

EXPLANATION OF 45TH BIBLEBOOK

ROMANS 4:17b-22 (April A.D. 67)

INTRODUCTION

In Romans 4:1-17a, Paul proved that justification by faith has always been the only true method of salvation in the Bible. In Romans 4:17b-22, he shows the character of Abraham's faith in order to show us what genuine faith is. In Romans 4:23-25, he teaches the relevance of Abraham's faith for believers today.

OUTLINE

(II) 4:17b-25 An example of justification by faith from the Old Testament (Abraham)

a. The five characteristics of Abraham's faith (4:17b-22):

- (1) The object of Abraham's faith was the God who gives life to the dead and calls non-existent things into existence (4:17b).
- (2) The aim of Abraham's faith was directly related to his hope (expectation) that God's promises would be fulfilled (4:18).
- (3) The strength of Abraham's faith was that he expected the apparent impossible (what God had promised) to happen (4:19-20).
- (4) The ground of Abraham's faith was God's trustworthiness and ability (he speaks the truth and does what he says) (4:21).
- (5) The result of Abraham's faith was that he was justified by God (4:22).

b. The relevance of Abraham's faith for believers today (4:23-25):

- (1) Faith is based on the promise in the Old Testament and the fulfilment in the New Testament (4:23-24).
- (2) Faith is grounded on the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ (4:25).

EXPLANATION

(II) 4:17b-25 An example of justification by faith from the Old Testament (Abraham)

a. The five characteristics of Abraham's faith (4:17b-22).

4:17b. the God who continuously imparts (vppa) life to the dead and continuously calls (vppa) things that are not (vppa) as though they are (vppa).

4:18. Against all hope, he (Abraham) in hope once for all believed (viaa) so that he once for all became (vnad) the father of many nations, just as it had been told¹ (vprp) to him, "So shall be (vifd) your seed."

4:19. And without becoming weak (vpaa) in faith, he took note of (contemplated, considered)(viaa) that his own body was (as good as) dead (vprp), - about one hundred years he was (vppa) - and the deadness (barrenness) of Sarah's womb.

4:20. Yet he did not waver (be divided in his mind)² (viap) in unbelief with respect to the promise of God, but he was empowered (strengthened)(viap) in faith, giving (vpaa) glory to God.

4:21. being fully persuaded (vpap) that he who promised (virn) is (vipa) able to also do (vnaa) (it).

4:22. For this reason³ 'it was reckoned (ascribed, imputed)(viap) to him for⁴ righteousness' (cf. verse 3).

(1) The object of Abraham's faith

was the God who gives life to the dead and calls non-existent things into existence (4:17b).

Abraham did not just believe. He believed in someone specific and in something specific. He believed that God was all-powerful and he believed that God could give life to the dead. He believed that God could call non-existent things into existence.

- **Abraham believed in God "who imparts life to the dead"**. This verse describes the characteristics of God that were the specific object of Abraham's faith, when he believed in God and was justified. Abraham believed in the all-powerful God, who possesses life-power by which he can raise the dead to life. This distinguishes the living God, who revealed himself in the Bible, from all other so-called gods in the religions of the world. *The so-called prophets and founders of all other religions are dead and have never been raised from their graves by their god. In contrast, the God who revealed himself in the Bible (1) gave life to Abraham and Sarah's almost dead bodies (4:19), (2) gave life to Abraham's son Isaac when Abraham had already sacrificed him in his mind and almost in his deed⁵, and (3) raised Jesus Christ from the dead⁶!*

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was prophesied 1000 years⁷ and 700 years⁸ before it actually happened! And there were very many eyewitnesses of the resurrected Jesus Christ⁹!

¹ G: legó, eró, eipon, eiréka

² G: diakrinó

³ G: dio

⁴ G: eis

⁵ Genesis 22:9-12; Hebrews 11:17-19

⁶ Acts 3:15; 26:22-23

⁷ Psalm 16:10

⁸ Isaiah 53:5-11

⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

The God who reveals himself in the Bible is not only the Creator of everything and everyone¹⁰. He is not only the Sustainer of everything and everyone¹¹. He is also the One who resurrects the spiritually dead¹², the One who resurrects the physically dead¹³ and the One who will perfectly restore this dying old creation¹⁴.

Because he has life-power to raise the completely dead, he also has life-power to raise the half-dead. Abraham believed that God would enable both him and Sarah to beget and conceive a child, even though their bodies were very old and half-dead (4:19)¹⁵.

