



Paul is so caught up in the doctrine of justification by faith alone that he just can't let it go. He's like our country right now—we are so caught up in the controversy of the red Starbucks cups. On and on and on.

“For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith” (Rom. 1:17). Two weeks ago in Romans 3:21–31 we learned that *“we are all justified freely ... by faith ... through the blood of Christ.”* Last week in Romans 4:13 we learned that *“It was not through the law (i.e. good works) that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.”* This is the most important teaching in the Bible. John Calvin said that “the doctrine of justification by faith is the hinge by which everything else turns.”

To get our minds thinking about this in the right way, let me reuse an illustration I used two weeks ago. It was two scenarios of a drowning man. In the first scenario there is a man in the ocean flapping his arms, bobbing up and down, screaming for someone to save him. He is clearly drowning and he's asking for someone's help. A kind person on a nearby boat sees him, throws him a life preserver and all is well. Some people mistakenly think this is the way God saves us; justifies us by faith. A person sees their need, they call out for help (which would be seeking), they put their faith in the life preserver and then they are rescued. This is wrong (Ephesians 1, Romans 9, 1 Peter 1, 2 Corinthians 5).

Instead, let me describe scenario #2. There is a man in the ocean but he is not flapping his arms and bobbing up and down. He is dead, lying on the ocean floor. He has no pulse and therefore he is not screaming for anyone to save him. God sees him, slides his hand under him and draws him to the surface to breath life into him. Then the formerly dead person responds in faith. Without a response of faith, there is no salvation. This is the scenario the scriptures are painting. A person could be wondering, what does it look like to respond in faith?

In our progression through Romans, we come to chapter 4, verses 17–25 today. In his attempt to seal up this topic, that's the question the Apostle Paul answers: What does Biblical faith look like? If salvation hinges on it, there shouldn't be any confusion about what it is.

But there is confusion about faith today. Does it look like Kris Kringle's definition in the movie *Miracle on 34th Street*? He said,

“Faith is believing in things when common sense tells you not to.” Is that what the Bible means? Is that how you'd describe your faith? “... believing in God when common sense tells you not to”? I hope not.

Our verses today will use Abraham to provide a case study to answer the question, What is Biblical faith? The verses of scripture are going to show us that Biblical faith is ...

- Only as good as its object
- Unwavering belief in the promise of God
- A personal response

Turn in your Bibles to Romans 4:17b and let's read God's holy, inspired word.

He (Abraham) is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

We pick up the story of Abraham halfway through verse 17 of Romans 4. Paul says, *“He (Abraham) is our father ...”* meaning that the recipe of faith that Abraham possessed is our recipe too. We see the first part of the answer to the question, What is Biblical faith?

Faith is Only as Good as Its Object

This verse describes God as the object of Abraham's faith. Notice the two supernatural descriptions of God here. God gives life to the dead; that's referring to resurrection. God calls into being things that were not; that's a reference to Creation when God created the universe out of nothing.

When you think about it, these two things silence humanity: nothingness and death. Death is final. Despite our incredible medical advancements, we do not know how to bring people back from the dead. We don't like that but we accept it. While death is an impossible problem for us, it's nothing for God. He raised Lazarus, Jarius' daughter, a boy from Nain, and Jesus Christ from the dead.

Try to comprehend nothingness. How do you make something out of nothing? Only God can do that. Humanity only knows how to remix the components that are already here. Today, even atheists like Stephen Hawking believe the universe was created out of nothing. The scriptures tell us that God did that.

Abraham was placing his faith in the God who could handle impossible obstacles. God was the object of his faith. The creation

and resurrection are still the two main manifestations of God's power. Abraham believed that about God.

What objects do people place their faith in today? Some will say, I put my faith in fate. Good and bad things happen to everybody. I believe fate will take care of me. I can see how that works for someone whose life is pretty positive. But I've never met a homeless person who'd say their faith is in fate. Fate dealt them a bad hand. Unemployment on top of mental illness on top of physical injury on top of isolation on top of indebtedness has placed them on the streets. I think fate is an unreliable object to place your faith in.

