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Enjoying God Ministries
Romans #19
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Trusting our God who is Able to do what He has Promised!

Romans 4:13-25

Donald Grey Barnhouse was for many years the pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in downtown Philadelphia. He died in 1960. During the time when he was actively in ministry, he was asked to address a combined meeting of several civic clubs in a certain city. After speaking on the gospel, a friend whispered in his ear: "Dr. Barnhouse, that man over there is a prominent businessman who always tries to trick our guest speakers. I just thought I'd warn you in advance."

The businessman approached Dr. Barnhouse and introduced himself. "I am a Jew, and I have a question." He proceeded to explain that the OT was his code of life and he wanted to know if he would be eternally lost if he did not believe in Jesus Christ. Dr. Barnhouse asked him who he thought was the greatest man in the OT. "Abraham," he replied. Dr. Barnhouse then answered his question by saying that he could not go to heaven unless he goes there in the same way that Abraham did, believing the same thing. A smile came across the businessman's face, as he said, "Dr. Barnhouse, I am glad you are broad-minded."

Barnhouse immediately cut into his smile with a sharp question: "Sir, how *did* Abraham get to heaven?" "By keeping the Law, of course," came the reply. At that time Dr. Barnhouse made an announcement in the presence of numerous witnesses. He offered that Jewish businessman \$1,000 to be donated to any he charity he wished if he could show him one verse in the OT which said that Abraham or Moses or David or anyone else during the time of the OT went to heaven based on their obedience to the Law.

The man was startled. "Well, then, how *did* Abraham get to heaven?" Dr. Barnhouse explained that Abraham got to heaven by believing in the promise of God. As for Moses, he got to heaven by placing his faith in the blood sacrifice offered up on the Day of Atonement by the High Priest of Israel, who just happened to be his brother, Aaron. The man stood in silence for a moment, and finally said, in a somewhat muffled voice, "Thank you," and walked away.

Although you may not know it, the question of how people during the time of the OT gained entrance into heaven and were accepted by God is of critical, indeed eternal, importance for you and me. I realize that since Abraham and Moses lived a few thousand years ago you may wonder what possible relevance their spiritual experience has for us today.

To answer this question, let me remind you of what Paul has been doing in Romans 1-4. His purpose has been singular and clear: to demonstrate that because of the universality of human sin, on the one hand, and the righteousness of God, on the other, our acceptance with God can come about only because of what God has graciously done, not because of what we are doing. That righteousness which alone will

avail in God's sight is not a righteousness that we produce by our efforts but one that God gives or imputes or reckons to us by his grace. And we get it, not by works but by faith. Paul summed it up in Romans 3:28, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

Whereas this all may sound fine to Gentiles like us, living in the 21st century, it struck a sour note to many Jews living in the 1st century. Their response to Paul's teaching was to protest: "But Paul, what about Abraham and Moses and David? Were not these great men of the OT justified by works of law rather than by faith alone?" Romans 4 contains Paul's answer to that question. He says, "If Abraham, the greatest of all the saints, was not justified by works, then surely no one else can be, whether they be Jew or Gentile, whether they live in the 1st century or the 21st. That is why it is so critical that we listen to Paul's explanation of how Abraham found acceptance with God: it was through faith alone, apart from works of the law.

The Principle Stated (v. 13)

It's quite clear that if we are to understand Paul's point, we need to become acquainted with Abraham. We did this briefly last week, but today we must expand our knowledge of him. We are told in Genesis 12 that when Abraham was 75 years old God spoke to him with unequivocal marching orders.

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:1-3)

When Abraham finally arrived in the land of Canaan, God established a covenant with him in which he made three promises. *First*, God promised to grant him title to the land of Canaan: "The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, 'Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever'" (Gen. 13:14-15).

Second, God promised to Abraham an innumerable posterity: "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted" (Gen. 13:16). Again, "And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.' And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:5-6).

Third, God told Abraham that he would make him a channel or source of blessing for all nations: "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3; cf. 17:6-8; 22:17-18).

Now, the question is this: What was Abraham's responsibility? What did he have to do in order to experience the salvation that God promised, with all its attendant blessings? Many Jewish people in Paul's day said that he had to obey the Law of God; he had to perform works of righteousness. Paul's answer, on the other hand, is quite different, as we see in Romans 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. 4:13).

There were no stipulations to be met, no works to be performed, no money to be given, no law to be obeyed. There was only one responsibility: believe the word of promise! But what does Paul mean in describing Abraham as “heir of the world”? He isn’t simply heir of the promised land, but of the entire world. God’s people, the offspring of Abraham who like him have put their faith in the promise of grace, stand to inherit the world (see 1 Cor. 3:21-23). This surely has in view the new heaven and the new earth described in Revelation 21-22.

