

Lesson 45 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 4:16, Continued

Romans 4:16 — 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,

Last week, we saw a contrast between two systems of justification. The first system is based on law, and it requires flawless obedience to that law. The second system is based on faith, and it does not require flawless conduct. Why did God create that second path? Because the first path was blocked by sin. No one could take that first path, so God created a second path.

We also looked last week at something very important about that second system. Yes, it is based on faith, and yes, it does not require us to have flawless conduct, but no, that does not mean that we can just do whatever we want when it comes to receiving justification under that second system.

The Bible teaches us that there are specific things we must do to receive the free gift of God's grace. And if we fail to do those specific things commanded by God, then the word for that is not faith but rather is faithlessness. Paul teaches this fact very clearly in Galatians 3, which is a good place to turn for anyone who would try to contrast faith with baptism.

Galatians 3:25-27 — But now that **faith** has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through **faith**. For as many of you as were **baptized** into Christ have put on Christ.

Paul says that we are all sons of God through faith. Why? Paul answers that question. “For **as many of you** as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” That is why we are all sons of God through faith — because we have all put on Christ in baptism.

But what if I don’t put on Christ in baptism? Then I am not a son of God **through faith**. That is what Paul tells us in Galatians 3:25-27.

And Paul will tell us the same thing in Romans when we get to chapter 6. Baptism is an **essential** step in God’s plan of salvation. And, in fact, baptism is the step at which our cleansing occurs. Paul certainly knew that.

Acts 22:16 — And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and **wash away your sins**, calling on his name.

I think we all know the steps in God’s plan of salvation. We know that we must hear the gospel, that we must believe the gospel, that we must repent of our sins, that we must confess that Jesus is the Son of God, that we must be baptized in water for the remission of our sins, and that we must remain faithful unto death. We know that was God’s plan of salvation in the first century, and we know that is still God’s plan of salvation today. We know that those are the things we must do to receive the free gift of God’s grace. That is how we become a child of God through faith.

And I think we all know what those steps involve. We know what it means to hear, we know what it means to believe, we know what it means to repent, we know what it means to confess, and we know what it means to be baptized. But what about being faithful to God unto death? What does it mean to be faithful?

I think when it comes to that question, we sometimes are suddenly not quite so sure about what it means. We know that we continue to sin after we arise from the watery grave of baptism to walk in newness of life. And we know that at some point that sin can reach a point where we are no longer faithful to God. But where is the line? How can we tell? How can we know that we are still faithful to God? And we can know — John tells us that in 1 John 5:13. But how can we know?

The best way to answer those questions is to open the Bible and find the answers in God's word. And one place we should look for answers is right here in Romans 4. Why? Because Paul uses Abraham as an example to tell us what it means to be faithful to God. Was Abraham perfect? We know he was not. Was Abraham faithful unto death? We know that he was.

And what did it mean for Abraham to be faithful? What did Abraham do? What did Abraham think? What characteristics in Abraham's life show that Abraham was faithful to God?

Look at the Handout for Lesson 45, and notice the highlighted text. What can we say about the faith of Abraham, whom Paul calls "the man of faith"?

- In hope Abraham believed against hope.

- Abraham did not weaken in faith.
- No unbelief made Abraham waver.
- Abraham grew strong in his faith.
- Abraham was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.
- By faith Abraham obeyed.
- Abraham's faith was completed by his works.
- Abraham was a friend of God.

All of those things were true of Abraham. Are they also true of me?
Are they also true of you?

God does not require us to have sinless perfection. If he did, then Christ need never have come. But God does require that we believe him, that we trust him, that we rely on him, and that we always strive to obey him and do his will. That is the faith we see in the life of Abraham, the man of faith. Is that what we see when we look at ourselves?

There are many great songs about faith, but I think the greatest song about faith may be a song that never uses the word "faith."

When we walk with the Lord
in the light of His Word
What a glory He sheds on our way!
While we do His good will,
He abides with us still
And with all who will trust and obey.

Trust and obey. That is faith. That is what we see in Abraham's life from beginning to end. Why did Abraham leave Ur? Because he trusted God and he obeyed God. Why did Abraham raise the knife? Because he trusted God and he obeyed God. Trust and obey — for there's no other way.

But sometimes we doubt. Sometimes we waver. Sometimes we are tempted to disbelieve. That happens to all of us. We also see that in Abraham's life.

