

Romans 4:13-25 - Promise Keeper

ROMANS SERMON #11

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The focus of the Christian life is Jesus.

Which sounds obvious, and like it doesn't need to be said. But much of our Christianity has become very focused on the self. And we bring Jesus along to help us with our self-improvement project, but still focus inwardly.

There is a Christian-looking kind of self-centeredness that is pervasive within the lives of church folks. Because we have gotten confused about where the main focus of Christianity is, we have focused inwardly, thinking that the main thing we should be doing is examining ourselves and working on ourselves.

We spend a lot of time focused on the self in ways that we would think are very Christian. We are very concerned about spiritual self-improvement, at looking at ourselves in the mirror and evaluating ourselves. We think that the Christian life is predominantly about navel gazing, self-contemplation.¹

We tend to think the Christian life is all about looking to ourselves to make sure we're being good, a life of checking up on ourselves to make sure we are doing right, examining ourselves to see if our faith is strong. And there have been countless books written on Christian self-improvement and self-help that call us to focus inwardly and work on me, with Jesus to help me become a better me.

The biggest question we ask about our Christianity is "How am I doing?"

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/navel-gazing>

I focus primarily on my performance for Jesus, finding and following my purpose, becoming all I should become.

I can even obsess over my faith, and whether I really have it or whether it's strong enough. There is no limit to the number of opportunities for us to gaze inwardly to look for answers.

And while there is some place for self-examination in anybody's life, and even some commanded in scripture, it is this preoccupation with self that is often the enemy to a vital life of faith.

This preoccupation keeps us from growing in love for God and our neighbor, and leaves us feeling insecure and confused.

I remember as a new Christian endlessly praying the sinner's prayer because I wasn't convinced that it took last time and I was really a Christian. I didn't feel any different. I remember years of wrestling with assurance and wondering if I am really a child of God and trying to find my answers by looking into my heart.

I spent years trying to believe harder, not really having any idea what that would mean, trying to believe "really deep deep down in my heart", really sincerely, really meaning it, but not knowing what that would even be like. I rededicated myself to Christ regularly, I did a lot of work on my faith directly. I looked at my faith a lot, questioned it, doubted it, tried to work it up. But it was all frustrating and vague, it was chasing after the wind. I didn't know what I was after and wouldn't know when I arrived.

But faith, as we'll see in today's passages, is the opposite of self-focus. We are actually self-defeating when we look inwardly to build faith. Faith doesn't spend a lot of time looking in the mirror, but looks outside itself to Jesus.

So we're going to talk today about the focus of the Christian life and what a life of faith looks like.

And we'll see it in the prototype for the life of faith, Abraham, in our passages in Genesis and Romans today.

So let's actually begin today in Genesis 15:

At this point in the story, God has made a promise to an 85 year old guy named Abram that, even though he has no children, he will have a son who will be his heir, and through him many nations will come. God has Abram look up at the sky and shows him the stars and says "that's the number of descendants you're going to have." And even though he was past child-bearing years...

Genesis 15:6 "he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness."

Abraham believed. He was made righteous. We might call it being saved, or born again, God gave him a perfect resume through faith.

7 And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." 8 But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"

So God promises him offspring and land. And Abram asks, "How shall I know that this will come true?"

Notice that He has faith in God, but that is not opposed to knowledge. A life of faith is not a life that is opposed to knowledge. The question is not whether we have a life based on faith or a life based on facts. Faith anchors itself in the facts.

Faith says "how do I know?" Abraham is not lacking faith to want to know something that is rock solid. He wants to put his faith in that rock-solid thing.

So when he asks a question to help build his faith, God answers. But God answers in an incredibly strange way:

9 He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

So Abram brings God a small petting zoo, and God has him cut the animals in half and keep the vultures away. It's a fairly dramatic object lesson that has been set up here.

12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain *(there it is again! God wants him to know for certain, faith is anchored in the facts! Knowing for sure feeds faith, it isn't opposed to faith)* that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

So God fills out the details of his promise a little. You're going to have offspring, they're going to go to Egypt and multiply, but end up under severe affliction. But then, when the current inhabitants of this land (the Amorites) have completed the downward trend of cultural decay and are as wicked as they can be, I'm going to have your descendants come back in here and possess the land.

