

“So Help Me God”
Romans 4:13-25
December 22nd, 2019

It was the day after Christmas at a church in San Francisco. The pastor of the church was looking over the nativity scene when he noticed that the figure representing the baby Jesus was missing. He looked around and saw a young boy with a red wagon, and in the wagon was the figure of the infant Jesus. So, the pastor called out to the boy and asked, “Well, where did you get your passenger, my little friend?”

The boy replied, “I got him from the church.” “And why did you take him?” the pastor replied. The boy said, “Well, a few days before Christmas I prayed to Jesus and I promised Him if He would bring me a red wagon for Christmas, I would give him a ride around the block in it.”

That little guy knew something about keeping one’s promises!

In his book, *Evangelism Explosion*, the late D. James Kennedy writes, “Imagine that you had the ability to predict the future and you predicted to an expectant mother 8 things about her unborn baby: its gender, date of birth, name, weight at birth, college, occupation, manner of death, and age at death. The chances of all 8 of your predictions being fulfilled is one in 10 to the 17th power – 10 with 17 zeroes (one hundred quadrillion).

Someone has suggested a way to illustrate the chances of all 8 predictions being fulfilled as follows: Cover the state of Texas...(Keep in mind, from north to south, Texas spans 1,000 miles, and it’s about the same distance east to west) cover the state of Texas two feet deep, with silver dollars. Now mark an ‘X’ on one of those silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly. Blindfold a person and send him across the state as far as he wishes to go. Instruct him to pick up one of the silver dollars. *What chance would he have of getting the right one?*” 1 in 10 to the 17th power.

Similarly you can easily find 8 Old Testament prophecies about Jesus. And, they would have been issued hundreds, if not thousands of years before they happened. But, happen they did. And Jesus didn’t fulfill just 8 prophecies, but He fulfilled at least 333 of them! (Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion*, 151-52)

Christmas is God’s Promise Kept. From the prophecy of God’s seed overcoming the seed of the serpent in **Genesis 3:15** to the very location of the Messiah’s birth in **Micah 5:2**, God came through on each promise. In so doing, He demonstrated again His amazing faithfulness. He is trustworthy, dear ones!

Promises kept is the theme of our text this morning, **Romans 4:13-25**. Five times in these verses before us, the word ‘promise’ is used. The surety of promises fulfilled is the basis for hope, and hope is something we all need in order to function properly in a fallen world.

Romans 4:13-25:

“For the promise that he would be the heir of the world *was* not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴For if those who are of the law *are* heirs, faith is made

void and the promise made of no effect, ¹⁵ because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law *there is* no transgression.

¹⁶ Therefore *it is* of faith that *it might be* according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all ¹⁷ (as it is written, “I have made you a father of many nations”) in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; ¹⁸ who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, “So shall your descendants be.” ¹⁹ And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. ²⁰ He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, ²¹ and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. ²² And therefore “it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

²³ Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, ²⁴ but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵ who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.”

With today’s message, we bring to a close our study of **Romans Chapter 4**. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter we’re studying (Romans) to the Church at Rome. But, it is a letter intended for many more people than those in ancient Rome. It’s a letter for the Church the world over in our day. Romans has much contemporary application for us.

First, we note that **the heirs of God’s promises are heirs through faith, and not through law.** That’s what verses 13-15 say, “For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, ¹⁵ because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression.”

The passage begins by mentioning “the promise.” That word is used 52 times in the New Testament, and Paul provides half of them (26) in his letters. Looking back at God’s promise to Abraham, we find it (first mentioned) in **Genesis 12:1-3**:

“Now the Lord had said to Abram:
‘Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house,
to a land that I will show you.
I make you a great nation;
I will bless you and make your name great;
and you shall be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and I will curse those who curse you;
And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

These promises are not only to Abraham but also to his seed. And his seed is not merely those who descend from him via procreation. This great nation is entered by and held together by faith. We, his descendants by faith (his seed), are part of a great nation (the Church). We will be both blessed and a blessing. Further, God protects us against those who curse us by cursing them instead.

In this passage from Romans, Paul shows that law and grace are opposites, and if a person chooses one, he or she inevitably rejects the other. “To put it another way, law is man-directed (pointing to human abilities), while faith is God-directed (it points to God’s accomplishments).” (Boice, 472)

God gave the law to show us that we cannot get to heaven by keeping it – so that, having learned that we cannot keep the law and will be condemned if we try – we will turn to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith and be saved by Him. The phrase at the end of verse 15 is curious, if not bewildering: “for where there is no law there is no transgression.” Paul is not saying that if someone does not know the law; they cannot be guilty of sin. Rather, he points out that if there is no transgression, then there is no need for salvation, either. Law shows us where we stand, but it does not save us.

