

Faith In The Promise

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Preacher: Canon David Short

- [0 : 00] Thanks, Dan. Well, friends, if you're visiting with us this morning, this is the point in the service where we take out the Bible and we have a look together at a passage.
- And we're going to turn back to that passage in Romans 4, which is on page 941. We don't do this because it's just a habit. We do it to make sure the preacher isn't making it up because we believe the treasure is in the text.
- This passage, the second half of Romans 4, is about faith. And one of my favourite logos that you'll see driving around Vancouver is for the real estate agent whose name is Faith Wilson.
- You might have seen it. The logo is Faith Moves Houses and has a little halo over a house in the background. I called Faith this week, wondering if there might be some deep spiritual message behind it.
- And she was absolutely delightful, but she said, no, I'm sorry, it comes from an advertising agency. I'm guessing someone in the advertising agency knew the words of Jesus, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you'll say to this mountain, move, and the mountain will move.
- [1 : 18] However, it's a wonderful picture of what we've done. One, we've separated faith and belief, they're the same thing, same word, we've separated faith from Jesus.
- And we've made it into a kind of a psychological power inside us. I'm guessing if you polled a lot of people in Vancouver and asked them what faith is, most would say it's a kind of a sunny, positive, optimistic disposition.
- Someone who's hopeful and imagines good things. But it's my ability, it's my inner strength when things are down or when I'm facing challenges.
- You can see this some years ago when Prince Charles attempted to tinker with the British Constitution and changed the royal title from Defender of the Faith, meaning Christianity, to Defender of Faith, which is a blanket cover over all subjective experience, not just Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, but cults and covens and vodos and witchcraft, or even my own blind faith in myself.
- But perhaps closer to home is the Olympic theme song from this year, I Believe, sung by that girl with the amazing voice, Nikki Janowski.
- [2 : 40] I believe together we'll fly. I believe in the power of you and I. I believe the time is right now. I believe. All together now.
- No, no. It was an amazing time, wasn't it, the Olympics? You know, you'd go out in the street and people would talk to you and never talk to you at other times. It was great shouting until you were hoarse, although I was deeply conflicted when there were Australians in events.
- I've got to tell you that. But there was a relentless advertising campaign, buses and billboards preaching one message, Believe. And we'd have very serious people on television looking into the camera saying, I believe.

And the obvious question I wanted to ask was, what do you believe? Do you believe we can host the best Olympics so far? Do you believe we're going to have lots of gold medals?

Do you believe we're the best city in the world? And the spokesman for the CTV Rogers Consortium said that the campaign was meant to show the central place belief plays in sports.

[3 : 48] And in a sense, I think that's true. Because every sports person exercise a form of belief. I mean, the downhill skier has belief in her ability and her equipment so that she'll take the risks she does.

The luge team has to have a certain faith in each other. You and I do this every day when we put money in the bank. We pin our hopes on all sorts of things.

The reason I'm saying all this is because this is not what the Bible means when it talks about faith and belief. It's something very different from that.

Have a look at the first verse in our passage, which is a tricky verse. Verse 13. For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be the heir of the world did not come through the law, that means the Ten Commandments and our obedience, but through the righteousness of faith.

When the Bible speaks about faith, it's not speaking about a vague, general, spiritual feeling. It's talking about a very specific kind of faith by which we are counted righteous.

[4 : 59] And I don't think there's any other passage in the Bible that's better at speaking about the DNA of real faith. And so that's what I want to do with you today. And I've got three things that I want to point to you.

The promise of God, the power of God, and then we'll finish looking at three specific promises which God makes us today. So firstly, I want to look at promise because true Bible faith is always directed to the promise of God.

In fact, the key to understanding this passage is the link between our faith and God's promise. If you just cast your eyes down and see the word promise comes up in verse 13, verse 14, verse 16, over the page in 20 and 21.

And Paul is picking up everything he said till now at the end of chapter 4, the language of righteousness and justification which has been his focus.

