

# Features Of Faith

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn to Romans chapter 4 and just briefly this evening looking at verses 16 to 21. That passage from verse 16 through to 21, these verses in particular.

And I want to focus this evening on Abraham as the way he's presented here, believing in God and believing in the Word and the promise of God and some of what we'll call the features of faith that are set out in these verses.

Verses before this, of course, back to chapter 3 and 28 to 30 especially, where they are now expanded, the emphasis on being justified by faith in Christ and how righteousness is by faith and not by works.

Another great theme, as you know, of the Apostle Paul here and also in Galatians particularly. But I'm not going to go into that theology of that this evening, either the justification aspect of it or indeed the way it relates to righteousness.

But to look at these features of Abraham's faith as they actually impinge upon our own faith and how they are replicated in faith wherever this faith is found genuinely in anybody's life.

[ 1 : 25 ] These are features of it. And verse 16, you can see, of course, that this is set out. It's not just applicable to Abraham. It's not only to the adherent of the law, but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.

So, as it is written, I have made you the father of many nations. Now, you could get the impression that's the father in terms of genealogy, but of course he means there the father of faith, the father in the sense of being the example of faith that is connected with righteousness or through which righteousness is applied by God.

So, in that respect, Abraham, you could say, in a sense, he's setting him out here as not quite a test case, but an example of what he's talking about in the surrounding chapters and verses.

And it's not quite a tangent. It's not quite a by-the-way sort of thing. He's not actually saying these things in these verses as something of an aside.

But he is giving time to bring out these features of Abraham's faith, and they are very, very interesting features. And it's important that we understand, while, of course, the greatest thing for us is not so much to understand faith itself, but also especially where faith rests, the foundation for our faith, which is Christ himself and his righteousness.

[ 2 : 56 ] That's really what our faith connects with, and it's for his sake that we are justified and accepted as righteous with God. But having said that, it is still important for us that we, as far as possible, get into looking at the workings of faith, the features of faith.

The better able we are to understand that, the more we understand why faith is important in the world in which we live, in terms of our own life in it, as well as for our own personal development. So two things. Firstly, faith's view of God, how faith views God, as we see here from Abraham's faith. And secondly, faith's commitment to God's word, especially God's word in terms of its promises.

Faith's view of God, the first thing we want to notice. And what he's saying here is that Abraham believed in God, who gives life to the dead, and calls into existence the things that do not exist, verse 17.

That he's saying is the God Abraham believed in. Abraham believed in this God of these particular characteristics, not just in a general fashion, a belief in the existence of God, but this God, this particular God, the God of these characteristics, the God who gives life to the dead.

[ 4 : 19 ] Now he mentions in this context how Abraham eventually came to produce a child, Isaac, through his wife, Sarah, who would himself be the promised heir.

That's what God promised him many years before, and that's what eventually actually took place, because God never actually is short of his promises. But the important thing is here is that Isaac actually came out of what Abraham, what Paul here actually says, is the deadness of his own body, or Abraham's own body, and also the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

He's saying here, Abraham, though he was still alive, of course, as a human being, he's still, comparatively speaking, and compared to younger people, he is in fact past the age when you'd expect him to produce a child, his own body, which was as good as dead since he was about 100 years old.

And when you go to Sarah particularly, the barrenness of Sarah's womb, well past the stage when a woman would be expected to have children, or to be able to produce children, or conceive.

both Abraham and Sarah, you could say, are characterized by relative deadness. The deadness of her womb and the deadness of Abraham's virility, if you like, in terms of his old age.

[ 5 : 45 ] That's what's emphasized in the passages, that it is out of that deadness, out of what appeared to be an impossible source of life, that new life actually came.

because here, the faith of Abraham is faith in the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Abraham told, God told Abraham he would have a son, that he would be a son of promise, that through him all the families of the earth would eventually be blessed. Well, there was no sign of him then.

Of course, he didn't exist except in God's mind and in God's promise. But exactly as he was in God's mind and God's promise, and as we'll see in God's time, Isaac came to be born.

He became, as God had promised, the son born to Abraham in his old age. Now, Abraham himself struggled with this. Struggled not in the sense that he disbelieved or put the promise aside, but he did appeal to God at one stage in Genesis 17 and verses 17 to 18.

[ 6 : 56 ] It's worth just quoting these words as they are there in Genesis 17 where God is speaking to him there about faith and righteousness and promise of a child.

And in verse 17, here is Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?

And Abraham said to God, Oh, that Ishmael might live before you. What does he mean? Oh, that Ishmael might live before you. His son Ishmael born to Hagar.

And here is Abraham making his appeal to God and saying, Lord, let this be the son of the promise. Surely, how can it be that we are going to have any other offspring given the age we're at?