And no, that does not mean we have lost our faith. It just means that we need to strengthen our faith. And that is something a faithful child of God is always doing — even Abraham. Paul tells us that Abraham grew strong in his faith (Romans 4:20). Notice that word “grew” — and keep in mind that Abraham was growing in his faith for 175 years!

When we are tempted to doubt the promises of God, what should we do? One thing we should do is pray. We find such a petition on the lips of the man who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus in Mark 9.

Mark 9:21-24 — And Jesus asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But **if you can** do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” And Jesus said to him, **“If you can!** All things are possible for one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; **help my unbelief!**”

“I believe! Help my unbelief!” Yes, we can and we should ask God for a stronger faith. But, as always, we need to be careful what we ask for. Perhaps the trials that we are facing in this life are an answer to that prayer for greater faith.

How do we grow in our faith? Does that growth happen more when our life is easy or when our life is difficult? I think it is time for another song!

Oh, for a faith that will not shrink
Though pressed by many a foe,
That will not tremble on the brink
Of poverty or woe:

It will not murmur nor complain
Beneath the chast'ning rod,
But in the hour of grief or pain
Can lean upon its God:

A faith that shines more bright and clear
When tempests rage without,
That, when in danger, knows no fear;
In darkness feels no doubt.

Lord, give me such a faith as this,
And then, whate'er may come,
I taste e'en now the hallowed bliss
Of an eternal home.

If we were to summarize that beautiful song about faith, I think the best summary is what we find in Mark 9:24 — “I believe; help my unbelief!” That petition to Christ is the same prayer we find in that song — “Lord, give me such a faith as this!”

As an aside, whenever I check out a new translation of the Bible, the first verse I usually look at is Mark 9:24. Why? Because of the father's statement to Jesus — “help my unbelief.” You can almost picture that

man trying to find the right words to say to Jesus, but managing to utter only that anguished cry, “help my unbelief!” It is a beautiful account of a wonderful event.

And yet, much of that beauty is lost in modern translations that try to fix what the father said. That is not the job of the translator. The translator is not here to fix what was said but rather to accurately convey what was said.

I read the ESV earlier, but here are some other translations of that father’s statement to Jesus in Mark 9:24.

- Help my weakness of faith!
- Help my lack of faith!
- Help my lack of trust!
- Please help me to have even more faith!
- Help me to believe more!
- Help me where faith falls short!
- Help me overcome my unbelief! (NIV)

Is any of that what the father **meant**? Maybe. Is any of that what the father **said**? No, it is not. The father said, “help my unbelief!” And a good translation will tell you what that father said — not what that translator thinks that father meant to say.

Now, back to verse 16, and let’s read it again.

Romans 4:16 — 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,

“That is why **it** depends on faith.” What is “it”? Last week, that was our first question about verse 16. We said that “it” is the promise of great blessings to Abraham that we saw back in verse 13. And I think we also see that same promise in Galatians.

Galatians 3:14 — So that in Christ Jesus **the blessing of Abraham** might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

I think that blessing of Abraham is the blessing in verse 13, and I think we are seeing that same blessing of Abraham here in verse 16. And, as Paul confirms in Galatians 3:14, that blessing is a blessing that we also enjoy — it is our blessing in Christ Jesus.

What does Paul mean when he says that the promise “may rest on grace?” What he means is that it does not rest on law. It does not rest on a system of justification through which we earn our justification through flawless conduct. Instead, it rests on a system of justification through faith in Christ and the free gift of salvation.

If the promise had been based on a system of flawless conduct, then the promise would have been **void**. Paul just told us that in verse 14.

But because the promise is instead based on a system of faith, the promise is **guaranteed**. Paul tells us that right here in verse 16.

What does Paul mean when he says that the promise is guaranteed? I think the short answer is that “guaranteed” is the opposite of “void”! That is the contrast that Paul is making in these verses.

Does this guarantee mean that once I have been justified by faith, I can never lose that justification? No. How could it possibly mean that? What if Abraham in Genesis 15 had said this to God:

“Look. I left Ur when you told me to, and ever since then I have relied on your promises to my detriment. You promised me countless offspring, but my offspring are instead very easy to count - and the number is zero. I believed you at first, but I just don’t believe you anymore. I’ve had enough. I’m going back home to Ur.”

If Abraham had said and done that, does anyone think that we would have had Genesis 15:6? Does anyone think that we would be reading about Abraham’s faith in Romans 4 or in Hebrews 11 or in James 2?

We know Abraham did not say that or do that, but that is not the issue. The issue is whether Abraham **could** have said and done that? If so, then Abraham *could* have lost his justification because of his faithlessness. Abraham *could* have turned his back on God.

