

In the Maker's Hands

Brian Carroll / General Adult

Unashamed - A Study of Romans / Romans 4:13–17

God's promise does not depend on human willpower or obedience to the law, but on His gracious will and sovereign power. Because the inheritance rests on the God who gives life to the dead, everyone who shares Abraham's faith can receive it with confidence.

Introduction

- I can count exactly three times in my life when I've been under some form of anesthesia.
 - It really is a strange idea when you stop and think about it.
 - You allow someone you do not know to fill you with drugs you don't understand so that you will not care that someone else you do not know does something to you that, under normal circumstances, you would never allow anyone to do, ever.
 - And somehow, we call that health care.
- The most recent time for me was back in May, when I had eye surgery.
 - I didn't know the guy who did it.
 - I'd never met him before and I haven't talked to him since.
 - I'm not even sure how they decide who does surgery...paper, rock, scalpel or something.
 - And when someone is about to operate on your eye, you find yourself especially grateful for a surgeon with a steady hand.
 - Like, when I met him, I shook his hand and held onto it for a minute.
 - I let go when I was satisfied he didn't have tremors or anything like that.
- Then, the other day, I saw a video this recorded inside an operating room during an earthquake.

- Imagine lying on that table.
- You are under anesthesia.
- You have placed yourself completely into the care of the medical team.
- Then the floor begins to move.
- The lights begin to sway.
- The equipment begins to shake.
- Everything in the room that seemed stable suddenly is not.
- At that moment, your confidence cannot rest in the steadiness of the room.
- It has to rest in the steadiness of the hands caring for you.
- It's not like you can help...
 - If things start to go sideways, you can't chime in.
 - "Hey, I watched a YouTube video of this procedure and they suggested clamping off that artery that's gushing blood."
- That is a picture of the kind of faith Paul describes in [Romans 4](#).
 - God made Abraham an extraordinary promise.
 - But everything around Abraham seemed to shake the credibility of that promise.
 - Humanly speaking, the circumstances did not support it.
 - Abraham could not fulfill it through willpower.
 - He could not secure it through obedience to the law.
 - He could not make it happen with his own hands.
- But the promise was never in Abraham's hands.
 - It was in the hands of the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

- That is why the promise is secure.
- Our circumstances may shake.
- Our resolve may weaken.
- Our obedience may falter.
- But the hands holding God's promise never tremble.
- So, as we turn to Romans chapter 4, verses 13 through 17, the question is not, "Are my hands steady enough to make God's promise come true?"
 - The question is, "Whose hands is the promise in?"
 - And the answer is the title of this morning's message:
 - "In the Maker's Hands."

Scripture Reading

Romans 4:13–17 [ESV](#)

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

¹⁵ For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

¹⁶ 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,

¹⁷ 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.

- We're still in [Romans 4](#) this morning, still walking through the same letter, still watching Paul build his case one plank at a time.
 - For three chapters now, he has been doing something patient and relentless at the same time.
 - He has been taking away, one by one, every hand we might reach for to save ourselves.
 - Our record doesn't save us.
 - Our religion doesn't save us.
 - Knowing the right rules and following most of them doesn't save us.
 - Paul has methodically emptied our hands.
- And now, in chapter 4, he doesn't just leave them empty.
 - He shows us what fills them instead.
 - He turns to Abraham — not a theologian, not a lawgiver, not a religious professional, just a man who believed God — to show us what has been true from the very beginning.
- Because here's what makes this argument so airtight.
 - Abraham lived centuries before the law was ever given.
 - Before Moses. Before Sinai. Before there was a single commandment to keep or break.
 - Which means whatever God did for Abraham, He didn't do it because Abraham had the law and kept it.
 - He couldn't have. It didn't exist yet.
- So if Abraham was made right with God apart from the law, then Paul's gospel isn't a new idea he invented in the first century.
 - It's not Plan B after the law didn't work out.
 - It is, and it has always been, the only way anyone has ever been made right with God.

- Which brings us to the promise itself. God made Abraham an extraordinary promise — heir of the world, father of many nations.
- And the first thing Paul wants you to see, before he'll let you rest your weight on that promise, is what it was never built on.

The promise cannot be earned through the law (vv. 13-15)

- Abraham received the promise through the righteousness of faith, not obedience to the law.
- Look at verse 13 again.
 - "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."
 - That word "heir" is telling us a lot here, because it isn't just a word about Abraham, it's a word about us.
 - An heir doesn't earn an inheritance.
 - An heir receives one.
 - Nobody works a shift, clocks out, and collects an inheritance as a paycheck.
 - That's not what inheritance means.
 - The moment you start earning it, it stops being an inheritance and starts being wages.
- So when Paul says Abraham is heir of the world, he's already telling you how this works before he explains why.
 - Abraham didn't get handed the deed to God's promises because he filled out the paperwork correctly.
 - He got it the way every heir gets anything — because someone else decided to give it to him.
 - As Paul said elsewhere...