- Abraham believed in the God “who calls things that are not as though they are.” Paul does not say that God was still busy creating new realities out of non-existence, as in Hebrews 11:3. He says that God calls *things (events) that do not yet exist* in the material universe as already existing! “The things that are not” refer to the things determined by God to come to pass in the future history of this world and thus already have existence in his eternal plan, even though they do not yet exist in present history! These things do not yet exist in the material universe, but since God determined them in his eternal plan, God calls them as *having existence* (cf. 8:29-30). These things do not yet exist in the present history, but since God promised them and therefore shows that he had already determined that they should come to pass, the certainty of their realisation in future history was absolutely secure. For example: the event of the birth of Isaac. God promised to Abraham that this event would certainly happen, even though it had not yet happened in the present¹⁶.

Thus, for Abraham, *God’s promise was as good as its fulfilment!* “The things that were not” did not belong to the category of the *possible* (they might or might not happen), but belonged to the category of *certainty* (they will certainly happen)! God had determined that it would happen and therefore it will certainly happen¹⁷! This is also what Hebrews 11:1 is saying, “Faith is being sure of what we hope for (what we expect will happen), and certain of (the existence of) what we do not see.” Abraham’s faith was not a wish that God’s promise might be fulfilled, but an absolute certainty that God’s promise would be fulfilled!

(2) The aim of Abraham’s faith was directly related to his hope (expectation) that God’s promises would be fulfilled (4:18).

- Abraham did not simply wish, but unwaveringly expected that what God said was going to happen! In the world people wish that something may happen without any certainty that it will happen. But Abraham did not simply wish that he might have a son. He expected with absolute certainty that he was going to have a son, *because God promised it to him!* Both Christian faith and Christian hope are grounded on what God said/promised (his Word).

Romans 4:18 says that Abraham “against all hope Abraham in hope believed”. The words ‘against hope’ refer to his circumstances, described in verse 19, which humanly speaking would give no one hope that it would actually happen.

If he had only looked at his circumstances, that his own body was as good as dead and Sarah’s womb was dead, then his circumstances would have destroyed all his hope that God’s promise would come true. Abraham was already 99 years old when God confirmed his promise in Genesis 12:3-4 and Genesis 15:5-6¹⁸ that he and Sarah would have a son¹⁹. If Abraham only looked at the circumstances, it would humanly speaking be impossible that he and Sarah would still have a son.

The words ‘in hope believed’ do not mean that Abraham had faith in the contents of his hope. It was not hope and also not the contents of hope that was the object of his faith, but God was the object of his faith. Abraham’s hope was not a wish that something might happen, but an unwavering expectation that something was certainly going to happen! Abraham’s faith and hope were working together. His faith was that he was *sure* of what he hoped for – he

¹⁰ John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 11:3

¹¹ Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3

¹² John 5:24-25

¹³ John 5:28-29; Ephesians 1:19-20

¹⁴ Acts 3:21; 2 Peter 3:10-13

¹⁵ Hebrews 11:11. “By faith he (Abraham) --- // even together with Sarah herself being barren (sterile) (dative case instead of nominative case) // --- received the ability to sow seed (to father, to beget)(something a woman could not do, and therefore cannot be interpreted as ‘to conceive’) even though he was past the right time of life, because he considered the one who promised (to be) faithful.” Grammar. “By faith he (Abraham) --- //even (kai) ‘together with Sarah herself (αυτος-η-ο)(npnfzs)’ (‘i’ under the ‘η’ and ‘α’)(dative case) being barren (sterile) (η στειρα)(‘i’ under the ‘α’)(dative case) (instead of: ‘and Sarah herself’ (αυτης-η-ον)(nominative case)//--- received (ελαβεν>λαμβανω)(viaa--zs) the ability (power) (η δυναμις)(n-af-s to sow (εις + η καταβολη)(t.t. for sowing seed in the sense of begetting) seed (το σπερμα) (to father, to beget) (something a woman could not do! And therefore cannot be interpreted as “to conceive seed” or “to become pregnant”) even though (και) he was past (παρα)(pa) the right (proper) (καιρος-α-ον)(a--am-s) time of life (age)(η ηλικια)(n-gf-s), because (επει)(cs) he considered (counted, regarded) (ηγησατο>ηγεομαι)(viad--zs) the one who promised (επαγγελιαμενον>επαγγελλω)(vpadam-s) (to be) faithful (πιστος-α-ον) (a--am-s).

¹⁶ cf. Ephesians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

¹⁷ cf. Isaiah 14:24,27

¹⁸ cf. Genesis 22:18-19

¹⁹ Genesis 18:10; 21:5

expected those things to happen. His faith was that he was very *certain* of the fulfilment of God's promise²⁰. He believed that *God's promise was as good as its fulfilment. Abraham's faith was based on God's character (God is faithful and omnipotent).*

And *Abraham's hope was based on God's promise* (God promised that in his seed all nations would be blessed). His faith was directed to God's faithfulness and omnipotence, and his hope was directed to the fulfilment of what God had promised.

(3) The strength of Abraham's faith

was that he expected the apparent impossible (what God had promised) to happen (4:19-20).

