

How Can I Have a Stronger Faith?

Rich Nathan

Sermon—August 12/13, 1995

Romans 4

This morning we are going to talk about faith. And it ought to be fairly obvious, but if you hang around Christians very long, you are going to hear a lot of talk about faith. The word will be tossed around a great deal and you will be talked to about the need to believe and the importance of faith. I often see that the word “faith” is misunderstood and we are going to talk about that a little bit. But what I really want to center on tonight is why Christians talk so much about faith. Indeed, if I were to state the question a little more clearly, it might be why does the Bible talk so much about faith?

There is an underlying premise in Christianity which is that whatever we accomplish as Christians for God in this world, anything that is worthwhile, is accomplished by faith. Not only is faith the beginning of the Christian life, but Christians have this idea, and the Bible clearly teaches as we are going to see in just a few minutes, that the whole of the Christian life is lived by faith. That the Christian life is a life of faith.

Thus, many of us are struggling with some life controlling habit. In your case, it may be a food or eating disorder or a habit of gambling or a sexual addiction. Perhaps in your particular case, it is explosive anger or jealousy that just grips you. You just find yourself constantly upset when you see someone who you have perceived to be a rival in this church or in love or in the work place. Maybe your particular struggle is with material and with shopping or perhaps it is with anxiety, fear about the future, fear about your finances, a fear regarding your children.

Whatever it is that you are battling with, I can bet you that you will find no answer as a Christian without the employment of faith. Faith is the way that we break through life controlling habits. Faith always is going to be at the center of your answer for getting rid of various kinds of addictions and various kinds of enslaving habits.

Faith is the way that you will battle through temptation. So often, it is not obvious to us that God’s way is better when we are tempted. The essence of temptation is for a little while to make sin appear more attractive than what God says in the Bible. Sin seems more pleasurable for a little while to you. Sin seems more convenient. Sin seems to be more promising, more satisfying.

How do you battle with the temptation to sin? It may be that you don’t have a life controlling habit, but you are being strongly tempted to do something that the Bible tells you not to do. The only way to deal with temptation is with faith. To believe that in the moment, even though I don’t yet feel that God’s way is better, that it makes sense to stay in a bad marriage, that it makes sense to hold my tongue or to be meek—the Bible yet tells me that blessing comes by being meek, that blessing comes by being humble, that blessing comes by keeping my commitments and keeping my vows even when it is hard. But I can’t lay hold of any of these promises in the Bible apart from faith.

Faith is the way we battle through our habits. Faith is the way we deal with temptation. Faith is the way we deal with delay. So often we are faced with the great problem of delay, of having to wait. We are asking God to speak, to give us some guidance regarding our future, what do you want God? We are asking God to do something, to give us a job, to provide some money so that we can pay our bills, to heal a person, to save a family member. But there is this delay.

Sometimes we feel like all we are getting for our prayers is the silence of God. God doesn't seem to be saying or doing anything. I will tell you there are a few things that will plumb the depth of your Christianity more than delay. You are just looking for one word from heaven, one little indication that God is at work in healing someone or in doing what you need to have God do and you get nothing. There are few things that will test you more than having to wait. To be standing there with outstretched hands and have nothing dropped in for a period of time. You know, in those moments of delay, we question God's existence. We question whether God hears us. We question whether God knows what we need. We question whether God cares. We question whether God can deal with all the obstacles.

We need faith to battle sin. We need faith to battle temptation. We need faith to deal with delays when God seems to be inactive or asleep. We need faith to deal with disappointments. All of us have things in our pasts which brutally disappointed us. We put our hope in what we thought was going to be good and to be, perhaps, even be God and it turned out to not be good and maybe it turned out to not be God. There is no one who can be a Christian very long without suffering a serious disappointment. To have prayers that go unanswered. Or to have prayers answered differently than what we asked. Someone we love rejects us. A relationship that meant everything to us broke down. A family member dies.