And here is him saying, Oh, that Ishmael might live before you. And God said, immediately in verse 19, you read, God said, No, but Sarah, Sarah, your wife, shall bear you a son and you shall call his name Isaac.

[ 8 : 02 ] I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. And then, of course, he referred to his prayer for Ishmael that he had heard him in regard to Ishmael as well.

That's a wonderful emphasis that although Ishmael was not going to be the son of promise, Abraham's prayer for him was not ignored by God. I've heard him. I've heard you for him as well.

That's just by the way. But here is giving life to the dead, calling the things that do not exist as though they were in existence. And then he calls them into existence.

Now you carry that with you through to the incident where Abraham was commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac. Take now your son, he said, your only son, Isaac, in whom the promises are situated, deposited, and sacrifice him for me on a mountain that I will show you.

And you imagine the test for Abraham having waited for this child for so long, knowing that he's the son promised by God, the seed through which blessing will reach down the line right through to us in the New Testament age, that by many nations will be blessed, you imagine Abraham's mind and Abraham's faith reckoning and wrestling with this now, take him and put him to death.

[ 9 : 30 ] What's going to happen to the future? What's going to happen to God's promises? How can it be that the son of promise through whom the promise is going to be fulfilled is now going to be sacrificed?

How can God mean such a thing? But you see, Abraham didn't doubt in regard to what God had actually requested or commanded indeed of him to do with Isaac on Mount Moriah.

The fact is that because Abraham had received Isaac out of deadness in the beginning to begin with when he was conceived by Sarah and born, he had no problems thinking of Isaac actually being put to death and then something of God's promise being fulfilled nevertheless afterwards. And we're given a key into the reckoning of his mind and indeed of his faith in Hebrews chapter 11 because as you know he appears there as one of that great list of faith, of believers.

And here's what it says in verse 17 By faith Abraham when he was tested offered up Isaac and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son of whom it was said through Isaac shall your offspring be named.

[10:48] He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead from which figuratively speaking he did receive him.

And that gives you a key gives you an insight into the working not just of Abraham's mind and the way Abraham reasoned with this but the way that Abraham's faith operated not by casting his reason aside but informing him as it were in terms of the promise of God and how that was sure and steadfast would come to pass Abraham by faith he offered up Isaac.

In other words in terms of Abraham's faith and obedience Isaac was dead. He hadn't literally killed him he hadn't literally put him to death physically but in terms of Abraham's commitment to do so Abraham's obedience to God he had given him.

That's why it says there in Hebrews 11 he offered up Isaac just as surely as if he had literally ended his life physically.

In terms of his commitment of his offering to God of his obedience to God Isaac had been offered so that when God spared Abraham from actually bringing the knife down as he was ready to do upon his son that was really for Abraham a parable.

[12:17] He received him back in a figure. He received him back as it says in Hebrews figuratively speaking he did receive him back.

In his mind he was dead now that he was spared and alive again it was effectively like a resurrection from the dead. And that's really I think what Jesus himself meant in John chapter 8 and verse 56 where he said to the Jews your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day and he saw it and he was glad.

Abraham was given an insight into the day of Christ the day of Christ's ministry in the world the day of the New Testament age the day of the kingdom of God as it come in Christ and following on from that he rejoiced to see that and that's what you find here in chapter 4 as well of Romans this is the God in whom he believed having received a son out of the deadness of Sarah's womb considering his own relative deadness at a hundred years of age and then being asked to offer him and doing so obediently Abraham well understands the kind of God he's dealing with he's the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things which do not exist you take that with you of course and that is something that comes to be more fully revealed fulfilled and fulfilled in Christ himself the day of Christ that Abraham rejoiced to see because you can take this very fact this truth this great truth with you into the way that the gospels speak about Jesus and as you actually read about Jesus why do they tell us about Jesus going to the home of Jairus where his daughter lies dead to the widow of Nain who is carrying or helping to carry her only son to his burial or to the grave of Lazarus the sepulcher where Lazarus' body has been lying for four days why are we taken into all of these scenarios into all of these different events because Jesus demonstrates that he is the resurrection and the life and that if we believe as he said to Martha whoever believes shall never die and though he die yet shall he live and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die do you believe this you see the emphasis believe believe believe believe in what believe in whom believe in

God believe in Jesus believe in his provision in Christ you see the world we're living in doesn't really bother to stop about very often these minute details and sometimes certain species of theology doesn't really care much for these details either can't be bothered with reformed theology can't be bothered with the kind of thing that looks into the person of Christ and really stops over these events as real historical events they tell us well it doesn't really matter whether they were real whether they were historical or not there's a story to be told there's a moral in these details and you don't need to go much further than that if they're not historical if they didn't happen our faith is in vain what are we going to rest on where are our hopes going to be that's the whole beauty of scripture that it is the word of God that tells you about these things that took place in history real events in the person of Jesus the resurrection and the life and of course that's why

