

I want to ask you a question that I want you to really consider throughout the sermon this morning. What do you believe? What do you believe about God, about who He is, about what He's like, about what He has done and what He can do? What do you believe? Just let that question be sort of simmering on the back burner of your mind and of your heart this morning.

The first Sunday of this year, January 7, we began our slow, methodical, verse-by-verse journey through the NT book of Romans, Paul's letter to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians in Rome. And if you've been here for any significant portion of those sermons, you may already know that Romans isn't like an ordinary letter you might write to someone. It isn't even like other books of the Bible. When we walked through 1 John, John would often write in these

circular ideas, introducing one thought and then moving on to another one, and then coming back to his first one again, over and over throughout the book. Or if you were around back in 2021 when I preached through 1 Corinthians. In that letter Paul deals with various issues on the church, one at a time. So he addresses this thing, then moves on to another thing, then another, then another, until he's finished answering all their questions. But Romans is different. The whole book of Romans is a treatise, an argument. Paul is laying out a case, like an attorney would in a courtroom. He makes an assertion, a claim, and he shows the evidence. And he drives that point home until he's sure his readers – the jury – understand it. And then, once he's cemented that point, he sets out to prove the logical implication of that point. I'm going to prove that this thing is true, and if this is true, then

this next thing must be true. And if that's true, then this must be true. That's the way he builds his case, his argument.

So he started in chapter 1 with this message, the gospel – a message about Jesus, the Son of God who came to earth as a man, died, rose again, and now reigns as Lord – which has the power to save anyone who believes because it reveals the righteousness of God. Which of course, left us with the question, “Why do we need to be saved? Why do we need God's righteousness to be revealed to us?” And so he spends the rest of chapter 1, all of chapter 2, and half of chapter 3 answering that. We need to be saved, we need the righteousness of God revealed to us, because we – all mankind – is fundamentally unrighteous and subject to God's wrath

against sin. That's what we need to be saved from: God's wrath. We need God's righteousness because we are unrighteous and we can't fix ourselves by doing good things and obeying the law. Then, having established that point and driven it home (you may remember those sermons...I think there were like six of them, wrath, judgment, guilt, sin, hopeless, helpless), he shifts again in the middle of chapter 3 to say, if that's our problem, here's God's solution. Since you can't overcome your unrighteousness and be saved by keeping God's rules, God will grant you right standing and status through faith, through believing. And he hammers that point home through the rest of chapter 3 and all through chapter 4. Faith is the way we are justified or made right with God. Faith preserves God's righteousness and justice. Faith operates apart from the law or any works we might do.

Faith is available to both Jews and Gentiles. Faith was how Abraham was justified, apart from his works and apart from his ethnicity.

And this morning, beginning in 4:13, he wraps up this emphasis on faith by focusing on the **idea of the promise** God made to Abraham. And he uses that promise to show us the content of Abraham's faith – WHAT exactly he believed that was able to save him – and then how the content of Abraham's faith informs the content of OUR faith and tells us what exactly we are to believe in order to be saved. So I want to invite you this morning to take a Bible, turn with me to Romans 4, and follow along as I read, beginning in v.13. And as I read I want you to listen for the things that are familiar, things that you've heard Paul say before, but also for the things that Paul hasn't

really been explicit about before, things that we're hearing him focus on for the first time. So let's read together Romans 4:13-25 [READ].

The first three words of this passage introduce this new word, this new idea we haven't really seen so far: promise. It indicates that a promise was made to Abraham and his offspring. So what **was this promise**? Paul tells us: the promise was that Abraham and his offspring would inherit the world. That's the promise. Now we already established last week in 4:9-12 that Abraham's offspring are not his biological descendants, but all those – Jew and non-Jew – who share his faith. Who believe like he believed. So God made a promise to Abraham and all those who have the same faith he did that they will inherit the world. Now where in the Bible did God explicitly make that promise to

Abraham? Well, nowhere. At least not in those words. This promise, the way Paul phrases it here, actually merges together three different aspects of the promise that we find all over the book of Genesis. The first part of the promise God makes is that Abraham will have numerous descendants. We see that promise in Genesis 13:16, "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted." Then again in Genesis 15:5, "And he brought him outside and said, 'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'" In Genesis 12 he's promised a nation, and then in chapter 17 that becomes a multitude of nations. So lost of descendants. He second part of the promise is that God will give those descendants land. In Genesis 13:14-15 God says to Abraham, "Lift up

your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.” That’s the second part, a land for them to possess, to inherit. And then the third part of the promise is that, through Abraham, God is going to bless all the peoples, all the families, all the nations of the earth. That’s in Genesis 12:3, “...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” You put those three pieces together and you get the promise of global inheritance.