17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.

So there's a center aisle between the animal halves, and God shows up as a smoking fire pot and flaming torch (similar to the form He would have when he leads them in the wilderness.) And he walks down the aisle between the halves of dead animals.

All to answer Abram's question of "how will I know?"

This doesn't seem like it answers Abram's question. "Lord, how do I know you will do these things? Oh, got it, firepot and torch walking in between halves of dead animals. Got it."

But it did answer the question for him.

He would have looked at this bizarre scene and said, "I get it." This was a familiar ritual in Abram's day.

This was a common way of ratifying a covenant between a suzerain, or a greater king, and a lesser vassal king.² So if the greatest king in the land was going to make a peace treaty with a small tribal lord, they would get together, spell out the terms of the deal (Our nation will do this for you (defend you), you will do this for me (pay taxes).) Then they'd cut animals in half, and both parties would walk side by side down the aisle between them, and they'd say, "You'll be just like these dead animals if you break the deal." That was how they made a covenant official. When they talked about making a covenant, they called it "cutting a covenant" for this reason. This is why we "cut a deal."

It wasn't the cleanest way to sign a contract, but their wi-fi was pretty cruddy so they couldn't just authentisign the documents.

But one thing would have stood out about this deal for Abram. Abram didn't walk down the aisle. Only God did. Abram was a passive observer.

God tells Abram what he will do for him: bless him, multiply him, give him the land. And Abram is silent. He doesn't even have an end of a bargain. God isn't saying "I'll do this stuff if you do this other stuff."

God is making a promise. And this is a promise that relies 100% on God and 0% on Abram.

So Abram asks God, "How will I know that I'll have these descendants and possess the land."

God's response is "because I promise."

So Abram sees God make this promise, He knows God is able to keep the promise, he realizes he doesn't have to do a thing to make the promise come to pass, and he trusts God.

² <http://www.fivesolas.com/suzerain.htm>

He knew God was trustworthy, he knew what God promised, and he trusted him. And that's what his faith was. That's where his faith came from.

His faith came not from looking inwardly, but from looking outwardly to a trustworthy God.

Faith is trust.

And you build trust not by directly working on trust and asking "how is my trust doing." But by becoming convinced of the trustworthiness of the one you trust.

Trust is perceived trustworthiness.

This week I took my daughter Isabelle out for breakfast before school for her birthday. And at the end of breakfast I put down my credit card on top of the bill, and the server came and took it up to the register. Isabelle said, "She just took your credit card!" I said, "Yeah, I trust her." Isabelle said, "What if she isn't trustworthy?" I am raising a cynic. But that really is the question.

We trust when we perceive trustworthiness.

Faith is the response to the perceived trustworthiness of God.

And here's Abram trusting God because he perceives that God is trustworthy.

Let's look deeper into his faith, what he knows about God that gives him faith. Because over in Romans 4 (turn there), God holds up his faith as a model for ours. His faith is our faith.

So far we've seen that his faith was essentially trust in God. He believed God was trustworthy. But there's even more content to his faith:

Romans 4 "13 For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For

the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.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, 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.

Abram believed in God, but it wasn't just any generic vague God. He believed in a God who is something - who has attributes. Who has characteristics and edges. Who is certain things and is not other things. He didn't just have faith that there's a god of some sort out there who sometimes makes good things happen. He wasn't just optimistic that things would work out OK in the end. That's not what faith is.

It was trusting very specifically in who God is and what God has promised to do.

There are two attributes specifically that form the content of his faith:

1) God gives life to the dead

2) God calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Abram believed that God is a God who gives life to the dead.

Verses 18 and 19 unpack that some more for us:

18 In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.” 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

God first made this promise to Abraham when he was 85, and it still hadn't materialized when he was 100 and she was 99. So its a century-old couple being told they'll have a baby.

Sarah is well past child-bearing years. And Abram is no spring chicken.

But “he believed against hope.” The situation itself had no hope to find in it, it was completely hopeless for Abram and Sarah to have a child.

It says he “considered his own body.” He knew the reality of the situation, he didn’t deny reality.

But there was another reality he couldn’t deny that was just as solid, just as true: God raises the dead, and that God had made a promise. He said He would do it, and He has the power to do it, so it will be done.