[16:10] Paul like of elsewhere uses this kind of language or similar language for example 2nd Corinthians chapter 4 and verse 6 where he says therefore God who said let light shine out of darkness has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ again we've mentioned that text a number of times but it's important to reemphasize that what Paul is not saying he's not saying that God who said let light shine out of darkness has shone into our hearts that's not what he's saying he's saying he has shone in our hearts that's why he's relating it to the creation of light in the beginning by God the God who said let light shine out of darkness not into darkness but out from the darkness what has he done in your own heart now that you're a Christian what has he done compared to what you were how did you come to actually have the light that you now have spiritually because

God created it by his spirit in your rebirth that's something that wasn't there until God created it and it isn't simply that the light of the gospel shines into our minds and into our hearts that of course is true but that by itself does not create life spiritual life it's God using that and operating in his own creative power to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ to us how have you come to know Christ well there's a whole lot of different ways that we can answer that but you would never have come to know Christ without this added root without God creating that knowledge in your soul he has creatively shone out of the darkness of our souls by creating light in it and that's why you are the light of the world that's why the light shines out of you that's why he says in

Philippians that you might indeed be shining as lights in the midst of a nation or generation so there is where it's rooted in Christ's own resurrection faith's view of God of God in Christ the God who calls things into existence the things which do not exist and who gives life to the dead the faith that operates in your own heart tonight is a faith that is grounded in the resurrection of Christ from the dead and if you go through that great treatise in 1 Corinthians 15 that's what Paul makes it plain then if Christ be not risen our faith is futile it has nothing to rest upon if it's just a fable if it didn't really take place if it's less than an actual physical resurrection as the Bible makes it out to be well your faith really can't have a secured foundation it's not really faith at all in the sense in which Paul presents it so faith's view of God gives life to the dead and that resurrection and life is especially available to us and created by God for us in Christ and through his resurrection we come to possess it in our souls by faith but then it's faith's view of God but faith's commitment to God's word first of all the testing of faith because it's obvious from this passage itself from verse 19 he did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body which was as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory just one or two small points from that the testing of faith we have to remember that twenty years or more elapsed from the time that

Abraham was given the promise in the first place until Isaac was born and that's why you have here the fact that the waiting period was a testing for Abraham it was a testing with regard to did he accept and believe the promise of God or not was he regarding the things that were naturally true of himself as standing in the way of God's promise being fulfilled and the answer from this is not he was not no distrust made him waver concerning the promises of God and he needed to hold on to that as time elapsed and as he was tested again at Moriah as we've said regarding this Isaac and you translate that into your own life as well and your faith comes to be tested but also comes as we'll see in a minute to increase and to be strengthened through the testings what would your faith be like tonight if there were no testings what would our faith look like how would our faith grow how would our faith increase how could we apply our faith to everyday life if there was no such element as testing in the course of life from day to day well you know the answer to that your faith needs to be tested it's through being tested not only that it shows itself to be genuine but that it proves to be what you might call efficient faith faith that really works on your behalf by the blessing of

[22:04] God because when you come to no testing and your faith says well I'm going to hold on to the promise of God because that's not going to fail I'm going to hold on to his word whatever people around me might say whatever the world of our day might teach whatever it might suggest or might insist upon that's contrary to what I believe and contrary to the word of God however much they may demand of me that I let go my opinions and let go my convictions I'm going to hold to God's word I cannot actually believe things that I know not to be true I cannot accept things that I know and believe to be directly contrary to the standard of God's word to the morality of God's word Abraham by faith did not waver concerning the promise of God but grew strong in his faith as he

gave glory to God you know we speak about our nation and efforts that are made on the part of God's people to present the truth and as we heard in prayer as far as we can see matters are not improving there is an even greater boldness daily on the part of sinful practices and people who elevate that particular lifestyle or lifestyles and unbelief and secularistic views of life increasingly and we wonder well who's going to make a difference in parliament whether it's in Edinburgh or Scotland or Northern Ireland assembly or Welsh assembly but then cast your mind back to William Wilberforce was given by God the conviction that slavery and the slave trade was an evil it was something that really needed to be dealt with something that needed to be abolished he didn't begin by tackling the issue of slavery itself very wisely

