

## Faith Takes Action

Scriptures: Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Romans 4:13-25 *Mark 8:31-38*

### **Read Romans 4:13-25**

#### **Father of Nations**

Our first Scripture this morning, from Genesis 17, records an encounter between our Heavenly Father, and Abraham. Abraham is a great hero of faith in the Bible, and I'm glad we have this particular story recorded to look at today. The take-away I want you to catch today from it is that God told Abram to do something in this passage: "walk before me faithfully and be blameless." As a consequence, or result of "walking before God faithfully and blamelessly," God said He would make an eternal covenant – a promise – between Him and Abram, with the promise being that Abram would be the father of many nations, and God would be their God. With this promise came a name change: Abram would now be known as Abraham, and Sarai would be known as Sarah. Abraham had to be willing to take the first step on his walk with God.

In the days of Abram, people worshiped all sorts of idols. People carved statues out of wood and stone to place in shrines and each town had their top god, who they thought protected them. When they traveled, their gods could not protect them, because the gods were tied to specific geographic areas. That's why we have myths about Greek, Roman, Babylonian, and Egyptian gods. They usually focused on natural forces, like storms, rivers, seas, wind, the sun, and so on. It's a strange concept for us to grasp today, because we understand they were attempting to use what they could observe in the physical world to explain how things worked, and why events happened the way they did. Today we have Science, Meteorologists, and all sorts of equipment, but they still cannot get the weather forecast right. The God Abram and his family followed was different – He was the One True God, Lord of the Universe, and we first read of His promise with Abram in Genesis 15. From the Bible, we can tell Abram's a lot like us – we sometimes try to do things our way, instead of God's way. We would like to "have it your way," to use the Burger King commercial line. And we can get pretty creative in explaining why our way most certainly must be God's way. We fail to consider the words recorded by the Prophet Isaiah, "'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" (55:8-9). We frequently find this out through very painful experiences.

Believe me, Abraham had his share of painful experiences. Genesis 16 records when Abram and Sarai had concocted a plan to get God's blessing – by having Abram father a child with Sarai's slave girl. The sad result was a son (Ishmael), with a mom who didn't have the best relationship with his father's wife – a real dysfunctional family situation that resulted in hard feelings between everyone involved! At that point in time, I'm willing to bet that Abram probably thought God would use Hagar, Sarai's slave girl, to deliver His promise of offspring. But Abram's action, of doing things his way, instead of God's way, really messed things up. Abraham wouldn't see the promise of a son through Sarah until he was a hundred years old.

#### **The Law shows the flaws**

The second Scripture passage today, from Romans, reminds us that the Law found in the Old Testament brings condemnation. The Law points out the flaws of being human and being alive in this world – and all the sins that separate us from the holiness of God. The covenant that God made with Abraham, to make him the father of nations, wasn't given to Abraham because of his obedience to the Law found in the Old Testament – the Ten Commandments were given to Moses hundreds of years after Abraham had died. And it wasn't because Abraham somehow kept the Law – we know he didn't – he started out as a

worshiper of idols in Ur. Paul tells us Abraham received the covenant because of righteousness that comes by having a living, active faith in Jesus. It was because Abraham was willing to step out of his comfort zone, and follow God. Abraham left his homeland, and his extended family at Haran, and traveled to Canaan, to a land that God had promised to give to Abraham's descendants forever. Abraham's faith is what the Apostle Paul is writing about to the church in Rome – and to us today here at New Hope – in this chunk of Scripture.

### **Adopted through Jesus**

Through placing faith in Jesus, Christians – along with Jews – become Abraham's descendants. That's what Paul is saying in verse 16, because in Paul's day there was some arguing in the ancient church about who were inheritors to the promises made in the Scriptures. Through Jesus we've been adopted into God's family, and because of that, we have become descendants of Abraham. These promises in Scripture apply to us today. "For Abraham, human reason for hope being gone, hoped in faith that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been promised, 'So numberless shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered the utter impotence of his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about 100 years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's deadened womb" (Rom.4:18-19). Can you imagine being 100 years old, and having a child?! I can't imagine it!