You know, very often when a person suffers a disappointment, there is a sense that if God allowed this to happen to me in the past, allowed me to go through this bitter experience in a church or in a relationship or with respect to prayer, then I cannot move forward with God in the future. I am convinced that many of the intellectual questions that people raise regarding God and the arm's length that people put God at, a lot of the philosophical questions that people raise are at bottom rooted in past disappointments. There is a wound, an emotional hurt, something that we have suffered and it went unhealed. And that wound froze our ability to believe. You need faith to break through disappointments.

Friends, there is no area of life that you can grow as a Christian in and move forward as a Christian without growing in your faith.

Now faith is so essential for living the Christian life, you need to understand one thing and that is faith can grow. The Bible in various places speaks of weak faith and in other places speaks of strong faith. We are going to see that in today's lesson regarding Abraham. Abraham's faith grew and got stronger.

I believe that our entire Christian life and our enjoyment of God and our ability to live successfully as Christians depends on us learning some secrets in

growing our faith. Learning the lessons of growing our faith. I have called today's talk from Romans 4: "How Can I Have a Stronger Faith?" Let's pray.

Now, I would like for you to look at Romans 4:1-8:

"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.'"

Paul speaks of two people in establishing his point about the importance of faith. He speaks of Abraham and he speaks of David. They are both Old Testament figures. The reason he picks Abraham and David is because these are the two great figures of Old Testament history. Abraham represents the great patriarch, the great father of the Jews and David is their greatest king.

Now, the general backdrop of Paul's argument regarding faith is this: That faith is the way that Old Testament people were saved. I made this point last week, but I want to underline it again. God didn't have several different plans of salvation. You know, a plan for Abraham and another plan for Moses and another plan for David and another plan for these other people. And all of these people failed. They couldn't live up to God's standard and so finally God came up in the New Testament with a whole new way of saving people: Faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul's argument is that what he is preaching is something that was discovered way back in the Old Testament by Abraham and by David. Faith is the way of salvation from beginning to end. There has ever only been one way that people have been saved. Faith alone in Christ alone.

So, Paul makes the point here: What shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? What was Abraham's discovery regarding the way of salvation? Abraham's discovery was that the way of salvation was faith alone.

You see, you must never read the Old Testament as simply a book of prophecy or predictions regarding what the way of salvation would be in the future. The Old Testament is more than a book of prophecies and predictions regarding what would be coming in the future in the New Testament. The way of salvation so plain and clear in the New Testament was also spoken about in the law and in the prophets.

There are a number of reasons why it is important to hold onto this one way of salvation. Paul has argued the reason to hold on to it in verses 27 to 31 of chapter 3. He says that it excludes boasting. We will talk about that in just a second. But he said the reason to hold onto this one way of salvation is because God is one. Verse 29:

"Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through the same faith."

If there is one God for Gentiles and Jews, then Paul's point is that there must only be one way of salvation. Jews don't get in differently than Gentiles. Old Testament people don't get in any differently than New Testament people. One way of salvation for one God: Faith alone in Christ alone.

You know, there is a faith strengthening exercise here. When you step back and realize that from eternity God had just one plan for salvation that he is executing in the world. That all people need to do is to rely on Jesus and rely on what Christ accomplished for them on the cross and they will be saved and set right with God. What can really strengthen your confidence that really works is to see that this is God's eternal plan. This was a plan set in motion by God before he ever made the world. And yes, it has been progressively revealed in the sense that it has become more and more clear through the progress of the Old Testament into the New Testament, but even though it has become more and more clear, the plan has always been the same. All we have is the bringing of the plan into clearer focus, like the adjusting of a camera lens.

Never see the New Testament in contradiction to the Old Testament or even in contrast to the Old Testament. There is a great continuity between the Old and the New Testaments. They both lay out one plan for salvation: Faith alone in Christ alone. A plan that has become progressively clear over time. What are some points of continuity in the Old and New Testament messages?

