

It's All About Faith

Amid the ruins of WW II Germany, a woman named Basilea Shlink brought together a small group of women in a faith community. They believed God wanted them to build a chapel, but they had nothing more than prayer, faith, and the encouragement of Scripture. So they prayed, and land was donated, but repeatedly the building authority said, *"You can't build on that land."*

So one morning Basilea decided to walk 45 minutes into town to visit the building authority and, on her way, a car slowed to offer her a ride. The driver was the town's mayor, and in five minutes she was able to explain her request. The building permit was granted, and a prayer tent was erected on the property as the women asked God to provide the missing \$61,990 of the \$62,000 needed to build. And the funds came in. Schlink wrote that *"this experience deeply etched into our hearts our responsibility to hang on in faith when a situation seems hopeless, for then the name of the Lord can be glorified before many people."*

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all knew the outcome of everything and the outcome would always be good? If we could look into the future and actually see that God was going to be faithful in guiding our children on the right path. If we could look through a telescope of time and know that we're going to be financially secure. If we could know that the problem that seems **so big** now would work itself out. We could ditch the blood pressure pills, throw away the anxiety meds, and put our feet up and sail through life.

But just because we want a calm life doesn't mean we'll have one, does it? In fact, the minute we sink down in the easy chair of life, heaven seems to push the remote and change the channel: A cardiologist says "Bypass heart surgery," or the auto body tech says "Totaled," or the test grade reads "F."

And that was certainly how it was for Abraham, or Abram, as we first know him. He is living in a land of modern-day Iraq, where he was born, where he grew up and where he expected to one day die. He was his dad's firstborn which meant that he would one day inherit dad's business and properties. Abram was married without children, and as far as we know, the "without children" part of his life was the only negative thing going on with him. So, other than that, things couldn't have been better.

But, at the age of 75, God interrupted that comfortable life when He commanded Abram to depart the house of his father and journey to a strange land formerly given to Canaan, but which God now promises to Abram and his offspring, ensuring to bless him and make him a great nation.

Abram had no idea where he would end up, what it would look like or how it would turn out. The only thing God told him was to go and that He would be with him.

He might not have wanted to admit it at first, but somehow Abram knew it was God speaking, and he knew what God was saying – pack your bags, kiss your relatives goodbye, and hit the road. But a 400 mile journey for a 75 year old is not exactly an easy move to the suburbs, is it?

Up to this point, as far as we know, God hadn't done anything in Abram's life to cause him to trust God. No miracles. No answers to prayer. No immediate ancestry of people who followed God. In fact, Abram was raised as a pagan in a pagan society. So it couldn't have been easy for him to follow God.

Nevertheless, Abram left, as the Lord had told him, taking with him his nephew Lot, his wife Sarai, and all the possessions they had accumulated, and they set out for the land of Canaan. And when they arrived Abram even built an altar there to worship the Lord.

One might say that this story is all about faith, isn't it? Just imagine a farmer in the middle of a drought. The ground is cracked, the sky is cloudless, and the air is heavy with heat. Yet, every morning he climbs into his tractor and heads to the fields to plant. Some people in the community shake their heads in wonder – *"Why waste your time?"* But the farmer keeps right on planting, because he believes the rain will come.

And that's exactly the kind of faith Paul is talking about in Romans 4:13-25 – A faith that acts on God's promise even when the circumstances scream otherwise. Paul points out four things in these verses about Abram's faith for us so that we would know exactly what makes up faith. Since sometimes it's easier to talk about what something is not, we'll begin with what faith is not, followed by what faith does, what faith actually is and, lastly, consider whom faith helps.

So in verses 13-15 we learn what faith is not. Here Paul tells us that faith isn't trying to obey and fulfill some kind of law. In other words, faith is not expecting God to accept and love us simply because we've tried our best to obey some standard. That is known as the law, not faith.

If we think that God is going to accept, love, and forgive us because we've tried hard to do what we think is right, then we're on the wrong track. And Paul tells us why.

Notice that Abram received the gift, the promise of righteousness, long before the Law ever was given. *"It was not through the law,"* Paul says, *"that Abraham and his offspring received the promise."* If we look in Galatians, we'll find that Abram received the gift of righteousness 430 years before the Mosaic Law was ever given. And second, the Law renders the promise worthless. *"For if those who live by the law are heirs (of the promise), faith has no value and the promise is worthless."* Simply put, faith is not works.

If there is an athlete here, I would challenge you to do something to demonstrate this for us. Please stand here before the pulpit and jump up and touch the ceiling. If you do that, I will give you a thousand dollars. Any volunteers? You can even stand on the platform. No volunteers? Why is that? Because you think my promise is worthless, right? I'm asking something that no one can do. Even though I sincerely mean it, it has no value to you because you can't do it.

This is what the Scriptures tell us. The Law requires something that man cannot do. All that the Law asks of us is that we love God with all our heart and strength and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.

But if we can't, then the promise is worthless. And guess what? We can't. We can't love everybody, and we don't. And we can't love God like we ought. Therefore the Law is worthless in obtaining the promise of righteousness.

But Paul doesn't stop there. There's another reason why we'll never be able to gain righteousness by trying to meet the requirements of the Law. And that is, the Law brings wrath by subjecting us to punishment if we don't make it.

Wrath is defined for us in the very first chapter of Romans as God's removal of all divine protection – we can do what we want. We can have our own way. C.S. Lewis, one of the most influential writers of the 20th century, said that the world consists of just two kinds of people: those who say to God, "*Thy will be done,*" and those to whom God is saying, "*Thy will be done.*" That is wrath.