I hear all kinds of different places people put their faith. Science, good deeds outweighing their bad, another religion. Some people have very sincere faith. But most of the people I talk with on the peninsula have an unexamined object they're placing their faith in. For different reasons, it just hasn't been a high enough priority. They're really busy and generally they're handling life. So their rationalization is, I'll think about it later.

In order to help ourselves and others place their faith in God—the best object of faith—we should be getting to know more about **him** and helping them know more about God too! Instead of just reacting to our circumstances, we should engage in measured reflection on the person and nature of God.

The first part of our answer to the question—What is Biblical faith?—is faith is only as good as its object. Abraham believed in the God of the impossible. Christians believe in the same God.

Faith is Unwavering Belief in the Promise of God

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness" (verses 18-22).

Notice how Abraham faced the hard facts but wasn't ruled by them.

Verse 18 – *"against all hope"* – he was facing an impossible situation. Humanly speaking, there was "no hope" that his wife would get pregnant.

Verse 19 – *"without weakening in his faith"* although he was about 100 and his wife's womb was dead.

Verse 20 – *"he did not waver regarding the promise of God"* and he...

Verse 21 – *"fully persuaded that God had power to do what he promised."*

Abraham had unwavering faith in the promise of God. We see here that Abraham honestly faced his reality but never let go of the promise of God. He knew he needed a miracle. The only difference between him and a lunatic is that he was trusting in God (the object) and he was trusting in God's promise to him.

Let's turn back to Genesis 12 to see what God promised Abraham.

The Lord had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

**"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;**

**I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.**

**I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;**

**and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."**

So Abram went ... and they arrived there.

Abram traveled through the land ... The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land" (Gen. 12:1-7).

So what's the promise that's made here? "I will make you into a great nation." "I will bless you." "I will make your name great." "You will be a blessing." These are all amazing. The implication, although not explicitly stated, is that Abraham would have a son. Somehow people had to multiply in order for a nation to exist.

Turn over to Genesis 15:1 to see how this promise becomes clearer.

After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

"Do not be afraid, Abram.

**I am your shield,
your very great reward."**

But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:1-6).

What's the promise made now? A son and grandsons and great-grandsons and on and on and on as numerous as the stars. When Abraham believed this promise—a promise to do the impossible—God credited righteousness to him. Why? Because he didn't waver. He was fully persuaded that God would keep his promise. He hoped against the odds and put his hope in God.

Biblical faith doesn't mean just to believe anything but to believe in God's promises which are all found in his word. That's what Abraham was doing. We should get to know more about God's promises in his word and act on them, even when it's hard!

Often people say they have faith in God about a situation they're in. When I begin to ask questions about that I often find they're believing God will do things he's never promised to do. But once you accurately nail down what he's promised, you can bank on that. Why? Because not only is God powerful, he's also faithful. He could never make a promise he doesn't keep. It would be against his nature. *"God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?"* (Numbers 23:19).

This relates to us in many ways. Fundamentally, it relates to salvation. Back in Romans 1-3 Paul built the case that **no one** can ever be right with God because of our sin. This means that every person who's ever lived has faced an impossible problem; we can't rebuild the relationship with God.

So what does humanity do? The Christian faith is built on the foundation of trusting God to do the impossible for us too. This occurs when we hope against the evidence of our sinfulness and our spiritually dead condition and trust in the promise God made to give salvation to anyone who has faith in him. And then we hold unwaveringly to this. This is why Abraham is the father of all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior. As you think about Abraham's unwavering faith, he's pretty impressive, isn't he? Anybody feel like you fall short of his bar? I sure do.

Let me point out one important characteristic of Abraham's faith. The emphasis here is on his persevering faith in the promise God had made him. He was fully persuaded and believed so he persevered. But he didn't have perfect faith.

Let's think about what's recorded about him in scripture. You know his faith wasn't perfect. He faltered a lot. Abraham lied about Sarah being his sister instead of his wife so the Egyptians wouldn't kill him in order to steal Sarah. Where was his faith in that moment?

