

**Sermon for Sunday, November 29, 2009**  
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**THE TRUTH ABOUT FAITH**  
**Romans 4:12-25**

Today's theme is faith that makes a difference. We will consider what true faith is and how it grows. Following Paul, Abraham will be our guide and example. So then, how does faith grow? First, it grows by separation.

The life of Abraham shows that for faith to grow we need to get away from home. It's the idea in ministries like Sky Ranch in the mountains of Colorado. Christian guides take groups of seven to ten kids into the wilderness. There are no phones, no radio, they are under the authority of guides who tell them when to get up and hike, when to eat and rest. In the morning they have devotions. In the evening, meditations. It's always memorable; sometimes it's life-changing.

This principle is first seen in Abraham. God called Abraham to a faith that would grow. For that reason, He called Abraham out of his city and nation, away from the influence of his family and friends, away from their way of thinking. The Lord was wise to lead this way because we need to separate from our culture, at least partially, if we hope to grow.

Most of us think and act the way the people around us think and act. If American Christians get into a conversation about politics, it's all but certain that we will assume that it's right to protect democracy and to promote free market capitalism. I'm as grateful as anyone that I live in a free market democracy.

But since it's the air we breathe, we often assume that not just that it's good, but that it's the truth, God's way, his mandate and law. In fact, the Bible doesn't say a word about democracy. There are other good ways to govern. For a while Israel was governed by tribal leaders. Later, it was a constitutional monarchy, where a king ruled, but ruled under the law. There was no democracy. Remember that. Our political debates will be more civil if we're slower to claim "God is on my side."

To the personal level, if a believer comes to me to talk about a hard life situation, they usually talk in categories that come both from the Bible and the culture. They will talk about prayer and God's will or leading, but they (almost always) say they long to be happy. They want freedom to create the life they imagine for themselves. I understand and truly empathize with their longings.

But we must know that when we talk about "liberty and the pursuit of happiness" we quote Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence, not the Bible. Jefferson was a deist, a foe of Christianity, but the Declaration of Independence has a great influence on American minds, including the Christian mind. The Bible speaks in terms of joy, peace and blessing, but not happiness.

God had to remove Abraham from his culture in order to do something new through him. Everyone tends to think as their culture thinks. In the colonial era, all sorts of artists, scholars, theologians supported the idea that some races are inferior and others superior and so justified the rule of the white man.

Nietzsche said artists think they are on the frontier but they "have ever been in the service of some pre-existing ideology. They are smooth sycophants... of vested interests or of forces newly come to power"<sup>1</sup>. "Our coziness with the surrounding culture makes us so blind to many of its evils that, instead of calling them into question, we offer our own versions of them – in God's name"<sup>2</sup> In the Bible,

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, essay 3.5

<sup>2</sup> Volf, *Exclusion Embrace*, page 36.

Isaiah 30 warned of prophets who prophesy "smooth things." It's the same idea.

We see this when we travel to another country. First, we notice that their food is different, then we realize it tastes better. Finally, we may decide that their food is healthier and think, "I need to eat this way at home - better bread, more fruit."

So we need to get away from our culture to break with the sins of our culture. That's why God wanted his prophets to be independent of Israel's kings. One king called Elijah "the troubler of Israel." That is accurate; it was his calling – to cause trouble when things were moving all too smoothly toward idolatry.

That is why, God called Abraham out of his culture. God fulfilled His purpose for Abraham by separating him from his culture, which went astray. Then Abraham could truly hear the Lord's voice (directly or in dreams and visions). He became Abraham's teacher and called him to create a new culture. He said, "I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord... [to] bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (Genesis 18:19).

I saw this principle in Korea. The church there is strong and well-organized, but it struggles with moralism. Why? All humans tend toward moralism – even missionaries. We contributed to the problem. But moralism may be especially strong in Korea because the prior religions, Buddhism and Confucianism, are moralistic. The Confucian moral code is Father, Teacher, King. I'm a teacher, therefore they would not let me carry anything or pay for anything. It was harmless, pleasant, but the origin is probably Confucius, not the Bible.