- 1) There is one God
- 2) He has a plurality of persons
- 3) There is a divine Messiah
- 4) There is a problem of sin
- 5) Blood sacrifices are necessary because you can't save yourself
- 6) People are saved through faith

Very early on in my Christian life, I learned a little nursery rhyme that has served me well in understanding the Bible. The nursery rhyme is this:

"The New is in the Old contained
The Old is by the New explained.
The New is in the Old concealed
The Old is by the New revealed."

Now, if you are outlining chapter 4, the first 17 verses are about faith alone saving us. And these 17 verses can be broken into three parts. Verses 1-8 Paul says that it is faith alone that saves us, not works. And then in verses 9-12, Paul says that it is faith alone that saves us, not religion (or in his case circumcision). And then in verses 13-17, Paul says that it is faith alone that saves us, not the law and obedience to the commandments. It is faith alone that saves us. That is the overall title of verses 1-17. It is faith alone that saves us, not works, not religion and not law. It is faith alone that saves us, not works.

Do you remember that the entire argument that Paul is working from is how can we get right with God? He established in the first three chapters of Romans that people are wrong with God. That we are not born right with God, but rather that the wrath of God is on us, that we deserve the judgment of God, that people are living in a state of hostility toward God and rebellion toward God. That God properly can and does respond to in judgment.

And from this state of hostility and estrangement and antipathy, enmity, Paul asks the question: How can a human, being what we are, get right with

God being what he is? How can we who constantly fall so far short in our love and in our obedience and in our faith ever get right with God who is glorious and holy and perfect? How can I hope, at the beginning of a day, to come into the presence of God and be secure in his presence given what I am? How can I hope to have my prayers answered? How can I gain standing with God so that he would listen to me?

Paul's answer is faith alone in Christ alone. The way that we get right with God is faith alone, not works.

Now, why must it be so? Well, Paul lays out his reasons why it must be faith alone and not works in verses 1-8. We see in verse 2 Paul's first answer. Works, my accomplishments, my deeds, my goodness, leads to boasting. The reason it must be faith alone and not works is to eliminate causes for boasting before God. Verse 2: "If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God."

See, the Rabbis taught that Abraham because of his good deeds gained standing with God. That Abraham's good deeds were meritorious. They stored up a big account in heaven's bank with God. In fact, the Rabbis taught that Abraham's account in heaven, because of his good deeds, was so full that it was enough for all of the Jews who followed after him in circumcision. Paul is very concerned that we understand that Abraham got right with God only by faith and not by works because if it were by works, he would have something to boast in before God. Something he could pride himself in. Something that he could march up and down before God and say, "Look at how good I am, God. Even you are forced to recognize and to reward me for my goodness."

Friends, let me tell you something. You know a good test for how well you or someone you are talking to understands Christianity is what you boast about. What you take pride in. A Christian is someone who fundamentally stops boasting about themselves and their own accomplishments. The characteristic of someone who has not met Christ and not really understood the cross of Christ as the only full payment for their sins is that they boast about themselves and their own accomplishments. A really good test for whether you understand Christianity and have committed yourself to Christ or not is to listen to what you boast about. If you look at Paul, before Paul became a Christian, what came out of Paul's mouth was boasting about himself. About his heritage. About his family background. About his religious accomplishments. About his schooling. About his knowledge. About his religious activity.

Read Philippians 3. It is a litany of boasts. He was born of the tribe of Benjamin, of the people of Israel, a Pharisee. He obeyed the law scrupulously.

You know that you are talking to a non Christian or to a very badly informed Christian if the person is boasting about themselves.

I have talked with so many folks that when we really get down to discussing their relationship with God and what would set them right with God will start pointing out their own accomplishments. A person will say, "Well, you know, I have tried to be a good dad. And I know that I haven't been perfect, but I spend a lot of time with my son and always was there. I always provided."

"After the divorce, when my husband left, I hung in there and I got another job. I took care of my kids."