Not only does God raise the dead, but God calls into existence things that don’t exist. Remember, God had Abraham look up at the stars when he made this promise to him. “Look up at the universe that I created with a word. I spoke and created “ex-nihilo”, out of nothing. With a word I called into the nothing and out came everything.”

So God raises the dead, and God calls things into existence.

Therefore, when He makes a promise, He can fulfill it. He is trustworthy. So Abram trusts him.

Abram was a man of faith. But we have no record of him sitting around asking if he really believes enough, of him asking “how am I really doing with my faith.” He looked to the God who raises the dead and calls things that don’t exist into existence, and lives like that reality and the reality of his promises is even more sure than circumstances.

20 No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

So Abram, in his impossible situation, glorified God by being convinced that God was able to do what He promised He would do. His trust in God glorified or honored God. It was worship.

To trust somebody is the deepest honor you can give them.

When you trust a friend with your car keys, you are honoring them and their ability to drive (or at least your insurance company's ability to cover the damages.)

When you trust someone is telling you the truth and you act accordingly, you've honored your friend. Trust honors.

And Abraham trusted and honored God, and it was in looking to God that he grew strong in his faith.

Even though there was evidence that Abraham wouldn't have a child, the more convincing evidence was the trustworthiness and promise of God.

God's nature and God's promise were more persuasive than the circumstances that said otherwise.

And remember, Abram's faith is a model for ours - both in our coming to Christ and in our daily living:

22 That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." 23 But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification."

The content of Abraham's faith is similar to ours. We believe that God raises the dead, in fact that He did raise the dead when Jesus rose from the grave. No, that doesn't happen. There is evidence that people don't rise from the grave. But the contrary evidence is the word of God, and every word is sure - we have the promise of God that Jesus did.

Just as Abraham believed in the God who raises the dead, so do we. He is trustworthy because he spoke the universe into existence, but also trustworthy in that he now has resurrection of the dead on his resume'. He spoke, he acted, he promised, he raised the dead, and we respond by trusting Him.

We look to God who speaks into nothing and out comes a universe. We look to God who speaks into a grave, and out comes a life. Faith doesn't ask, primarily, "how am I doing," but faith looks to God.

And to grow in our confidence in our salvation, to grow in our faith, we don't need more self-focus. We need to beat back the weed of self-focus that keeps growing in our hearts.

Faith is grown when we take our eyes off of self and place them on the sure thing that the cross and resurrection are for us. Faith is found in Jesus, not in the self. It's found by looking to His perfect life, not to ours. We are like shifting sand, but He is a solid rock.

When we ask, like Abram, "How do I know you will keep this promise to us," the answer is not only that God has power to raise the dead, but He did raise the dead.

And we have an even more sure thing than Abram, and he was fully convinced.

For us, God didn't just come and walk between animals that were slaughtered, he became the slaughtered one. He didn't just revive a woman who was almost dead so she could give birth, He revived His son who was dead and the grave gave birth to new life.

We don't need to ask, "where in my heart can I find my faith." We look to Him who is worthy of our faith, worthy of our trust - to the trustworthy one. The answer isn't in you, it is outside of you. It isn't in your heart, your emotions, or your circumstances, it is in Christ. Faith lays hold of Christ.

We are made right with God like Abram was, by faith in a God who calls into nothing and out comes something, by faith in a God who has raised the dead.

And remember, faith doesn't just get us started in the Christian life. It is how we live the Christian life - by looking out from ourselves to God every step of the way.

2 Corinthians 5:7 "for we walk by faith, not by sight."

We don't spend a lot of time looking in our Christian mirrors, but looking to Jesus.

Geerhardus Vos wrote, "Faith is nothing else than that act whereby man lays hold of, appropriates for himself the endless power of God. If faith were a human endeavor, something working by its own inherent strength, then it would be indeed reasonable to say with reference to the one exercising it, "If thou canst." On the other hand, if the innermost meaning of faith consist precisely in this, that man with an utter renunciation of his own strength, casts himself upon the strength of God, then plainly all further concern about what is possible or impossible, every "If thou canst," is out of place. Hence also faith is not a quantitative matter, as it would have to be, were it a principle of human endeavor; faith like a grain of mustard seed will accomplish the greatest conceivable results, because, small though it be, it nevertheless, provided it be genuine faith, connects man with the exhaustless reservoir of divine omnipotence, Lk. 17:6." - Geerhardus Vos

So in daily life, this looks like looking to God, seeing that He is trustworthy, knowing his promises, and living like they are true.