The only alternative is to say that Abraham lost his free will when he first believed God — that God somehow prevented Abraham from ever disbelieving and disobeying.

Did Abraham lose his free will? Was he prevented by God from ever turning away from God? Calvinism answers yes. That is what Calvinism teaches, but how is that faith? How does a puppet have faith in the one who pulls his strings?

And if God overrides the free will of those he chooses to save, then how is that not partiality? Hasn't Paul already told us that "God shows no partiality" (Romans 2:11)? Calvinism teaches the opposite of that verse, and so just from that fact alone we know that Calvinism is false. This guarantee in verse 16 does not mean that once we have this justification, we can never choose to walk away from it.

So if that is not what the word "guaranteed" means, then what does it mean? How is the promise of great blessings *guaranteed* to all of Abraham's offspring?

Well, let's look at that question from the other side. What sort of guarantee would we have under a system that requires flawless conduct? That question is easy to answer — we would be guaranteed not to receive those blessings. We would be guaranteed to never be blessed because we could never accomplish what is required to be blessed under such a system. We have all sinned.

And so now let's turn back to the system of faith. What is the guarantee under that system? It is the opposite. The guarantee that we **can-not** receive the blessings has been replaced with the guarantee that we **can** receive the blessings. They are available to everyone, and everyone is able to do what God commands that we do to receive those blessings.

Later, in Romans 10, Paul will return to this same theme. There he will remind us that, while we were the ones who had to do all of the hard work under a system of law, God is the one who did all of the hard work under a system of faith.

We don't need to talk Jesus into coming down from heaven because God has already taken care of that for us. And we don't have to raise Jesus up from the dead because God has already done that for us. God has done all the hard work. All we must do is obey the gospel. Paul will tell us all of that in Romans 10, but here in verse 16 I think we see an abbreviated preview of the same message.

But who are the offspring in verse 16? Paul answers that question in the second half of verse 16: "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."

As we said earlier, the word "law" in that phrase is preceded by a definite article in the Greek text (like we saw in verse 15 but unlike what we saw in verses 13 and 14).

And here I think the meaning is very clear — the adherents of the law are the adherents of the law of Moses. I think Paul is dividing the world into two groups, as he has so often done in this letter and as he does even in the theme of the letter in Romans 1:16 — the gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, **to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**"

I think we see that same division here. Not only to the Jewish believers ("the adherent of the law") but also to the Gentile believers ("the one who shares the faith of Abraham").

And how do we know that Paul is talking about Jewish believers and Gentile believers? We know that because of that word "offspring." That is the same word we saw back in verse 13, and it was to that same offspring that the promise of great blessings was made — a promise

that came through the righteousness of faith. The offspring here are the faithful people of God.

But why are the faithful Jews described as adherents of the law? The short answer is that they aren't. The word "adherent" is not in the Greek text — neither here in verse 16 nor earlier in verse 14. The Greek word is just the word "of," as we see in the ASV version.

Romans 4:14 — For if they that are **of the law** are heirs, faith is made void, and the promise is made of none effect. [*But remember that "the law" in verse 14 is really just "law" in the Greek text. Verse 14 really says that they are "of law."*]

Romans 4:16 — ...not to that only which is **of the law**, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.

Now, maybe the ESV is correct, and maybe "of law" and "of the law" mean "adherent to law" and "adherent to the law," but I think that decision should be made **by** the reader rather than **for** the reader! And that is especially true about verse 14 where the ESV somehow transforms the phrase "of law" into the phrase "*adherent of the law!*" Sometimes the ESV looks more like a commentary than a translation.

So, back to our questions: Why are the faithful Jews described in verse 16 as being *adherents* of the law, or more accurately, why are they described as being "of the law?" And why are the faithful Gentiles described as sharing the faith of Abraham? We can answer both of those questions with a single word: **circumcision**.

The faithful Jews were circumcised. Why? Because they had followed the law of Moses. The faithful Gentiles were not circumcised — just

like Abraham was not circumcised in Genesis 15:6 when God said that his faith was counted to him as righteousness. That was Paul's contrast earlier in Romans 4, and I think we are still seeing that contrast here.

What we are seeing in the second half of verse 16 is the same thing we saw in verses 11-12.

- "All who believe without being circumcised" in verse 12 are the same as "the one who shares the faith of Abraham" in verse 16.
- "The circumcised who are not merely circumcised" in verse 12 are the same as "the adherent of the law" or those "of the law" in verse 16.