Galatians 3:18 [ESV](#)

¹⁸ For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

- And here's what makes that detail so pointed: the law hadn't even been given yet.
 - Abraham is Genesis. The law is Exodus.
 - That's not a footnote — that's the whole argument.
 - Paul isn't telling you that Abraham had the law and somehow found a loophole around it.
 - He's telling you Abraham never had access to law-keeping as an option in the first place.
 - The promise came first.
 - The law came later.
 - You cannot retroactively earn something you already received.
 - That means the same is true for us.
 - If Abraham—the father of our faith—was never given law-keeping as the basis of his inheritance, then it cannot be the basis of ours either.
 - Whatever confidence we have before God cannot be built on a foundation Abraham himself never stood upon.
- Verse 14 moves the argument even further — If the inheritance depended on law-keeping, faith would be emptied and the promise nullified.
 - Verse 14: "For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void."
 - Paul isn't just saying law-keeping is insufficient.
 - He's saying it's corrosive.
 - If you try to add law-keeping onto faith as the basis for the promise, you don't get faith-plus-law.

- You get faith equals nothing, and promise equals nothing.
- Think about what that means.
 - The moment you say, "I'm trusting God, but I'm also making sure I keep up my end by being good enough," you haven't strengthened your faith.
 - You've dissolved it. Faith by definition rests its whole weight somewhere else.
 - The instant you slide a hand underneath to catch yourself, you've stopped trusting the one holding you.
- Most of us do not consciously reject grace; we quietly try to supplement it.
 - We draw a little confidence from our church involvement, a little comfort from not being as bad as someone else, and a little reassurance from how faithful we have been lately.
 - But the moment any of those things becomes part of the basis for our acceptance before God, we are no longer resting entirely on His promise.
 - Faith may be weak. Faith may tremble.
 - But saving faith looks away from itself and rests its weight on Christ.
- Consider v. 15: "For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression."
 - The law exposes sin and brings judgment; it cannot secure the inheritance.
 - The law does not create human sinfulness, but it exposes it and names it.
 - It takes our rebellion against our Creator and identifies it as the violation of God's revealed commands.

- The law draws the line clearly — and then shows us how often we have crossed it.
- Here's the part that stings a little.
 - The law was never designed to be the vehicle that delivers you to the promise.
 - It was designed to show you exactly how far you are from being able to deliver yourself there.
- The law doesn't produce righteousness.
 - It produces awareness of the lack of it.
 - That's not a bug, that's a feature.
 - It's not a ladder you climb toward God.
 - It's a measuring stick that shows you the ladder was never going to reach.
- So if you're building your confidence before God on how well you've kept His commands, you have taken the one instrument in Scripture designed to diagnose your condition and tried to use it as your cure.
 - That's like taking an X-ray and asking it to set the bone.
 - The law can tell you exactly where you're broken.
 - It cannot put you back together.
 - It brings wrath, not rescue — because wrath is the appropriate response to seeing, with perfect clarity, exactly how short you fall.
- So here's where that leaves us.
 - The promise didn't come through the law.
 - It can't come through the law.
 - And it was never going to come through the law — because the law was never built to carry that kind of weight.

- Which means if the promise is going to stand, it has to be resting on something else entirely.
- That's verse 16.

The promise is guaranteed by grace (v. 16)

- The inheritance depends on faith so that it may rest entirely on grace.
 - Look at verse 16:
 - “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.”
- Notice the chain of thought:
 - It depends on faith, so that it may rest on grace, so that it may be guaranteed.
 - Faith. Grace. Guarantee.
 - Those three ideas belong together.
- Paul says the promise depends on faith because faith is the only way of receiving something that leaves all the credit with the giver.
 - Faith does not purchase the promise.
 - Faith does not earn the promise.
 - Faith simply receives the promise.
- That is what makes faith different from law-keeping.
 - Law-keeping says, “Give me what I have earned.”
 - Faith says, “I am trusting You to give what You have promised.”
- And that distinction has to be guarded carefully, because it's possible to turn faith itself into a kind of law-keeping.