After 11 years of waiting for a child, Sarah said to Abraham: We've been waiting a long time. Why don't you have a child with my servant girl, Hagar? Did Abraham say, "No, Sarah, we have to trust God"? No! He said, Cool." He got Hagar pregnant and what a disaster! Where was his faith then?

Yet Paul says he didn't waver in his belief, that he believed against all logical hope, that he was fully persuaded of God's power. Paul, being a rabbi, knew Abraham's story backwards and forwards. So what's going on? What's Paul thinking?

Here's how I see it: Though Abraham's faith wasn't perfect, it was never extinguished. Abraham was never permanently overcome by doubt and disbelief. Though his faith had temporary lapses, it remained over the long haul. Like a guy running a marathon — he may have times during the race where he tires and slows down, but when it's all over you can say of him, "he was steadfast; he persevered through the whole race."

Notice what Paul says about Abraham as he persevered, and this may be the key: Instead of wavering, *"he was strengthened in (through) his faith and gave glory to God"* (v. 20.) The more he trusted God amidst adversity the stronger his faith became. I believe somebody here needs to hear this today. Let me repeat it — *"as he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God ..."*

In her book *Evidence not Seen* Darlene Dibler Rose shares her horrific experience as a prisoner of war during World War 2. She wrote, "If prisoners were not returned to their cells immediately, I had to will myself not to think about the water treatment - I could be the next victim. At such a time as this, I took refuge in God's Word, especially Psalms 27 and 91." As she trusted the promises of God, God's Spirit came to her in a supernatural way and she was carried on God's strength. This is the strengthening that comes as the Christian turns to God in faith. Biblical faith is unwavering belief in the promise of God.

Faith is a Personal Response

Let's finish up Romans 4 by reading verses 23-25,

The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

The story of Abraham isn't meant to just be heard. Each person has the choice to "believe in God, like Abraham." The righteousness of God wasn't for him alone but also for anyone who believes in the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

In James 2:19 we read that demons have some elements of belief. What do they lack that prevents their belief to become faith in God? They lack personal trust. While they can see the power and goodness of God and they are aware of the promises of God, they refuse to personally place their faith in God.

I'm sure all of us believe that George Washington was the first President of the United States. That's an undisputed historical fact. But none of us are "believing in him" to bring us salvation. We are not putting our personal faith in him. The Christian puts

their personal trust in God. First for salvation and then for living a victorious life through God's power. As we do this, our faith is strengthened little by little and God is glorified more and more.

The hero of this story isn't Abraham; it's God. Abraham's dad, Terah, might have had stronger faith, but he put his faith in the wrong gods. Abraham put his faith in the right God, and he just stayed where God told him to go. It was better for him to put little faith in a big God than big faith in a little god. This is good news. This is why Jesus says you only need faith the size of a mustard seed. Why? Because it is not about the size of your faith; it's about the size of your God.

I love this quote from scholar James Dunn: "The character of Abraham's faith is determined by the character of the God in whom he believed." His hope is not in how strong his faith is; his hope is in God. What God? The God who calls into being things that are not. The God who created all things. The God who called

the dead to life. Abraham's old body and Sarah's old womb are pointing to a Son, to Jesus, the object of our faith.

So what problems are you struggling with today? Let me encourage you to look at your problems in light of God's promises. Jesus promised rest (Matthew 11:28–30). Burdens are lifted at the cross of Calvary. Jesus promised abundant life to those who follow him (John 10:10). Jesus promised eternal life to those who trust him (John 4:14). Jesus promised his disciples power from on high (Acts 1:8). In this power, they "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). Jesus promised that He will return for us (John 14:2–3).

Look at your problems in light of God's promises.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2015 Central Peninsula Church South, Redwood City, CA
Catalog No. 1418–10S

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, November 15, 2015 at Central Peninsula Church South
1005 Shell Blvd. | Foster City, CA 94404 | 650 349.1132 | www.cpcweb.org. Additional copies available on request.