

Faith In The Promise

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[0 : 00] Amen. Grab a seat. It's probably going to be useful to have your Bibles open at page 941.

I'm the pastoral evangelist on staff, and so I'm quite sensitive to the fact at every service we have, there is likely to be people here who are not Christians or are very new to the faith.

And Romans has been tough going. Theologically, it's really dense. Paul packs so much into these little sentences, uses lots of technical Christian-y stuff.

I've been thinking as I was writing this sermon, for the people who are new in their faith or just turned up the church today, it must be just diabolical, some of the stuff we're kind of looking at.

Like, it's really dense and tough. I mean, just look at this first line here, verse 13. For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world, to not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

[1 : 14] I threw a lot of money at a world-class theological education, and I had to read that line a number of times to actually get my head around it.

And so, for the people who are kind of new to the faith or just visiting and exploring, I imagine it's quite intimidating. I mean, who's this guy Abraham?

And what was the promise? And 2,000 years ago, what are they talking about when they talk about the law and righteousness? What does that mean? Faith.

And what exactly is faith? So, what I'd like to do this morning is I want to quickly and quite simply define some of these Christian terms in this first sentence, because that helps us understand the rest of the passage.

And then I want to focus in on what I think is the main point of the whole passage. So, are you with me? So, I'm going to define all this Christian-y stuff at the start, and then focus in on what is the main point of the whole passage.

[2 : 25] First, some definitions. Okay. Abraham. Who is this guy Abraham, and what is the promise? Well, to talk about Abraham, we need to go right to the start.

We need to go back to the creation story. So, God created the universe. And he created people. And he gave us a place to live as people.

And he gave us a way to live. And he created that all out of nothing. We see that in verse 17 here, actually. Ex nihilo is a fancy Latin term.

That's what I got for my \$40,000 at Regent College. Ex nihilo means out of nothing. And then there was the fall. You might be familiar with that term, the fall.

And that's what happened when Adam and Eve ate the apple stuff. You probably have some memory of that. Ate the apple. It wasn't actually an apple. It was some kind of fruit. We don't know what it was. So, what's that all about?

[3 : 28] Well, it wasn't anything particularly naughty about the tree itself. It wasn't God's favorite tree, and he didn't want people sort of messing with it at all. Remember, the tree was called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

And the sin of Adam and Eve wasn't that they discovered what was good and evil. Their sin was that they wanted to decide what was good and evil. They wanted to decide what was right and wrong.

And that is at the core of what is wrong with the world today, isn't it? We all individually want to decide what is right and wrong. We all want to be our own gods.

And the effects of the sin, them deciding what is right and wrong, is very graphically seen in their offspring, Cain and Abel. Cain kills Abel at a jealousy.

And the story continues in the Bible. And we see the world becoming an increasingly evil place. You with me so far? This is easy, right? This is easy. We're all together. Next big thing, Noah's Ark.

[4 : 32] Noah's Ark. What's that all about? Well, God wiped out everyone in the world in a flood, except for this guy called Noah and his family. And he saved them by telling them to build a big boat so that they could ride out the flood.

So God basically took the best guy he could find and his really great family, put them on a boat, wiped out everybody else, and so gave the world a fresh start.

So God restarted the world with the best family around. And so what happened a year later when they got back on the solid ground after the flood? What happens? Genesis 9, Noah gets drunk and naked.

You can read it for yourself. Even when God restarted everything with the best guy around, it all goes downhill very quickly. It was not enough to restore humanity to its right place.

It wasn't enough to get out the core problem, which is in all of us. We want to decide what is right and wrong. We want to be our own gods. And again, it all goes downhill after this, even after this really great restart.

[5 : 46] Next big thing, the Tower of Babel. So the flood couldn't wipe out the core problem of God wanting to be their own gods. And Babel is a great example of this. You probably know this story.

People wanted to build this tower. They wanted to be like God. They wanted to be up there with God because they thought they were gods. So they built this massive tower trying to get up into heaven.

And it just shows the arrogance and foolishness of people. And God obviously put a stop to that nonsense pretty quick. Okay, so what have we learned up until this point?

This is what we've learned. People, on their own efforts, can't make the world a better place. It goes downwards. It cycles downwards.

And here's a little side note here. This highlights one of the most startling differences between Christianity and other faiths. Most other faiths are about something that you do.

[6 : 43] If you can live by these statutes, if you can obey these laws, if you can live to this code, if the whole world can get behind this philosophy, it will be alright. And the Bible says no.

Christianity is not about you doing something because you can't do it. Christianity is about God doing something. Which is a great segue into the next big name in the Bible, which is Abraham.

Okay, so now we're back into our text, alright? Abraham, Abraham. Okay, if the world is going to get right, it's going to be something that God does that doesn't rely on people being good.

And of course, God knows this. So he makes a promise to Abraham. God promises him offspring that will number the stars.

