

Prayers

To God

Read psalm 46 and use it to inspire your prayers to God; it speaks of the natural wonders of Creation, but also of God's presence 'in the city', and the turmoil of politics as 'kingdoms totter'. At the end of this extraordinary poem praise, it says 'be still and know that I am God ...'

For Self

Lord Jesus; You bring true compassion into this world of selfishness and materialism. Remind me of Your love for the lost, the poor, the weak and the disadvantaged, and open my eyes to their need. Inspire me to follow Your example of living for others and not for myself, and give me a heart of service. In this way, may I live the Gospel I declare. Thank You Lord Jesus: AMEN.

For others

Pray for those who are in the spotlight of the press at the moment

Pray for the press, that they use their freedoms well and do not abuse them

Pray for those who need more attention from the press, because there is news people need to know and it is not covered ...

Meditation

I was wondering when the Lord might speak to me; and then it happened:

I was working at my desk, and He said 'Follow me';

I was in the middle of a meal, and He said 'Share with the poor';

I was thinking about myself, and He said 'Love your neighbour';

I was checking my bank balance, and He said 'Give sacrificially';

I was telling a friend about my work, and He said 'Share the Good News';

I was relaxing at home watching the news, and He said 'I am the truth';

I was enjoying a drive in my car, and He said 'I am Lord of all';

I was living life to the full, and He said 'I died for you';

I came to a stop, and He said 'follow me' ... again.

Bible Passage

Romans 4:13-25

¹³ The promise that Abraham would inherit the world with his descendants had nothing to do with the giving of the law, but everything to do with being put right with God by faith. ¹⁴ So if the people of the law are the only heirs, then faith is invalid and the promise is meaningless, ¹⁵ for the law brings only wrath, and without the law there is no disobedience.

¹⁶ So the promise depends on faith because it is about grace and is guaranteed thereby to all Abraham's descendants; these are not just those who keep the law but those who demonstrate the faith of Abraham. Before God, he is the father of us all ¹⁷ (as it is written '*I have made you father of many nations*'), the God in whom '*he believed*', who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that do not otherwise exist!

¹⁸ Contrary to all reasonable hope, Abraham believed what God had said to him; '*Your descendants will be numerous*', and he would become the '*father of many nations*'. ¹⁹ His faith was not weakened through knowing that he was unable to procreate, being about one hundred years old, or that Sarah's womb was barren; ²⁰ he did not doubt the promise of God but grew stronger in faith and gave glory to God. ²¹ He was fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised, ²² and this is why his faith was '*regarded as putting him right with God*'.

²³ Now the words '*regarded as putting him right ...*' were not written for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for us as well. We will be '*regarded*' in the same way through our faith in Him who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead, ²⁵ who was handed over because of our sins and was raised precisely so that we may be put right with God!

Bible study Review

Romans chapter 4 is certainly a taxing passage, and not easy to read or understand today because it deals with things like circumcision and the law. It is a part of Romans most forget, largely because the church has long since grown away from its Jewish roots. We must not forget, however, that we do not practice circumcision or keep ritual Law today because Paul's argument here in Romans was successful. His analysis of the Gospel prevailed and was accepted by the church. Yet if we are courageous enough and are willing to try and learn from each part of Scripture, then we will find that this passage does indeed have much to say. For example, Paul uses this opportunity to encourage all God's people to copy Abraham's faith (4:18f.), and use his life as a means of inspiration.

At the start, Paul continues detailed legal arguments from the first half of the chapter, by insisting that Abraham was given a right relationship with God by faith (righteousness) before he was circumcised (4:13). The logic of his point is simple; the Jewish people cannot therefore be the sole heirs of God's covenant. They have mistakenly placed their faith in the Laws of Moses and the ritual of circumcision when they should have looked further back in their history to discover that righteousness before God had always been granted on the basis of faith (4:14).

