
HOPING AGAINST HOPE
ROMANS 4:13–25
A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL ON SUNDAY
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Take a moment to remember something in your life that you've really hoped for... something so deeply—that it consumes your thoughts and attention. Maybe it's hoping someone would ask you to prom. Hoping you would get into Duke. Hoping that it's the perfect time for retirement. I'm pretty sure that we can all share that sentiment. Personally, a few months ago, I was hoping deeply and prayerfully for a successful set of final exams. I know with 100% certainty that I'm not alone in that.

But why do we hope? Why do we set our eyes on outcomes, accomplishments, or situations with oftentimes an unrelenting pursuit? Some may point to a desire for a better result or to optimize one's productivity. Others might propose that it helps us get through the day. I resonate with wanting to get through my Monday classes to crawl towards my bed in everlasting victory.

The factor that underlies all of this, I believe, is a desire for an outcome that supersedes one's current situation and pursues a dream or aspiration. Hope underlies this. This desire can propel us to lay aside our natural understandings and predispositions and hold on to a belief that it can be achieved. It's a desire surrounded by patience. Take Abraham for example... Even the time between the first promise of a son to Abraham and Isaac's actual birth lasted 25 years! Now that's desire surrounded by patience. As Romans 8:25 states, "But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."

Abraham is mentioned all throughout the Bible as a beacon of faith and hope and rightfully so. The Book of Hebrews even grants him a prestigious mention in its "Hall of Faith." For context, within the book of Genesis, Abraham and his wife Sarah were encountered by God who gave them a promise: that they would have a son, Isaac, and they would have a multitude of descendants— as many as the number of stars in the sky.

Now, a major caveat to this is that they were pretty old and past the point of bearing a child. Even Abraham and Sarah were in shock and laughed at this promise. It was contrary to any human reason or possibility— as Paul writes in verse 19, Abraham saw it as a fact that "his body was as good as dead." Thus, any fulfillment of this promise could not arise out of the normal, but came out of the miraculous hand of God.

And guess what? God fulfilled his promise. It was a promise that went against a hope centered around human understanding, but was entrenched within God's handiwork.

Now, throughout Romans 4, Paul describes the process of justification and emphasizes the role of faith in God's covenant with Abraham. In order to depict this, I like to think of it as a tension of two types of hope. It's like a tug-of-war between a hope informed by works and human understanding and a hope grounded in faith.

These are two realities that we must contend with, especially as we face trials and circumstances that cause us to question how God is moving in our world. Do we need to rely on works in order to have a relationship with God? Or is a belief in Him enough to influence our relationships and daily encounters?

As we go through verses 13-25, Paul shows us that while multifaceted, the hope we rely on is centered on the works of God in our lives. I invite you to following along in your personal or pew Bibles as we go through the text.

Paul begins this passage by saying outright that Abraham did not receive the promise by the law. For context, the Mosaic Law was a law given by God to the people of Israel as a direction on how to live and best serve Yahweh. Knowing that, Paul has already held the tension between a righteousness by means of the law and a righteousness by faith in God's workings.

Moreover, as we continue to verse 14 and 15, Paul brings up a concept that can seem contradictory to our understandings of faith. If the kingdom of God was meant for those who *depended on* the law for salvation, then there would be no need for faith at all. However, what about those who didn't have the law? Paul just said that Abraham received the promise without having received the law.

In the midst of this seemingly contradictory thought, Paul propels us to the solution in the following verses.

Paul boldly states, in verse 16, that "the promise comes by faith." It cannot be because of the workings of the law or striving to be perfect under it. It can't be because I prayed every day for 15 minutes. It can't be because I woke up in the morning. It can't be because I read my Bible. It can't be because I said please and thank you daily. The promise comes by faith.

This is so important because that means the promise extends to you and me. While we aren't members of Abraham's biological lineage, we are able to receive the promise ourselves. And better yet, it's by grace. It isn't something that we can earn. I didn't write an award-winning sermon that gained me access into heaven. I could never do that. Now, Dean Powery probably could, but let's just say he hasn't either.

Rather, the promise extends to all of us— Jews and Gentiles, people who grew up in church and people new to the faith, Pratt students and Trinity students alike. We all become recipients of the opportunity as we continue to act in faith.