- Abraham's view of God made Abraham's faith strong. Abraham's view of God determined the character of his faith. Instead of trying to forget his circumstances, *he deliberately faced his circumstances*. Humanly speaking Abraham and Sarah were both much too old to have children²¹. But in spite of considering his circumstances, Abraham was not weak in his faith. The reason why Abraham was not weak in his faith was because he fixed his attention, not on his circumstances, but on God, on God's character and on God's promises. God's character and promises caused him not to waver in unbelief.
- God's repeated promises made Abraham's faith strong. God had promised Abraham that he and his wife would have a son, and that God would use that son to bless all the families of the world. But because both he and his wife were very old, humanly and scientifically speaking it seemed impossible that such a promise could be fulfilled. Nevertheless, Abraham faced his circumstances without weakening in his faith in God and especially in God's promise. *He did not allow his circumstances to determine his faith!* He did not waver or stagger by entertaining doubting thoughts with reference to God's promise. He did not give room to doubts concerning God's promises, because he believed in the faithfulness and omnipotence of God.

Abraham grew strong in faith, that is, his faith (as an instrument) empowered him. The question is *what* with respect to his faith empowered Abraham? He was empowered by God's repeated promises to him. Again and again God renewed his promise to him²². His faith in God's repeated promises empowered him.

- Giving glory to God made Abraham's faith strong. His faith was also strengthened every time he gave glory to God for being faithful and omnipotent. To give glory to God is to reckon that God is what he is and that God will do what he says. When you trust God you bring glory to God. And when you doubt God you dishonour God. The strength of Abraham's faith was not based on something in Abraham's personality or on something Abraham did, but only on God's character and on what God had promised and done! That is why Abraham continually gave glory to God.

(4) The ground of Abraham's faith

was God's trustworthiness and ability (he speaks the truth and does what he says) (4:21).

Abraham believed that God spoke the truth and did what he said. *His view of God determined the character of his faith in God and his faith in God's promise.* Because he viewed God as faithful and omnipotent, he did not give room to doubts. He held on to the unswerving conviction that God had the power to do what he had promised. That was the strength of Abraham's faith. Because he viewed God as faithful and all-powerful, also his faith in God was strong and unwavering.

(5) The result of Abraham's faith

was that he was justified by God (4:22).

What is the exact meaning of the words, "It (his faith) was reckoned to him for righteousness"?

This does not mean that Abraham's *faith itself* was regarded as *some kind of good work or righteous deed* and that God compensated or rewarded him by 'crediting' righteousness to his account. If this were true, Abraham would have earned his righteousness and he would have been able to boast before God (4:2).

Abraham's faith can never be regarded as some kind of righteous work, because it (his faith) was reckoned to him by God's grace, as a gift from God (4:16) and never as an obligation (to compensate or reward) on the part of God (4:4)!

The word *to reckon* does not have anything to do with compensation or a reward. It is a legal technical term meaning *to impute, to ascribe, to reckon*, in the sense of *to declare, to regard and to treat*. Therefore, lest we begin to regard the word 'to credit' as a compensation or a reward, it would be better to say that Abraham's "faith was *ascribed or imputed* to him for righteousness". It means that God's response to Abraham's faith was *to declare him perfectly righteous* and thereafter *to regard and treat him as perfectly righteous in his eyes!*

The words "it was reckoned to him for righteousness" mean exactly the same as "he was justified by faith only". 'Righteousness' is the righteousness of God (not of man) that was merited by Christ (not by man). 'Righteousness' is

²⁰ Hebrews 11:1

²¹ Genesis 17:17; 18:11

²² Genesis 12:1-3; 15:4-6,18-21; 17:1-21

God's undeserved gift to believers. "Christ Jesus has become for us ... our righteousness, holiness and redemption"²³. And 'faith' is the instrument (means) by which a believer personally receives God's gift²⁴.

It is not true that everyone is saved by his own faith in his own religion. It is not any kind of faith that justifies. Abraham's faith was not a general kind of faith without any specific content, but a very specific faith with a very specific content.

It was not a religious feeling, but a deep conviction. His faith was not in any god of any other religion, but in the God of the Bible who promised the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. His faith was in Jesus Christ who by his death and resurrection would bless all the families of the earth²⁵. His faith aimed at bringing glory to the God of the Bible. His faith was not merely an intellectual or historical faith. It was also not the faith needed for miracles. Abraham's faith was salvation faith. His faith led to his justification or salvation. His faith was directed to God's promise of the coming Messiah, who by his death and resurrection would bless all the families of the earth. His faith trusted God's words and depended wholly on God's righteousness in Christ for salvation and not on any kind of human works.

b. The relevance of Abraham's faith for believers today (4:23-25).