God says, I'll make a people for myself. I'll give you land and I'll bless you. In other words, God is going to try and reverse the fall, which we talked about.

[7 : 43] So this was God's plan to restore humanity. And it was all about God saying, I will do this, not you need to do this. And they were amazing promises because as we read here in Romans, reflecting back on Genesis and Abraham's story, Abraham and his wife were both quite old and Sarah's womb didn't work properly.

So, I don't quite know how to say it. It just wasn't really up to speed, was it? So, that is who Abraham is.

And that's the incredible promise that God made to him. And I'm going to spend some more time on that soon, but I just want to get through all these other definitions first. Okay, the law. So I've talked about Abraham and the promise.

The law. Back to verse 13. That's the next tricky word. All right, now very quickly, the law, Hebrew word Torah, it means instruction. The law was like the rules for governing the life of God's people.

There were negative ones. Don't do this. There were positive ones. Do this. The question is this, though. If we can't obey the rules and we have demonstrated to God that we cannot obey the rules, why would God give us the law?

[8 : 55] Why bother with these guidelines? Why did he do it? Well, there's PhDs written on the topic. But one of the big purposes of the law was simply to show us that we are sinners.

And it does that because we actually, we can't obey the rules all the time. We don't live up to God's standards. We don't even live up to our own standards sometimes. In other words, the purpose of the law is to show us that we cannot make the world a better place by trying hard to be better people.

I've said that already about 50 times. All right? I'm going to keep just saying that because I want you to hear that. We can't pull it off. If the world is going to be restored, it's going to be put, if we're going to be put into a right relationship with God, it's not going to come from anything that we do.

And we see this in verse 15 here. For the law brings wrath. The law brings wrath.

All the law does in this verse is saying it's all it does is actually show us that God is not very happy with how we behave sometimes. Okay. Next big word in this sentence is law righteousness.

[10 : 17] Righteousness. Now, if we kept the law from birth all the time, we would be declared righteous. We would be righteous. But we haven't.

Yet the passage does say in verse 13, it talks about a righteousness of faith. So there must be some other way for us to be declared righteous.

And we need to be declared righteous to be in relationship with God. So there's some other way of being declared righteous. Verse 22, it says that Abraham was declared righteous because of his faith, not because of his rule keeping.

Verse 23, it says it's not just this cool thing that Abraham gets to have. It says that we can be declared righteous if we have faith. And verse 24, it tells us the substance of that faith, believing that Christ died for us and rose again.

And I'm going to talk more about that shortly. But in sum, two ways to be declared righteous. One, keep all the rules and let me know how that pans out for you.

[11 : 24] Two, faith. But faith needs to be explained because it's a tricky subject. But before we get onto that word faith, let me tie up all these first concepts together and deliver you in this nice kind of sort of homiletical package, okay?

Here we go. Go homiletical. There's a word. God's plan is to restore humanity. That's right. Always being God's plan. Restore humanity. A righteous people in relationship with a righteous God.

And he made a promise to Abraham. He said, I'm going to do this. I'm going to pull this off. And that righteousness that we need to be in right relationship with a righteous God is not going to come because we obey all the rules.

We just can't. So God had to intervene. Remember, it's all about what he does, not something we do. And here is where we get to the bit about how he made us righteous through faith, which we'll get to.

God sent his son Jesus to live the righteous life that we couldn't. And he did that for us. He also died on a cross taking the punishment for all the awful things humanity has ever done.

[12 : 42] So Jesus met the standards of righteousness required on our behalf and paid the price of our sin on our behalf. Let me give you an example.

Imagine you're very naughty and you have to go to court and the judge is sitting in judgment over you. And he says, yes, you are very, very naughty.

And for your naughtiness, I fine you \$10,000. So he's a good judge. He has to declare you guilty. But then he says, okay, court is finished.

And then he takes off his robes, walks down beside you, pulls out his checkbook and writes a check for \$10,000 and hands it into the bursar. So he declares you guilty, but then pays the price for you.

That is what Christ has done. That is what God has done. Now, if we believe, see, if he's a good judge, you might be thinking, well, why doesn't he just sort of like, just kind of like forgive us?

[13 : 47] Why doesn't he sweep all the awful things that humanity has done under the carpet? Isn't he the God of love after all? Well, he is the God of love. But he's not a very loving God if he is apathetic towards evil.

If he pretends nothing wrong has ever been done, that's not a God I want to be in a relationship with. That's an apathetic God who doesn't care.

So he can't have it both ways. For God to be a God of love, he has to be a righteous God. For God to be a righteous God, he has to judge and he has to say, you have done wrong. But then in his amazing lovingness, he pays the price for us.

All right. Now, if we believe that, faith, God says, we are righteous.