The Principle Proven (vv. 14-17)

But note that Paul does not simply assert the principle. He proceeds to prove it. His proof, found in vv.14-17, consists of a series of disastrous consequences were it not to be the case that the promise comes by faith. In other words, the promise of salvation to Abraham and to us cannot be by works of law, otherwise three things would follow, each of which is disastrous. Let’s look at them.

First, if the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham was based on his works of obedience, “faith is null and the promise is void” (Rom. 4:14). Paul’s point is that faith and promise have no meaning, have no place in a relationship that is characterized by works and reward. If what you do for me is based on and determined by what I do for you, our relationship is a legal one, not a gracious one. Whether or not I have faith in what you promised is irrelevant. If I perform according to the terms of a legal contract, you must pay me. It is your legal obligation to do so. In such a relationship, the words “faith” and “promise” are meaningless. We saw this in Romans 4:1-12.

In other words, if the promise to Abraham is based on his obedience to the law, there won’t be any heirs at all. The promise would be useless because no one can or has perfectly obeyed the law. As v. 15 makes clear, the law brings wrath. This isn’t because the law is defective or evil. No, it is because we are defective and evil. When we are confronted by the law, we transgress, we sin, and thereby provoke God’s wrath.

Second, faith alone must be the basis of our relationship with God, for otherwise grace is excluded (v. 16a). This is important because if it were by works, no one would ever be saved. And if somehow someone could work to gain God’s favor, the individual human being would get the glory and not God.

Third, everything must be based on faith alone, otherwise assurance is undermined (vv. 16b-17). Did you see the word “guaranteed” in v. 16? We can be guaranteed or assured of the certainty of the promise only if it is rooted in faith. If it were by works, we start asking anxious questions such as: “*How many* works are necessary?” “*What kind* of works are necessary?” “*How long* must I perform them?” “*How thoroughly* or consistently must I perform them?” “How can I know if they are the works God approves?” The point is that the only way we can ever have assurance of our salvation is if it is by God’s grace, through faith, that we are accepted in his sight.

We should also pause to note that in order to be an offspring of Abraham and thus an heir to the promises given to him, you don't need to have his blood in your veins. You don't have to be a physical descendant. You only need to be "one who shares the faith of Abraham" (v. 16). Abraham "is the father of us all," both believing Jews and believing Gentiles. The promise of the land and the innumerable seed was initially given to Abraham and his physical progeny, the Jewish people. But with the coming of Christ, the definition or meaning of what it is to be the seed or offspring of Abraham has expanded to include not only his physical descendants but also his spiritual descendants. ***Every single believing Jew will inherit the promises you read about in the OT. But so too will every single believing Gentile.*** Look at how Paul expresses this in Galatians 3:

"Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (Gal. 3:16).

But if Jesus Christ is the sole offspring of Abraham who stands to inherit the promises, what about us? Paul answers in Galatians 3:26-29,

"for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gen. 3:26-29).

Gentiles, like you and me, who have faith in Christ, are now included in the offspring of Abraham no less so than are Jews who have faith in Christ. Your blood, your DNA, your ancestry no longer matters. The only thing that matters is whether or not you are in Christ. And if you are in Christ by faith, you are an heir of all the promises, regardless of your ethnicity. In other words, Jewish men and women who reject Jesus as their Messiah and Savior forfeit their promises as Jews. And Gentiles, like you and me, who accept Jesus as the Messiah and Savior become heirs of those promises. What's clear from this is that the reason we are heirs of the world is because Jesus Christ is the heir of the world, and we are in him by faith.

The Miraculous Birth of Isaac (vv. 17b-22)

We must take note of Paul's two-fold description of God. He is the one "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (v. 17b). This is what sustained Abraham when all looked hopeless. The primary thought in Paul's mind is the quickening of the body of Abraham and of Sarah. The promise that Abraham would be the father of an innumerable people looked foolish, given the fact that both Abraham and Sarah were well beyond the years when they might have conceived children. Abraham was 99 and Sarah was 90! But that was no obstacle to God. He's in the business of giving life to what is dead.

The statement in v. 17 that God “calls into existence the things that do not exist” has been interpreted in two ways. Some insist that this refers to God’s creative activity by which he called the world into existence out of nothing. But I’m inclined to think this phrase points to God’s promise to bring nations and innumerable descendants from Abraham when as yet none existed. The promise that Abraham believed was that God would grant him descendants, as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abraham had faith that God could effectively call these descendants into existence, even though they did not yet exist. All this, of course, would come about through the miraculous birth of Isaac.

