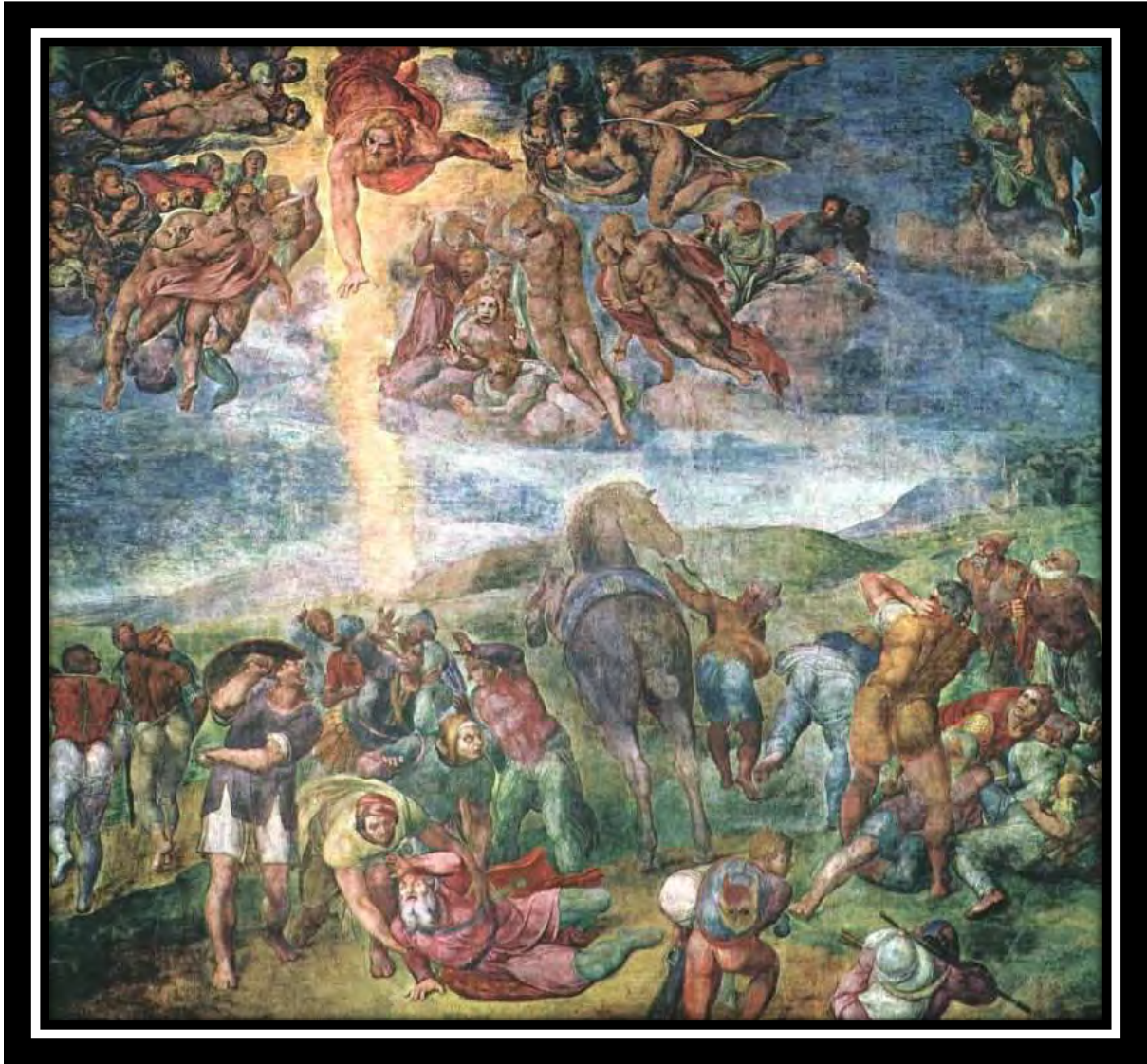


ROMANS—WEEK 4

THE GENESIS OF FAITH



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Abraham's faith began with a promise. In believing that God could pull it off, he demonstrated faith. Our faith begins on similar ground. But that nascent faith grows through use and experience.

