

## Romans | The Gift of Righteousness (part 4 of 5)

Grow Strong in Faith, Resting in God's Promise

Romans 4:13-22

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*13 For 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. 14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. 16 That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—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, 17 as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18 In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." 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), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. 20 No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." Romans 4:13–22 (ESV)*

While studying for our text this week, I found two stanzas of a hymn written by Charles Wesley. Unfortunately this hymn stopped being placed in hymnals in the 1920s. I say "unfortunately" because I love certain phrases in this hymn, which we still need in the twenty-first century:

*In hope, against all human hope,  
Self-desperate, I believe;  
Thy quickening Word shall raise me up,  
Thou shalt Thy Spirit give.*

*Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees,  
And looks to that alone;  
Laughs at impossibilities,  
And cries, It shall be done!*

Romans 4 is all over this hymn. I hope you caught a few things from our scripture reading and this hymn, but let me highlight three:

1. The phrase "in hope against all human hope" is nearly word-for-word from Romans 4:18.
2. The connection of faith and promise is a clear theme in Romans 4:13.
3. To "laugh at impossibilities" is what Abraham did in Genesis 17:17 after he heard that Sarah and he were going to conceive a child in their old age.

Wesley's hymn is a great introduction to what we are going to examine in Romans 4 today. Last week we learned about the connection between belief and righteousness – namely, that faith and belief, not works, produce righteousness. We saw the way Paul made the case about faith by illustrating it from the life of Abraham and David and the issue of circumcision. And his aim was to show that if faith is the basis of righteousness, then anyone who believes can be saved.

## Connecting Faith and Promise

Our text today builds on last week and introduces the connection between faith and promise. If last week connected faith and righteousness, this text connects faith and the promises of God. Verse 13 is the first time that the word “promise” is used since 1:2, and verses 13-22 are the most thorough treatment of the issue of promise in the entire book.

If you have an ESV Bible, you likely have a heading over this section which reads “The Promise Realized by Faith.” That is a pretty good summary of what is happening here. Faith is what is counted as righteousness, but faith in what? Answer: the promises of God. To fully understand the beauty of what it means for righteousness to come by faith, you also have to appreciate the connection between faith and the promises of God.

Paul gives us a theology of promise so we can grow in our understanding and practice of faith. The focus of this text is upon faith *through the lens of promise*. There are three observations about promise in Romans 4: 1) it is apart from works, 2) it rests on grace, and 3) it is to be believed. Let's look at each of these.

### 1. A Promise Apart from Works (vv 13-15)

Paul's first point connects a thought we have already seen in Romans that essentially is the main point: righteousness does not come from works. But here Paul intends for us to see how this same “anti-works” mentality applies to the concept of promise.

The word promise is all over this pericope. Look at how many times the word or a form of it is used in verses 13-22:

- v 13 – “For the **promise** to Abraham and his offspring...”
- v 16 – “That is why it depends on faith, in order that the **promise** may rest on grace...”
- v 20 – “No unbelief made him waver concerning the **promise** of God...”
- v 21 – “...fully convinced that God was able to do what he had **promised**.”

The Greek word for promise is *epangelia*. You might hear the word “angel” because there is an “announcement” or a “news” aspect to this word. What's more, the word is also related to another important Greek word, *euangelia*, which is the word for “Good News” or the gospel. “Promise” in the Bible is essentially what God has announced or declared will happen. It is to announce in advance and with certainty what one will do. This is what God has done, and this is what we put our faith in. God makes promises that we must believe. Faith and promise are absolutely linked: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.” (Hebrews 10:23, ESV) The promise of God is what we put our faith in. Faith is meaningless without God's promise, and God's promise is not received without faith.

What is the promise in verse 13? It is that Abraham and his offspring would be “heirs of the world.” This is a reference to the Abrahamic Covenant that we talked about last week from Genesis 12 where God says that in Abraham all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Paul interprets that promise accurately by going right to the end of the redemption story as recorded in the book of Revelation through the phrase “heirs of the world.” The idea is simply that through Abraham comes the blessing of the Messiah which ultimately brings about the restoration of all things in the new heavens and the new earth.

When this restoration happens through the work of Christ, the Bible indicates that those who are Christ’s will reign with Him. The New Jerusalem is described in Revelation 22 in the context of a believer’s reign with Jesus:

*“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” (Revelation 22:1–5, ESV)*

So the promise is that the followers of Jesus will be heirs of the world. Understanding this promise is important, but the main point here is that this great and glorious promise is based not on works, but on faith. We do not share in the blessing of Abraham, nor do we reign forever and ever with Christ, nor do we become heirs of the world by our actions.

Paul clearly states this in verse 13b: *“The promise. . . did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.”* In other words, righteousness and the fulfilment of the promise are both connected to faith. So Paul simply establishes this point and then identifies two reasons why this is true.