God led him first of all to deal with the issue of the slave trade the trade in slaves largely from Africa through to America West Indies to America that's what he focused on but he had to wait years and years and years attempt after attempt to bring a bill before parliament for the abolishing of the slave trade and just time after time he failed didn't have enough votes it fell until at one particular year of parliament there was enough support to carry the slave trade bill successfully he didn't give up he didn't say this is just pointless the past 15 years some of us have looked at this and we've tried everything we've tried to persuade parliament and people that matter in parliament it's not worked it's just not worthwhile he kept plugging away because he was a believer he knew his bible knew what god was like he had a certain view of god and of righteousness and of holiness and of public life and as he waited and waited and exercised faith in god's time isn't that what it says here in god's time as indeed god himself had stated he didn't say exactly when this would take place he just simply being convinced that god was able to do what he had promised and he believed against hope that he should be the father of many nations it's the god he believed in was a god who took his own time if you like who had his own timetable and he does for you and for me too the things we're praying for tonight we may not see them during our lifetime the things we're busy setting before god for our nation for ourselves for our localities for our communities even for our own families we may never see them do you stop praying do you stop believing of course not you just do exactly as abraham here is with his view of god and his commitment to god's word you go on believing you persevere in your believing you persevere in your praying and in your worship and you see it's interesting isn't it that what it says here is a very good translation he grew strong in his faith verse 20 as he gave glory to god in other words by this faith he was giving glory to god he wanted to give glory to god and he wanted his life to give glory to god and the only way he knew of giving glory to god by his life was by believing by proceeding by proceeding with this life of faith that god had taken him into but you see what it's saying he believed in hope he believed against hope and what that basically means is the hope he might have had looking at things naturally he had to believe against that he had to believe god's word against what he saw with his eyes about himself and about Sarah his hope with regard to the natural production of children you might say it just wasn't going to take place at their age until god intervened and said well yes but I'm going to make sure it comes to pass and so he believed that word of god despite what he was seeing with his eyes and he didn't wave up but he actually grew strong he was strengthened in faith he grew strong in his faith now that's important because as your faith continues to trust in god and believe in god and accept the word of god your faith is actually made the stronger for that the more it's tested the more you go on believing just like Abraham he grew strong he was strengthened in his faith sometimes we get into the kind of thinking or come across people that have the kind of thinking all guilty of it I'm sure at times it says if only I had stronger faith if only my faith was stronger than it is I would then take the next step that I really want to take for god I would like to do more for god I would like to witness for god I would like to actually make more of a public testimony about my faith and tell people that I love the lord and all that's associated with that but if only my faith were stronger you see what this is saying to us is strengthening of faith comes through obedience it's not the other way around it doesn't mean that strengthening of faith comes followed by obedience it's obedience is followed by strengthening of faith when you've come yourselves to profess the lord those of you who've come openly to profess him you can tell from your own experience that this is the case maybe you are waiting like many others for that greater assurance from god that you really were a believer that you really were genuinely one of christ and maybe you said to yourself many times when I had that

[ 29 : 51 ] I would go and take communion because it's in my heart to do so and I really do love the lord and I want to be with his people but I'm going to have to wait until this strengthening comes well

what the lord is saying here is those who are indeed his are strengthened by obedience by taking the steps whatever they are whether it's taking communion whatever else might be that's proper and fitting to do for god well he was strengthened in his faith he took the step of trusting in god and proceeding on the basis of believing that and the more he was tested the more his faith responded so he grew stronger in his faith as he gave glory to god what a great privilege you and I have tonight to have a certain view of god that comes through faith that can only come through faith the faith that's challenged by the world for the views we hold and nevertheless the faith that you yourself are conscious of that wants to go on believing in this god who raises the dead calls the things that be not as though they were and who will fulfill his promises for you at his time in his way that's the god you believe in and the testing of your faith is really a part of the way in which god brings our faith to be strengthened as from day to day we exercise that faith to the glory of god himself may bless to us this word this evening we're going to conclude now by singing from psalm 71 this is in the scottish altar this time psalm 71 verses 14 to 17 that's on page 311 but i with expectation will hope continually and yet with praises more and more i will thee magnify thy justice and salvation my mouth abroad shall show even all the day for i thereof the numbers do not know and i will constantly go on in strength of god the lord and thine own righteousness even thine alone i will record to the end of verse 17 but i with expectation but i with expectation will hope continually and yet with praise more and more i will i will i will thee magnify thy justice hope in all J ini say my earth shall tür customize

And so in all that day, for I, they know, the numbers do not know.

And I will constantly go on, in strength of God the Lord.

And I, O the righteous, mercy blind, alone I will record.

For even from my youth, O Lord, by Thee I have been told.

[ 34 : 29 ] And hitherto, I have declared the wonders of the Lord.

If you let me get to the main door, please, after the benediction. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore.

Amen.