Without the birth of Isaac, the promise to Abraham would have failed. But Isaac does not exist, and humanly speaking cannot exist. His Father is ninety-nine years old. His mother is ninety and barren all her life. She is now post-menopausal. But as Abraham “considered his own body” (v. 19) “he did not weaken in faith” (v. 19). When he thought about Sarah’s barren womb, “he did not weaken in faith.” He trusted God to do the humanly impossible. Let me ask you: when you are confronted with what you are convinced is an impossibility because of human limitations, do you give in? Do you throw in the towel? Do you quit? Do you abandon faith in God? Or do you respond as Abraham did?

Let’s be clear about what Abraham’s “faith” entailed. The Bible does not say that by faith Abraham “denied” his circumstances. Rather, he “defied” them. There is a world of difference between the two. Some people think faith means we work to convince ourselves that things don’t truly exist when they do, or that things do exist when they don’t. No. The Bible never calls on us to deny reality. Rather it calls on us to put our faith in the one who is Lord over all reality. When Paul says that Abraham “in hope” “believed against hope” (v. 18a) he means that from a human perspective it was hopeless; it was contrary to all reasonable hope that he and Sarah would have a child. But he defied every obstacle and trusted in God’s word.

Take the issue of physical healing as one example. Some people think that in order to exercise faith you must deny your symptoms. You must somehow coerce your mind into convincing yourself that in spite of the MRI you don’t really have a brain tumor. That pain in your left knee doesn’t really exist. It’s not there. But that isn’t faith. That’s pretending. Faith doesn’t mean you deny the reality of your circumstances. It means you defy them by putting your hope and confidence in the God who is infinitely more powerful than the very worst of circumstances. Instead of turning a blind eye to his and Sarah’s physical inability to have a child, Abraham “*considered* his own body” and “*considered* the barrenness of Sarah’s womb” (v. 19). He stared directly at the human obstacle to the fulfillment of God’s promise and chose instead to trust that what God had said he would do, he would do.

When Abraham pondered the condition of his body and that of Sarah, he didn’t say: “I refuse to believe that my body is incapable of producing a child. I refuse to believe that Sarah is beyond child-bearing years.” He didn’t strive to convince himself that the facts weren’t facts. He didn’t labor to convince himself that the local physician had misled them, perhaps even lied to them. He knew that his body and Sarah’s body were “as good as dead” (v. 19).

Abraham's faith consisted of his realization that the very real and imposing natural barriers were no hindrance to God. Abraham said to himself: "I'm too old to produce a child. Sarah is too old to bear a child. But God is not hindered or restricted by our physical limitations! What may appear hopeless to me, what may be utterly beyond and against hope as far as we are concerned, as far as our natural abilities are concerned, is of no consequence whatsoever to God!" Faith doesn't declare the circumstances and natural barriers to be non-existent. Faith simply declares that God is not shackled by them.

But *defying* circumstance is only one half of Christian faith. The other half is *relying* on God. So let's review the narrative as found in Genesis. When God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees and brought him into the land of Canaan, his name was not Abraham, but Abram. Abram means something like "exalted father" or "father of many." Can you imagine the embarrassment that must have caused him? I can imagine travelers stopping by the tent of Abram for food and water and asking, "So, you are very kind and generous. What's your name?" "My name is Abram." "Oh, you are the exalted father. Wonderful. How many children do you have?" Pausing to clear his voice, he answers, "Uh, well, uh, none." The visitors must have struggled to suppress their laughter, perhaps even their ridicule.

The pressure finally got to Sarah. She couldn't handle the scorn and embarrassment any longer.

"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, 'Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. . . . And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram" (Gen. 16:1-4a, 15-16).

How do you think God responded to this? From Abram's point of view, it appears that God adds insult to injury. He does it by changing Abram's name to Abraham.

"When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.' Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, 'Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God'" (Gen. 17:1-8).

“And God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.’ Then 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!’ God said, ‘No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year’” (Gen. 17:15-21).

Try to envision the scene where Abraham announced the change of his name. Perhaps everyone was seated around the dinner table, waiting anxiously for the news. They all knew that the name Abram had been an embarrassment, given the fact that this “exalted father,” this “father of many” had no children. Then Abram spoke: “God said he’s changing my name from Abram to Abraham. I am to be called ‘the father of a *multitude*!’” At first, stunned silence gripped the room. Then laughter. Then concern for Abraham’s mental frame of mind: “The old man has finally gone ‘round the bend!” “Abraham is not rowing with both oars in the water!” “Abe is a couple of pickles short of a barrel!” “Poor fellow, his bread isn’t completely cooked!”