Having seen the **heirs of God’s promises are heirs through faith and not through law**, we see another principle – **trusting in God’s power is the kind of faith that saves**. This is verse 18 again, “who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken...” Now, look at verses 19-22 – “And not being weak in faith, he (referring still to Abraham) did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore “it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

From a human perspective Abraham’s situation was hopeless. He is here 100 years of age, and his wife, Sarah, was 86 years of age. Neither of them was still in the childbearing years, instead, they were much, much closer to death than to bearing life.

And, it is true that Abraham didn’t have the law in his possession – that would come from God through Moses, as we see in much of the Bible’s second book, Exodus, well after Abraham’s death. Nor did Abraham have the scriptures by which to read and constantly remind himself of God’s provision and power. He had nothing going for him except the promise of God. And he clung to that tightly. By it, Abraham knew that God could bring life to where there was only death or deadness. He could be fully assured that what God said, God did.

“Hope” mentioned in verse 18 is a word used more in the Book of Romans than any other New Testament book. Hope is not merely optimism because it is actually grounded in what God has done in Christ.

“We have no hope of eternal life except that God has promised that in Christ we can be made righteous. We can face the loss of things we enjoy, and grief when those we love are taken away, yet not lose hope or feel that life isn’t worth living. The person who believes God can face anything and say, ‘I still have God’s promises – and that is enough.’ (Keller, 107) Because God is faithful and His Word is true, we can hope on Him. Abraham was fully convinced in God’s abilities, and he would not waver.

As I pointed out a couple of weeks ago, Abraham was not exempt from sin; he was not above or beyond the law of God. It applied to him as much as it did to anyone else. In **Genesis Chapters 12, 15, and 16**, Abraham questioned God's promise, he lied about who Sarah was, and he tried to bring God's promise of a child to fruition himself, sleeping with Sarah's maidservant Hagar. Abraham was not perfect, but his faith was never extinguished. Keller notes here, "The life of faith is not the perfect life; it is the life which clings on to what God has said He will do, and which sees struggles, joys, and failures as means of increasing our attachment to the God who makes and keeps His promises." (Keller, 106)

Verses 23-25 give us applications of today's message. In these verses, we have the basic gospel in its most compact form. Martin Luther wrote, "In these verses the whole of Christianity is comprehended."

This is a letter for us. It was written for our sake. It points out that saving faith in Christ consists of the whole gospel – to atone for our sins, Jesus, who was pure and holy because He was (and is) also God, became sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Jesus, as **2 Corinthians 5:21** instructs. The righteousness we need for eternal life doesn't come from us or within us. If it did, we'd have no hope of eternal life in glory. Rather, we receive this righteousness through faith – faith is the instrument whereby we receive God's saving grace. God is the One who "raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification."

We must put our faith in Jesus, even though the circumstances of life may seem to rule against it. Like Abraham who looked at himself and considered himself dead – we are dead to spiritual things. But, we must believe what God says, committing ourselves to Christ, and finding that the power of God that was active in quickening Abraham's old body will quicken us. He who promised is faithful!

It was the year 1809. The international scene was tumultuous. Napoleon was sweeping through Austria; blood was flowing freely. Nobody then cared about babies. But the world was overlooking some terribly significant births.

For example, William Gladstone was born that year. He was destined to become one of England's finest statesmen. That same year, Alfred Tennyson was born to an obscure minister and his wife. The child would one day greatly affect the literary world in a marked manner. On the American continent, Oliver Wendell Holmes was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And not far away in Boston, Edgar Allan Poe began his eventful, albeit tragic, life. It was also in that same year that a physician named Darwin and his wife named their child Charles Robert. And that same year produced the cries of a newborn infant in a rugged log cabin in Hardin County, Kentucky. *The baby's name?* Abraham Lincoln.

If there had been news broadcasts at that time, I'm certain these words would have been heard: "The destiny of the world is being shaped on an Austrian battlefield today." But history was actually being shaped in the cradles of England and America. Similarly, everyone thought taxation was the big news--when Jesus was born. But a young Jewish woman cradled the biggest news of all: the birth of the Savior.