The person is pointing out something about themselves and what they have done—some work of charity, some sacrifice for their mother or father. They didn't move out of town like their sisters or brothers did.

Boasting.

Paul says it has to be faith alone because a Christian is someone who boasts in God. A Christian is someone who clings to nothing other than the cross. You don't claim anything before God. You don't look at anything in yourself. A Christian is someone who comes naked and empty before God and says the only thing that I bring in my hand is Jesus. And that is all I cling to. The cross of Christ. The righteousness of Christ.

When we tell stories about the church, who is the hero in the story? Is it God? When we tell stories about someone getting healed, who is the hero? Is it God? When we tell stories about a ministry we are involved in, who gets the glory? The truth is we always start off "Oh God, oh God, oh God..." but then when God comes through we end up saying, "Yes, I knew exactly what the medical condition was and then I spoke to the illness." A Christian is someone who glories in God and glories in the cross. Paul said, "God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of Christ Jesus."

We celebrate the fact that God could take someone like me or like you and turn us around and change us. Change our attitudes. Faith alone preserves that. And it is important that we not turn faith into a work. Paul says, "What does the scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

But you keep boasting out from the front door and you say, "Okay, I am not going to talk about my goodness or my works." And boasting comes right in through the back door. We are so full of pride. You know how it comes through the back door? Because we turn faith into a work. We start taking pride in our faith. Many people have these theologies that say, "Well, you know, God tried to save people through good works, but they couldn't do it. So he established a lower bar. He made it easier for people. He established the way of faith."

You must never turn faith into a work. And by a work I am talking about something that would catch the eye of God. A work is something that because you have done it, you have accomplished something in God's sight and merited something from God. Faith is not some meritorious thing that gains standing with God. Christ gained you standing with God. His shed blood on the cross and gained you standing with God. It is Christ and his cross that merited any favor you may have with God. Faith just relies on Christ and receives God's favor.

What is faith? Faith is simply a channel, a means, by which we receive righteousness, that is right standing, from God. Paul says this in verse 3: "What does the scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

It was not as if God looked at Abraham's faith and said, "Okay, Abraham, your faith merits righteousness." No, faith received the righteousness, the right standing, that God gave as a gift. Faith is a channel. Faith is an instrument. Faith is a way to receive a gift. Faith doesn't save us so much as faith receives God's salvation. God saves us. And faith believes in God. It is the object of faith that saves us. So we never boast about our faith.

Let me try to explain this through a couple of different means. You know, in the Bible one of the ways that faith is described is by using the analogy of the human body. And sometimes the author will say that faith is like the eye that looks to Jesus. Faith enables a person to stare at Christ who saves. Faith looks at Christ.

Now, if you have ever been in love and started into the face of your lover, did you immediately think, "The only thing I can concentrate on now is my eyes. Thank God that I have eyes." or did you rather think, like most people, "The only thing I can concentrate on now is my beloved."

See, faith always draws attention away from itself onto the object. It doesn't boast in itself. The Bible says that faith is like a hand that grips Jesus and the gift of salvation. When someone hands you a gift, you say, "Oh, aren't I great because I have hands to receive the gift?" Or do you say, "Thank you for the gift" and your focus is on the gift.

John 6 says, "Faith is like the mouth that takes in the Bread of Life, eats the Bread of Life." If you are sitting before a great meal, do you say, "Well, right now as I look at that meal, boy, I am just so glad I have teeth".

When I hear people boasting about their faith, as in some of the faith movements, and talking about how great their faith is and what wonders their faith accomplished. Or even when I hear people say, "Oh, I wish my faith was like yours." I realize the person doesn't understand faith at all. Because faith doesn't talk about itself. It is not a work. We don't boast in faith. We boast in the object of faith, God.

At the end of the day what Christians want people to say is not what a great faith you have, but what a great God you have. Not look at your faith, but look at God's faithfulness. Faith receives, faith eats, faith looks at, but it does this as an instrument and in no sense a meritorious way.