And I'll say it again. Not because of something that we have done, but because of something God has done. Okay, that's pulling all those Christianese words together. But the key to understanding it all is faith.

[15 : 00] Faith. Faith. And if I said, what do you think faith is, I would probably get a million answers. Faith is something that is really misunderstood. So I want to spend some time on this word faith.

Because it's actually what this passage is all about. I don't think I need to convince you of that. The word faith is mentioned, I think, 10 or 11 times. The word believe in here, when it says believe or belief, that's the word faith as well in the Greek.

So let's spend some time talking about faith. And I don't want to... I'm not doing this because I think, oh, you know, faith is a good thing for you to know about. It's a great attribute. Christians should have it.

I mean, you should know about it. It is a great attribute. But the Bible makes it clear. The key to appropriating salvation is faith.

So it really is something you have to have a right understanding of. Okay, so what is faith? What I'd like to do is I'd like to define it negatively.

[16 : 04] And what I mean by that is I want to look at what faith isn't. What people think it is, but it actually isn't. And there's about five of those, and I'll do it quickly. Okay, the first misconception about faith is this, that faith is a leap in the dark, a.k.a. it's faith goes against the evidence or faith is the opposite of reason.

This is a very common misconception, and it is wrong-headed. Faith is not irrational. I think Paul describes Abraham's faith here as quite reasonable.

It has a very reasonable base. And here's what I mean. And this is a key sentence that I want you to hear in this sermon. Here's a key sentence. Faith is believing or trusting in a person, God.

Okay? So it's reasonableness depends on the reliability of the person being trusted. It is always reasonable to trust the trustworthy.

It's always reasonable to trust the trustworthy. And God is trustworthy. So faith is very reasonable.

[17 : 17] Verse 21 here. It says that Abraham was fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised. God had demonstrated his faithfulness before. So it was reasonable for Abraham to trust in God.

It was not a leap in the dark for him. It was not like, gee, I hope God comes through for me here. It wasn't, I don't know what's going on. I don't know what's happening here, but I have faith.

No, no, no. It was, I trust in God. I trust in his promises. Because he's demonstrated his faithfulness before. And so in that sense, his faith was very reasonable.

And here's a little side note here. We can only have faith in the things that God has actually promised. We cannot expect God to do anything he hasn't said he will do.

And I'll talk more about that later. So in summary, faith is reasonable because it's perfectly reasonable to trust the trustworthy. The second misconception about faith is that faith is subject oriented.

[18 : 25] This is what I mean by this. People sometimes think this. This faith is all about me. Moving mountains is all about how much I believe.

It's not the case. Faith is object orientated. Faith is all about the object. In this case, it's God and his promises. Now, what are the implications of that?

It's when we make faith not about us, but about God. The implication is this. When I started this talk, I said that Romans is hard going. It's true because it's theologically dense. It's technical.

But it's also destabilizing. Because Paul, the author of Romans, is constantly pushing us out of the center and putting God there.

And that's what faith is supposed to do. It pushes us out of the center. It makes us not the object of our lives, but rather God.

[19 : 25] And that is painful. And that hurts. But it's good. The third misconception about faith is that faith is a skill.

S-K-I-L-L. A skill. Like cooking. Or a characteristic. Like having a good sense of humor. If you've ever looked at somebody and said, Oh, I wish I had their faith.

You are under this misconception. Faith is not something you're born with. It's not something we drum up. We don't go, Oh, I'm just going to really try and just have faith about this.

Ooh. Make spiritual noises. No. Faith. This is important. This is another key sentence. Faith is something we receive as we hear the promises of God.

We receive faith. It is a gift to us. There is something in the promises of God. There is a power in those things that gives us faith. Romans 10 says, Faith comes by hearing and hearing the word of God.

[20 : 41] So it doesn't come from in here. It comes from out here. God puts it into our hearts. God speaks to us through his word. That's why in this church we're just, we're so, you know, single-minded about preaching the word.

Why we do expository teaching. Why when you visit with a minister, they'll most likely ask you, are you in a small group?

Because we want you to be in the word. I mean, the alternative is just me getting up here and just sharing my thoughts on life. I tried to do a journal once.

You know, like, and the bishop says to me, you should try journaling your thoughts, you know. So I'm just like, got these pages open. I'm looking at these blank pages, and I'm like, well, I like peanuts.

See, my thoughts aren't particularly life-giving. But God's promises, God's promises are.

[21 : 52] Okay, fourthly, fourth misconception. It's just, if I just believe enough, anything can happen. This was my biggest misconception about faith early in my Christian walk.

In other words, the person with the most faith is the person who can believe for the most unlikely thing to happen. That, my friends, is faith in faith.

That's not faith in God. That's faith in faith. I remember my, when I was a young Christian, my youth leader was very sort of positive, got really positive, was, you know, like Salt Amway, and was kind of like, really kind of like, let's, let's, let's be positive.