And he says, the righteousness of God is offered to us in the form of a promise. And we take hold of that promise by faith.

[6 : 07] He offers to forgive our sins, to count us 100% righteous with the righteousness of Christ. And we grasp this by faith as we believe his promise.

Christian faith doesn't focus on anything in us, but it focuses on God and his promise. It has to be by promise. We cannot manipulate God.

We cannot engineer God to do anything. It has to spring from his grace entirely. Think about it. God's never obligated to us. That's a very happy truth.

I mean, if God is not obligated to us, it means that his salvation must be grace and gift to us, or else there would be no security or stability or certainty.

We all wobble. We all go up and down. We all fail to live up to our own expectations. Because God doesn't act out of any inner compulsion or any inner anxiety, what he promises is completely trustworthy.

[7 : 11] And the security of Christian faith is not how hard you believe, how strong your faith is. It's how free God is to make the promise. You see, true Bible faith is not just generally belief that God exists.

It's not the awareness we're not alone in the universe. It's attached to very specific promises of God, which are now written for us in the Bible. And when you separate Christian faith from the promises of God, it becomes something else.

It becomes a corruption. It becomes a caricature, a crass attempt to get God to do what I want to do. And I think the most obvious illustration of this is what's called the prosperity gospel.

You may have heard of it. It's a very North American gospel. It's God made in a North American image. And it teaches that God will bless you with health, perfect health, perfect wealth, and happiness, as long as you work up enough faith and just believe, believe, believe that God's going to give you that Ferrari or that new knee.

And of course God heals and of course God gives gifts. But this is just Christian wishful thinking. That if you believe hard enough, God has to do it. Nowhere he's promised that.

[8 : 36] And I think in the end, this turns out to be a cruel, self-centered and unbiblical idea. When I was at university, I had a friend in my youth group who died of bowel cancer.

And between the time he contracted the cancer and the time he died, I asked my Christian friends at university to pray for his healing. And one of the guys at the university confronted me one day and he said that if my friend had enough faith, God would cure him.

And I want to say, can you imagine the cruelty of going to my friend and saying that to him?

Basically it puts the blame for his disease on himself because he doesn't have enough faith. You know, in the early days of our troubles with the diocese, after it had dragged on for a few months, a man came to see me from our congregation and he said, perhaps we are on the wrong side.

We're not winning. God hasn't answered our prayers in the affirmative. And my question is, has God promised that we'll win in court? Has God promised that we would have an easy road?

[9 : 53] Is it possible that God could win more glory for himself by our losing and moving than by our winning? We've seen this over and over again in scriptures, haven't we?

And in the life of our congregation together, God uses suffering and difficulty to spread the glory of his name. That's why our chief considerations, our chief considerations can't be safety and ease and comfort.

It has to be what brings the glory of God more close. And I think that's why Paul uses Father Abraham as the perfect example.

Very important man in the Bible way back in the first book 3,000 years ago. He was a moon worshipper. Didn't even, never heard of the God of the Bible. And one day God came to him and spoke to him and he promised to bless him with children and to make him the father of many nations.

And Abraham believed God's promise even though God waited one, two, three decades to fulfill that promise and Abraham was a hundred and Sarah was ninety.

[11 : 08] Because what God promised was completely humanly impossible. Abraham had one foot in the grave. He was as good as dead.

Sarah had gone through menopause, his wife, half a century before. And before she went through menopause she was infertile. But Paul, we just read, the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

God made a specific, explicit, particular promise and Abraham believed that God was as good as his word and God declares Abraham righteous.

Abraham brings nothing of his own into this equation. He doesn't deserve the promise. It's beyond his power to achieve it and yet God counts him righteous because he believes. And it's exactly the same for us.

Faith is a way of receiving not achieving. It receives what God promises. God says, I will give you what is rightfully Jesus Christ and faith opens its hands and takes a hold of God's promise.