And finally the reason Paul says that it cannot be works, but it must be faith alone is because if it were works, we would be putting God in our debt. And God is no man's debtor. Verse 4: "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."

Listen, faith alone secures grace alone. The only way for salvation to be a gift, the only way for salvation to be sheer grace and not to be a debt owed is if salvation came simply by trusting God and not working for God. You know, if you work for someone, then at the end of the day, they owe you. And when you present your bill and they pay you, they are only giving you what you deserve. If a plumber comes to work at my house and repairs the pipes and at the end of the day presents me with a bill, when I pay him, I am not giving him a gift, I am giving the plumber what he deserves. I am meeting an obligation. I was in his debt and am simply paying off the debt.

Do you understand that if you rely on some activity of yours before God to secure your position with God, then what you are saying is that God was in your debt until he paid you off. Now, friends, listen. God is never ever your debtor or my debtor, not at the beginning of the Christian life, nor in the middle.

But you know, somewhere along the line, I believe that we move away from the idea that everything comes to us as a matter of grace, God's free gift to

the undeserving, and we start believing that somehow God owes us something. After all, I have been a Christian now for over 20 years and I am working in ministry and I am trying to do this and that for God, surely I deserve a certain amount of help. You have been a Christian for five or eight years, or ten years, you have been praying and you have tried to witness, you put yourself on the line. Surely, you deserve something from God—an answer to prayer, a provision for your finances, that your kids would turn out okay.

Let me tell you, friends, one of the most dangerous views you could ever adopt is that God has suddenly gotten in your debt because of your Christian activity. That God owes you something.

You know, I believe that a good deal of peoples' frustration with God, and even folks' anger with God, is based on this faulty idea that they have become God's creditor. I believe that some of us need to repent today, especially if you are angry with God. Some of you are frustrated with God, God is delaying too long in answering one of your prayers for a job, or for a marriage partner, or for a healing or some other blessing. Or God has recently disappointed you. I believe a huge amount of folks' anger and disappointment with God is based on the fallacious notion that you have become God's creditor. We must never say, not even in a veiled way, "You owe me, God." Not at the beginning of the Christian life and not at the end.

It doesn't matter what kind of service you have done for God. It doesn't matter how much you put yourself on the line. How much you risked. How much you have given up. Always, always, always you come to God as the greatest debtor in the world. Always you say to God, "God, you owe me nothing. You don't have to answer one of my prayers. The fact that I get to draw one more breath is sheer grace. If you gave me what I deserved, I'd be in hell right now. You don't have to do anything for me. And any little thing that you do, God, you do as a matter of sheer grace to someone who deserves absolutely the opposite."

That is the way to stay healthy with God, friends. That is the way to clean up our anger with God and our upsets with what God should be doing. It is the way for God to be God and for us to be creatures.

Faith alone, not works. Faith alone, not religion. Verses 9-12:

"Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as a righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walked in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised."

You know, Paul is talking about circumcision here. Many Jews in Paul's day put a lot of emphasis on circumcision as gaining merit with God. They put a lot of emphasis on their own actions and their own works as gaining merit with God. But then they said, "But you know what really gets us merit with God is circumcision." There is even a saying, "Circumcision saves Israel."

Paul makes three simple points. He says, friends, circumcision didn't save. If you look at it historically, circumcision came after Abraham was saved, not before. Verse 10: "Under what circumstances was it credited? [this righteousness] Was it after he was circumcised or before? It was not after, but before!"

Abraham was already deemed right in God's sight by his faith. Faith alone saved him. Circumcision came later. So, as a matter of history, circumcision never saved.

And then he looks at the purpose of circumcision. And the purpose of circumcision was never to save, but to serve as a sign and a seal. Verse 11: "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised..."

Why circumcision? It was not designed to save Jewish people. It was designed to be a sign and designed to be a seal. A sign points to something else.