Abraham had to separate from his former religion and society. The Koreans need to separate and we need to establish distance from our society too. How?

- Write some ideas about personal and social life that you've heard over and over, things everyone seems to consider "self-evident." Then ask, "Can I prove this from the Bible?"
- Study other cultures and times, asking: Where are they closer to truth than we are?
- You may see that we read capitalism, democracy, happiness, freedom, even materialism, into the Bible. We need to separate from unbiblical influences.

#### **4:13-16 Faith grows by grace.**

So then meritorious law-keeping is not the basis of a blessed relationship with God.

One of the ideas most cultures and religions assumes goes like this: If you obey and honor and serve the gods, they will reward you with good life – or at least not curse or punish. The idea was common in Paul's world as surely as in our world. That is why Paul is not afraid of repeating the gospel.

If you cut Paul, he bleeds the gospel of grace. Paul states it in chapter 3. Romans 4 illustrates it again and again. Start with the great truth of Christmas: Jesus is truly God, with the same substance and character as the Father, and yet he truly became a man – with a human mind and will and emotions. He is like us in all things except for our sin (Hebrews 4:15). After a flawless life of love, "he was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25)!

This is the gospel. But we "also walk in the footsteps of the faith [of] our father Abraham" (Romans 4:12). We also live the gospel of grace in three ways:

1. As a response to grace, we follow Jesus and obey him.
2. We receive the blessing of daily gifts.
3. We receive the blessing of mercy for our sins, the blessing of grace to grow.

Romans 4:13 says, "It was not through law that Abraham received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith."

Note the phrase "heir of the world" (4:13). God promised to give Abraham the land of Canaan, not the world. But God always had the world in mind. From all the world He chose one man, Abraham. But He also said, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3). God chose Abraham, but He keeps saying, five times in all, that all nations will be blessed through Abraham and Israel (12:3, 18:18, 22:18, 26:4, 28:18; cf. Psalms 72:17, Isaiah 19:24-25, Jeremiah 4:2, Zechariah 8:13.)

The Lord chose one to bless many. He did it again in Moses and David. Above all, He did it through Jesus' person and work. The prophesy said he will be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32).

Paul wants us to dwell on this gospel. So he continues: "If those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath" (Romans 4:14). Law cannot save. It undercuts grace. It doesn't cure sin, it compounds it. For "where there is law" sin is "transgression." By stating God's will so clearly, it makes sin the violation of God's expressed will. Sin is now also rebellion. No one can claim ignorance. Sin is now transgression.

So then, the promise comes by faith... by grace" and because it comes by grace, God can guarantee it to all Abraham's offspring" – Jews and Gentiles alike. He says: grace is not only "for those who are of the law" – that is, those who live under the law of Moses. It's also for "those who are of the faith of Abraham" (4:16).

Consider: Abraham had faith and a strong relationship with God for ten years before he first heard a law in Genesis 17. So he came to God as an outsider; like a Gentile he had no law, no covenant at first. But of course he is the father of Israel, for God made His covenant with Abraham, and the Jews descended from him. So Abraham "is the father of us all."

## **2. The nature of true faith**

So far, we have considered how faith grows and learned two things. First, considering Abraham, we saw that to grow in faith, we need to separate from the mindset of our culture, even our family. Second, following Romans 4:13-16, we said that we grow as we live by grace, not law, every day.

Now Romans 4:17-22 describes the character of genuine faith: real faith trusts the power, goodness, and promises of God. Again Abraham illustrates.

Paul said, "Abraham is the father of us all" (4:16). He explains: God said, "I have made you a father of many nations." This is a quotation from Genesis 17. If we revisit Genesis 17:4-5, we see that God changed the man's name. His given name was Abram, but now God renames him Abraham.

"Abram" means "exalted father." A hard name for a man who had no children at the age of seventy-five. (He eventually had a son by a concubine, rather than his wife.) But while he still waited for a child from his wife, God dubbed him Abraham – father of a multitude. And God promised once more: he will have a child from his own body. Abraham believed it and so became a father of all who believe.

