

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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Sermon Title: Abraham Part 3: The Promise Realized

Sermon Text: Romans 4:13-25

Rom. 4:13 ¶ 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.

Rom. 4:14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

Rom. 4:15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Rom. 4:16 ¶ 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,

Rom. 4:17 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.

Rom. 4:18 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.”

Rom. 4:19 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.

Rom. 4:20 No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,

Rom. 4:21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

Rom. 4:22 That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”

Rom. 4:23 But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone,

Rom. 4:24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,

Rom. 4:25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

Main Point: God is calling on all people to have a faith like Abraham, looking to Christ, and having no confidence in themselves.

Outline:

1. Promised Hope (4:13-17)
2. Preternatural Hope (4:18-21)
3. Persistent Hope (4:22-25)

Introduction

For Paul, Abraham has been a living embodiment of someone who lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved him and gave himself for him. We’ve seen already: Abraham heard the promise of the Savior. Abraham believed the promise. Abraham was counted righteous by God apart from any works. Abraham received the sign of the covenant and applied it to his descendants and embodied Peter’s words from Acts 2: “The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2:39).

And all of chapter 4 has been Paul persuading us *from Scripture* that this is how God deals with his people, and not just Abraham – that the gospel he preaches isn’t some new innovation, but that the gospel is God’s ancient way that he has dealt with his covenant people from the earliest times.

Today’s text is Paul completing his survey of Abraham’s life of faith and how God dealt with him. Not only did he have faith prior to obeying God by receiving the sign of the covenant, but Abraham believed that the promise would also be given to his descendants.

The other thing that I want you to see as we wrap up Paul's narrative of Abraham's life is the way that Paul insists, he has not just been giving us a history lesson here. This wasn't just an overview of an interesting episode from the past. He wants us to know, the story of Abraham can be the story of us, as well. We also can follow in Abraham's steps by having the sort of faith that he had.

And so this morning we're going to focus on three aspects of saving faith that we can also share with Abraham. Those three aspects of saving faith are "a promised hope, a preternatural hope, and a persistent hope."

1. Promised Hope (4:13-17)

First we see that this is a promised hope.

You look at verse 13, and Paul says,

“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.”

How did the promise come? This is what Paul leads with here. What Paul does here is he employs a type of argument known in Latin as a *reductio ad absurdum*. It reduces to the absurd. If followed through, the idea that the promise hinged on obedience rather than faith, would lead to an absurd conclusion. What is the absurd conclusion? You see it if you keep going in verse 14:

“For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.”

Paul is saying, “here is what it would mean if this all hinged on lawkeeping: if only the Jewish people were heirs of the world, then Abraham would be the father of only one nation, not many nations as the promise claimed. Abraham cannot be the father of many nations if he is the father of only one nation. This promise was always meant from the beginning to go out into the world, not to shrink the world.”

And then Paul adds another argument in verse 15:

“For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.”

Paul is saying, even if there was no problem with Israel being the only nation Abraham would be the father of, you would still have another problem: Israel are sinners. So if it all hinges on lawkeeping, that's not good news for a nation of lawbreakers. They had broken the law. We've broken the law! So we have to really abandon any ideas of the promise that hinge on works, or lawkeeping, or anything other than leaning (as sinners) on the grace of God.

I want you to see these two things and treasure them: the first is, the promise is for all people groups and ethnicities. Any way society may try to break down human beings into groups or nations or whatever, God says, "Abraham is going to have descendants there." The gospel is not for any one people, and from the beginning that was always the plan.

Second, (keep holding on to this as we go through Romans), because the law brings wrath, and because we are sinners, our hope rests on God's good grace that he has promised us in Jesus, the sinless one. Paul is stripping us here of our power so that everything hangs on God's power and promise alone.

What kind of hope is Paul preaching through Abraham's life? A promised hope.

2. Preternatural Hope (4:18-21)

Second, Paul speaks of a preternatural hope. In my effort to alliterate I used an odd word here, but preternatural just means "beyond what is natural." To put it another way: a hope that does not make human sense.

By God's grace, Abraham has a hope that rests in something that's beyond is reach. Think of how Paul sets the scene here: at this stage in his life, and at his age, how capable *might* Abraham be of having even one child (let alone a whole nation)? Well look at 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), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb."

God chooses to make this promise to Abraham at the point in his life when it is the most unbelievable that Abraham could make this happen for himself. At his most

helpless, defenseless, powerless, God makes a promise that would be utterly absurd unless it really did come from Him.