Boy, we get caught up in signs, don't we? We love signs. We forget that signs are designed to point beyond themselves to something else.

Jack Hayford has a wonderful illustration of this. He says that you are driving along the road and you see a sign that says, "Philadelphia—75 miles". What do you do? Do you get out and hug the sign and kiss the sign and lick the sign? The sign is nothing, it is just pointing to something else—the city that you are headed for.

We Christians get so caught up in the signs and much of what's been happening around the recent renewal movement when there have been these various manifestations—people have shaken or fallen—there has been so much discussion of the signs. It is like walking up and hugging the signs. But the sign is designed to point to God. Circumcision was a sign of God's activity in Abraham's life. It pointed to Abraham's faith and beyond Abraham's faith to God. In itself, circumcision was nothing. Its function was to be a sign pointing to God.

And it was also meant to be a seal. A seal is an ownership mark. We brand cattle with a brand that says this is my cow. Circumcision was a way that God marked his people. These are my people. I will put a cut in their flesh.

I think it is interesting that the cut was in the place that is so rarely given over to God—our sexuality. Man's sexual prowess. God marked it and said that's mine. Your whole body is mine. Your sexual life is mine. Your thought life is mine.

Circumcision was never a way of gaining favor with God. It was a way of marking those who were already favored. Religion has never been the way of getting right with God. It has always been faith. Paul argues the reason it is faith is so that Abraham could be the father of both Gentiles and Jews. Verses 12 and 13: "So then he is the father of all who believe, but have not been circumcised in order that righteousness might be credited to them and he is also the father of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised."

You, Gentiles, who have put your faith in Jesus, you have as your spiritual father, Abraham. I don't know if you feel connected to Abraham, Gentiles, but you should because you have the same faith that Abraham did. The stories that you read in the Old Testament become your stories because you are linked to

Abraham spiritually. You are connected to him. This isn't just the story of Jewish people. This is your history. You have been grafted in to the olive tree. The branch has been put in and so the life of the olive tree now flows into you. You can call Abraham, "Father Abraham". You are connected.

And I was raised as a Jew, but Abraham, Paul said, was not my father spiritually until I put my faith in Christ. When I put my faith in Jesus at age 18, Abraham became my spiritual father. The reason it has to be faith and not religion is so that Abraham could be the father of everyone who believes, just like he did.

Well, friends, it is faith alone and not religion. And what that means is that whenever anyone starts talking with you about their religious pasts as a way that they think they are right with God, you know they don't understand the way of faith alone. People won't talk with you about circumcision, but they will talk with you about the fact that they were altar boys. Or they will talk with you about the fact that they used to go to Sunday School. Or the fact that they grew up in the church. Or the fact that their grandfather was a Methodist minister.

I don't know how many former altar boys I have met among Catholics and how many grandfathers were Methodist ministers among lapsed Methodists—Paul says that religion is nothing. Faith, faith alone in Christ alone is the issue.

And it is faith, not law. Verses 13-17:

"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. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. Therefore, 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 the father of us all. As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations.' 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."

Paul links up several thoughts in his mind all the time. Law, transgression, wrath, grace, faith, blessing. How do we respond to God's commands? Mostly by breaking them, which brings wrath. The reason why salvation is not by law is because the only thing that law does is point out to us how far short we fall. You give us all a bunch of standards and we will immediately prove that we don't live up to any of them. Law brings wrath.

Grace brings blessing. And the response to grace is faith. Faith alone. It is not works. It is not some merit that I bring to God. God owes me nothing ever. It is not religion or religious practice. And it is not law and obedience to command. In fact, it is nothing that I do. I don't atone for my sins in any way. By feeling really sorry. By trying to do better. By wishing harder. By attempting more. By self-improvements. I rely on the atonement and the sacrifice of Jesus. I come to the cross without anything in my hand and cling to Christ. That is what saves me and that is what will save you.