But we don’t just see that in God’s promises to Abraham. In the Psalms we’re told that the Davidic king – the king from David’s line on David’s throne – will possess and rule over the ends of the earth. David’s a descendant of Abraham. Later in the OT the idea of a promised land in



the Middle East with specific geographical boundaries expands to the whole world. Isaiah 54:3 says, “For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations and will populate the desolate cities.” In Isaiah 65-66 there’s a promise that God’s people will inhabit a new heavens and a new earth. So there’s this progressive expansion through the OT from a defined territory under the Old Covenant to the entire earth under the New Covenant. The idea is that one day, God and His people will reclaim the world that was lost through Adam’s sin. So what is the promise? It’s a promise of global blessing and inheritance and possession.

So then how did **this promise come** to Abraham, and why did it come the way it came? Well the standard Jewish view was that the promise came to Abraham through his

obedience to the law, therefore one could be Abraham's heir by taking up the yoke of the law as well. But Paul says here that the promise did not come to Abraham through the law, but by faith. In fact, he says if you have to keep the law to be an heir of Abraham's promise, faith is null and the promise is void. If the promise only comes to those who base their hope of inheritance on their obedience to the law, faith is empty and the promise is nullified. But why? Why are faith and the promise futile if the promised inheritance of the world comes through the law. Well, there are a few reasons. For one, the whole idea of working for something and obligating someone to give it to you as a reward runs counter to the idea of faith (which is about receiving something) and promise (which isn't something someone has a right to). Second, if the promise is for global blessing to both Jew and Gentile, only the

Jews had the law. SO if the promised inheritance of the world only comes through keeping the law, and the Gentiles don't have the law, there's no way for Abraham to be the father of many nations. He could only be the father of one nation, which would not fulfill the promise. But the main reason that the promise can't come through the law, Paul tells us explicitly in v.15: it is impossible for anyone to keep the law to the extent necessary to earn the inheritance. No human being can adequately adhere to the law. And if that's the case, there would be NO heirs. NO peoples. NO nations to inherit the earth. The promise of global blessing and inheritance fails and faith in that promise is proven meaningless. Rather than the law bringing blessing and inheritance, it brings wrath on everyone because everyone fails to keep it. Paul says if there were no law, there would be no transgression. He

uses a word there – transgression – that means the knowing, conscious, willful violation of explicit, written commands. But because God has give his law to those who think they can keep it, it magnifies their offense when they inevitably break it, and it renders them MORE accountable for their failings. It's like if you're driving on an empty stretch of highway with no speed limit sign in sight, and you get pulled over for excessive speed, you might get away with saying, "I had no idea what the speed limit was." It's a totally different story if you mash the gas while driving past a 35 MPH sign while the police officer is sitting under it with his radar gun. The law doesn't rescue anyone from condemnation; it confirms their condemnation.

Instead, receiving the promised inheritance depends on faith. Why faith? So that the promise, the inheritance, the

blessing, might rest on God's grace rather than obligation. Grace is a gift. Grace is undeserved, unearned. God makes the promise, man receives it by faith, and God fulfills it by grace. If it comes by the law, then it doesn't depend on grace, but on human ability. The law is what WE do; grace is what GOD does. And so faith, resting on God's grace, guarantees the inheritance to ALL Abraham's offspring, those who have the law but exercise faith (Jews) and those who only know faith (Gentile). Faith guarantees the promise made to Abraham to be the father of MANY nations. So how does the promise come? Not by the law, but by faith.

But now Paul moves from the HOW (by faith) to the WHAT (the content of that faith). So faith, but faith in what exactly? What was it specifically **that Abraham believed**

that resulted in his being made right with God? Was it just some vague, general, undefined cliché? Hey Abraham, just believe in something bigger than yourself! You just gotta keep the faith! Was that it? NO! It wasn't some ethereal, hazy, nondescript belief in something. It was very specific. First, Abraham's faith was anchored in the person and character of God. It wasn't just any promise; it was God's promise. It wasn't just any inheritance; it was God's inheritance. His faith wasn't as much in the outcome or the benefit; it was in God Himself. So whatever else we read, keep in mind that it's all rooted in who God is. And then, specifically, Abraham believes that God is the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not yet exist. Let's look at each of those descriptions. First, the God who gives life to the dead. Abraham believes in a God with life-giving power. A God

who is able to bring new life – pregnancy, a child – from the body of Abraham and the womb of Sarah. In order for this promise to be fulfilled, God is going to have to overcome the practical “deadness” of Abraham’s body and the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. Abraham believed God could infuse life where there was none. That He could renew old, broken, useless bodies to they could conceive and bring forth a child in fulfillment of God’s promise.

Hebrews 11:11-12 recounts the story and the faith they displayed: “By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” They believed God could bring real life out of effective death.

And second, that he could call into existence the things that do not yet exist. Now this probably isn't referring to God's creative power (like in Genesis 1 where He speaks the universe into being), but rather God speaking of or summoning that which does not yet exist as though it did.

So what does God tell Abraham in v.17? I HAVE MADE you the father of many nations. When did God say that to Abraham? Genesis 17, before Abraham's son had even been conceived! Abraham's faith was in a God who can declare things to be before they are, as though they already exist. Simply by His declaration, His call, He ensures that His word will come to pass, that His promise will be fulfilled. God can do the impossible. That's what Abraham believed. Do you believe that? I mean REALLY believe that?