On the face of it, this is extraordinary, for the people of Israel in Old Testament times clearly defined themselves in terms of their covenant with God indicated by circumcision, and the Law. In truth, scripture says remarkably little about the sign of circumcision, and there are plenty of

prophetic pleas to be found appealing to God's people to respond to Him by love and mercy and not by legalism (e.g. Amos 5:20-27). But Paul is not saying that that Jews cannot inherit God's promises, only that God's love is bigger and broader than what they thought. His gracious covenant includes Gentiles of faith, who like Abraham when he first 'believed' in God, are uncircumcised. Moreover, this broadening out of the Gospel to the Gentiles is the fulfilment of one of God's key covenant promises to Abraham, that he would become the *'father of many nations'* (4:17, see Genesis 12:2,3). It is a powerful point, and to this day, Christians accept Abraham as their ancestor not just because Jesus was a Jew, but because Abraham was the first person to respond to God by faith.

From verse 18 onwards, Paul runs through some of the details of Abraham's life to draw out further points about the nature of his faith. So when Abraham 'believed' God, the issue at stake was his childlessness; Abraham had no son and heir and it seemed that his wealth together with God's covenant blessing would be taken by a distant relative (see Gen 15:2). Further, the idea that Abraham and his barren wife Sarah would bear a child seemed to him far-fetched; he was 90 and was too old, and Sarah was 80 and past the age of child-bearing (4:19; the ages can be computed from the details in Genesis). We find out later that Abraham was not as infertile in his old age as he imagined, because he was able to have a son by Hagar, his servant (named Ishmael - Genesis 16). On this account, some feel that Paul's point here is less than reliable, but Paul is more concerned with the barrenness of the couple than which one was fertile! His message here is that Abraham's faith was rewarded even though Scripture clearly reports him as stumbling in his journey of faith (see Genesis 17f.). Yet along the way he *'grew stronger in faith'* (4:20) and eventually, in fulfilment of God's promises, Isaac was born in miraculous circumstances (Gen 20).

Paul reports all this not merely to pick up on one feature of the long story of Abraham's life. Rather, he presents faith as the single most important thread running through Abraham's life, and he encourages us to believe in God like Abraham. He finishes by claiming that Abraham's faith is essentially the same as that possessed by Christians when they *'believe in Him who raise our Lord Jesus from the dead'* (4:24).

It may sound odd for Paul to make this gigantic leap from the earliest books of the Old Testament to the Gospels. Remember, however, that the very last act of Abraham's life recorded in Scripture is his sacrifice of a lamb in place of his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, a story with strong connections with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Ultimately, faith in God is faith in Him who raised Jesus from the dead!

Going Deeper

New words and phrases found in this passage of Romans

This passage describes the quality of Abraham's faith using references to his life story as found in Genesis. In addition, Paul introduces some other significant ideas; these are *'grace'* (4:16), *'hope'* (4:18), and growing *'stronger in faith'* (4:20). Each of these are highly important, and the next chapter of Romans (ch 5) begins with a powerful description of the way that faith grows within the mature Christian (5:1-5)

In addition, there are some verses of praise to God, in verses 17 and 25. On the first occasion, Paul breaks off from the flow of his argument about making Abraham a father, to offer praise for God's creative wisdom. His praise is fascinating and uniquely worded; *'God - who gives life to*

the dead and calls into being things that do not otherwise exist!' This certainly gives us pause for thought about the creative power of God! The second time Paul praises God (4:25) are thought to connect with Abraham's 'almost' sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah. In that moment, everything Abraham lived for and believed was placed in God's hands, by faith, and it was traditionally believed that God saved Isaac from sacrifice to signify the manner in which he would one day raise Jesus from the dead. With this in mind, the words of verse 25 have added meaning; *'to us who believe in Him who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead, who was handed over because of our sins and was raised in order to make us right with God!* (4:24,25) This reads like something between a statement of faith and what is called a 'doxology' (i.e. 'words of praise' to God).