Since I have been focusing so much on faith as that which alone saves us and that which is necessary for living the Christian life, I want to conclude today's talk by talking about what faith is and I want to read in finishing, verses 18-21:

“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.’ 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 power to do what he had promised. This is why it was credited to him as righteousness.”

What is faith? Well, it is certainly not just mathematical probability. It says in verse 18: “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed...”

You know some people believe that faith is just weighing up the odds. What are the chances that this plane is going to go down? Well, they are so slim, I guess I will trust that God will hold the plane up again.

What are the chances that something terrible is going to happen with one of my children when they are away? Slim. Well, I will trust God with their safety. What are the chances of this sick person recovering? Not good. Well, I'll need tons of faith to make up for the terrible odds.

Faith is not just simply mathematical probability. Abraham believed when it was against hope, that is when it was against the odds. When everything looked humanly impossible. He, himself, was 100 years old when God said that he was going to give him a son. Sarah was 90. The odds were against them having a child naturally.

There are some things that the odds are against in your life. When you faced a major delay in receiving from God what you have been asking for. There has been a major delay in that job coming through for you. There has been a delay in your finances being straightened out. There has been a delay in fulfilling a promise God made to you. Are you facing an obstacle? The odds just don't seem to be stacking up in your favor. Faith is not just mathematical certainty.

And it is certainly not what we humanly can stack up in terms of tangible evidence. Abraham's body was as good as dead. One of the obstacles in your life might be something that is as good as dead. Like a dead marriage or dead emotions toward your spouse. Or a calling that was on your life in the past, but there are so many things in the way of you ever fulfilling that calling you say is as good as dead. There is no way any longer that you could ever be in missions. Or there is no way any longer that you could be involved in ministry in a significant way. It is dead.

Faith is not a matter of the odds. Faith is not also a matter of your wish fulfillment. It is not a matter of human projection. It said, “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...”

No, I don't look at the odds, but I also in faith don't just project up to God whatever I wish and say, “Well, I am just going to believe that.” You know, so many people mistake their own projections and their own wishes for biblical faith. Biblical faith is a matter of getting a promise from God and believing it. People make things up before God. Some of the so-called faith teaching was simply a matter of people projecting up to God whatever they saw fit to project. God hasn't said anything about that particular issue. People held up before God large cars and fancy houses and hundreds of thousands of dollars in income.

People do that all the time with churches. They are going to believe God for 3000 people. They are going to believe God for this great ministry. God hasn't said anything about that many people or this size ministry and yet, we are believing God for it.

Faith is not wish fulfillment. It is hearing a promise from God and standing on that promise despite everything. Sometimes, it has to do with the written Word of God. Believing that God is in control or believing that God will answer my prayers in spite the delays and despite the prior disappointments. Sometimes it is just standing on the written word of God.

It could be standing on a word that God has spoken to you personally by the Holy Spirit as you have prayed. I mentioned before the issue of calling. There are many, many, many people who have gone through great delays in having a calling in their life finally fulfilled. Some of you may have been called into ministry as young people. And there have been a lot of delays along the way. Maybe you took a side track and maybe you took a different job. Maybe you got involved or had a family and you financially couldn't see how you could get the training for ministry.

But I will tell you, if the Lord has spoken to you and he has put a promise in your life about something, faith clings to that and holds onto it. Has the Lord made you a promise about something? A promise about marriage? A promise about your kids? A promise about a calling? A promise about ministry? A promise about healing – an emotional or physical problem in you or your kids or your spouse? Has the Lord said something to you?

And he calls you to believe it. To exercise faith in it. Faith is not a matter of the odds. It is not a matter of wish fulfillment. And faith is not a matter of denying the evidence. It is not escapism. Verse 19 says: "Without weakening in his faith, he faced that fact that his body was as good as dead..."

