

What Is Saving Faith?

Your eternal salvation depends on your understanding and personally believing the truth that Paul has been hammering on in Romans 4, that we are justified (declared righteous) by faith alone. Abraham of the Old Testament has been the great example that Paul uses to prove this truth. Like Abraham, we are not made right with God by works of the law or by moral behavior, but by faith in the God who credits righteousness to the ungodly (Rom. 4:1-8). We have seen that this blessing is not based on religious rituals (4:9-12) or on keeping the Law, but it comes by grace through faith (4:13-16).

This begs the question, "But Paul, if we are justified by faith, exactly what is this saving faith that you are talking about? What is the essence of saving faith?"

Paul gives us the answer again by pointing to Abraham in the last verses in chapter 4. Although Abraham displayed great faith at many points of his life, Paul focuses in on the faith that led to the birth of his promised son. The simple answer we find to the question, "What is Saving Faith," is that ***saving faith is trust in the God of the resurrection.*** That is the essence of the faith of Abraham. And it is the essence of the faith of true believers today.

Today we will examine the saving faith of Abraham. Please follow along in your Bibles as I read Romans 4 today, starting in verse 16:

Romans 4:16-25

- 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.

Verse 16 is a summary of what Paul has been teaching in verses 1-15. Salvation has to be through faith in order to be by grace. As we have said, faith is not some good quality that we possess or a merit that we have. It is the undeserving hand that receives the unearned gift from God. Because it is by grace through faith we can be sure of our salvation. Read verse 16 again, **“Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed.”** If we had to work to earn our salvation we could never be sure that we had done enough. The good news is that Christ has done enough and we can receive God’s righteousness when we believe in Christ and what He has done for us.

Therefore the kind of faith by which Abraham was saved is the kind of faith by which anyone can be saved and anyone can be sure.

From the next few verses we discover five facets of Abraham’s saving faith.

1. Saving Faith is in God’s Person.

Verse 17, **“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.”**

“Him whom he believed—God” - Abraham believed God. Abraham’s faith was not an intellectual exercise. It was a total reliance and dependence by Abraham on God’s person. The key is the object of faith. Don’t miss that truth here. God is the object. Abraham had a great faith. But it was great because the One in whom he believed was great. The amount of faith you have has nothing to do with it. That is why Jesus told us that even if we have a little tiny faith, like a grain of mustard seed, it will work. The One in whom you believe is the important thing.

Whom did Abraham know God to be? The God of resurrection: **“God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did.”** In context, Paul refers here to God’s promise to Abraham (and Sarah) to have a child in their old age. God would bring forth life from these two people who were as good as dead. Abraham believed in a God who could give life to the dead.

Abraham looked at the One Who made the promise, at God Himself. It is not a question of how little or how big your faith is. The ultimate question is how big is your God? He is the God Who makes dead things live, Who takes things that have died and become hopeless, and brings them to life again. He is the God Who **“calls those things which do not exist as though they did.”** He calls into existence the things that do not exist. God alone can make the dead to live.

Faith in God as the One Who brings life out of death enabled Abraham to be sure of the promise of a son.

2. Saving Faith rests on God’s Promise.

All through this section Paul is emphasizing God’s promise (4:13, 14, 16, 20; 21). At the beginning of verse 17 Paul quotes God’s promise to Abraham from Genesis 17:5, **(as it is written, “I have made you a father of many nations”)**. If you go back to Genesis, you find that God had repeated this promise 5 times—in Genesis 12, 13, 15, 17, 21. In Genesis 17, Abraham was almost 100 and Sarah was about 90. Although God had promised to give him a son through Sarah almost 25 years before, they still had no son. Now, the human prospects of having a son seemed impossible. Sarah had been barren all her life and now both of them were past the age of conceiving or bearing a child.

Abraham believed God's promise, even though the fulfillment of it was humanly impossible and seemed very unlikely. To believe in God's promise is essentially to believe in God's person. If I promise to do something for you, but you don't believe my promise, in effect you're calling me a liar. You're saying that you can't trust me to do what I've promised. If God promises something and we refuse to believe it, we've called God a liar!

It's easy to sit here and think, "Well, I'd believe God, too, if He appeared to me as He did to Abraham and promised me something." But, would we? Think of all the promises God has made to us in His Word. Think about who God has revealed Himself to be through His word and through His Son. Abraham had none of that. He had God's promise and He believed Him.

We must always come back to these questions: What has God said about this? What promises has He made? I like what D. Martin Lloyd-Jones once said about faith: "It must be anchored to the bare Word of God and on nothing else whatsoever." If you think about it, Abraham had no one to talk to about this and certainly no precedent to follow. All he had was the promise of God, and that was more than enough.

Abraham believed God and His promise, even though it was humanly impossible ever to be fulfilled. The next verse describes that as hope against hope.

So the third facet of saving faith is:

3. Saving Faith is Hope when it seems hopeless.

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."

Hope and faith are related concepts. Hebrews 11 gives us a definition of faith saying, **"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."** Hope is the desire for something to happen. Faith is the confidence that it will happen.

Abraham hoped when there was no hope. I mean, it didn't make any sense to hope when he hoped. It could not have been easy for Abraham to believe. The promise flew in the face of their circumstances. First, Sarah, who had been barren all of her life, was way past menopause. And Abraham was 100. So when God told him that he would be the father of a multitude of nations and that Sarah would be the mother of nations, Abraham laughed and asked God that Ishmael might be the heir. But God insisted that the heir would come through Sarah (Gen. 17:15-19).

