are promised that faith in God will lead to eternal life—His presence here, and continued life in His presence in the age to come.

God does this by taking those who are spiritually dead and giving them life. He recreates them to be what He wants them to be. Through His Holy Spirit, His Holy Breath, He breathes His life into them, and those who are physically alive but spiritually dead become living beings in a sense they had never known before! This is what our Sunday School lesson was about this morning. It is why Jesus describes finding faith in God’s promises as being born again.

Nothing is impossible with God. Once God has decided to do something it is as **good** as **done**. From the beginning of the prophets, they spoke of God’s decrees of what He would do in the past tense. They wrote of what God would do as if He had already done it. Paul looks back to that and says it is still true. There is a tension in the Christian life between what God has said and what we see in the world around us. We call it the

“already and not yet.” Paul points to it here when he says that God calls things that are not as if they were. He named Abram Abraham, even though he did not yet have a child. He called Gideon “mighty warrior” as Gideon hid in a pit for pressing grapes. He called named Simon Peter, which means “rock,” even as Simon was one of the least stable of the apostles and often spoke before he had anything to say. He calls us, *us*, righteous, holy, perfect, beautiful, spotless, and His children! He calls us these things because that is what He is making us to be.

Even more to the point, God calls all who believe in Him **saved**. In crediting righteousness to us He brings us from the realm of those who deserve His wrath into the realm of those on whom He can shower His love and mercy. Going back to Abraham, Paul wrote, “*The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.*” (vv.23,24) All these promises of God become ours when we believe **Him**. He raised Jesus, our Lord, from the dead. Of all the resurrections in the Bible, this is the most miraculous and the most important. It is belief in the God who raised Jesus, and by raising Him demonstrated that He accepted His sacrifice on our behalf, that makes us right with God—nothing else. We believe. God credits that belief to us as righteousness just as He did Abraham. The situations and circumstances of our lives do not change right away, but we get new hearts and our lives are never the same after.

This works because of what this Jesus whom God raised from the dead did. “*He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*” (v.25) We must believe in God. We must believe His promise that what He did through Jesus can apply to us too. This belief is one that changes our lives. It is not just about accepting some facts in our heads. It is about reorienting our lives around a new fundamental truth. If we belong to Jesus then we are not our own. We are bought with a price and we no longer have any rights or authority over ourselves. If Jesus is our Lord then He is in charge and we are to spend ourselves in obedience to Him. We will not do it perfectly. Thank God, however, that Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf, and so the life He offers us is perfect.

Again we are brought back to the truth that it all depends on what God has done through Jesus. I can’t put it any better than the prophet Isaiah did, and so we close with His description of what Jesus did. “*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering . . . he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*” (Isaiah 53:3,5,6)