In each case, Paul has divided the faithful people of God into two groups: the faithful Jews and the faithful Gentiles.

And why has Paul done that? Paul has done that so that he can make the statement at the end of verse 16: "Abraham, who is the father of us **all**" — emphasis on the word "all!"

That has been Paul's point all along. That is why Paul mentioned the Jews and the Gentiles separately in Romans 1:16. That is why Paul talked only to the Gentiles, and then talked only to the Jews. That is why Paul has been talking about Abraham here in Romans 4. The gospel is for all!

The gospel is not just for the Jews, and the Jews need to understand that. But likewise, the gospel is not just for the Gentiles, and the Gentiles need to understand that. Some of the Jews were treating Christ as their exclusive possession, just as they had treated Abraham. And

some of the Gentiles were treating the Jews with contempt because of their Jewish traditions.

Paul will deal more with both of those problems later in this letter, but for now the message is clear — the gospel is for all! Both Jew and Gentile. And if we want conclusive evidence of that fact, just look at Abraham — who is the father of us all!

And if we want conclusive evidence that Abraham is the father of us all, where do we look for that? Paul looks in the Scriptures.

Romans 4:17

Romans 4:17 — 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.

The verse that Paul quotes here is Genesis 17:5, but as we always do, let’s go back and read that verse in its context.

Genesis 17:1-8 — When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, 2 that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” 3 Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, 4 “Behold, my covenant is with you, **and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.** 5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for **I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.** 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. 7 And I will establish my covenant be-

tween me and you and your **offspring** after you throughout their generations for **an everlasting covenant**, to be God to you and to your **offspring** after you. 8 And I will give to you and to your **offspring** after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, **for an everlasting possession**, and I will be their God.”

The first thing we should note about that great passage from Genesis 17 are the verb tenses.

- Verse 4: You **shall be** the father of a multitude of nations.
- Verse 5: I **have made** you the father of a multitude of nations.

Paul quotes the past tense version from Genesis 17:5, but there is also a future tense version in Genesis 17:4. Which is it? Past or future? And the answer, of course, is that it is both. Genesis 17:4-5 tells us that it is both. But how can it be both?

The answer is simple, and it is something we see often in the Bible. In fact, we see it so often that there is a name for it — the prophetic past tense.

When God says that he will do something or that something will happen, that thing is then so certain that it can be spoken of in the past tense even before it has happened. The fulfillment of that prophecy is so sure to happen that it can be spoken about as having already happened.

That is the prophetic past tense, and we see an example of it in Genesis 17:5, which Paul quotes in Romans 4:17. “I **have made** you the father of a multitude of nations.”

But really? Abraham was 99 years old and childless. And Sarah was 90 years old and barren. The father of many nations? Yes, absolutely. Yes, with complete and total certainty.

How can we be so sure? Because it had already happened. Or at least that is how God looked at it. God had already made Abraham the father of many nations — and so that is how certain it was to happen. It was just as certain to happen as if it had already happened.

But how can any promise be that certain? With mankind, there is always the possibility that the promise will fail — but not with God.

Paul reminds us here in verse 17 that this promise to Abraham was received “in the presence of the God in whom he believed.” God showed up personally to make this promise to Abraham. And that is the first reason Paul gives for why we can be so certain about the fulfillment of that promise. This promise was made by God.

But there is a second reason. The promise is also certain because of what we know about the power of God. Yes, we know that God made the promise, but we also know that God has the power to fulfill the promise. Paul also tells us that in verse 17. This promise came from the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

Do we want a list of some things that mankind will never accomplish no matter how hard we work or how long we try? Do we want a list of things that will forever be beyond the reach of mankind? Things that will forever live only in the realm of science fiction?

If so, then just look at the end of verse 17. God, and only God, can give life to the dead. God, and only God, can call into existence the things

that do not exist. Life from death, and creation from nothing. Those are things that belong only to God. Science has never and will never do either of those things.

And that is why this promise is so certain. If God can give life to the dead, then we know that God can make a 100 year old man the father of many nations. And, likewise, if God can call into existence the things that do not exist, then we know that God can make a 90 year old barren woman the mother of many nations.

And there is a lesson here for us. If we ever doubt the power of God, or if we are ever tempted to trumpet the power of science, then we need to remember the end of Romans 4:17. It is God, not man and not the science of man, who gives life to the dead and who calls into existence the things that do not exist. “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world” (1 Corinthians 1:20)?