[12 : 22] Did you notice when it was read that the opposite of faith in this passage is not unbelief, it's works, law, our doings because the law, the Ten Commandments tells us what we must do and we respond with works but the promise of God tells us what God will do and we respond with faith, the open hand but our works are busy hands.

We need both but it's faith by which we are counted righteous. The righteousness that we have lost as we've seen over the last weeks, the righteousness that we need to stand before God, it can never come from inside us.

It's humanly impossible. Look at verse 14. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

Paul is not trying to make us lazy, passive, detached Christians not interested in works because true faith, once it's grasped Jesus Christ who always wants to please God and that will show, true faith will show in good works.

Our faith without works is dead but we are declared 100% righteous apart from works. Got to get the horse before the cart. Faith alone is the receiving faculty.

[13 : 43] Works are our doing. And what Paul says in verse 14 is that the moment we begin to rely on our works, the moment that we begin to relate to God on the basis of what we are doing, our faith is an empty thing and the promise is void because true Bible faith is directed toward the promises of God.

That's the first point. The second point is very simple and obvious and that is God stands behind his promises. And what makes these promises special is who it is that stands behind them.

Faith is object oriented. It's not, again, I sometimes have people say to other Christian believers, oh I wish I had your faith. Faith is not just an inner ability that some lucky people are born with, you know, a skill or a gift.

Faith is always connected to God. You take God away, no faith, no such thing as faith. We cannot work it up in ourselves. It comes from the fact that God stands behind his word.

In fact, I think I could say that faith is never a thing in itself. It's always defined in relation to God. The reason I say this is did you notice that the apostle uses three names for God in this passage?

[15 : 04] He calls God three things. In verse 17, turn over the page, he calls him the God who gives life to the dead.

That's name number one. He then calls him the God who calls into existence the things that do not exist. Name number two. And in verse 24, the end of that verse, the God who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord.

God, this is the God who promises us righteousness, complete acceptance, and future glory. He promises to eliminate all evil.

He promises to bring judgment on those who disobey. He promises a new creation, everlasting joy and glory for those who trust him. And they are very, very big promises. I mean, I can make all sorts of promises and I have made promises in my life.

You can't trust me to fulfill them. The NDP, the provincial NDP is finding this. They're looking for a new leader and it's very interesting as you listen to the people who are putting themselves forward.

[16 : 11] One of the trickiest parts of running for political office is making promises which are attractive but not promising too much because you know that when you're in office all sorts of things are completely outside your control.

And in the age of the internet, no one, no one is going to forget anything you promise publicly. This is a bit of a naughty illustration but I discovered this week that of the 500 promises President Obama made during his campaign, 123 of them have been kept.

The rest are either broken, compromised or stalled. My son assures me that's a very high achievement record. And maybe Cleopatra was right. Always under-promise and over-deliver.

But not the God of the Bible. Not the God we worship. He creates out of nothing.

He gives life to the dead. And when he makes a promise it's not just that he's utterly reliable, good and truthful. He has the power to fulfill his word.

[17 : 19] There is nothing beyond his control. He is the one who created the heavens and the earth out of nothing. He comes to a 100 year old couple and says, I am going to make you the father of many nations.

It's not a difficult thing for him to do. He promises us that he will forgive our sins utterly and regard us as entirely righteous and that he will raise our bodies with Jesus on the last day renewed, remade for eternity and he's publicly openly committed his reputation to doing it.

We don't have the power to either create or destroy matter let alone make life. But this is what God promises. Do you think he can keep his promise? All these things that he promises are utterly, humanly, physically, scientifically, demonstrably impossible.

So was creation. So was the exodus. So was the parting of the sea. So was Jonah and Jericho. So was turning water into wine and feeding 5,000 with five loaves and two fish or walking on the water.