Paul says, "God gives life to the dead" in 4:17. He means God gave life to the bodies of Abraham and Sarah, which were good as dead reproductively speaking. Later, Abraham believed that God would raise Isaac from dead (Hebrews 11:19).

Paul adds, "He calls things that are not as though they are" (4:17b). That is, God calls things into being that do not yet exist. He speaks to things that "are not" and by speaking calls them into existence. You see, God calls Abraham "father of a multitude" when he has but one, and God determined not to count that one. So God called him "father of a multitude" when he was anything but.

Yet "against" all hope, beyond every reasonable hope, Abraham believed his new name (4:18). Humanly speaking, it made no sense to keep hoping that God would fulfill his promises. God promised

Abraham and Sarah a child when they were seventy-five and sixty-five. Life expectancy was perhaps one hundred twenty years. If sixty-five was like forty-five, there was a chance that Abraham and Sarah might have a child of their own, just as a childless couple in their forties has a tiny chance of bearing a child by ordinary biology.

But twenty-five years had passed. Abraham had been "hoping for a very long time without receiving the object of his hope". It was time to give up. Yet God promised Abraham a child from Sarah, then descendants as numerous as the sand of the sea or stars of the sky (22:17, 15:5). These descendants would bless the nations.

To continue to hope was to defy all human calculation, every plausible expectation. But God gave him hope and he lived in hope. He hoped for something better than riches or safety or freedom. Nothing selfish - not even that he and Sarah would enjoy ordinary parental bliss. No.

He hoped for the content of God's promise: "You will become 'the father of many nations.'" And because he hoped, he did become the father of many nations. Hope can change things. When we give up hope, we can't do much. This is not magical thinking, not the power of positive thinking. The thinking in itself does nothing. But thinking that empowers action can accomplish great things.

This was not a blind faith: "All will be well; God is on my side." People do terrible things in the false belief "God is on my side." Armies have marched to their deaths, soldiers have walked into bullets, ships have sailed to their doom because they wrongly dreamed "God is on my side; he must protect me."

Paul says Abraham was different. Abraham was no fool, no dupe; he understood the facts: "Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead — since he was about a hundred years old — and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief... but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (4:19-21).

Abraham was fully persuaded of God's power, His ability to act (Romans 9:22, 11:23, Matthew 19:26). As the New Testament says, "he is able". He is able to do what he promises (4:21). He is able "to guard what [we] have entrusted to him" (2 Timothy 1:12).

Abraham considered his body with eyes open, unblinking. He knew what he saw – wrinkled skin hanging loose from bones, sinews and muscles grown feeble, bodies as good as dead, for bearing children: "Sarah's womb was dead." But God gives life to the dead and quickened Sarah for one child; Abraham had several more after Sarah died.

But Paul does not focus on the quality of Abraham's faith - not "Abraham is exemplary because he believed the impossible." Abraham didn't believe the impossible, he believed the promise of God. Better than that, he believed the God who promises. Sustained by God's promise, strengthened by it, Abraham continued to love his wife emotionally, spiritually and physically. That love was a part of his obedience. In that way, he laid hold of the promise that he would father a child and bless the nations. For them, sleeping under the same covers as husband and wife was an act of faith and love. More than we realize, loving affection and a shared bed remains an act of faith and love today, too.

The greater point is that God's promises impel us to action. Because the Lord says He "will provide" we keep working at our business or vocation, expecting a result, even when everything seems to be against us. The evidence may point against the promise. If so, make sure you have understood the promise correctly. If you have, then believe the promise over the evidence.

When Israel was in captivity, God said, "I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). Because God says this to His people, we keep working – not for narrow material prosperity, but for a life of peace - when the economy

is against us. Grad students pour themselves into research and writing, not because their advisor is encouraging, but because they believe God has a plan. We never give up if God has a promise that applies to our situation.