Was it ridiculous for God to give him this name? From a purely human point of view, yes! But since when was God restricted by our perspective? Abraham had begotten Ishmael in the power of his sinful humanity. He would now beget Isaac in the divine power of resurrection life. Just as God said, “Let there be light,” and light broke forth out of the darkness, so also would he say, “Let there be Isaac,” and Isaac was conceived in the womb of a woman who was far beyond her child-bearing years. Sarah, on the other hand, wasn’t convinced.

“They said to him, ‘Where is Sarah your wife?’ And he said, ‘She is in the tent. The LORD said, ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?’ The LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.’ But Sarah denied it, saying, ‘I did not laugh,’ for she was afraid. He said, ‘No, but you did laugh’” (Gen. 18:9-15).

“The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac” (Gen. 21:1-3).

Conclusion

This entire story tells us a great deal about the nature of Abraham's faith and the kind of faith that God is pleased to see in us. So let me conclude with some observations about his faith and, I hope, ours too.

First, his faith is not just another name for "the power of positive thinking." Christian faith does not say, "I can accomplish whatever I want if only I will." It says, "God can accomplish anything he wants because he said he would." Faith doesn't say, "I think I can, I think I can." Faith says, "I know God can. I know God can." Faith is not belief in the impossible, simply because it is impossible. Faith is trust in the divine promise that *God can overcome the impossible*. Or as God said to Sarah, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" The only reason Abraham believed the promise was because it was God who had spoken it. So Abraham did not believe in faith. He believed in God!

Second, he grew strong in faith. Often times, what little faith we have is easily destroyed by what we believe are insurmountable obstacles. But Abraham not only maintained his faith, he actually deepened and increased in it. Faith is never static. It is always either increasing or decreasing.

Third, he gave glory to God! He knew that God was the author of his faith and that his ability to persevere in it was a gift of grace. In fact, it was *because* he gave glory to God that his faith was strengthened. Worshiping God, that is to say, ascribing honor and praise to him as the one who alone has the ability to fulfill his seemingly impossible promises, is the means by which the Spirit generates stronger faith in our hearts. By faith we acknowledge God as all-powerful and true to his word, which in turn nurtures an even greater measure of faith in his ability to perform what he has promised. But let's be clear: giving glory to God doesn't mean adding glory to God, as if he is somehow lacking in glory and we supply him. It means showing or making known or calling attention to the fact that God is glorious.

Fourth, how is it that he did not waver? At first, he doubted. He laughed. But as he contemplated who it was that had made the promise, his faith strengthened. He grew stronger in faith because *he was "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised"* (v. 21). Some cynics ridicule the idea of "faith" by saying it means you believe what you know isn't true. Faith, so they say, is believing without evidence, a veritable leap in the dark. No! Abraham's faith, and I hope yours as well, is well grounded. It is grounded in God and the integrity of his promise and the power by which he can do what appears to be impossible by human standards.

Fifth, it was in response to his faith that God credited to his account the righteousness that is required for acceptance with God. But please note that this entire story was not merely for Abraham's benefit alone. In other words, this story about Abraham and Sarah was ultimately designed to communicate to you and me that the only way to be reconciled to God is by faith. Note again what Paul says in v. 23b – the narrative about how Abraham's faith was "counted to him" wasn't included in Scripture for his sake alone *"but for ours also."* That's you and me! This entire story has as its ultimate aim to lead us to that faith which alone will secure on our behalf the righteousness that God's righteousness requires him to require.

But faith never hangs in midair. Faith itself is only as good as the object of its focus. And that is Paul's point in vv. 24-25. Our faith, the faith that results in God reckoning or imputing or counting righteousness to us is that faith which is rooted in and directed toward Jesus, "who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."

Jesus, says Paul, was "delivered up *for* our trespasses," by which he means it was *on account of* our sins that Christ had to die. It was "because" of them that he suffered on the cross. Jesus was also "raised *for* our justification," by which I think he means in order that we might be justified.

So, as you consider the many obstacles, challenges, and seemingly impossible barriers that lie ahead, do you believe that God is able to give life to what is dead?

Do you believe he is able to call into existence the things that do not exist?

Are you fully convinced that God is able to do what he has promised?

Is your God able?