I could go on and on and on. The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, he is the one who at the start called all things into existence that didn't exist at the end he promises to give life to the dead and right in the middle he has raised Jesus from the dead and every time someone bows and receives his promises and believes the promise of the gospel God creates something out of nothing and raises to eternal life one who is full of death.

[18 : 53] Christian faith feeds on the character of God. Yeah, but some of you may be thinking does that mean Christian faith is just turning away from reality closing your eyes to empirical evidence just back to the old leap in the dark.

I knew all along that what makes you a Christian is not faith but your gullibility. Well, have a look down verse 18 let me read a couple of verses here.

Speaking about Abraham the apostle says Abraham did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body which was as good as dead since he was about 100 years old or when he considered literally the deadness of Sarah's womb no distrust made him waver concerning the God concerning the promise of God but he grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised.

You see, Bible faith doesn't put its head in the sand. It doesn't leave our brain at the door. Abraham took a long hard look at the reality of his situation his circumstances.

Paul says he considered he considered he was convinced he used his mind he thought hard he weighed up his circumstances on the one hand and the promise of God on the other and he was convinced that God had the power to fulfill his promise.

[20 : 21] That's why Christian faith is not sign of an optimistic self-delusion. We don't believe God's promises because they're impossible but because it's he who promises.

And Christian faith is not passive it's active. No one's going to do our believing for us. And Abraham grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God because the way to grow strong in faith is not squeezing up yourself spiritually every day and saying believe, believe, believe.

the way it grows is by focusing not on yourself but by focusing on God and seeking to do whatever will bring his glory to live actively looking at life through the lens of the glory of God and when we give God glory we don't add to his glory we don't improve his glory we call attention to it we try and show it for what it really is and the primary way in the Bible to give God's glory is to believe what he says to accept his word to accept his judgment over ours that's the way we honour God and the primary way to dishonour God is to suppress the truth in unrighteousness the real question for Christian faith is not what we are in ourselves but who God is in himself it's not our integrity or ability or purity it's whether he will do as he promised so Christian faith is based on the promise of God firstly secondly it's based on the power of God because he stands behind his word and thirdly what has God explicitly promised to us here in this passage

I mean 3,000 years a long time ago isn't it how could this be relevant to us and I want to mention three things that God specifically promises in this passage and I want to take I want you to take these home and to chew on them and give glory to God the first is obviously righteousness verse 22 that is why Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness but the words it was counted to him were not written for his sake alone but for ours also it will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord who was delivered over for our trespass and raised for our justification it was by faith that God communicated righteousness gave righteousness to Abraham it's exactly the same for us today the words written 3,000 years ago are written for our sake as well we do not earn the gift of God's righteousness it is counted to us by faith it's not that

God looks at us and sees us trying to believe and gives us a reward of righteousness he promises righteousness in Christ and the way he has so arranged it is that as we believe his promise and believe the Lord Jesus Christ he counts us righteous can you trust this promise he has put forward his only son and he promises here that if we believe him and if we believe that Christ has died for our sins and risen from the dead we will be forgiven and we will be glorified one of the best phrases I've come across is that Jesus comes to us clothed in his promises and when we take hold of his promises we take hold of Jesus himself because all that belongs to him now belongs to us so that's the first promise 100% righteousness the second promise is bodily resurrection when God raised Jesus from the dead it didn't just have significance for Jesus although it did but for every one of us as well when we commit ourselves and trust

[24 : 20] Jesus Christ God promises that he will raise you bodily from the grave with the same kind of body that Jesus now has just keep your finger in chapter four and flick over one page to chapter 8 verse 11 if chapter 8 11 if the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his spirit who dwells in you so you see true Christian faith doesn't just believe that God exists it's not just that God raised Jesus from the dead it's believing the promise that through Jesus we are rescued from death and sin and will be raised on the last day to a new existence so the first promise is righteousness the second is resurrection and the third promise is the world turn back to the first verse in the passage