The great promises made to Abraham

The promise Paul speaks of in verse 16 is God's promise that Abraham would *'inherit the world'*, and is quoted in the previous verses (4:13-15). This combines the three promises made to Abraham when God appeared to him (Genesis 12,15,17) and the fourth great promise made to both him and his son Isaac after he had passed the test of faith on Mount Moriah. Because of the importance of these passage I will quote them here;

1. The first happens when Abraham came into Canaan for the first time; *'I will make of you a great nation ... in you all the families of the earth will be blessed'* (Gen 12:2,3);
2. The second happens when God promises Abraham that he will have a son; *'your own son will be your heir ...look to the heaven and count the stars ... so shall your descendants be'* (Gen 15:4,5);
3. The third happens when Abraham is given the rite of circumcision thirteen years later when Sarah finally becomes pregnant *'I will make my Covenant with you ... you shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations ... I will establish my covenant ... to you and your offspring after you'* (Gen 17:2-7).
4. The great Covenant blessing is given to both Abraham and Isaac later on after Isaac has grown into a teenager; *'I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.'* (Gen 22:17-18)

Our passage today quotes various parts of these four great promises, which are about God acting through Abraham's life to make something of this man he has chosen. God was successful not because Abraham was any better than other people; indeed, he made some quite devastating mistakes, including trying to have a son and heir outside of God's promises and outside of his marriage (resulting in the birth of Ishmael - Gen 16). Yet because Abraham had faith (15:16) God always led him back into the right pathway as acts of grace (see 4:16). This grace means God's underserved favour, resting upon those who respond to Him in faith, and this is the first place in Romans where we get a glimpse of the famous *'law versus grace'* contrast found in so many of his writings.

Significantly, God had always intended to bless the world through Abraham (sometimes referred to as *'many nations'* - see promises 1,3 and 4 above). This blessing has only ever meant one thing, the blessing of a relationship with God restored after the 'Fall' (Gen 3). If God accepted Abraham's faith as sufficient to restore this relationship, then this is a clear indication that faith was always intended to be the key that unlocks the doorway to a relationship with God

for all people. Through Abraham, God wanted to build a nation that would demonstrate this to the world, a *'light for the nations'* (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6), yet Israel failed in its task and it was left to Jesus to fulfil this promise.

The example of Abraham's life

In this passage of his letter, Paul quotes from God's promises to Abraham, and also gives a general example of Abraham's faith. The whole story of Abraham in Genesis 12 to 23 is worth reading because it contains many stories from which we can learn about faith, even today, in a different world from that in which Abraham lived. Here, Paul focusses on probably the most important feature of Abraham's life story, which is the struggle Abraham and Sarah had to conceive a child and thus make real the covenant promises of God.

Paul spoke of Abraham's faith by which he believes God will give him and his wife a son in their old age (4:18-20, Gen 15:1-6). This son is supremely important because through him, God's relationship with Abraham will be passed on through the generations to the whole world. Yet Scripture records Abraham as having great difficulty at this point, for immediately after receiving the promise, he attempts to obtain a son and heir by making Hagar, Sarah's maidservant, pregnant (Gen 16). We should not be too hard on Abraham for doing this, because it was quite normal amongst ancient nomadic people to do just this. He did what was normal for his day, but God required faith for something different. He told Abraham directly that the mother of his son and heir would indeed be Sarah (17:15f.). This was not simply a racial matter, as if to preserve the 'true blood' of the ancestors of Terah and the godly line of Noah's son Shem (Gen 11:10-31), it was also evidence of the value God placed upon the unity of marriage. God's desire was to keep the Covenant of 'faith' pure, not in a racial sense, but in moral sense. Despite some difficulties, and some sharp words between God and Abraham, and also between Abraham and Sarah (Gen 21:10f.), both of them learned through the whole experience and undoubtedly grew in faith throughout their lives, and successfully brought their son through childhood into adolescence (Gen 22,23,24).

