

## Romans 4:13-25 + Faith Fully Confident + Series: What Does This Mean?

Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 20th Sunday after Pentecost + 22 October 2017

How long would you wait for someone to keep a promise? A couple days? A couple weeks? A couple months? A couple years? I suppose it depends on the person and the promise. Is the person making the promise reliable or will they fail to come through? What about the promise? Is it realistic? When my father was a kid, for a time he wanted to be a motorcycle cop. Probably out of a desire to not see his grandson in harm's way, his grandfather promised to give him a motorcycle on the day he became a pastor. Now that wasn't the only reason my father became a pastor. He had a lot of better encouragement along the way, but he also hoped for that motorcycle. On the day he graduated from our Seminary, he received a small gift from his grandparents—not the keys to a motorcycle, but a little toy motorcycle with a little figure riding on it. They “kept” their promise.

In most cases, you and I are too realistic, too cynical to wait all that long for someone to keep a promise. We know ourselves too. We know that even at our most honest, there may be reasons why we don't always keep every promise we make. Parents make a promise and something comes up. A loved one makes a promise and they forget. A co-worker or a classmate make a promise and they blow it off. It takes too much trust, too much faith, too much confidence for us to wait long for someone to keep a promise.

So when God makes a promise in his Word, especially if he doesn't tell us when or how he's going to keep that promise, do you hear a little voice in the back of your head tempting you to think that it might just be a little too good to be true? Oh, we give lip service to God's ability to keep every one of his promises, but do we actually believe that or are we hesitant to trust him, to trust that he'll come through for us?

This fall we've been taking a look at hallmark teachings of the Reformation and why they still matter to us today. This year, this month we're celebrating the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation—and faith alone is one of those hallmarks at the very heart of the Reformation, at the very heart of what we believe and teach. “By faith alone!” What does that mean? To help us understand faith, the Apostle Paul points us to a man who waited 25 years for God to keep a promise—a man named Abraham.

By any measure, Abraham was an amazing man. If you had to pick someone who might possibly perhaps be considered deserving of heaven, Abraham might get your vote. At a time when most of us would be collecting Social Security, Abraham's life was just beginning. At the young age of 75, when he was still known as Abram, the Lord told him, **“Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.”** (Genesis 12:1) “Pack up and go to this land you've never seen before. I will take you there. Trust me.” That's a pretty tall order even for someone starting out much earlier in life. Keep in mind that not only was Abram 75 years old, but he was also quite wealthy possessing many servants, flocks, and herds. This wasn't pack up the apartment and move to a new town. No, he and his 65-year-old wife Sarai had to uproot themselves and all they possessed, then travel by foot all the way to unknown Canaan—because God told him so.

With that command, however, God attached a promise. **“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”** You see, Abram and Sarai had no kids, but the Lord was going to make him into a great nation. The Lord would richly bless his every endeavor, and through him, the Lord would bring Blessing to every nation on earth. Trusting in the Lord and his promises, **“Abram left, as the LORD had told him.”** (Genesis 12:2-4)

Years passed and God blessed Abram with tremendous wealth and an excellent reputation in Canaan, but still no kids. Fifteen years after God had first promised a son, Abram wondered if God would ever come through. He planned to designate his chief servant Eliezer to be his heir, just in case, but the Lord came to him again and used the night sky as an object lesson. **“Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them...So shall your offspring be.”** Moses tells us, **“Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”** (Genesis 15:5-6)

Two thousand years later, the Lord used Paul to explain what that meant. **“Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations...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 regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised.”** Abram had faith—fully confident in the Lord, in the Lord's power, and in the Lord's ability to keep his promise.

Nine years later, when Abraham was 99-years-old, the Lord assured him and Sarah once more. Twenty-four years had passed since God's first promise, so the Lord came to them in person to inform Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son within a year. Sarah laughed in doubt. Abraham trusted in the Lord. From their family line would eventually come the promised Savior from sin, but first a son would come to Abraham at 100 and Sarah at 90—and he did. The Lord fulfilled everything he had promised.

So did Abraham earn God's credit? After all, Abraham seemed to heed God's commands and promises so well. You might even think he deserved the righteousness that God credited to him, but Paul tells us. ***"It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith."***

You see, Abraham was a sinner like the rest of us. Sprinkled throughout these great examples of faith, Abraham often trusted in himself and his own wisdom. Fearful of what Pharaoh of Egypt might do to him, he passed off his wife as his sister. Thankfully, the Lord rescued her from becoming part of Pharaoh's harem. Years later he repeated the same lie with a King Abimelech. When the Lord didn't seem to be carrying out his promise on their timetable, Sarah gave her servant, Hagar, to provide a son for Abraham, and Abraham went along with it. That only caused conflict and more problems in the family. The truth is, whenever Abraham trusted in himself and his own ability, he proved further that God wasn't paying him for faithful services rendered.

In spite of Abraham's natural dependence on himself, God still blessed him. In fact, he poured out generous promise after promise—not because Abraham was so worthy or so righteous or so faithful, but simply as a gift of God's grace. Paul explains it this way, ***"...The promise comes by faith so that it may be by grace..."*** It wasn't about Abraham trusting in himself, but trusting in God's unconditional, undeserved, undying love for sinners like Abraham.

You and I get so easily caught up in thinking we can trust in ourselves, that we can be confident in our own abilities, our own strength, our own wisdom. Society wants you to think only about you and what you accomplish. You find yourself quick to boast about yourself and quick to minimize your failures. "Look at what I've done! Don't look at my failures. It was his or her fault anyway. Look at what I deserve! Don't look at what I really deserve for what I've thought or said or done! Look at what I've accomplished for myself! Don't look at what I had to do or had to give up or had to compromise to accomplish that!" So often we apply that to our spiritual lives. So often you act more like faithless Abram than faith-filled Abraham trusting in yourself and what you do for God rather than in God and what he does for you. You fail to see how your own efforts fall short. You fail to realize that your sin-corrupted works will only get you condemnation from God.

In the end, when you close your eyes in death and your lifeless body is placed in the ground, what will your self-centered trust accomplish when you have to stand before the holy God? That question deeply troubled Martin Luther when he was a young man. He was terrified of facing God's judgment because he knew he was so unrighteous. He tried to cleanse himself of any hint of guilt even to the point of beating himself unconscious, but it never went away.

The fact is, though others may honor your public words and works, though family and friends may think you were the greatest person in the world, apart from God's grace, apart from faith that is fully confident in the Lord alone, all you deserve is eternal death in hell separated from God and his love forever.

So if all your own efforts fail, how can you stand before God? How can you face the future? For Luther, everything changed when someone pointed him to Christ and the righteousness God gives us through Christ. We can take a cue from Father Abraham. ***"The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham...He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were."*** It's not about trusting in your own efforts, but trusting in God's. It's realizing that your efforts to please God will fail, but God's efforts to save you will never fail.

God did what you could not. He provided that long-promised Savior—the Blessing of the Nations—who left the glories of heaven to become like you living in this sinful world, but unlike you he was holy. He trusted in his heavenly Father's faithfulness and faithfully fulfilled every promise our God had made. Paul makes the connection between God giving his righteousness to Abraham and to us through Christ. ***"The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."***

Through faith in your Savior Jesus, God gives you what you do not have—guaranteed forgiveness for all those times when you've trusted in your own efforts; eternal life and peace with God; hope focused not on yourself, but on the One who made the promise; faith that is fully persuaded that God has the power to do what he has promised. That faith didn't come from something you did or decided, but was planted in your heart through hearing the good news of Jesus and through saving baptismal waters when Jesus made you an heir of eternal life in his family.

Our God still fulfills every one of his promises. He sent that Savior, who lived and died and rose again for you as promised. He forgives your sins. He dries your tears. He opens the gates of heaven to you—all just as he promised. So as you hear and read God's promises in his Word, how will you respond? With realism, pessimism, or cynicism? Or will you look at those promises with faith fully confident, fully persuaded that God has done everything for you, even giving you his righteousness in Christ? We look to the future with hope then. We trust in all of God's promises as we make our way through this life. We look to eternal life with confidence, to that time when Jesus will fulfill his final promise and bring us home to be with him forever. Amen.