First, we see in verse 14 that if being an heir was fulfilled by works, it would invalidate faith and the promise. Faith would not be necessary, and there would be no promise of God. There would only be a debt for God to pay us. As the NIV translates it, faith would mean nothing and the promise would be worthless. Second, we see in verse 15 that law and promise are antithetical. The law brings wrath, not promise. And the law only serves to increase transgressions. It does not create hope in future promises.

One commentator states, “Law, though good in itself, is so closely bound up with sin and wrath that it is unthinkable that it should be the basis of the promise.”<sup>1</sup> The law, by definition, only serves to undermine my hope in the promises of God because of my inability to earn the right to those promises. No matter how hard I tried, I could never do enough to deserve or earn the promises of God. We do not believe and *work*; we do not work and *just believe*.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995) citing Barrett’s commentary on Romans.

*In hope, against all human hope  
Self-desperate, I believe*

The promises of God are always apart from works.

## **2. A Promise that Rests on Grace (v 16)**

The second thing we see here is the connection between promises and grace. In verse 16, Paul identifies that the promise must depend on faith, and then he gives two reasons as to why this has to be the case:

*“That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—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,” (Romans 4:16, ESV)*

The first reason is so that *“the promise may rest on grace.”* A promise is only as good as the one who is making it and keeping it. If the promise was based upon our ability to earn it or keep it, we would be in a terrible position. There would be no hope. You would have to work and work and work to earn the promise, and you would have to work and work and work to not break the promise. But there would also be no joy. A works-based understanding of righteousness or promise-securing would put you in a constant state of stress and fear. How would you know if you ever worked enough? What assurance would you have that you could not lose it?

But if the promise rests on grace, there is security, hope, and joy. Because to say that it rests on grace is really to say that it rests on God. This is what makes the gospel message “Good News.” It means that my hope that God can and will forgive my sin through the sacrifice of Christ does not rest on me, it rests on God. It means that the beauty of an imputed righteousness – the legal declaration that a person is completely righteous – is what God does, not what I do. It means that the ability to put very attractive and appealing sin to death actually happens as I look away from my desires and the promises offered in sin and I trust in what God says – that I fight through Him and by Him, not myself. It means that when suffering or persecution comes, my confidence in that hard day is not in me but in God. It means that the promise of my eternal future – that those who receive Christ will live eternally in the new heavens and the new earth with no sin, no death, no pain, and only God’s glory – is rooted, not in me, but in God. It means that the hope of continuing to believe for the rest of my life, such that I never abandon, desert, or deny him rests on God, not me.

If Christianity is faith in the promise of God, then everything gloriously rests on grace!

The second reason why it must depend on faith is so that *“the promise can be guaranteed to all his offspring – not only to the adherents of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is father of us all.” (Romans 4:17)* Paul wants us to see once again the extent of God’s grace. The phrase *“not only to the adherents of the law”* is really another way for Paul to make reference to Jews, and the phrase *“the one who shares the faith of Abraham”* refers to Gentiles. Faith makes Abraham the father of us all.

Once again Paul causes us to marvel at the depth of God's grace. And just when you come to see the depth of God's grace, Paul blows us away with the breadth of God's mercy. It might like compared to see a large and beautiful mountain from a distance and the closer you get to it, the more majestic and compelling it becomes. You are transfixed with it, barely able to take your eyes off of it. Then you decide to climb the mountain and at some clearing in the trees you are stopped dead in your tracks as you see not just the mountain but the mountain range! Multiplied over and over is the beauty and majesty of not just one mountain but hundreds of mountains. Look around you in this sanctuary today. God has not only been gracious to you but He has been gracious to all of us. His grace to us individually would be stunning enough, but the fact that He is gracious to all of us who have put our faith in Jesus is just amazing.

The promise of righteousness through faith rests on grace.

### **3. A Promise to Be Believed (vv 17-22)**

The final aspect of promise unpacks even further what it looks like to believe in the promises of God.

There are a series of statements that not only describe what it is like to believe, but they also serve to fan our belief into flame. In other words, by looking at what it means to believe, we are encouraged to believe even more. As we meditate on what it means to trust in God's promise for our redemption, it serves to strengthen our belief in all of God's promises. We are called to "grow in grace" (2 Peter 3:16), and passages like these help us. So as I walk through these seven phrases, prayerfully consider what this means and how it applies to your life.

Paul lists six phrases about Abraham's belief in God's promises:

- ***In God's power***

Verse 17 takes the promise that God makes to Abraham, adds the phrase "*in the presence of God in whom he believed,*" and then gives us two very significant statements about God's power. In other words, Paul tells us why Abraham's belief in God was not foolish. Both statements relate to God's power: "*who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.*"

Why should Abraham believe in God's promises and why should you? Because God is the one who brings to life what is dead and gives life when it doesn't exist. God is able to do what no one else can do. He can bring life out of nothing. He can raise the dead. He has the power to conquer death.

For me, this truth has often sounded like this: "Mark, if God can give spiritual life to your dead heart and call you out of the tomb of your spiritual death, then surely He can deal with \_\_\_\_\_." To believe in the promises of God means that you are siding with a God who can bring life from death!