Like many things, exercise is the key to getting your faith in shape.

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Romans, Week 4 — The Genesis of Faith
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1 Romans 4:13–15 (ESV)

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. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Paul is saying that God’s promise to Abraham can’t be about the law because it’s a promise. Here’s the reference.

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. — Genesis 15:5–6 (ESV)

As Paul has noted, this was before circumcision, and it was long before the law was given to Moses. There is nothing in what God said to Abraham that anticipates the law, much less obedience to it.

But Paul’s argument here isn’t about chronology. He says, “*For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.*” Paul’s saying that if the “promise” is contingent on obeying the law, then it’s not a promise at all. It would be an agreement, or a deal, or something—Paul doesn’t say what—but not a promise.

In other words, God’s promise to Abraham doesn’t have any contingencies. *For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.*

His promise to Abraham can’t be transgressed because there’s nothing there to transgress.

All this is not to denigrate the law. The law is important, but its role is not to save us. In fact, at first glance, it looks like the role of the law is to “unsave” us.

But that’s not it. The law helps us see our unsaved nature. We’re plenty unsaved already. We’d still be in rebellion against God even if He hadn’t given us any specific laws to break.

But because He gave us laws, we can see our overwhelming tendency to violate them. Thus, our sinful nature is revealed. Thank God for the law! *For the law brings wrath.* It sets the stage for Christ.

If you’re wondering, “Why would God do it that way?” you’re thinking ahead. God sets things up so that He can jump in and save us, at enormous personal cost. He could have created any universe He wanted, and He created this one—this messed up, fallen universe. Then He jumped in.

And on top of all that, being forgiven for our rebellion depends, not on obeying laws or doing good deeds, but on faith in Him.

All this is for His glory.

2 Romans 4:16–17 (ESV)

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, 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.

Since Israel is one nation, who are the many nations? Ishmael and Esau could be considered to have begotten many nations but neither the Bible nor world history seem to support that view.

When Paul refers 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,*” he’s making a key generalization. Abraham is the father of the faith and the father of anyone who believes. That generalization changed the world.

The Greek word that’s translated as nation here is “ethnos” (ἔθνος) from which we get “ethnic.” Back then, “nation” was a synonym for “race.”

That concept is strange to most Americans, but it’s common around the world. The Kurds want a separate Kurdistan. The Croats want their own Croatia. This isn’t wrong or evil; it’s just an ancient definition of nation that still holds in many languages and cultures.

But the US broke that mold. We’re a nation based on a principle (liberty) instead of an ethnicity. Many nations are now becoming integrated, but we jump-started it.

Actually, Paul jump-started it. When the Lord called Paul, He called him to take the gospel to the gentiles. He commanded that the religion of the sons of Israel would be expanded to cover everyone. That turned an ethnic religion into a universal one.

This fulfilled His promise to Abraham.

“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.” — Genesis 12:3 (ESV)

The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?” — Genesis 18:17-18 (ESV)

Is our multi-ethnic nation part of God’s plan?

Of course; everything is part of God’s plan. This country is a wonderful gift—we should thank God every day for it—but it’s nothing compared to the incredible plot twist of the Messiah being for all peoples.

No one saw that coming, regardless of what God said to Abraham.

It’s just too creative.

3 Romans 4:17b–25 (NASB)

God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. 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.” 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; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness. Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, 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, He who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

Let’s be honest here. What makes Abraham’s faith so impressive is the absurdity of God’s promise. For him and Sarah to have a kid at that age is nothing short of laughable. In fact, when Sarah hears about it, she does laugh.

He said, “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing. Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?” — Genesis 18:10-12 (NASB)

But notice that Paul emphasizes, not Sarah’s age and barrenness, but Abraham’s. Abraham is the one he calls as good as dead. *Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old.* And notice the context. *God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.*

Abraham knew he couldn’t father any children better than he knew Sarah couldn’t bear any.