Thus Abraham is the father of all believers – Jews and Gentiles, insiders and outsiders. Abraham had great adventures and persevered in great adversity, but these aren't the proof of his faith. True faith looks to the Lord, whatever the evidence says. Abraham's faith rested on God and his promises. He did not demand signs or proofs – nor should we. He loved God's word.

Calvin applies it to us: "Let us remember that we are in the same condition as Abraham." Circumstances often seem to contradict God's promises: "He promises us immortality, yet we are surrounded by mortality and corruption. He declares that He accounts us just, yet we are covered with sins... What then? We must close our eyes" and disregard all that keeps us from believing that God is true.

Of all God's truth, the greatest is this: God credits righteousness to all who believe in Jesus our Lord, the risen Christ. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and God raised [him] to life for our justification" (4:25). Again, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Lessons... First, Genesis and Paul show that the Lord calls us away from all lesser loyalties. Abraham left his land, his wealth, his security, his kin. When Jesus called his first disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, John, we see the same thing. They left their nets and their father. Their nets are their wealth. Their father is their family. Jesus calls them from their culture, from all voices but his own.

So too, we must be willing to leave lesser loyalties, silence lesser voices so we can follow God. No mistake here: We are thankful for our family, our culture, our country. Americans should be thankful for their nation and culture. Europeans, Africans, Asians, and South Americans should too. Whatever our heritage, we should give thanks. Culture is not trivialized, but it is relativized.

"Culture is not trivialized" means it counts. But it is relativized because it's never ultimate. A believer is never an American, German, Chinese or Brazilian first and foremost. We are always disciples of Christ first; everything else is secondary, so we try to keep a certain critical distance from it.

Indeed we form a new culture. Notice that Abraham didn't leave his country alone. Sarah came too. Soon a community formed – a community of wanderers, united by the voice of God. They transcended the old ways together – as must we.

Belonging without distance destroys. I am more than an American (Canadian, German, etc.). But distance without belonging isolates. We have a culture, we belong there. We belong to our nation, yes, and the church in transformative power.

Second, Abraham gave up his gods and all believers must do the same. Abraham left the gods of the Chaldeans. He also forfeited all substitute gods – wealth, family, security, protection, Abraham gave up everything to heed God's call to a mission to the world. I must ask: have you done the same?

In his recent book, *Counterfeit Gods*, Tim Keller proposes four tests we can use to find our idols: First, when you day-dream, where do your thoughts go? Career success? Earning money? Fame? Respect from friends? Getting even with enemies? The house, the clothes, the vacation? Our thoughts go to our gods.

Second, Where does money seem to flow? Flow too much? Do we have to watch spending because it goes to children? Do we spend it on clothes? Sports? Our money flows to our gods. It's "a good working hypothesis" that money may be a false god.

If you say you love the Lord and his work, does your money flow there? Do you find yourself giving

and planning to give? Financially, it's been a tough year for most churches, ours too. Giving is down, ministries pared back. Let's finish the year strong. We should take pleasure in giving for the sake of God's work.

Third, how do you respond to unanswered prayers? If you are merely sad or a bit frustrated and move on, OK. If you are depressed, despairing, angry at God when we don't get what we want, it may be an idol. If we accept a "No," give thanks and keep praying, good!

Fourth, what are your uncontrollable emotions? When do you get more angry or feel more despair than you should? Where do you find yourself losing control? False god is near there.

Notice that several of these touch on money; most Americans are tempted to make wealth or possessions or security a god. That is quite visible now. A friend of mine tends to rise very early, around 4:00 a.m. daily. This Friday morn, he saw more cars than usual - streams of cars heading for the mall at 4:00 a.m., rushing to Black Friday. Soon they were pushing against doors, running up isles, grabbing the big sales, often with manners that would embarrass their parents. But on Black Friday, the parents behave the same way. Jesus called it "running after all these things." But we know better than to judge. We may be more reserved, but we can be just as greedy, just as grasping, in our own way.

Again, let's give thanks that we live in a land of abundance. Most of us have never really worried about starving. We're not even close. Black Friday is OK, I suppose, as long as you look beyond it to Good Friday and what Jesus accomplished: "He died for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."