- ***In hope, against hope***

I love this phrase in verse 18 because it is so real! Believing in the promises of God is not easy, especially when the circumstances of life line up such that it seems that there is no way to have any

hope. To hope against hope means that you believe despite what you see around you. Look what Paul says in verses 18-19:

*"In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." 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), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb." (Romans 4:18-19, ESV)*

Abraham's body was weak – as good as dead – in terms of conceiving children. And to hope when everything around you points the opposite direction could be rather scary. Yet Abraham hoped against hope. Or as Wesley said:

*Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees,  
And looks to that alone;  
Laughs at impossibilities,  
And cries, It shall be done!*

Abraham did not deny that he was old and that he and Sarah were barren. Those facts were true! However, there is a difference between something being true and something being in control. To hope against hope means that you live in the real world, but you also know that God is true to his Word.

- ***Battling distrust***

Verse 20 contains another phrase that is really helpful. It says, *"No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God."* The idea is that Abraham did not fall into unbelief. He kept believing the promises of God despite what he saw with his eyes or what was true at the present time.

The reason I love this statement is because it acknowledges that potential of wavering or the fight of not falling into unbelief. One of the most helpful lines that I have ever heard from John Piper is "Keep trusting the One who keeps us trusting." One of my favorite verses in the Bible is in Mark 9 when a father of a demon-possessed child comes to Jesus to plead with Him to cast out the demon. The disciples tried and failed. His son would convulse, fall on the ground, and foam at the mouth. All this father wanted was for his boy to be free, and Jesus said, "All things are possible for one who believes" (Mark 9:23). Standing between the sovereign healer and the life-dominating issue of his son, the man says "I believe; help my unbelief." What is he saying? He is saying that while he believes, he needs Jesus' help to fully believe.

- ***Always growing***

The fourth phrase is also deeply encouraging. The text says, *"...but he grew strong in his faith..."* This seems to be the solution to the potential of distrust and wavering concerning the promises of God in the first part of verse 20. Clearly faith is not something that is just a state of mind or being. Belief is not just a one-time event. Abraham grew strong in his faith. The more he believed, the stronger his faith became.

Faith is something which can become stronger or weaker depending on what promises we choose to believe. The writer of Hebrews gives this warning:

*“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” (Hebrews 3:12–13, ESV)*

This is why we need one another! We need to keep reminding and helping one another to cling to the promises of God. We need to grow strong in faith and help others to grow strong in faith.

- ***Giving glory to God***

Central to what it means to grow in faith is the object and the aim of belief. Verse 20 clearly tells us that the object and the aim of his faith was God Himself. Growing in faith is directly tied to the glory of God. Faith in God gives glory to Him as God is fully trusted and rested upon for our future. But the glory of God also fuels even more faith as we see God be true to his word and we are emboldened to have even more faith.

So the focal point of Abraham’s faith and the fuel for Abraham’s faith are the same: the glory of God. Throughout Biblical history, the more people trusted and beheld God, the more they trusted and beheld God.

- ***Fully convinced***

The string of phrases end with a wonderful and beautiful statement in verse 21: *“fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.”* Notice who the focus is on! This is the key to Paul’s point. Abraham was fully convinced that **God** was **able** to do what **He had promised**. Abraham’s focus, hope, trust, and belief are all resting fully on God.

Abraham knew he was old, knew that he and Sarah were barren, and knew that he could not see a way forward, yet he knew God’s promise. He was fully convinced that God could and would fulfill His word. He didn’t see “how” but he knew “who.”

Abraham was called to believe the promise of God. He had to put his trust fully on God and not himself. He had to believe in God. And that is why verse 22 says the following:

*“That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”” (Romans 4:22, ESV)*

Why is faith counted as righteousness? Because Abraham was convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. He fully trusted in God and God alone.

The promise of God is apart from works so that we can never take credit. The promise of God rests on grace so that it will never fail. And the promise of God must be believed because God Himself stands behind it.

So the question that we must all wrestle with today is this: “Do I believe?” For some of you that looks like putting your trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. It means believing in what the Bible says about you (that you are a sinner) and what it says about Jesus (that he died to take away

your sins). Believing in Jesus means that you turn from yourself and turn to Christ. In so doing, you become a child of God.

But for others, this initial moment of faith creates a lifetime of belief. Putting one's faith in Christ is the beginning of continually trusting what God says *about* us and *to* us in His word. It means that we keep trusting the One who keeps us trusting.

Next week we will celebrate Easter, and that weekend is a reminder that if God has kept His promise there, will He not keep it again?

So what promise do you need to believe today?

*In hope, against all human hope,  
Self-desperate, I believe;  
Thy quickening Word shall raise me up,  
Thou shalt Thy Spirit give.*

*Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees,  
And looks to that alone;  
Laughs at impossibilities,  
And cries, It shall be done!*

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