Matthew Henry:

“All the arguments of sense, and reason, and experience, which in such cases usually beget and support hope, were against him; no second causes smiled upon him, nor in the least favored his hope. But, against all those inducements to the contrary, [Abraham] believed.”

And what this means is, what Abraham is given by God can't be seen because at the time he received the promise his body and Sarah's body were not naturally capable of having children any longer. *All* he had was a promise. All he had was God's word.

It glorifies God when we trust his word, *especially* when it's hard to believe. Because in that moment, we are really believing God, not just an abstract promise. We're trusting the *one* who gives us the promise.

What God gave Abraham at that point was a hope, but it was only a *promised* hope. What that means is that he didn't have it yet. He couldn't look around and say, “I have it.” He didn't get to luxuriate in having what was promised in hand. His numberless descendants weren't here yet. He had to live by hope by only looking forward. He couldn't look around, and he couldn't look back, he had to look ahead and believe God who made that promise.

The hope of Abraham rested on something that he couldn't see. But he had to trust in it. He rested in it. He received it. He lived by it. He hoped in it. This thing he didn't have yet.

The ancient preacher John Chrysostom, in one of his sermons on Romans makes this point that Paul not only says that the promise comes through faith, but he directly denies that it comes through law. And Chrysostom points out, Paul is making sure you can't say that the promise comes through faith *and* law. It comes through faith only. Here's how Chrysostom says it in his sermon:

“To prevent anyone from saying that it is possible to have faith *and* to keep the law at the same time, Paul shows that this is impossible. For one who clings to the law as if it had saving force dishonors the power of faith.”

Here he is saying you can't have faith plus law. They do not mix as a means of justifying sinners. We can't live by God's promise and by what we can do. We *have* to live by faith alone, with nothing of our own mixed in as the ground of our justification. That is how the promise comes to sinners like Abraham, and you, and me. Faith alone, unmixed with law. Saved by Christ, not our obedience.

At rock bottom the promise that Abraham is really hearing and believing is: we will be reconciled to God through Christ. That's what Abraham is hearing. The object of this promise and the object of Abraham's faith, and the object of the faith we have to live by is quite simply Jesus himself.

And this is precious: like Abraham, if we trust in Christ and not ourselves or our works or our strength, what do we get? We get the perfect, pure, good, righteousness of Christ imputed to us. We receive the goodness and righteousness of Jesus himself. It was like this for Abraham, and it's like this for us too by faith alone.

Paul is giving us a preternatural hope. The sort of hope that is beyond us to make happen through our own efforts.

3. Persistent Hope (4:22-25)

Third, Paul speaks of a persistent hope.

This is a hope that isn't just for one person at one time in one place. Instead, Paul is very big on this point: the same hope Abraham had is ours through faith. That same promise, that same hope he had, God holds out to us. It is a hope that persists through the ages, even to today. It's a hope for us right now.

Look how he says this near the end of this section. He kind of breaks the fourth wall here as he's telling Abraham's story. As he is wrapping up he says in verse 23,

“The words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

Like I said, Paul sort of breaks the fourth wall here and says, “We’re not just looking in on a cool period of history. We’re looking at the story of how we have peace with God, too. If we rest in and receive Jesus Christ, we too can have that peace.”

It was written for us. God had us in mind. He loves you. He had you in mind. It was written for you. For us. He knew sin would still exist on into the future, long after Abraham. He knew that generation upon generation would continue to be born, and that we would all need the same thing Abraham had: to be regarded as righteous in Christ. And he knew that lawkeeping would not be how that gets accomplished.

Here is how the Swiss Reformer Heinrich Bullinger put it:

“The Holy Spirit in the Scriptures did not wish merely to demonstrate how Abraham alone was justified, but rather how every race of mortal men and women can be justified. For Abraham is the father and model of all believers. What do those who contend with Paul in speaking of their works, who are under the law and not under grace, have to say to this? For we hear that both the old way of being justified and that of our own is one and the same. Therefore, even if Abraham was faithful and already under grace, it was still by none of his merits but only by faith that he was justified. Therefore, it must be that all Christians are justified by nothing else but faith.”

You see, Paul is drawing a line here from Abraham to us. This hope persists. It continues. It’s not just history, it’s a now our story through faith. It’s at least as relevant for mankind today as it was for Abraham.

