

Grace is Gained Only by Faith (4:16)

4:16 For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all...

Building on What Came Before

- “For this reason” tells us that this section is building on what came before. Four statements were made about the Law:
 1. Abraham and his spiritual children receive God’s promise only through a righteousness received by faith: “...the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith” (4:13).
 2. Law-keeping for salvation is the opposite of saving faith: “...if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified” (4:14).
 3. The Law condemns us as guilty and meriting God’s judgment: “...the Law brings about wrath...” (4:15a).
 4. The Law points out our sins: “...where there is no law, there also is no violation” (4:15b).
- Nobody can have a right standing before God in this life or in eternity by keeping God’s moral Law – by being a moral or ethical person. Law doesn’t merit God’s promised blessing or saving righteousness.¹

¹ If you are attempting to save yourself by good works, you will fail. Good works follow salvation by grace through faith, not before. READ Ephesians 2:8-10. FAITH → SALVATION → GOOD WORKS (according to God’s moral Law).

- God’s grace works through faith, not Law.²
- “...those who are of the Law” is a reference to Jews (the same descriptor is used in 4:14, and they are called “the circumcision” in 4:12). They are “of the Law” since they were a people defined by the Law – God had given it to them when He created them as a nation and entered into the old covenant with them. They still received the blessing and promise of God solely by faith, not keeping the Law.

God’s Promise Fulfilled in Christ (4:17a)

4:17a... (as it is written [in Genesis 17:5], “A father of many nations have I made you”).

- This parenthesis explains calling Abraham “the father of us all” (4:16), defending this title with a quote from the Old Testament.
- Abraham has already been called “the father of all who believe without being circumcised” (4:11) and “the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised” (4:12).
- Notice that this promise in Genesis 17:5, the very promise which embodies Abraham’s name (“father of a multitude”), doesn’t come to its fulfillment in Abraham’s time. Abraham was one of the saints of old, who “died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance” (Hebrews 11:13). This is one of the deep realities of faith as it is modeled and described in the Bible – faith calls on us to step from this world into eternity without having seen the fulfillment of biblical promises, yet believing in them with all we are.

² We see this in the introduction to the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1,2//Deuteronomy 5:6). An unmerited, gracious salvation out of Egypt precedes the commands of the covenant.

The Only Object of Saving Faith

...4:17b *in the presence of Him Whom he believed, even God, Who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.*

- When God gives Abraham the sign of the covenant (circumcision), He commands Abraham: “...walk before Me...” (Genesis 17:1). The believer is aware that we are always in God’s sight. Always.
- Abraham’s faith in “God, Who gives life to the dead” is seen twice in his life:
 - God had promised to bless the nations through the seed of Abraham, but Abraham’s age (“his own body, now as good as **dead**”) and Sarah’s barrenness (“the **deadness** of Sarah’s womb”) seemed to make this impossible (4:19). Still, Abraham believed God (Genesis 15:6).
 - Abraham showed faith in the God of the resurrection when he was tested with Isaac: “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said [in Genesis 21:12], ‘In Isaac your descendants shall be called.’ He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type” (Hebrews 11:17-19).

- Abraham believed in a God Who “calls into being that which does not exist.” While this could be a reference to creation, in this context it refers to God’s promises to Abraham.³ They didn’t exist, but God spoke them into being by His promise. Abraham believed in this God – what God said would happen. This is faith: “...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

The Nature of Saving Faith

What Kind of Faith Was It?

4:18 *In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken [in Genesis 15:5], “So shall your descendants be.”*

- “In hope against hope he believed...” I’ve always been captured by this phrase. There was no physical reason to hope that he would have children. But God said it. That was the only evidence needed.
- Paul quotes God’s promise from Genesis 15:5, then alludes to Genesis 15:6 at the end of this section (Romans 4:22).

³ It is possible that Paul has in mind the connection between the original creation and the new creation in Christ. He also makes this comparison in 2 Corinthians 4:6, where he says, “God, Who said [in Genesis 1:3], ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

Reasons Against Faith (4:19)

4:19 *Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb...*

- Abraham’s faith was not one that ignored apparent reality. It wasn’t an unthinking faith. The facts were that Abraham and Sarah were beyond child-bearing age. Abraham considered this – but it didn’t weaken his faith at all.

Keys to Faith That Grows Stronger (4:20,21)

4:20...*yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God,*
4:21 *and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.*

- Abraham’s faith, and the strengthening of his faith, came through the Word of God (“*the promise of God...what God had promised*”).
- Abraham didn’t believe in his opinions about God, and didn’t just generally believe in God. Abraham concretely believed in the revealed Word of God he had.⁴

⁴ “The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word...by this faith a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word for the authority of God Himself, and also apprehendeth an excellency therein above all other writings and all things in the world, as it bears forth the glory of God in His attributes, the excellency of Christ in His nature and offices, and the power and fullness of the Holy Spirit in His workings and operations: and so is enabled to cast his soul upon the truth thus believed; and also acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing **the promises of God for this life and that which is to come**” (1689 Baptist Confession, 14.1,2).