### **Faith Takes Action**

Raising kids is tough work – and here are these two old people, way past the age of being able to have kids, and they want to have one, and God told them many years before that they were going to have one. No unbelief or distrust made Abraham waver (or doubt and question) the promise of God, but he grew even stronger in his faith and praised God and gave Him glory, verse 20 says, because Abraham knew God could do what He said He was going to do. Abraham showed remarkable faith – leaving home, family, and his alternative pathways behind to do things God's way.

The faith Abraham demonstrated, in doing the things God told him to do was credited to him as righteousness. And Paul tells us that it's for us, too, because of what Jesus did for us when He suffered on the cross, and rose again. Jesus did the heavy lifting – He took the sins away, and paid the price. But, are you ready for this church? That's not where this ends. Faith requires action. Faith requires a movement of some sort, so that people can visibly see and know it's real.

By now I think all of you with children or grandchildren here at New Hope have gotten the letter about the Junior Church and Nursery programming changes, along with the updated Safe Sanctuary policy. If not, let me know, and I will get it to you today after worship. A group of us have went through some trainings at the conference office in Worthington, to look at how we can more effectively disciple families and empower them to disciple their children. And Kendra and I spent a lot of time talking and praying on our trip south over Christmas break.

One topic that kept recurring in our conversations, and in our Family Ties meetings, was what we – as the church – are doing with kids' ministries. Barna Research Group says that in the United States, kids ages 5-13 have a 32% probability (or likelihood) of accepting Jesus as their Savior; teens aged 14-18 have a 4% probability of doing so, and adults age 19 and over have only a 6% probability of following Jesus. The focus on the needs of kids and the work with children's ministries has never been greater in our society than today. Hence, we are going to see some changes around here, starting next week.

The kids will be able to go back to the chapel to have an actual “Junior Church.” They will have Scripture readings – and some of the older ones will be invited to read the texts. They'll have a message based on the Scripture, just like you all do, and then they'll talk amongst themselves about what they think it means, and how they can apply it at home and school. They'll sing some songs a Capella (or maybe with some music videos), and we'll close the time together with prayer. It's going to be a good thing for the kids. It's going to be an opportunity for them to have a basic understanding of how and why we have worship services the way we do. It's going to be good for our church, because the kids will be better equipped to be active listeners once they start sitting in the Sanctuary with their families. I encourage you to join us in praying about these programming changes, and that God would lift up willing servants to assist in monitoring them. A few people in isolation cannot effectively carry out the ministries of the church; it takes many people being willing servants – of Jesus – to do the ministries effectively that produce long-term fruit.

One time Jesus was in the villages around Caesarea Philippi, and told His disciples that He would suffer and die. And Peter takes Jesus aside, and rebukes Him, you know, he probably said something like, “Don't say that kind of stuff, you won't really have to die.” Or something like that. I mean, this literally happens right after Peter says that Jesus is “My Lord and My God!” And Jesus turns around and looks at the disciples and rebukes Peter saying, “Get behind me, Satan. You don't have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” Have you read that story in Mark 8? Do you know what Jesus says next? I'm going to tell you: He says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and lose their own soul? Or what could a person give in exchange for their soul?”(Mark 8:31-37).

Abraham and Sarah's faith paid off – they had Isaac, and through Jesus, we are their descendants. So their faith continues to be active; people several thousands of years later continue to be impacted by it. Paul's faith paid off – he's probably the most influential missionary there ever was, and people read his writings even today. His faith continues to be active; people a couple thousand years later continue to be affected by it. Jesus' faith paid off – His faith put Him on the cross, pinned our sins onto His Perfection, and credited the Righteousness – not just of Abraham, but of Jesus' own complete Righteousness – onto us, His followers. Jesus wiped the slate clean for you and me, and promises an eternal relationship with Him through the empty tomb, Jesus' faith paid off – it should be obvious that His faith is still active; people are transformed into new creations in Him every day because of the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit, and they show this by demonstrating love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal.5:22-23a) towards those around them. I want to leave you with some questions to ponder this week church: How is your faith taking action and paying off? How is your faith impacting other people?