

Romans Session 58 Salvation by Divine Power Not by Human Effort

Romans 4:18-25 (NASB)

¹⁸ *In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE."*

¹⁹ *Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb;*

²⁰ *yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God,*

²¹ *and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.*

²² *Therefore IT WAS ALSO CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.*

²³ *Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him,*

²⁴ *but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead,*

²⁵ *He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.*

This passage concludes Paul's illustration of Abraham as the supreme Old Testament example of saving faith.

It makes clear the fact that although man's faith and God's grace are both involved in salvation, they are in no way equal components.

Even man's faith is included with the provision of God's gracious salvation, as the apostle declares to the Ephesians;

Ephesians 2:8-10a (NASB)

⁸ *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;*

⁹ *not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

¹⁰ *For we are His workmanship*

Abraham's original name was Abram, which means father of many.

Yet when God called him he was living in Ur of the Chaldeans, and was childless.

By the time he left Haran, after the death of his father Terah, Abraham was seventy-five years old and still without children.

Yet by faith he began the last part of his journey to the land God had promised.

In his initial call, God promised that He would make of Abram a great nation (*Gen 12:1-2*)

And when the promise was reiterated some years later, the Lord promised Abram that his descendants would be as innumerable as the stars in the heavens, although the patriarch and his wife Sarah were still childless.

It was at that time that Abram believed in the Lord: and He reckoned it to him as righteousness;

Genesis 15:5-6 (NASB)

⁵ *And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."*

⁶ *Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.*

We do not know what Abram's thoughts were when he was originally called in Ur or when he first entered the land of Canaan, the promised land.

We do not know who God convinced Abram, and idolatrous pagan, that He was indeed the true and only God or how He persuaded Abram to place his trust in Him.

But we do know that the same God who made the call prompted the faith to respond to it.

Abram's faith was truly astounding.

For some forty years before it was fulfilled, Abram believed God's promise to give him an heir.

For the century that he lived in Canaan, Abram owned none of it, except for the small parcel of ground he bought for a burial site for Sarah and himself.

Abram trusted God to make him the father of a great nation and of a multitude of people, although there would not be a nation in the usual sense of that term until nearly 600 years later, when Joshua would lead the Israelites back into Canaan to possess it.

After Abram arrived in Canaan he was immediately faced with a number of severe tests of his faith.

He encountered famine (*Gen 12:10*)

He encountered a potentially hostile pharaoh (*Gen 12:14-20*)

He encountered a conflict with his nephew Lot (*Gen 13:5-9*)

He had an encounter with fear (*Gen 15:1*)

Yet through all the testing he remained faithful to the God who had called him.

In his commentary on Romans, Donald Grey Barnhouse writes insightfully of Abram:

Now Abram was an Oriental. He was used to the palaver of the Orientals. Furthermore, he was strategically located at the center of the camel caravan's movements carrying the commerce of the ancient world between Egypt and the North and East.

He owned the wells, and his flocks and herds were great. (Gen 13:2). When the caravans of the rich merchants came into the land, either from the north or from the south, they stopped at Abram's wells. And the servants of Abram took good care of the needs of the camels and the servants of the traders. Food was sold to the travelers. And in the evening, time the merchants would have come to Abram's tent to pay their respects. The questions would have followed a set pattern. How old are you? Who are you? How long have you been here? And when the trader would have introduced himself, Abram would be forced to name himself: Abram, father of many.

It must have happened a hundred times, a thousand times, and each time more galling than the time before.

"O Father of many! Congratulations! And how many sons do you have?" and the answer was so humiliating to Abram: None." And there must have been many a time a half-concealed snort of humor at the incongruity of the name and the fact that there were no children to back up such a name.

Abram must have steeled himself for the question and the reply, and have hated the situation with great bitterness.

Father of many, father of none. The possibilities were varied, and I believe that it is possible to detect in the psychology of the narrative the fact that there was much gossip about it. The servants who heard the jokes and who saw Abrams embarrassment repeated the details with embroidered variations.

It was a world of cloth and goat skins, where all lived in tents, and where there was little privacy from the eyes and none in the realm of the ears. There must have been many conversations on the subject, who was sterile, Abram or

Sarah? Was he a full man? Oh, he was the patriarch; his word was law; he had the multitude of cattle and the many servants, but he had no children, and his name was father of many!! (God's Remedy: Romans 3:21-4:25 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954]. pp.311-12)

Such pressure undoubtedly was a strong contribution to Sarah's suggestion that Abram have a son by her Egyptian maid, Hagar.

It is quite possible that the servants overheard that proposal and knew that in desperation Abram consented.

When Hagar became pregnant everyone knew that it was Sarah who was sterile. Sarah soon regretted her rash suggestion and became envious of Hagar and treated her with considerable cruelty.

When Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, Abram at last had an heir, but it was an heir of his own sinful contriving and human virility, not the divinely promised and divinely provided heir to whom only Sarah could give birth.

Thirteen years later, when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Merciful Lord appeared to him again and repeated the promise of multiplying Abram's descendants.

He also changed Abram's name saying,

Genesis 17:5-8 (NASB)

⁵ "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.

⁶ "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you.

⁷ "I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.

⁸ "I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

If Abram was embarrassed by his former name, he was even more embarrassed by his new one.

He just could not perceive how the promise could be fulfilled through a son by Sarah, who was 90 years old and past the normal time of childbearing, Abraham asked the Lord that Ishmael might become the promised heir.

Genesis 17:18 (NASB)

¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before You!"

And God answered;

Genesis 17:19 (NASB)

¹⁹ But God said, "No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.

It is a profound lesson to learn that God's promises can only be fulfilled by God's power, and human efforts to affect His will, no matter how sincere or clever those efforts might be, are doomed to failure, and bring God dishonor rather than glory.

Human effort, even for the purpose of keeping God's commandments or of fulfilling His promises, is futile and is a form of works righteousness.

In warning the Galatian believers against the legalistic Judaizers, Paul said,

Galatians 4:21-23 (NASB)

²¹ *Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?*

²² *For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman.*

²³ *But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise.*

Ismael illustrates the product of legalistic human self-effort, whereas Isaac illustrates the product of God's sovereign and gracious provision.

Paul reminded the Galatian believers that, because of their trust in Jesus Christ, they were, like Isaac, children of promise.

They were God's children by the working of His divine grace, not by the working of their own human effort.

Just as God would not recognize Ishmael as the son of His promise to Abraham because that son was naturally conceived, He will not recognize as His spiritual children those who trust in their own goodness and accomplishments.

After showing that salvation comes by faith not works, and from grace not law, Paul concludes the chapter by showing that faith also comes by divine power, not by human effort.

In this passage the apostle points out three realities of saving faith;

1. Its Analysis (*vv 18-21*)
2. Its Answer (*vv 22*)
3. Its Application (*vv 23-25*)

We will talk, of these, next time together.