- If faith became the price we pay for grace, it would just become another work — the one spiritual achievement we could point to and say, "God owes me, because at least I believed well enough."
- That's not what Paul means.
- Faith is the open hand that receives the gift. And even that image has limits, because the power was never in the hand.
- The power is in the generosity of the One who fills it.
- That is why Paul says the promise "rests on grace."
- Grace means the inheritance rests on God's decision to give, not on anything we've achieved.
- And if it rests on grace, then its certainty rests on God's character rather than ours.
- Paul said it this way to the church in Ephesus:

Ephesians 2:8–9 *ESV*

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,

⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

- Because it rests on grace, the promise is secure rather than uncertain.
- Here's where we tend to get this backwards.
 - We assume grace makes salvation feel less certain — as if God has merely offered us a possibility, and now everything hinges on whether we can believe strongly enough, obey consistently enough, or hold on long enough.
 - Paul says exactly the opposite. Grace is what guarantees the promise, not what puts it at risk.
- Think about what a guarantee actually requires.
 - A guarantee can only be as strong as the party standing behind it.

- If the promise depended on anything in us — however small a percentage, however sincere the effort — it would only ever be as reliable as we are.
- And a guarantee that's only partly dependent on you isn't really a guarantee.
- It's a hope with better branding.
- That's the whole point of grace resting the promise on God alone.
 - It doesn't just remove the *weakest* link in the chain.
 - It removes human performance from the chain entirely.
 - The promise isn't strong because our grip on it is strong.
 - It's strong because it was never in our grip to begin with.
 - The promise is certain because God is the one who made it, God is the one who sustains it, and God is the one who will bring it to completion.

Philippians 1:6 ESV

⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

- The guarantee was never in the strength of the faith receiving the promise.
- It's in the faithfulness of the God who made it.
- Weak faith can receive a strong promise, because the promise was never resting on the strength of our grip.
- It rests in the Maker's hands.
- The promise extends to all Abraham's children — both Jew and Gentile — who share his faith.
 - Because the inheritance rests on grace instead of law, Paul says it's guaranteed "to all his offspring."
 - That phrase matters more than it might sound like at first.

- If the inheritance came strictly through the Jewish law, it would necessarily be limited to those who possessed that law.
- But because it comes through faith, it's open to everyone who shares Abraham's faith — "the adherent of the law," and also the one who never had the law but believes Abraham's God anyway.
- Jew and Gentile enter the family the same way.
 - The Jewish believer can't say, "I earned my place through the law."
 - The Gentile believer doesn't have to say, "I missed my chance because I never had the law."
 - Both stand on the same ground.
 - Both receive the same grace.
 - Both trust the same promise. T
 - hat's why Paul can call Abraham "the father of us all" — his family was always bigger than one ethnic line, because the promise was always bigger than one ethnic line.
 - His true offspring aren't merely those who share his ancestry.
 - They're those who share his faith.
- So here's what verse 16 hands us.
 - Our confidence before God was never meant to rest on how well we've kept the law.
 - It was never meant to rest on how unwaveringly we've believed.
 - It was never meant to rest on how tightly our hands have held on.
 - Our confidence rests on this — the promise rests on grace, and grace doesn't fail.
- But that leaves one question standing.
 - Grace may explain why God is *willing* to give the promise.
 - It doesn't yet answer whether He's *able* to keep it.

- Is God powerful enough to actually bring to pass what He has graciously promised?
- Paul answers that at the end of verse 17.

The promise is fulfilled by God's sovereign power (v. 17)

- Abraham's faith was ultimately faith in God, not confidence in himself.
 - Look at the second half of verse 17: "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."
 - Verse 17 doesn't just tell us Abraham had faith.
 - It tells us where that faith landed: "the God in whom he believed."
 - Not a promise. Not a plan. God himself.
- That matters tremendously for you this morning,.
 - If you've been sitting under the last several weeks of this series feeling your own confidence get quietly dismantled...
 - Your record disqualified
 - Your effort disqualified
 - Even your faith itself warned against becoming one more thing you're secretly trusting in
 - You may be asking a fair question: then what am I actually supposed to hold onto?
- Here's the answer.
 - Stop looking for reassurance by checking how strong your faith feels. Faith was never the place your confidence was supposed to live. God was.
 - Abraham didn't stare at his own faith and find courage there.
 - He stared at God.

- Your assurance this morning was never meant to come from an audit of how well you believe.
- It was meant to come from a good, hard look at who you believe.
- And when you look at Him, you'll find way more assurance than you'll ever find looking in a mirror.
- After all, he is a God gives that life to the dead.
- Paul's first description of this God is precise, and it's not incidental.
 - Think about what that means for the promise itself.
 - Abraham was about a hundred years old.
 - Sarah's womb had been, in Paul's own later words, as good as dead.
 - There was no biological path forward. None.
 - If the promise depended on anything Abraham or Sarah could generate, produce, or muster, it was already over before it started.
- And that is not a detail about ancient history.
 - That is the whole gospel in miniature.
 - Every one of us, before Christ, was not sick, not struggling, not simply falling short.
 - [Eph. 2:1](#) says:
 Ephesians 2:1 ESV
¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins
 - Dead people do not improve themselves.
 - Dead people do not try harder.
 - Dead people do not slowly work their way back to life through better decisions.
 - Dead people need someone to raise them.