Because Paul drills down on that, not just WHAT Abraham believed, but HOW he believed it, the quality of his faith.

First, Paul says, Abraham believed in hope against hope.

What does that mean, to believe IN hope AGAINST hope?

To quote ancient church father John Chrysostom, “It is against man’s hope, in hope which is of God.” Abraham had every reason to give up his attempts to produce a child through Sarah. All reason and common sense said it was impossible. All physical, biological evidence said that he was old, super old, way past the age of procreation, nearly 100, and that Sarah was way too old, not only past childbearing, but barren her whole life on top of that. And yet, Abraham hopes in the person and work of God. It’s not a blind faith. It’s not a leap in the dark. It’s not baseless or irrational. It’s based on the evidence of what Abraham knew and could see. Paul says Abraham did not weaken

in his faith when he considered his own body. Abraham wasn't delusional or deceived. This wasn't thoughtless optimism. It was genuine contemplation. He knew. He understood. He got it. But his own honest, thoughtful evaluation of his age and physical condition did not cause him to lose faith. He continued to believe no matter how unlikely it seemed. Why? Because God said it. The God who gives life to death, who brings birth out of barrenness. Paul says Abraham didn't waver, but that his faith grew strong. Which seems to contradict what we read in Genesis, where Abraham's faith wavered and fluctuated quite a bit. But Paul doesn't mean that Abraham never had ups and downs, that he never had momentary hesitations or lapses. That by itself may be what you need to hear this morning. His faith wasn't a perfect faith. And it didn't have to be. His faith was a faith that managed to avoid a deep,

permanent attitude of distrust. The basic pattern and direction of his life was characterized by trust, not doubt. He persevered and persisted and progressed in real faith, in a settled attitude of trust. He did doubt, but his doubt was temporary; his faith was consistent. And as his faith grows, Paul tells us, Abraham glorified God. In believing, he is able to do what the idolaters in Romans 1 failed to do. They exchanged the glory of God for images of created things; Abraham glorifies God in acknowledging his dependence on God and trusting that He will fulfill all His promises. Paul says Abraham was FULLY CONVINCED. He had a firm conviction that God can and that God will do what He promised in spite of tangible, visible obstacles. And the consequence? That kind of faith in that kind of God results in justification. Abraham was counted righteous before God. So what did Abraham

believe? He believed firmly, unwaveringly, increasingly, worshipfully in a God who brings life out of death, and it results in his justification.

So understanding that, how does what Abraham believed define what WE are to believe? Because we are not recipients of the same promise, that we will be the father of many nations and the all the families of the earth will be blessed through us. We are not in the same situation he was in, old and childless and barren. What do we **have to believe** so righteousness can be counted to us like it was to him? Well remember the first thing we saw about the content of Abraham's faith? It was a faith in God, first and foremost. We must have faith in the same God. Not primarily in what He offers or what He can do for us, but in who He is. Trust in God. And then, second, must believe in

Him who raised Jesus from the dead. Did you hear it? Did you catch the connection between what Abraham believed and what we are to believe? What did Abraham believe? He believed in the God who gives life to the dead. What do we believe? We believe in God raised Jesus from the dead. He believed in a God who brings life out of deadness; so do we. He believed in the promise of God to bless the world through him; believe that God did just that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For Abraham, faith in God's power to keep His promise meant a son. And it meant descendants. And ultimately it meant nations who would inherit the world. For us, faith in God's power to keep His promise means that He sent His Son to live the life we were incapable of living to earn righteousness for us, to die our death in our place to pay our penalty for our sin, and to rise again to defeat death

and secure eternal life for us. Paul closes the passage by affirming that Jesus' death and resurrection are the means by which God has kept His promise to Abraham and to us. And they are the means by which our sins are taken away and forgiven and by which we are declared righteous in His sight. God delivers Him up to atone for our sin, and He is raised to show that His atoning death as a perfect, sinless sacrifice is accepted so that His perfect, righteousness might be credited to our account. And when we trust in Him, when we place our faith in His person and work, His death becomes our death, and His resurrection becomes our resurrection. We die to our sins and we are raised to walk a new life.

So this morning, I want to make sure you understand that it matters **THAT** you believe. You can't be made right with

God by doing, by working, by obeying. Only by believing. But it also matters WHAT you believe. So what do you believe this morning? Do you believe God can do the impossible? I hope so! Do you believe that God can provide for your deepest need, against all odds? Do you believe that God can heal, in spite of every diagnosis? Do you believe that God can restore, even though the situation looks hopeless? I hope you believe those things. But more fundamentally, more simply, more importantly, do you believe that God raised Jesus from the dead? Do you believe that God gives eternal life to spiritually dead sinners? Do you believe that one day God will raise up from the grave all those who have believed in Jesus and loved Him? And do you believe those things the way Abraham did? With a settled, consistent, growing faith that glorifies God? Do you believe in a way that makes a

difference in your life and that transforms your standing before a holy God? What do you believe? Believers throughout the ages have often answered it this way:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. AMEN.



What do you believe this morning? And how do you believe it?