4:23. The words²⁶: "it was reckoned (imputed, ascribed)(viap) to him were not written (viap) for him (Abraham) alone,

4:24. but also for us to whom it (righteousness) is to be (vipa+) reckoned (imputed, ascribed)(+vnpp), to us who keep on believing (vppa) in him who once for all raised (vpaa) Jesus our Lord from the dead.

4:25. who was once for all delivered over (viap) to death for our transgressions, and was once for all raised (to life)(viap) for our justification.

(1) Faith is based on the promise in the Old Testament and the fulfilment in the New Testament (4:23-24).

The words: "It was reckoned to him as righteousness" were written in the Bible not only for Abraham's sake, but also for the sake of every believer in Jesus Christ in history!

Abraham *believed* that God had the power to fulfil his promise (4:21). But Christians *know* that God has already fulfilled his promise in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (4:25). Christians must not lose sight of God's progressive unfolding of his history of salvation. The main difference between Abraham's situation and the Christian's situation today is that Abraham (and all believers during the Old Testament period) *received the promise* and all Christians (during the New Testament period) *received the fulfilment of that promise!* Abraham's faith focused on God's promise that would certainly be fulfilled in his future. Our faith focuses on the accomplishment of God's salvation work through Jesus Christ in our past. *True faith needs both the promise and the fulfilment! No other religion in history has this kind of faith: faith that is based on God's promises and on the fulfilment of those promises!*

That is why Paul could write in 1 Corinthians 10:11, that "on us (Christians) the fulfilment of the ages has come". And that is why the writer to the Hebrews wrote in Hebrews 9:26, that Jesus Christ has appeared once for all "at the end of the ages" to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Abraham lived in *the beginning* of the ages, while we live in the fulfilment or *end* of the ages. The 'end of the ages' consists of the whole New Testament period from the first coming of Christ²⁷ to the second coming of Christ²⁸.

Although the circumstances of Abraham's faith and the circumstances of the Christian's faith are different, the similarities between Abraham's faith at the beginning of God's salvation history and the Christian's faith today show that *the faith in the Old Testament was essentially the same as the faith in the New Testament. And the God who revealed himself in the Old Testament period is the same God who revealed himself in the New Testament period.* Any god in any religion that does not justify sinners by grace through faith is NOT the God of the Bible!

(2) Faith is grounded on the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ (4:25).

The justification of a believer is dependent on both the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

- The death of Jesus. Jesus Christ was delivered over to death²⁹ as the punishment for the sins of the believer and as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the believer. Only by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross could God maintain his holy and righteous character and deal effectively with the sins of the believer. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross made atonement for the sins of the believer and satisfied God's holy and righteous anger against his sins. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross removed the believer's problem from him, namely, his sin together with the guilt, shame, power, corruption and punishment for his sins³⁰ and made a permanent end to the consequence of the believer's sin, namely, his separation from God³¹.

²³ 1 Corinthians 1:30

²⁴ John 1:12

²⁵ (Genesis 22:18; cf. John 6:29)

²⁶ (G: hoti)

²⁷ (Hebrews 1:1-2; 9:26; Acts 2:17)

²⁸ (Matthew 24:3; 13:39; John 6:39-40; 12:48; Ephesians 1:10)

²⁹ (cf. Acts 2:23)

³⁰ (1 Peter 2:24)

³¹ (Isaiah 59:1-2; 1 Peter 3:18)

Only by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross could God release his love towards us and save us, sanctify us, bless us with every spiritual blessing in heaven and eventually glorify us. Only the cross of Jesus Christ could reconcile and actually reconciled God's perfect holiness and righteousness (that must punish sin) with God's perfect mercy and grace (love) (that saves sinners)!

- The resurrection of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus Christ shows that God has accepted Christ's sacrifice (cf. 1:4) and guarantees the believer that God approves of him and has accepted him as his justified child into his family (cf. 6:4). *The living God will only justify sinners by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ*. Without faith in Jesus Christ and his death, the holy and righteous God must and will punish all sins with eternal death in hell. And without faith in Jesus Christ and his resurrection, the living God will not raise the believer to a new and transformed life on this earth and he will not resurrect his body from the dead to be like his glorious body (6:4-5)³²! Thus, the resurrection of Jesus Christ *guarantees the justification of every believer* and guarantees that his justification will last forever!
- Justification by faith in his death and resurrection. Justification will only have an effect when Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and is alive forever more! Therefore, the death of Christ for our justification cannot have any effect apart from his resurrection³³. *The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are inseparable! That is why Romans 3:24 and 5:9 say that we were justified by the death of Jesus Christ and Romans 4:25 says that we were justified by the resurrection of Jesus Christ*. Romans 3:22 says that we are *justified by faith*, that is, by faith in Jesus Christ who died and was resurrected.

³² 1 Corinthians 15:13-19; Philippians 3:21

³³ cf. 1 Corinthians 15:12-19; Hebrews 7:23-25