Think about this: there are currently more Christians living on earth than the sum total of saints who existed since Christ came. As global populations grow, and Christians pass on their faith to children and evangelize, the number of those who have come from Abraham and share in the same hope as him is now staggering. Abraham’s descendants are blowing up throughout the world. And in fact we hear that Christianity has been on the rise in the United States since 2022. Bible sales have increased by 40%, and Gen Z male church attendance is up 15%... and that’s just in the United States!

Here Paul redefines how his readers might understand Abraham's "descendants" to be. The common sense way of thinking of being someone's descendant is that you came from their body – you are genetically related to them. But in verse 24 he says that you are a descendant and recipient of Abraham's promise if you believe in him who raised Jesus from the dead.

So what he's talking about is a spiritual family, which is bigger, greater, wider, and more gracious than genetics. It's the family of faith, not flesh.

Paul is recalibrating the connection you and I, as Gentiles, may feel when we read the Old Testament. Perhaps the Old Testament feels like a foreign or strange land to you. Maybe it seems like something that is intimidating and strange. But what Paul has done here is, he's grabbed that history and he's pulled it close to us and said,

“These are your people, too.” “If you trust in Jesus Christ, you are like this guy who lived 4000 years ago.”

And he's done more than that he's said,

“In fact, you are his family. And now all of this book from beginning to end isn't about this distant people group, it's about you. It's your family, too. These are your people. They aren't distant. It's your family story, with its warts and sins and everything. You are more connected and more intimate with and more like these people than you would ever probably like to admit.”

And that might seem hopeless, especially if you read that history carefully. There are sins, huge sins. There are man-made disasters that these people caused for themselves with their own sin, even. And yet that just leaves you even more yearning for a real answer to the problem of sin that's bigger than just another ruler, just another king, just another president or whatever. Israel swapped out kings for hundreds of years, and both the good and the bad kings still disappointed and failed. We need a greater hope.

It's like if you were to read your own family history and find out that there were horrible things, dark things in your family history. It would be very humbling, wouldn't it? When we find out that we are Abraham's children, we suddenly have

two new realizations: one is, I'm a sinner from a long line of sinners. And the other realization is, "I need to take shelter in the same Savior that *they* were hoping in."

Paul is preaching for us today a hope that is persistent. It is still an ongoing hope. Something we can grab hold of right now, here today.

Conclusion

As we conclude chapter 4 here, I want to draw your attention to the last two verses, because what we really have here is a beautiful summary of the gospel. Not just the gospel, but a real gospel invitation for each of us.

What happens here? Paul says, just like Abraham,

"faith will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."

Why is Jesus Christ worthy of your faith, and able to accomplish what we trust him to do? Because, Paul says, two things:

First, Jesus was "delivered up for our trespasses." Jesus died because of *our* sin. Our sin provided the occasion on which the perfect man was put to death. We do sing the song "In Christ Alone" here at Evergreen, and in that song, Keith Getty writes,

"It was my sin that held him there/Until it was accomplished/His dying breath has brought me life/I know that it is finished."

Why was Jesus handed over? Because of *our* trespasses. We cannot have peace with God while also having sin. Someone has to take it. Someone has to deal with it. We needed a substitute, and because of that, Jesus was willingly delivered up. He became a substitute for sin, and died in the place of helpless sinners. When you trust in Jesus Christ, you are essentially telling God, "I cannot wash myself, I cannot cleanse myself, I cannot wipe away what I have done. I need a substitute. I need Jesus." So that's the first important thing here: Jesus was delivered up for our trespasses.

But second, Paul says Jesus was “raised for our justification.” This is an interesting way for Paul to conclude Abraham’s story, isn’t it? It’s an interesting phrase. In fact, it’s the only place where Paul connects the resurrection of Jesus with our justification.

What is going on here? I think Paul is showing us that peace with God isn’t just about being forgiven. It’s also about God sharing his own life with us. We don’t just need forgiven, we need to be enlivened. We need to have life, not just to have our sins forgiven. We need to be righteous, not just innocent.

At the resurrection, Jesus was seen by all as innocent, and holy, as being everything he said he was. And guess what: we need that, too. He was raised for our justification. He didn’t just receive pardon for sinners, but he lived our life, too.

There is no peace with God without the resurrection. We need more than his death: we also need his life. Like Abraham, you can trust him and find all the life that you will ever need.

Let’s pray.