Then there was this embarrassing matter of changing his name. His name Abram means 'exalted father' or 'father of many.' Can you imagine when people asked him about his name "Exalted Father, Oh, how many children do you have?" Abram would likely look down, clear his throat and say, "One." I imagine he would usually leave out the fact that the one son he had was not through his wife, but through her servant.

But now, after God appears to him in Genesis 17, the next day Abram must announce, "God gave me a new name last night." Everyone is waiting, thinking, "Maybe he's finally going to take a name that reflects reality!" Then Abram says, "My new name is Abraham, father of a multitude!" Can you imagine how people must have made fun of Abraham behind his back?

Faith and hope is not ignoring the facts or simply thinking positively. It is facing the facts confident that God is in control. Abraham was well aware of the obstacles to the fulfillment of the promise.

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.

From a human perspective there was no hope. Verse 19 says his body was already dead. That means he was dead when it came to conceiving a child. Abraham knew that fact. And Sarah's womb was dead as well. She had always been barren, unable to have a child and now she was way past her possible child bearing years being almost 90 years old. The facts from a human point of view said it is hopeless.

But one fact remained, God had promised. And that fact overrides all the other factors. Faith is not ignoring the situation. It is believing what God says about it.

Verse 20 says Abraham **did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief**. Paul is not saying that Abraham never had momentary hesitations, but that he avoided a deep-seated, permanent attitude of distrust in the promises of God. Abraham believed God in the face of discouraging facts and despite the knowledge that what God had promised could not happen naturally.

It's natural to experience some doubts, especially when you're discouraged and dismayed. Abraham laughed when God told him that Sarah would have a child in her old age. Sarah laughed too. Abraham suggested to God that Ishmael might be the promised son. For Abraham the doubts were there and they were real but he didn't allow them to take control. All faith works through the struggle, but the kind of faith that saves is the kind that lands on the confidence side.

What doubts do you need to deal with related to the specific situation you are facing right now? Do battle with unbelief or it will win and you will unravel. Tell God about your doubts. Be like the father who was struggling with issues related to his son when he said to Jesus in Mark 9:24: "**Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!**"

Look again at verse 20, how was it that Abraham did not waver in unbelief? He **was strengthened in faith**. I find this very encouraging. When we face the facts, deal with our doubts and ponder the promises of God, God Himself will fortify our faith. Maybe your faith is small. That's OK. God will grow it. God will strengthen it.

How does God strengthen our faith? The key is to grow in your knowledge of the object of our faith, namely, God. Faith is only as good as its object. You can have strong faith in a faulty bridge and it will collapse under you in spite of your strong faith. Or, you can have weak faith in a strong bridge and it will hold you up, along with a semi-truck that rumbles over it next to you. Your knowledge of that bridge would increase your faith in it, even though it may go over a frightening chasm below. Your strong faith stems from your knowledge that this is a trustworthy bridge. What happens when we are strengthened in faith? God, not your faith, gets the glory.

Which brings us to number 4:

4. Saving Faith Glorifies God.

Part of our problem when we feel hopeless is that we become consumed with ourselves. The way out of this selfish spiral is to begin giving all glory and honor to

God. Instead of looking within, it's time to look above. Abraham did this as we see in the last part of Ro 4:20: "...**giving glory to God.**"

Faith glorifies God. How does it do that? Verse 21, "**being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.**" God says, "Abraham, I'm going to give you a son." Now if Abraham believes that, what does that say? That says, "God, You're trustworthy," You can be trusted. If You say it I believe it. And that glorifies God; that honors God when you believe Him.

Think about the Hebrew young men in the book of Daniel: Mishael, Hananiah and Azariah, better known as Meshach, Shadrach and Abednego. The king is about to throw them into the fiery furnace because of their faithfulness to God. And they say, "**Our God is able to deliver us.**" God is able. They glorified God as the God of deliverance, the God of power.

Have you been waiting a long time for God to act? Settle the fact that it's not because God is impotent. He is powerful enough to do anything. The issue is ultimately whether something is His will or not, and if it is, then it becomes a matter of His timing.

Someone wrote: Faith is belief plus unbelief and acting on the belief part. Faith is not 100% certainty. Faith means seeing the promise and the problems, and then deciding to act on the promise even before you see it fulfilled. Faith doesn't wait. Faith acts.

Verse 22 gives the cumulative result of Abraham's faith: "Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness." It was saving faith.

Apply it to yourself (4:23-25)

What does all this say to us? I mean, what does it mean to us, this whole story of Abraham? Well, mark this, that the Bible does not record this or anything else just for those about whom it is recorded, but for all of us as verse 23 says, **Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us.**

All that Paul has written here was to show us what faith in Jesus Christ for salvation is really like. The promise boils down to one Man: Jesus Christ. He is the central focus of every promise that has ever been given. He is the One through Whom all the nations of the world will be blessed. He is the One Who dies on the cross and rose from the dead. He is the One who paid our sin debt and rose from the dead to be our Savior. He is the focus of faith. If He is not, then that faith is dead!

Our faith stands upon two great pillars of truth. They are:

- 1. Jesus died for our sins.**
- 2. He arose from the dead.**

The only faith that saves us is faith that is grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

With all the honesty that your heart possesses, can you truly say that you are trusting the Lord Jesus Christ alone for your soul's salvation? Paul's conclusion to this section of Scripture makes it clear that nothing else, or no one else will work. Salvation must come through saving faith in Jesus Christ.