You know, the sign of a cult is that they close their eyes to the facts. We are going to pretend that reality is the way that we want it to be. Cults are all escapists in their orientation. They pretend that sickness doesn't exist. They pretend that financial crisis are other than crisis.

Abraham looked at the facts. He looked at his body. He looked at Sarah's body. He knew that their bodies were worn out. He didn't close his eyes to that. He didn't pretend he was 25 years old and Sarah was 18. Some people think that faith is unreasonable. Faith is not trying to believe what you know is not true, as one Sunday School boy put it. Closing your eyes to the evidence as atheists would have it.

I want you to hear this. You know, unbelief, doubt, is essentially escapist and unreasonable. Unbelief is creating your own world. Unbelief says that this world exists the way my mind thinks it exists—without God in control; without a Father who cares; without someone who is at the center of the universe whose heart is good and whose heart is love toward me and my family. Unbelief creates its own world. Sin is escapist because it creates its own illusory world. Sin says that my way is better than the way that God has said. That getting a divorce, even though God says not to do it, is going to turn out for my blessing over against obeying God. Sin says running from your vows and running from your commitments makes more sense than obeying God and keeping your vows and your commitments.

Faith takes the universe the way that God hands it to us. Faith takes reality seriously. Because faith takes into account all of the evidence and whatever it is you are going through. But you know, all the evidence includes God. All the evidence is not just what the doctor said. It is what the doctor said plus God. All the evidence is not just what you are currently looking at in your marriage. It is what you are looking at in your marriage plus God. All the evidence is not just your financial situation currently. It is that plus God. It is not just your being nobody. It is that plus God.

I love verse 20: "He didn't waiver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened through his faith and gave glory to God."

Do you want to know the secret of having a strong faith? It is in every situation you weigh in God and you give glory to God. Another way to put it is the secret to a strong faith is a deepening knowledge of God.

You face an obstacle, sickness, trial, but then you weigh in God and you start saying, "God, you are omniscient. You know everything." This little obstacle that you are facing didn't catch God by surprise, did it? Do you think God promised you something – to provide for your needs and then God waylaid by you losing your job? "Oh my gosh! I didn't plan for that when I made that promise about providing. It caught me totally off guard. Now I have to scramble to make something happen." Friends, let me share a little secret with you. God is not scrambling, trying to improvise a solution for you and God is not sweating the outcome of His activity. He's totally in control even though we are not and we're frantic and panicked. He's in control.

You say, "Well, yeah, but this was a sin that I sinned. I did this deliberately. I walked away from God."

Do you think that God didn't know that? That you would do that? You turn back to God and God can and will bring blessing back into your life.

Take into account that God is the master of the universe. When you are struggling with faith, take into account that nothing is too hard for God. Take into account God's power. Abraham was fully persuaded that God had power to do what he promised. He lays that out in verse 17: "The God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were." God's power is evident by resurrection, bringing life to the dead—life to dead marriages; life to dead emotions; life to callings. And calling things that were not as though they are.

Some of you say that you are not very useful, that you cannot find your place in the body of Christ because you are nobody. Faith says that God can take nobodies and make them into somebodies. You know, God loves to do that because that gives him the most glory. God has a call for each one of you. There is no one sitting here that God doesn't have a specific ministry for. And it is more than sitting and listening to messages and it is more than standing and singing. God wants to make everyone of you useful. God often takes nobodies and makes them somebodies. That is the way that God operates. He always picks Gideons and Davids, the least, the last. The disciples are all the least and the last and he made them into somebodies.

Listen, the Summer Harvest Crusade is one week away. I believe God wants you to taste the blessing of being useful to the master by using you. Do you realize that if every person in the Vineyard invited one person, there would be over 2000 people invited? If our inviters invite more than one person, that's

several thousand people invited. Can you believe God for your own usefulness; will you believe him? I love what happens when God surprises a person who steps out and risks and they come back gushing, "I can't believe it! I invited someone to church. I was so nervous and they are coming. I saw someone come to know Jesus."