Faith grows

Paul praises Abraham's *'hope against hope'* (4:18), and his strength of faith (4:19,20) by which he gives *'glory to God'*. Abraham's problems were a passing phase, and his life was not characterised in general by doubt but by faith, and this is what was *'regarded as being right with God'*. In other words, the faith Paul describes in Abraham is a faith tried and tested in the crucible of life; it is not a one-off reaction to God's graciousness. This is the starting point, and faith grows in Abraham throughout his whole life.

Paul concludes his example of Abraham by declaring that God's promises had now been fulfilled. They had been given to Abraham, but delivered to the rest of the world through the life and death of Jesus Christ our Lord! (4:24,25) God was therefore asking all people to see in Jesus, His Son, the truth about His love and His desire to have a relationship with all. The only requirement for this to become a reality for anyone, was faith; faith that Jesus was indeed God's Son and that His life was what those who witnessed it claimed it to be; which was that of the Messiah not just of the Jewish people, but of all peoples for all times. This is what the church declares to this day.

Application

Discipleship issues

Faith grows

Faith is something that starts, grows, and comes to a completion in Jesus Christ. This is what Paul says here in our passage today. It is a matter of God's truest grace that it starts in the life of an individual at all; and anyone who feels the touch of God, or hears His voice, or responds to a call from God, will know that it is authentic because what has happened to them is undeserved. Neither does it depend upon how good anyone is, which is what Paul means by contrasting this 'grace' with the 'law' in verse 16. This remains an important matter, for people still believe, even within the church, that some deserve the answers to their prayers, for example, because they are observed to be 'such good people'! When will we learn! God's favour is undeserved and we can pull no strings to obtain His benefits by being 'good'; no, we trust Him because he loves us, with a trust that lasts our whole life long.

Faith is a living thing

It is very important for us to accept that the proof of faith comes in a lifetime of living it. Of course, a young person who has lived the faith for a few years is no less a Christian than one who has lived the faith for many decades. But for both, the testimony which counts is a testimony of faithfulness, that is, the evidence that they have borne faith through the trials of life, whatever they are, and faith that has been tested is faith that God can use in the work of His kingdom. The difficulty many Christians face today is that because many people do not talk about their faith, the bearing of it alone through life's trials can quickly become intolerable. We all need help to understand how faith works when life is tough, just as Abraham needed the voice of his wife when he could not face what was happening (as in Genesis 21 when Abraham found it hard to accept Isaac as his heir because he loved his first son Ishmael). Without sharing and mutual support, faith can become difficult to sustain, and the first thing that a church fellowship can do to help its people grow is to enable them to share their faith and support one another. In this way, a mature and confident faith can grow amongst people, a faith that truly shows the world the evidence of God's love in Jesus Christ His Son! This is our aim.

Ideas for things to do

As an exercise of faith read through the story of Abraham in Genesis 12-22 (perhaps using the studies available on the website), and for each chapter, ask yourself what can be learned about faith.

Pray for those who find it hard to accept the principle of faith as the way God wants us to respond to Him. There are some who feel that 'faith' is too abstract for them, and they seek other more concrete experiences of God before they are willing to 'believe'. Pray that God's people may accept the evidence of scripture

Questions for groups

Discuss in your group the different things that all of God's people can learn about faith from the life of Abraham.

*Why was it necessary for God to test Abraham's faith in the way described in our passage?
Why does He test our faith today?*

Do you personally feel that your own faith is 'counted' by God as placing you in a 'right relationship' with Him? How did this happen?

Final Prayer

Listen to us, Lord Jesus, and help us listen to You. Speak to us, Lord Jesus, and help us speak to You. And then, when we really begin to communicate, share with us the deeper things of faith and of the Kingdom of God, so that we might live our lives to the full and for Your praise and glory. Thank You Lord Jesus, AMEN.