

**Romans 4:16-25**

The last three verses, which we covered in last week's commentary, were the opening verses of a segment of Paul's letter pertaining to the promise made to Abraham. Today we look at the verses which conclude this segment.

Paul reminds his readers that if the promise made to Abraham is based on fulfilling the law, then faith is meaningless and the promise is useless because no one can fulfill the law. In verse 16, Paul says that the promise depends on faith in order that it may "rest on grace." The Greek word **charis** is the word which Paul uses and is translated as "grace." It is the same word which he uses in 1 Cor.12:4 when he says, "Now there are varieties of **gifts** (or, graces), but the same Spirit." **Charis** has been brought into our language as the word **charism**, meaning an extraordinary power to do something or to attract people, an extraordinary gift.

Grace is a gift; it is something which is freely given out of love. Many volumes have been written on this one word. It is an important word for it touches on the depths of our spirituality and our understanding of God. One way to look upon grace is to see it as "God's life." We say that whenever we receive any of the sacraments, we are receiving grace. When we manifest Christian charity, we are motivated by grace. In reality this means that when we receive the sacraments we are sharing in the very life of God Himself. When we show charity we are sharing the God-life within us. Whatever it is that makes God to be God is what we are privileged to receive when we receive grace. This interpretation helps us to understand what Paul is saying when he says that the promise rests on grace. Yes, it is a free gift. But more importantly, it rests on the very nature of God who is love and who cannot deceive. The promise made to Abraham rests on the faithfulness of God whose word is truth.

Since God's promise does not depend on the law, then the promise can be guaranteed to all people of any nation who believe as Abraham did. Paul goes to great lengths to remind the Jewish people that all who believe are the descendants of Abraham. With verse 16, Paul touches on a theme which he will reiterate at the very end of his letter (16:25). He will speak of the "mystery." This mystery which was hidden for many ages but is now revealed in the fact that Jesus died so that all people could be in right relationship with God. This means that even the Gentiles are now called to a relationship with God which is rooted in faith.

It is the love of God which secures this relationship. By this faith and life, the Gentiles are also descendants of Abraham, and therefore, heirs to the promise of abundant blessings.

At the end of verse 16 and the beginning of verse 17, Paul reminds the Roman Christians of the unity they share because of their faith in Christ. The promise which was made to Abraham is the same promise which is given to all believers, namely, being declared righteous by God. Paul says that Abraham is “the father of all of us.” The implication is that the Roman Christians are then brothers and sisters of one another. Paul supports this view by quoting Genesis 17:5, “I have made you the father of many nations.” It is in this same verse from Genesis that God changes the patriarch’s name from “Abram” to “Abraham.”

The next part of verse 17, “In the presence of the God in whom he believed,” is confusing. What we need to do is read verses 16 and 17 and skip over the part in the parentheses. The text would then read, “Who share in the faith of Abraham...in the presence of the God in whom he believed.” This is one possible arrangement for Paul’s added thought. It could be that Paul recalls the text in Genesis 17:18 in which Abraham asks God to make it possible for Ishmael to “live in your sight!” To live in the sight of God, or to be in the presence of God, is a common expression in the Hebrew Scriptures meaning to be blessed by God and to be in intimate relationship with Him. Paul is saying that Abraham’s descendants in faith share this same intimacy.

The last part of verse 17 can be understood in two ways. Paul says that God can give life to the dead and bring new things into existence. The first reference is to Abraham and Sarah. In Genesis 17:17, Abraham laughed when God told him that Sarah would have a son. In Abraham’s mind, they were dead as far as the possibility of bearing a child. But God gave them life, and God called into existence a child of promise. Paul could also have in mind the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. As Jesus was raised from the dead, God called into existence the victory over sin and death. It is the life of faith we live in God’s promise which makes our hope certain that we now share this victory, and we will share it fully in the life to come.

Verse 18 begins with the unusual phrase “Hoping against hope.” This is Paul’s way of saying that Abraham continued to trust God, even when all physical evidence pointed to the impossibility of God’s promise being fulfilled. The promise was that a son would be born, and this son would be the continuation of Abraham and Sarah’s family. Beginning with this child, their descendants would be numerous as the stars in the sky. God promised Abraham that in his descendants all nations of the earth would be blessed. We see this promise fulfilled in the person of Jesus. Abraham has many physical descendants, but he has even more descendants in faith. Whenever anyone believes that God can bring about the impossible, conquering sin and death, that person is imitating the faith of Abraham. God is true to His word.

Verse 19 continues the same theme of Abraham's trust in God's word. It is helpful to recall that at this time in Jewish history, Jews did not believe in an afterlife. The closest they came to such a belief was in the existence of **Sheol**. This was not reward and it was not punishment. It was the place of the dead. The only form of immortality for the early Jews was in the continuation of their family line. This was the belief of Abraham, and he trusted that God would bring this about.

In verse 20, Paul says that Abraham did not waver in his faith. Paul does not mention that both Abraham and Sarah laughed when they heard God's promise. (Gen. 17:17; 18:12) Their laughter became their great joy when the child was born. Abraham's faith grew as he entered more deeply into right relationship with God. Paul says that his depth of faith "Gave glory to God." This is a common phrase used in the Hebrew Scriptures to mean allowing God to manifest His power. When God's people have such faith as to trust his promise of the impossible, that acknowledgement in itself is an expression of praise to God. In a similar way, when we trust in the gift of forgiveness, we are allowing God to manifest His powerful mercy and love. When we ask for forgiveness and trust that we are forgiven, we are giving glory to God.