I've got to read this again because it's very big do you notice the way Paul put it the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith the world the whole world and as Paul said in the middle verses when we share the same faith as Abraham when we trust the same God he trusted the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob we become his heirs and we receive the same inheritance and the promise that Paul is referring to here is the great restoration at the end of history when God will bring a new heaven and a new earth and that new heaven and new earth will be given to every person who has faith in Jesus Christ all of it not just a juicy trust fund not just a west coast house but the west coast and the east coast and everything between and everything beyond

Paul says later in Romans he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also with him graciously give us all things or as Paul says in 1 Corinthians all things are yours the world life death or the present or the future all are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's when we are raised from the dead and share the glory of God we will come into that inheritance because God has said we will and he's delighted to do it for us all of it all of it the oceans the mountains the sky because we belong to Jesus and Jesus belongs to God and it has massive implications for us which we don't have a lot of time for let me just pull one together see if you don't belong to Jesus

Christ you have to invest all your energy and all your eggs into this life now and you'll pursue an excellent career you might get great wealth you might end up well off but everything you have is not really yours you don't possess it really it may possess you but at death it will be taken from your hands but the ordinary Christian who may have very little to their name will one day inherit all of it not just a piece but the whole world and what that means for us as Christians is that if you trust Christ you don't have to kill yourself trying to have it all now you don't have to go through life with that sour suspicion something I'm missing out on something you don't have to accumulate as much as possible you don't have to taste every experience or every food or every drink because we know one day we will inherit it all and we'll have a lot of time to explore it see the promise of

God and the power of God mean that Christians as Christians we don't need to prove ourselves we don't need to have the perfect body we don't need to be successful we don't need to travel to every city in the world there's nothing wrong with fitness and travel but the promise of God frees us from our slaveries and lifts our hope to something much much bigger and I'm aware this is dangerous talk because inheritance big inheritance can be a very dangerous thing when big wealth changes hands generationally what do we leave our children the evidence is mounting that the larger the amount we leave our children the more likely it is to ruin them can be a poison chalice for some it certainly won't bring them happiness now before he had children Bill Gates said that he would not leave his children a cent after he had his first child he said I'm going to leave the children one million each after his second child he said ten I'm not sure what it's up to now maybe he should give them Canadian dollars see those of you who are parents of kids who have just been baptized and all of us you should give your children what's going to last for eternity

[30 : 01] I mean do what you can to direct their hope not to wealth and success but to the glory of God to the promise of God teach them and model to them what it's like to live for the glory of God let me put it to you this way imagine you are a poker player in a tournament and I know a lot of you can imagine that and you're playing for gold that was a joke and you're playing for gold pieces and halfway through the first round you receive news that you are just about to inherit all the gold in the world it would completely change the way you played wouldn't it I mean you would be wonderfully free to take terrible risks because you've got absolutely nothing to lose the promises of God that we the promises of God to us mean we should set our spiritual ambitions higher than they are if God promises all the world will be ours we don't need to steal or hoard or fret or have it all we don't need to hold on to things terribly tightly we can actually do the opposite we can do things that people who don't trust

God promises would never dream of doing we don't have to be the same as everyone around us we don't need to be molded by the west coast culture if this life is short and eternity is long and the promises that we will gloriously inherit it all surely we could mold the culture around us it would be easy for us to settle into a life of flipping houses and building our own comfort if this is all there is but the power of God and the promise of God change everything if we will inherit the world it means we can choose where to live not based on comfort and luxury or profit but based on where we can serve God more fully and our family as well so here is my final word God has promised righteousness and a renewed world to you and I want to encourage you to take a risk on

God do something you've never done before simply for his glory simply because you trust his promises bring the glory of God into the centre of your daily life and the way you do your family and you will grow strong in faith as you give glory to God and now to him who raises the dead to life and who calls into existence that which does not exist to the God of eternal promise and eternal power be glory and majesty rule and authority now and forever amen let's kneel and pray not do you