His faith wasn’t easy.

Most of our prayers aren’t risky. We often ask God for things we expect to get anyway: a safe trip, recovery from a common illness, success in a routine surgery. Many of our miracles are the miracle of modern medicine. That’s weak.

Weak prayers are a symptom of weak faith. We’re afraid to ask for big things. We’re not willing to step out of our comfort zone and throw ourselves at the LORD’s feet.

It’s even worse than that. Weak prayers produce weak faith. If you never ask for anything spectacular, you’ll never see God do anything spectacular. And think about this—He could do something totally awesome, but if you didn’t ask for it, you won’t know what happened.

Prayer is a lens through which God comes into focus.

4 Romans 5:1–5 (NKJV)

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

What does Paul mean when he says, “*we have peace with God*”? Why does being justified by faith give us peace?

Because our faith is credited to us as righteousness. Our unrighteousness had put us at enmity with God. Being at enmity with the creator of the universe is about as far from peace as you can get. With that enmity now removed, we can relax.

Also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. This is truly a cause for celebration. But wait! There’s more!

And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Because we’re at peace with the creator of the universe and know that He’s got our back, we can handle tribulations. This turns out to be very useful because it’s how we grow.

You can become a newborn Christian by just understanding the theory and the evidence, but becoming a mature Christian takes time and experience. Jesus warned us that “experience” isn’t always a picnic either. He said, over and over, that we would be severely tried.

Now Paul explains what those trials are for; they build character. The chain of growth is perseverance, then character, then hope. But what does Paul mean by hope? Why would that be important?

“Hope” doesn’t quite capture the full meaning of the Greek word here ($\lambda\pi\varsigma$ “elpis”). It’s defined as hope/expectation/prospect. We’ve got plenty of basic hope (without the confidence) before we endure trials.

Through trials we learn to trust God and our hope grows into the full meaning of elpis.

But Satan has one avenue of attack that we need to watch out for—forgetfulness. God can come through many times but if none of them are recent, it starts to feel like He’s not there.

One of the great weapons against this is writing things down. Keep a notebook of the prayer requests in your fellowship group and it can be a treasure later. I have one from the 1990s that’s priceless. It journals God’s amazing provision as our lives and our kids grew. Every page is a blast from the past.

Not recording your prayers is like taking pictures but losing the captions.

5 Romans 5:6–11 (NKJV)

For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

Instead of dying for people who are righteous, Christ died to make people righteous. And even that is just to make it so that people are credited with righteousness, to reconcile them to God. How does that work?

Note that Abraham believed God's promise to him (which was a pretty wild promise) and that was credited to him as righteousness.

But what is it that we can believe that gets us credited with righteousness? Surely, it's not God's promise to Abraham.

No, but it's the same faith. Drill into the details and the connection becomes clear. What was it exactly that Abraham believed?

Abraham believed that what God promised would come to pass. So, what's the key to that?

It's not believing that God's promise is sincere—of course it's sincere—it's believing that God can do it.

In other words, Abraham believed that God really is God. In practice, that means believing in miracles.

This is why Paul emphasized that Abraham knew for sure that what God promised was impossible. It couldn't have just been wishful thinking; it had to be faith. Only a miracle could make Sarah a mom.

So, what is our faith?

It's faith that Jesus is who He says He is. If He isn't, then everything crumbles.

But if He is, then He has the power to keep His promises. That's the key.

This is inseparable from believing in His resurrection. The two go hand-in-hand. You can't have one without the other.

If you're going to believe in miracles, it helps to have seen a few. This is part of how *tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.*

You have to walk the walk to get there. Without trials, and the prayers they spawn, you don't grow.

Christianity doesn't live on the couch.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Name a common promise with no contingency clauses?
2. Which modern nations have ethnic specific laws?
3. Has an answered prayer ever changed you?
4. Have you ever recorded your prayers?
5. What miracles have you witnessed?

Items for prayer: