

Against all Hope

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Unashamed - A Study of Romans / Romans 4:18–25

Abraham did not close his eyes to the deadness of his own body or Sarah's womb — he was fully persuaded that what God had promised, God was able to do. That same faith was credited to him as righteousness. And it wasn't written for him alone: the same God-who-raises-the-dead is the one we're called to trust, the God who delivered Jesus over for our sins and raised Him for our justification.

Introduction

- Ben-hadad, king of Syria, had surrounded the city so completely and for so long that supply lines had collapsed entirely.
 - Nothing was getting in — no grain, no livestock, no relief.
 - And when a siege runs long enough, desperation becomes the definition of every day.
- Second Kings tells us people were paying eighty pieces of silver for a donkey's head.
 - Things were so bad, people were actually paying money for a cup filled with dove's droppings, just to have something — anything — to eat.
 - Two women had even made a pact with one another to do the unthinkable - to eat their own sons, one at a time.
 - They'd already eaten the first child.
 - This isn't hyperbole, and it isn't ancient exaggeration for dramatic effect.
 - It's recorded history, and it is exactly as horrifying as it sounds.
- The king of Israel heard the account of these two women and tore his royal robes in grief and rage.

- When he did, he revealed that he was wearing sackcloth underneath his robes.
- Sackcloth was the universal signal of woe and despair.
- It wasn't comfortable or stylish.
- For the king to wear it under his clothes was an obvious tell: He had already given up.
- He'd been mourning the city's death for who knows how long, privately, while trying to hold things together publicly.
- And when he turned his fury toward Elisha, blaming the prophet for the disaster, one of the king's officers — presumably a man of some standing and some faith — couldn't hold back his own disbelief.
- Elisha had just promised that by the next day, flour and barley would be sold at the city gate for next to nothing.
- The officer scoffed: “Even if the LORD himself should make windows in heaven, could this thing be?”
- That's a moment of really genuine honesty.
 - This isn't a pagan skeptic mocking Israel's God from the outside in Ben hadad's Assyrian horde.
 - This is a man inside the covenant, standing next to a genuine prophet, hearing a genuine word from the LORD — and finding it simply unbelievable.
 - He heard the promise just like everybody else.
 - But in his mind, the situation had exhausted every category he had for what was possible.
 - He'd done the math.
 - We're out here cooking donkey heads and the vilest among us are even cooking their children.
 - As the kids say today, “That math ain't mathing.”

- Elisha's answer to him was chilling: you will see it happen with your own eyes, but you will not eat any of it.
- That night, the situation changed.
 - With no army visible, no rescue plan, no natural explanation of any kind, the LORD caused the Syrian camp to hear what sounded like the thunder of chariots and horses — the sound of a massive approaching force.
 - Certain they were about to be overrun by hired allies, the entire Syrian army panicked and fled into the darkness.
 - The abandoned everything: their tents, their horses, their donkeys, silver, gold, clothing, and food, all of it left exactly where it sat.
 - Four men with leprosy, camped outside the city gate because they weren't allowed inside, decided they had nothing left to lose and wandered into the Syrian camp expecting to be killed or to find food.
 - They found neither enemy nor resistance — just an entire abandoned military camp, full of exactly the provisions the starving city needed.
 - They ate. They hid plunder.
 - And then, in a moment of conscience, they went back and told the gatekeepers what they'd found.
- By morning, the famine was over.
 - Flour and barley were selling at the gate at the exact price Elisha had named, on the exact timeline he'd named it.
 - And the officer who'd scoffed the day before was trampled to death in the gate by the crowd rushing out for food — seeing the fulfillment with his own eyes, just as Elisha said, and never eating a bite of it.
- That's the kind of God we're dealing with in Romans chapter 4.
 - Abraham didn't have a siege.
 - He had a hundred-year-old body that Scripture bluntly calls "as good as dead."

- He had a wife whose womb had been silent for decades, long past any biological window for a child.
- But the mechanism is exactly the same as Samaria's: a specific promise, spoken by God, with no visible means of fulfillment anywhere in sight.
- And Abraham had a choice about how he was going to respond to God's promises in the middle of the impossible.
- In [Romans 4](#), Paul tells us what Abraham decided.
 - "He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body... no unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith."
 - Not because the odds improved. Every day that passed was another day aging in the wrong direction.
 - Because God's promise never depended on the odds in the first place.
- This morning, we'll finish chapter 4 as Abraham shows us exactly what trust is all about.

Scripture Reading

Romans 4:18–25 ESV

¹⁸ In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be."

¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,

²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

²² That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness."

²³ But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone,

²⁴ but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,

²⁵ who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

- [Romans 4](#) has been building toward this moment from its very first verse.
 - Paul opened the chapter with a question: was Abraham justified by works, or by faith?
 - He answered it decisively — "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."
 - Not earned. Not worked for. Credited.
- Then Paul widened the picture.
 - He showed us David, celebrating the same kind of righteousness — not achieved, but reckoned, sins covered, guilt not counted against him.
 - He showed us that this blessing came to Abraham before circumcision, not after — so that Abraham could be father to anyone who believes, Jew or Gentile.
 - The promise was never about the sign. It was always about the faith the sign pointed to.
- By verse 17, Paul has already told us what kind of God we're dealing with — the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist."
 - That's the whole chapter's thesis, stated as plainly as Paul ever states anything.
 - And now, in verses 18 through 25, Paul stops talking about Abraham's faith in general terms and shows us exactly what it looked like up close.

- Not faith in the abstract.
- Faith staring at two specific, undeniable facts — and refusing to let those facts have the final word.
- So let's look at what that faith actually did.

Faith that faces the facts (vv. 18–19)

- Abraham's faith wasn't naive.
 - His circumstances were very real.
 - There was no denying that the odds were worse than bad.
 - The word “impossible” has entered the chat.
 - And it wasn't just that they were too old to have children.
 - Sarah was barren before she was too old.
- That also means that Abraham's faith wasn't just blind optimism.
 - It wasn't, “We'll just keep our fingers crossed.”
 - They were beyond, “It'll all just work out.”
 - They were at the point at which the only answer is this: “Only God.”
 - More than that, Abraham had already proven that there was nothing in him that could overcome that.
 - They tried that 14 years earlier when Sarah handed her servant Hagar over to Abraham.
- But now, at 100 years old.
 - This couldn't be closer to “bottom of the 9th, down by 3, bases loaded, 2 outs, full count, and the last batter in the order is at the plate.”
 - If that's you, you don't flinch. Because there's only one way this works out.

- But Paul is very specific in how he describes Abraham at this stage of the game.
 - It says that “he did not weaken in faith.”
 - That word for “weaken” is frequently used to describe someone the condition of the body when it is afflicted by sickness.
 - If you’ve ever had the flu, or COVID, or some other sickness that put you in the bed, unable to even sit up.
 - That’s this word.
 - When applied to faith, it isn’t hard to imagine a person who’s faith has been rocked by grief or trauma or crisis.
 - You know what God says, but in the moment, you’re not altogether interested in listening to him.
 - Maybe you’ve been there before.
 - That’s exactly what Abraham doesn’t do - despite the very real temptation to do just that.
 - He’s messed up by trying to force things 14 years earlier.
 - And now the odds are completely stacked against him.
 - Who could blame him if his faith was so sick it couldn’t get out of bed.
 - But it doesn’t weaken.
 - This isn’t just “positive thinking.”
 - We hear that a lot today, “Just think positively.”
 - I’m not going to say that positive thinking isn’t good for our dispositions.
 - But faith is far more than positive thinking.
 - Faith isn’t ignoring the circumstances, it’s trusting the God who simply isn’t bound by them..

- And Paul is very specific about that.
- Paul says even when Abraham looked at the despair of the moment, his faith never decided to crawl back into bed.
- Maybe, like Abraham, you've had your own Hagar moment.
 - Not a person. A decision.
 - A shortcut you took because waiting on God felt unbearable.
 - A compromise you made because the promise was taking too long and you decided to help it along.
 - Abraham's Hagar moment didn't speed anything up — it just added a complication he'd be living with for the rest of his life.
- What's yours?
 - Maybe it's a relationship you forced instead of waited for.
 - Maybe it's a decision at work you made out of fear instead of trust.
 - Maybe it's simpler than that — a moment where you stopped praying about something and just started managing it yourself.
- Here's the good news buried in this story: Abraham's Hagar didn't disqualify him.
 - It didn't cancel the promise.
 - God didn't say, "Well, you blew it, so this is off."
 - Fourteen years later, the promise was still on the table — because it was never resting on Abraham's track record to begin with.
- Maybe none of that's you this morning.
 - Maybe you're not tempted to force anything. You're just tired.
 - Your faith isn't defiant.
 - It's not even doubting, exactly.
 - It's just — sick.

- Worn down by grief, or a diagnosis, or a marriage that isn't getting better, or a kid you've prayed for so long you've stopped saying the prayer out loud.
- If that's you, I don't want you to hear this point as another reason to feel like you're failing.
 - Because here's what's actually true: Abraham's faith isn't the hero of this passage. God's ability is.
 - The text doesn't say Abraham's strength saved the day. It says he grew strong *by giving glory to God* — which means the strength came from somewhere outside of him.
 - It always does.
 - You don't need to manufacture strong faith by sheer will this morning.
 - You need to look, one more time, at who you're actually trusting.
 - That's where we're headed next.

Faith That Rests on God's identity (vv. 20-21)

- So what was the trick for Abraham to hold on despite the odds?
 - Did he just have self-generated resolve?
 - Was this just sheer force of will?
- Paul actually answers this for us. He says, "grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God."
 - That really is a powerful picture for us.
 - Abraham didn't just maintain status quo.
 - Rather than crawling back in bed, Paul is telling us that his faith actually went and competed in an Ironman!
- How is that even possible?
 - Well, it turns out that Paul gives us the mechanism here.
 - His faith grew strong AS he gave glory to God.

- Praise wasn't the result of strengthening faith.
- In a sense, Paul is treating faith like a muscle.
 - The circumstances were the resistance.
 - Giving God glory in spite of them was the exercise.
 - If you want to grow a muscle, you've got to exercise it under resistance.
- Most people who work out will tell you that it is always easier NOT to do it.
 - But they do it anyway because they know it's for their good.
 - As Abraham considered his circumstances and the impossibility of it all, it would have been easier to go down the "woe is me" pathway, and just stare at the misery of it all.
 - But instead, he continued to praise and glorify God through it all.
- That's strong faith — it keeps its eyes fixed on Jesus in the midst of challenging circumstances.
- But why? Why give glory to God instead of simply getting lost in the circumstances?
 - Because glorifying God isn't just an act of willpower aimed in the right direction.
 - It's a conviction about who God actually is.
 - You don't praise what you don't trust.
- And Paul tells us exactly where Abraham's convictions were found.
 - He was "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."
 - Not just present. Not just caring. Able.
- This is the real difference between faith and positive thinking.
 - Positive thinking says, "I can handle this."

- Faith says, "He is able."
- One is confidence in yourself.
- The other is confidence in God.
- Abraham's strength was never about the strength of his own resolve.
 - It was about the size of the God he was resolved to trust.
 - That's strong faith — it keeps its eyes fixed on Jesus in the midst of challenging circumstances, fully convinced that He is able.
 - And guess what - it turns out that God was able.
 - Sarah did get pregnant and gave birth to a healthy baby boy named Isaac.
 - And while one son is a far cry from a great nation, it's a whole lot closer than no sons at all.
- But note this — Abraham's faithful conviction didn't just apply to this particular situation.
 - A few years later, God would ask Abraham to do the impossible.
 - That one son, God asked Abraham to sacrifice him.
 - That is one of those hard passages in the scriptures and leave us asking lots of questions.
 - And the #1 question is "How could Abraham do such a thing?"
 - Simply put, it was because he was a man of strong faith.
 - The writer of Hebrews tells us that the same conviction that God was able to keep his promise also gave Abraham another conviction.
 - [Hebrews 11:17-19](#) says this:

Hebrews 11:17–19 ESV

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,

¹⁸ of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.”

¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

- It is as if Abraham looked at God and said, “I’ll do anything *YOU* say because I believe *YOU* can do everything you promise.”
- And that, Paul says, is why Abraham’s faith was counted to him as righteousness.

Faith That Gets Counted (v. 22)

- Not his obedience. Not his track record. Not even the strength of his faith itself.
 - Justification is not the grade we get at the end of the course if we checked off all of the requirements in the syllabus.
 - God isn’t the professor who is grading your final exam to make sure you have enough cumulative knowledge to get a passing score.
 - We have to purge any notion of self-effort from our vocabulary.
- That is why Abraham is such an important person in this conversation.
 - His faith — simply trusting God — was enough for God to declare him righteous.
 - Not earned. Not produced. Not worked for.
 - Credited. Given. Counted.
 - Abraham didn't do anything to deserve that verdict.
 - If I were judging Abraham, he’s got some serious marks against him for messing things up.
 - But let’s be honest, we all have more than enough serious marks against us.

- That's why Paul has already made the statement, "None is righteous, no not one; no one understand; no one seeks for God."
- Instead, Abraham believed God, and God called that enough.
- This isn't new ground for this church.
 - We've seen this truth before, back in Romans chapter 3 — righteousness that comes by faith, apart from anything we've done.
 - But it's worth hearing again here, because Paul isn't restating a doctrine.
 - He's showing you what that doctrine looks like on one specific man, in one specific moment, facing one specific impossibility.
 - That's the truth this whole series has been building toward, standing right here in the middle of Abraham's story: faith — not performance — is what God counts.
- But I think that's why this is so important.
 - It is easy for these great doctrines to get chalked up to concepts that belong in big, thick books on the preacher's bookshelf.
 - And Paul has done a masterful job making the case for our justification.
 - But let's never forget that it impacts real people.
 - It impacts you.
 - Abraham may not have been able to articulate that he was justified by his faith.
 - But that doesn't change the fact that he WAS justified by faith.
 - And you may still struggle to put into words what you have experienced in terms of your own salvation...but it doesn't change the mechanics behind it at all.
- Paul makes the same argument a second time.

- In his letter to the Galatians — same man, same citation, same conclusion.

Galatians 3:6–9 ESV

⁶ just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.

⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.”

⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

- This was never just an argument about one man, in one moment, on one afternoon a few millennia ago.
- It was always meant to reach further than Abraham himself.

Faith That Was Never Just About Him (vv. 23–25)

- "But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also."
- That verse was never a history lesson.
- It was always aimed at you and at me.
- Think about what Paul is claiming here.
 - He's not saying Abraham's story is a nice example of faith, something to admire from a distance the way you'd admire a statue in a museum.
 - He's saying Abraham's story was written — deliberately, by God, centuries before you were born — with you specifically in mind.
 - Every detail we've walked through this morning — the deadness, the waiting, the fourteen years, the muscle that grew stronger instead of

weaker — all of it was recorded so that you would have somewhere to stand when your own impossible situation shows up.

- The same faith. The same God.
- The same kind of impossible.
- Except now Paul names the specific promise you and I are asked to trust: "It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."
- Abraham looked at a hundred-year-old body and a dead womb and believed God could bring life from it.
- You're being asked to look at a cross and an empty tomb and believe the same thing.
- Not a different kind of faith.
- It is The same kind.
- Fully persuaded that what God promised, God is able to do.
 - Not persuaded that you can clean yourself up first.
 - Not persuaded that you can find enough strength on your own.
 - Not persuaded that your own record could ever be enough.
 - But fully persuaded that God raised Jesus from the dead for exactly this reason — so that your trespasses could be dealt with, and God could look at you and count you righteous, the same way He looked at Abraham.
- So here's the question this text leaves you with.
 - If you're trusting Christ this morning — if you've turned from trying to earn what can only be received, and turned to trust the God who raised Jesus for your justification — then hear this: your faith, however small it feels some mornings, is not too weak for this.
 - It never rested on the size of your faith.

- It rests on the size of the God your faith is aimed at.
- Maybe you've been a Christian for decades, and you still catch yourself, some mornings, quietly trying to earn back God's favor after a bad week — as if the cross needs your help finishing the job.
- It doesn't.
- Maybe you're newer to this, still not entirely sure your faith is the "right kind" of faith, still measuring yourself against people who seem more certain than you feel.
- Abraham didn't have certainty either.
- He had a promise and a Person he was persuaded of.
- That's what faith is.
- Not the absence of every question — a settled confidence in who God is, even while some of the questions remain.
- But if you've never done that — if you're still, this morning, trying to accumulate enough good to outweigh the bad, still hoping your record will somehow be enough — I want you to hear how far short that falls, and how unnecessary it is.
- You don't need a stronger record.
- You need to stop trusting the record altogether.
- Turn from it. And turn to the God who raised Jesus from the dead — the same God who looked at a dead body and a dead womb and spoke life into both.

• **The Apostle Peter spoke to this in [1 Peter 1](#):**

1 Peter 1:20–21 ESV

²⁰ He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you

²¹ who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

- He is able to do this for you.
- Not eventually, once you've proven yourself. Not partially, leaving you to make up the difference.
- Fully — the same way He was fully persuaded, He is fully able, and He is fully willing.
- Not because of what you've done.
- Because of what He's already done.
- So here's what I'm asking you to do with that, right now, in this room.
- If you've never turned from trusting your own record to trusting Christ — don't leave this building the same way you walked in.
 - Right where you're sitting, tell God the truth: that you've been trying to earn what only He can give, and you're done trying.
 - Turn from that, and turn to Him.
 - And then don't keep it to yourself — after this service, come find me, or one of our elders, or a trusted friend sitting near you, and tell them what just happened.
 - We want to pray with you and walk with you from this moment forward, not just watch you make a decision alone in a chair.
- If you've already trusted Christ, but you've been quietly living like Abraham did fourteen years before this passage — still trying to help God along, still gripping something you should have released — this is your moment to put it down.
 - Name it, specifically, before you leave this room.
 - Not in general terms. The actual thing.
 - And if you need someone to pray that through with you, again, find me or another staff member. Grab an elder or a deacon or a Small Group leader.

- And if you're not sure which of those is you — that uncertainty isn't a wall.
 - It's an invitation. Come talk to someone.
 - That's what we're here for.
- Whatever's true for you this morning — turn from the record.
 - Turn to the God who raised Jesus from the dead.
 - He's able. He can handle whatever your life has thrown at you.
 - He's already proven it.