In verse 21, Paul says that Abraham was "fully convinced." He had reached the point of absolute trust in God. In verse 22, Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 for a third time. The implication is that the Roman Christians should realize that they are part of the fulfillment of God's promise. Some of them are the physical descendants of Abraham, and all of them are his descendants in faith. In their own community they can see that God's word continues to be fulfilled. The challenge which lies before them is to have the same depth of faith which Abraham had. By this same faith, they too are made righteous. By faith they are put in right relationship with God.

In verses 23 through 25, Paul clarifies the association of the faith of Abraham with the faith of all Christian believers. He reminds them that the promise of righteousness is also their promise. As God gave life to two bodies which were considered dead, so too, did God give glorified life to Jesus who suffered and died for our sins. In the resurrection of Jesus, we can be "fully convinced" as Abraham was that we have received justification.

Paul concludes this portion of his letter by reintroducing the theme of justification. In chapter 5 he describes the effects of this justification for all believers.

#### **Romans 5:1-5**

Remember that the chapter and verse numbers were not part of the original text. They were added much later for the sake of facilitating scriptural study. But even if we did not have such references, the opening words of chapter 5 would catch our attention.

Paul begins chapter 5 with the word “Therefore.” This word is in a unique position at the beginning of verse 1. It clearly indicates that a major transition is about to take place. In the previous chapter, Paul presented Abraham as the example of the person of faith. His faith in God brought about his justification. Paul has established that the Christian believers have also received justification because of faith in Jesus. Now, Paul is ready to tell the Roman Christians just what it means to be justified.

Paul tells his readers that the justification they have received makes it possible for them to be at peace with God. At the root of Paul’s thought is the Jewish concept of **Shalom**, which means that everything is in harmony. We are in harmony with God because of what God has done for us through the death/resurrection of Jesus. We know that our sins are forgiven. We know that when the Father looks at us, He is seeing His own Son who was obedient unto death. This is what it means to be incorporated into the person of Jesus Christ. The works of the law could not bring this about, only through faith in Jesus are we brought into this right relationship with God.

In verse 2, Paul reminds his readers that it is through Jesus Christ that we are brought into this new relationship with God. He calls this relationship a “grace.” It is a gift which comes from the depths of God’s own love and mercy toward His people. It is a grace in the authentic sense that we now share in the life of God Himself. The intimacy we share with the Father comes through Christ and in His Spirit. It is an intimacy which is already present here and now and one which come to its fullness in heaven.

At the end of verse 2, Paul speaks of three important concepts. He says that we can now “boast.” Paul is aware of the numerous times he used this word when he spoke of the false boasting of those who they could achieve heaven by fulfilling the law. He now intentionally uses this same word to show the basis for true boasting. True boasting is not based on what we accomplish; true boasting can only be based on what God has accomplished. Secondly, Paul says that we boast “in our hope.” We recall that when Paul uses the word “hope” he is speaking of a certainty. This hope is a certainty because it is based on the promise of God Himself, and God cannot deceive. The object of this hope is not yet within our grasp, but it is a fact that we will one day possess it. Thirdly, Paul reveals the object of this hope, namely, “sharing the glory of God.” He says that we can be certain that one day we will see God face to face, and that we will share in His divine life. This is what it means to be justified. This is what it means to be at peace with God.

In verses 3 and 4, Paul wants to bring a balance into what he has just said about peace and hope and glory. Paul has no doubt about the truth of what he has said. But he is also aware that this faith-stance does not mean that suffering is eliminated. He is aware that Roman Christians have endured persecution in the past and that they will continue to do so in the future. He does say that they can also boast of their sufferings, for they can associate their sufferings with the sufferings of Christ.

If a person has faith, then the hardships which are encountered due to that faith can produce endurance. This endurance can build character, and character can strengthen hope. Paul is not a masochist. He does not look for suffering. But he knows that if we follow the teachings of Christ, we can expect opposition from those who reject His teachings. How true this is in our own day when we speak for the unborn or uphold the virtue of chastity.

In verse 5, Paul returns to the conviction that this hope will not disappoint us. Paul and the Roman Christians can be certain of this because of the gift of the Holy Spirit. God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Spirit. The Spirit's presence within us is God's pledge to us that He will never abandon us.

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**Side Note: Sheol and the Apostles' Creed**

In the Apostles' Creed there is a statement which says that Jesus "descended into hell". " This is confusing. If hell is the absence of God, then how can Jesus, who is God, be absent from God? The problem seems to be due to a mistranslation. It is our traditional belief that the people who died before the resurrection of Jesus had to wait until Jesus opened the gates of heaven. At His resurrection, Jesus awakened all the dead and brought them to heaven. The place where the dead waited was thought of as Sheol. Sheol was neither reward nor punishment. It was simply the place of the dead. As this belief was passed down through the ages, the word "Sheol" was translated into Latin as "hades", and hades was translated into English as "hell." But Sheol and hell are not the same. It would be more accurate in our Apostles' Creed if we were to choose a word other than "hell." At least it would be less confusing.