Give Glory to God

- Paul directly connects growing strong in faith with giving glory to God.

Rest in the Power of God

Doubt Is Not “Authentic” or “Genuine”

- Doubt (remaining unbelief) is not a sign of authenticity or intelligence. It is a sin against God. In popular Christianity, a confession of doubt is seen as noble. Instead, it is something to confess to God as sin and seek His help through prayer.

Examples

- Thomas is not praised for his doubt (John 20:24-29). The resurrected Jesus commands him, “*do not be unbelieving, but believing,*” and blesses those “*who did not see, and yet believed.*”
- The “*angel of the Lord*” appears to Zecharias and promises the birth of a son who would be used of the Lord (Luke 1:11-17). After hearing this, the old priest responds, “*How will I know this for certain? For I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years*” (1:18). Doubt. The angel condemns his doubt and proclaims Zecharias mute until the birth of the child “*because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time*” (1:20). The child still came, and Zecharias was able to name his son (John), but there was a disciplinary price to be paid for unbelief.
- There are times when people are confused and ask questions in the Bible. While correction is given, this is not condemned:

- John the Baptist summoned “*two of his disciples*” and “*sent them to the Lord, saying, ‘Are You the Expected One, or do we look for someone else?’*” (Luke 7:19). John has been proclaiming Jesus as One with greater authority than He (John 1:30). He has identified Jesus as “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29). He heard the voice of the Father and saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus while baptizing Him (John 1:32). Despite this, John had doubts and asked questions out of that doubt, seeking help for clarity. He wasn’t doubting – circumstances just weren’t exactly matching his expectations (happens to all of us every single day), and out of his confusion he asked questions to strengthen his faith.
- Nicodemus (in John 3) is another famous example of a question-asker. In this case, Jesus used the Pharisee’s genuine questions (he wasn’t trying to trick Jesus like his compatriots) to bring him to faith. Questions are good. Nicodemus becomes one who defends Jesus (John 7:50) and ministers to the Lord in His death (John 19:39).⁵

⁵ Thomas and Nicodemus reminds us that we should “*have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh*” (Jude 22,23).

Increase Our Faith (Luke 17)

- “*The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’*” (Luke 17:5). Before this Jesus had taught about correction and forgiveness (17:1-4). The apostles were so challenged by this teaching that they knew their faith had to be stronger to trust Jesus in this Christ-life.
 - We are reminded here that God is the Giver of faith.
 - He is the Giver of saving faith – why else would we pray to God for the salvation of unbelievers (Romans 10:1-4)? Faith is a gift granted to those chosen of God in His sovereign mercy.⁶
 - He is the Giver of growing faith, which is why we thank Him for growing faith in believers rather than praising them (2 Thessalonians 1:3). We don’t look down on others who are weaker in the faith (Romans 14 discusses this), since it is God Who has “*allotted to each a measure of faith*” (Romans 12:3).

Help My Unbelief (Mark 9)

- Faith comes into the discussion after three of the apostles witness Jesus transfigured (Mark 9:1-13). They come down from the mountain and encounter a father grieving over his demon-possessed son. The disciples of Jesus are unable to cast it out. Jesus exclaims, “*O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him to Me!*” (9:19).

⁶ READ Acts 13:48; 16:14; Philippians 1:29. Paul has just told us that “*there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside*” (Romans 3:11,12). The only way a lost soul can embrace God by faith is if that God moves in the soul to breathe faith into it.

- The father says, *“if You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!”* (9:22). Jesus responds, *“If You can?” All things are possible to him who believes”* (9:23). The father now pleads, ***“I do believe; help my unbelief”*** (9:24).
- Jesus’ address to an *“unbelieving generation”* had the father’s remaining unbelief in its focus. The father’s plea is important. His trust in Jesus was pushed further by the suffering of his son. The right response is a proclamation of faith and, at the same time, a confession of unbelief and a begging for help with it.⁷

Back to the Heart of the Matter (4:22)

4:22 *Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness.*

- Paul now returns to that massively important Old Testament verse (Genesis 15:6).
- A person who is trying to do the works of the Law to stand before God will fail. We cannot do it. And, since our confidence in our own abilities, we can never have assurance that we are saved.
- When our faith is in the promises and power of God for our salvation, we can have assurance and rest in what He has accomplished for us in Christ.

⁷ These days a confession of remaining unbelief by a believer would be regarded as “genuine” or “authentic.” Unbelief is a sin that needs to be confessed, and the confessor needs to prayerfully request the help of the God Who gives faith to overcome this sin. Unbelief/doubt may get you honor among certain groups in the Church today, but the Bible warns us against cultivating doubt in our lives: *“Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God”* (Hebrews 3:12). Do not feed your doubt; confess it as sin and pray for the help of God for strength of faith.