This brings us to the verse inspiring the title of this message: verse 18. Paul writes, "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'"

I will be very honest that when I first read this passage, I had to look at this verse approximately five times. I wondered, "Paul, what are you possibly saying here?" How can Abraham act against hope, but also in hope itself? But using our understanding of the tug-of-war between works and faith, this verse becomes increasingly prominent.

One could summarize the verse by stating, "Against normal human comprehension, works, and understanding, Abraham had faith in what God could do and so received the promise of God." This verse forms the centrality of our struggle as believers. Do we rely on our understanding of the world, or do we rest in God's hand over the world?

This sentiment is continued in verse 19. Abraham himself knew that it was insane! God giving a 100-year-old a child— that's contrary to anything I've learned in my biology classes. But as Jesus said, God can do the impossible.

That's the beautiful thing about faith. It doesn't rest in our ability to comprehend what God is doing. For example, when Jesus was washing the disciples' feet, they were astonished and confused as they didn't comprehend why God himself would wash their feet. But then John 13:7 states, "Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.'" God uses our imperfect faith to enact a hope that will surely come about.

This leads us to my favorite verse of the passage: verse 20. Paul writes, “Yet [Abraham] did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God.”

One commentator writing about this passage provided a deep insight into this verse. The commentator emphasized that, according to the Greek used, by giving glory to God, Abraham wasn’t just singing hymns or reading the Bible more (although these are very good outlets of our worship). He was resting in a full assurance and confidence in what God was doing.

“You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” I can guarantee that Abraham did not know how God would do it. I can guarantee that there were moments of doubt and discomfort and frustration. But I can also guarantee that God’s faithfulness carried them through it all.

Further, because of that trust in God—because they relied on Him even through unbelief, they were “fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.” This is faith! This is hope—our hope! And better yet, it doesn’t rest on what we can understand. It doesn’t rest on what we have done or what initiatives we’ve put in place to earn God’s love. It rests on God’s power to do what He has promised!

You know what’s even better? God credited that to Abraham as righteousness. Abraham wasn’t perfect, and he didn’t even have the Mosaic law to go off of. He legitimately could not have gained righteousness by works or understanding. Thus, God gave righteousness to Him. He relied on God and his faith in God for righteousness.

So this is great for Abraham, but what does this directly mean for us as believers? Thankfully, Paul gives it straight to us in the last few verses.

He begins by telling us that the understanding of God granting righteousness by faith wasn’t just written for Abraham. Rather, it is also a revelation for us today as we live our lives as believers.

As believers, we can rely on the wonder working power of God. He has the authority to credit to us a righteousness that supersedes our faithlessness. Out of that, we can trust that He will give us a hope and a future. We can trust that He will work all things for our good. But the even more beautiful part is that when we place our faith in Him— when we give Him our hearts and trust— our desires become aligned with His desires for our lives.

We’re no longer bound to fear of the future or the unknown. But rather we’re bound fully to the work of the Lord, and if He brings us to it, He will surely bring us through it. I think Jesus said it best when He stated in John 14:1, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.”

Now if we thought that Abraham’s situation was miraculous, it doesn’t compare to what God has done for each and every one of us. The bigger wonder of all is that God would send His son to die for sinners— for you and for me. And better yet— He didn’t stay in the grave, but was raised to life again. As Paul writes in verse 25, “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”

Because of the resurrection, Jesus’ righteousness can and will be credited unto us. It isn’t because we earned it. It isn’t because we go to church every Sunday or we are active in a Bible study, but rather it’s because of a faith that is centered on God’s promises.

This is such a powerful message for us as believers because it grants us a hope that surpasses any hope bound to understanding guided by the world. It empowers us to rely on and trust in the promises of God.

The even better part is as we rely on a full assurance of what God is doing, our desires change as well. We form a desire to serve the Lord with all we have, not to earn a spot in the promise but to thank Him for what He has done for us.

This empowers us to work our hardest for the Lord and give our hearts to the Lord. This empowers hope in every aspect of our lives— hope in our calling, hope in our relationships, hope in Christ. We can set our eyes on a hope for God to fulfill His promises, and while it may not be what we expect, it will be what we need. And we can rest in a full assurance that God surely will do it.

As Paul promises in Romans, “Yet [Abraham] did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God.” May we also be strengthened in our faith and continuously give glory to God. Amen