No disrespect to Amway, but it was kind of like, you know, like, let's just be really positive. And, you know, I'm like 16 years old or something, and he's like, you know, Aaron, in Africa, they're raising people from the dead.

They have faith, those people. Where's your faith? How many dead people have you prayed for lately, Aaron? Oh, I haven't prayed for many. See? And one day, he comes to youth group.

[22 : 57] It was a true story. Very excited. His eyes look wild, you know, and he's going, I was walking in the park today, and I saw on the ground a duck, a dead duck. And I didn't care who was watching this, I'm a man of faith.

And I laid hands on that duck, and I prayed for that duck. And, it was supposed to be really motivational, but I knew there was something wrong about this story. Even back then, I knew something was a bit off.

Because I laid hands on that duck, and I prayed for that duck, and you know what? The duck moved. The duck moved, people.

Like, he's yelling it out to the youth group, the duck moved. And I'm like, thinking, there's something very wrong with this youth group. You know. See, for him, faith was magic.

It was like, the Bible verses were like, you know, what's the one I've already mentioned? If you have the faith of a mustard seed, you can move mountains. He'd grab that. He'd grab a hold of that, and he'd treat it like an incantation.

[24 : 05] Like, if he just thought, if I just believe enough, I can make anything happen. No, no, no. We can only have faith in the promises of God, and the character of God.

We can't just believe for anything, and God has to do it, because we've kind of hypnotized ourselves into believing it. Abraham's faith in this passage here, when you have a look at it, it's always connected in terms of the original promise.

There's stuff, I'm not sure if they have it in the ESV, oh, they do. There's a lot of stuff in quotes here. They're quoting the original promise. That's what his faith was all about. It was about these promises from God.

Let's look at a practical implication here. God has not made us any promises with regard to this building. If we lose the building, it is not because we didn't have enough faith.

It will be because God wants to push his glory forward in some other way. So remember, it's all about faith in God and his promises, not faith in faith.

[25 : 25] That's just, that's magic. Okay, the last misconception, let's go for another three or four minutes here. The last misconception, we get more faith by training our mind to be really positive, i.e. pretending everything is okay.

Do you know who Monty Python is? Did Monty Python make it to Canada? Yeah? Okay. One of my favorite skits from Monty Python is from a movie, Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

You shouldn't have watched these movies. You might be offended. I'm not recommending it. But anyway, there's this really funny scene in Monty Python and the Holy Grail where King Arthur is crossing this bridge and he gets faced by the Black Knight.

I don't know if you remember this. It's fabulous. The Black Knight will not let anyone pass without a battle. So the Black Knight's standing there. King Arthur goes, I want to get past. Black Knight says, no, we're going to have a fight.

So they start fighting. King Arthur cuts off the arm of the Black Knight. And the Black Knight says, ah, tis a scratch. I've had worse.

[26 : 30] And they keep fighting. King Arthur cuts off the other guy's arm. And then King Arthur kneels down, thanking God for his victory, and gets kicked in the side of the head by the Black Knight who calls him a coward for giving up.

King Arthur points out to him, you have no arms. And the Black Knight says, oh, it's just a flesh wound. So King Arthur cuts off his leg.

And the Black Knight gets angry and says, oh, I'm going to do you for that. King Arthur cuts off his other leg. He has no arms and no legs.

And he's just kind of leaning against King Arthur, kind of head-butting him, right? And then he goes, well, let's just call it a draw, shall we? Yeah. Faith is not pretending everything is okay.

That's nonsense. And it's just, that's just being silly. Like verse 19 in our passage, Abraham, he did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead.

[27 : 41] It didn't say that he pretended he wasn't old. He didn't walk into Sarah one day and say, Sarah, I am a vigorous 25-year-old man and you have the womb of that octo-mum woman from the tabloids.

This is not going to be a problem. No, it says he actually considered. It doesn't say he did not consider his body. It says when he considered. He considered these things.

He didn't close his eyes to the realities of life. Faith doesn't ignore life, but it does look at the problems in light of the promises.

That's what faith does. In summary, I'm going to summarize in bullet points here. Faith is trusting in God, trusting that he will do what he said he will do and that he is who he said he is.

Faith is not blind. It's firmly planted on the promises of God. Things we can know about. Things we can learn about. Faith is not a skill or an attribute.

[28 : 51] Faith is a gift. You are not the source of faith. You didn't drum it up. God gave it to you. Faith is something we receive from God as we hear and learn about his word.

You don't get more faith by being told to get more faith. You receive it by submitting yourself to his promises. Faith pushes us out of the center and puts God there.

That takes us back to Genesis, doesn't it? Our core sin. We want to be at the center. And so in this sense, faith restores humanity to its right place, to its rightful place.

When the words of an old professor of mine, Faith turns the world upside down, right side up. Amen.