So if the law can't achieve righteousness, what does faith do? First, the promise comes by it. We actually obtain the sense of being approved, loved, wanted, and accepted before God himself. We are a part of his family and we are forgiven of all the past. It also makes us the heir of all the world. All that is achieved by faith, not by seeking to earn it. What works couldn't do, faith does.

The second thing that faith does is to introduce the principle of grace. For we need both Law and grace. The law condemns us but grace enables us. If we had to earn the standing that we have before God we would blow it. But if it comes by grace, if it's purely a gift and it doesn't depend upon us at all but upon God alone, then it's guaranteed to us because God's not going to fail.

And then we come to the heart of the passage in verses 17-20. Here Paul tells us what faith is: First, he says the key is the object of faith. We shouldn't miss that. Almost everyone in Abram's day had faith of one kind or another. Some of them believed in idols, others believed in luck or fate, and many simply had faith in themselves. But Abram's faith, Paul says, had a divine object. He had faith in God, and he acted on it. So the quality of our faith depends upon the object in which that faith has placed its trust. That's why Jesus told us that even if we have a little tiny faith, like a grain of mustard seed, it will work.

Now we may leave here this morning with the utmost faith that when we get into our car and drive away that our car is going to operate just as it was when we parked it. But maybe, while we're here, someone loosened the lug nuts from the front wheels. Even though we have confidence in our car, sooner or later the front wheels are going to fall off. Now some of us may go out to our car after worship and examine the lug nuts to make sure they're tight. And even then, we may start our car and drive it home rather timidly, still thinking that something might go wrong. Even though we have little faith, we are perfectly safe because the object of our faith is strong. It's God in whom our faith is fixed!

And there are two things about God that helped Abram tremendously: One, he is the God who gives life to the dead. And two, he is the God who calls into existence the things that don't exist.

Abram also teaches us that there are obstacles whenever we are called to exercise faith. He faced two: his body and Sarai's womb. Abram is now pushing a century; Sarai is not

much younger. Abram's body was sexually dead, and the promise of God hung on the fact that there must be a child born to Abram and Sarai. Everything hung on the birth of a baby. And through that child would come the Seed, which was Jesus Christ.

But here is the real beauty of Abram's faith. Paul says that he faced the facts. I just love that. In this translation it says that *"without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead..."* He believed in the power of God to do what He had promised, because when he looked at his dead body, he remembered that he had a God who raises the dead. And later, at the altar, standing over his son with a knife in obedience to the Lord, Abram again believed that God could give life to the dead. And when he thought about Sarai's barren womb, he remembered that he had a God who calls into existence the things that don't exist. And so he believed because of the God in whom his faith was fixed.

It's not at all mentioned here but Abram must have told Sarai what God said. I would have loved to have been a bug on the tent wall when Abram came in to tell her the news! After two and a half decades of turning wall calendars, he likely came in and said something like this: *"I've been having devotions, and what a wonderful time I had! God told me something."* *"Well, what was it?"* Sarai asked. *"I really don't know how to put this. You'd better sit down. God told me something very startling that's going to happen to us."* *"That's interesting. What is it?"* Sarai asked. Then, just like a man, he blurted it out. *"You're going to have a baby!"*

Sarai laughed, but God had the last laugh as He began getting busy at what He does best – the unbelievable. Sarai soon became pregnant with a son and the number of their tax deductions increased at the very moment which had been predicted. And I bet that Abram hung this sign above the wash bowl: *"Nothing is impossible with God."*

But first God had to change some names. Sarai, the barren one, would now be Sarah, the "mother of nations," and Abram, the father of one, would now be Abraham, the "father of many nations."

And in verses 20-22 we find one of the primary objectives of faith. Faith grows; Jesus said it would. The key is to follow Abram's example and praise God while we wait. That's how we grow in faith. Abram patiently trusted God to work through many delays and disappointments. Faith is kind of like a muscle. If we neglect it, it will atrophy. But if we use it, it will get stronger, and it will also grasp the promise of righteousness.

This happened two thousand years before Paul, but Paul says God didn't write those words for Abram alone. We look at the faith of Abram and say, *"That was extraordinary faith."* But Paul says it was ordinary and that anyone can exercise such faith if they want.

We can have righteousness, too. We are forgiven of our sins, restored, every day, a thousand times a day if we need it. This verse says the gift of righteousness is for those *"who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."* All that Abram had, the promises of the world, the indwelling of the Spirit, all are ours, Paul says.

We have a God who can raise things from the dead and who can call into existence the things that don't exist. We will never know when a thing that is lifeless may be touched by the grace of God and brought to life.

Now consider the story of Gabrielle Chanel, born in France in 1883. At the age of 11, her mother died and her father abandoned her in favor of an orphanage, where she was raised by nuns. Her lifelong goal was to become a singer, but her singing voice was marginal and she failed miserably to find steady work. But her faith in God remained strong. After many years of working as a hatmaker, she later had the opportunity to design a handful of women's fashions. And in 1921, at the age of 38, Gabrielle introduced her first fragrance, Chanel No. 5. And as the ol' saying goes: the rest is history.

When something that we cannot possibly hope for, something which doesn't exist, but which will be called into existence by the God who calls into existence the things that don't exist, when such a thing is promised by a God like this, life is truly an adventure. And faith is certainly the key to that adventure.