- So if you are in Christ this morning, hear this clearly: whatever brought you from spiritual death to spiritual life was never your doing, start to finish.
 - It was the same power at work in you that was at work in that hundred-year-old body and that dead womb.
 - The God who specializes in the impossible was never waiting on you to bring Him something to work with.
 - He raised the dead. That's not a metaphor for effort. That's resurrection.
- God also calls into existence what does not exist.
 - The second description goes even further.
 - Giving life to the dead assumes there was once something there.
 - This is a category beyond that.
 - This is the God who does not need existing material at all.
 - He speaks, and what was not, is.
 - That's not resuscitation. That's creation.
- And this is where the promise to Abraham stops being merely difficult and becomes, by every human measure, absurd.
 - Heir of the world. Father of many nations.
 - Spoken over a man with no child yet born to him.
 - God didn't look at Abraham's circumstances and find a small opening to work with.
 - There was no opening.
 - But he didn't need one.
 - He made it abundant clear in [Genesis 18:14](#)

Genesis 18:14 ESV

¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.”

- He spoke a nation into existence out of exactly the same kind of nothing He once spoke a universe into existence out of.
- If your own history feels like it disqualifies you.
 - If you look at your past and see nothing there that God could possibly work with — you are describing exactly the kind of situation this God specializes in.
 - He is not intimidated by nothing.
 - Nothing is His preferred starting material.

Invitation - TITLE

- What human beings cannot produce, the Maker can bring to pass.
- So here is where all three chapters, and this whole message, arrive.
 - Remember the earthquake.
 - Remember what it feels like to be on that table with the lights swaying and the equipment shaking and no ability whatsoever to reach up and steady anything yourself.
 - That is not a passing illustration.
 - That is where every one of us actually lives.
 - Our record shakes. Our resolve shakes.
 - Even our own faith, examined too closely, will start to shake, because it is still faith held by human hands.
- But hear this, and let it settle all the way down: the promise was never resting on the table.
 - It was never resting on the room.
 - It was never even resting on your grip on the God who gave it.

- From the very first verse of this chapter to the very last, Paul has been dismantling every human hand reaching for the promise, for exactly one reason — so that you would stop looking at your hands and start looking at His.
- I love Jesus' prayer in [John 10](#). Listen to vv. 27-29.

John 10:27–29 ESV

²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

- What a beautiful word. And what a powerful reminder for us.
- If you are in Christ this morning, your assurance is not a fragile thing you have to protect by performing well enough to keep it.
- It cannot be shaken loose by a bad week, a wandering heart, or a memory of your worst sin, because it was never sitting in your grip to begin with.
- It is sitting in the same hands that raised the dead and spoke the universe into being.
- Those hands do not tremble. They have never once trembled.
- And they are not about to start with you.
- Because absolutely nothing will allow you to be snatched out of those hands.
- That is the promise. And that is why, whatever else is true about you this morning, this can be true too:
- You are in the Maker's hands.
- But maybe you're sitting here this morning and none of that comfort has anywhere to land — because you know you're not actually in Christ.

- You've never trusted Him. You've been hoping, if you've thought about it at all, that your own hands were enough.
- Your own effort. Your own decency.
- Hear the mercy in what Paul has shown us today: this promise has never once depended on your hands being steady enough.
- It depends entirely on His.
- Which means the very thing that disqualifies you in your own eyes — the shaking, the failure, the record you can't fix — is exactly the material God specializes in working with.
- He raises the dead. He calls into existence what does not exist.
- He is not waiting for you to arrive with something to offer Him.
- He is waiting for you to stop reaching for your own hands and rest in His.
- That happens the same way it happened for Abraham.
 - Not by cleaning yourself up first.
 - Not by proving yourself worthy first.
 - By faith — by believing this God, trusting that Christ's death and resurrection are enough, and letting go of every other hand you've been holding onto instead.
 - If that's you this morning, don't leave here still gripping something that was never going to hold.
- And if you are in Christ — if the Spirit in you has just said "amen" to everything we've read this morning — let this be the posture you carry out of this room.
 - Not gripping, but resting.
 - Not straining to hold on but trusting the hands that are already holding you.
- You are in the Maker's hands.