It is claiming His promises because He is trustworthy.

Word-Faith Warnings

Now I want to clarify and warn about something here when we talk about claiming the promises of God.

There is a dangerous movement called the Word-faith movement³ which calls us to have faith in our faith rather than faith in God and his promises. It essentially says that faith allows us to speak things into existence like God does.

They would take a passage like **Proverbs 18:21 21 Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.**, as

³ For more on the Word Faith movement, I recommend the resources at equip.org, such as <http://www.equip.org/article/whats-wrong-with-the-word-faith-movement-part-one/>

a favorite verse.

And they take it to mean that our words have creative power like God's words do - that you can speak your reality into existence. Say things, claim things, believe hard enough, and they will come true.

That Christians have god-like power to speak words that can create what they think the Bible promises (usually wealth, health, or better circumstances.) In other words, if we speak more positive words over our circumstances, those circumstances will change for the better.

So if someone's life is going badly, it is because they aren't speaking words of prosperity over their lives or mustering enough faith. If circumstances are bad, we need to speak words of faith over that circumstance, and us believing those words is God's means of changing circumstances.

This isn't just some obscure group of folks teaching this. There are plenty of pseudo-Christian teachings that we don't need to call out here because they're not affecting anybody here. I never really have to preach against snake handlers, because this is probably nobody's big concern. Nobody ever comes in and says we need more rattlesnakes, snakehandling isn't a growing movement within Christianity. They're losing adherents pretty quickly.

But 5 of the top 20 downloaded podcasts under religion and spirituality are predominantly word-faith.⁴

Mega-best selling books preach this stuff. One huge best seller says this:

*"You have to begin speaking words of faith over your life. Your words have enormous creative power. The moment you speak something out, you give birth to it. This is a spiritual principle, and it works whether what you're saying is good or bad, positive or negative."*⁵

That is a spiritual principle, but its what the Bible calls witchcraft, or incantation, or sorcery.

⁴ <http://podbay.fm/browse/religion-and-spirituality>

⁵ Joel Osteen, [Your Best Life Now](#)

It treats our words as spells that we can cast on things.

And it takes faith, which is trusting in God and his promises, and instead treats it like a force. And our words are the containers for that force - and through that force of faith we can create our own reality.

In no place in the Bible do we see a statement that our speaking words is God's way of creating prosperity or health, that our words create. We can't create our circumstances by speaking them.

And faith is not naming and claiming anything we want.

We can't, for example, buy a lottery ticket and, by faith, claim that God is going to make us rich with it. Because biblical faith claims God's actual promises, not just what we want.

And God hasn't promised that you're going to win the lottery. So you can't claim that. God has promised you something vis.a.vi your lottery ticket: **"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." (1 Timothy 6:10).** You can claim that! Many pains and spiritual impalement. That's a sure thing, but not a jackpot. (That was, admittedly, slightly harsh.)

We can't claim promises He hasn't made.

But He has made a lot of promises.

And a life of faith knows who God is, knows the promises, and clings to them.

Examples of Faith in Action:

1. Clinging to Promises

1a. In General Struggle Against Sin

As we strive to follow Jesus, most of us will walk through seasons when we wonder if God could possibly be for us because we have blown it so badly.

We've either persisted in sin so long, or repeated it so much, or we've been so complacent that we wonder about God still using people as messed up as we are.

We believe that God **calls into existence the things that do not exist.** He calls wicked people righteous when they receive Him through Christ. We look at the reality of our situation and think, "I'm a total useless wreck." But there's a competing reality. Christ died, Christ rose.

1 John 1:9 " If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

It doesn't feel like it or seem like it - but God made this promise, He is able to keep this promise, and so we trust Him. We confess our sins and failures, spill our guts to Him, and rise in confidence that He is true to His word.

1b. Clinging to Promises in Struggle Against Specific Sins

Take fear and anxiety and worry. We have a lot that we tend to worry about. The boss calls you into the office after work Friday, and you know pink slips have been flying around. You don't have a specific promise that you'll never be laid off - you can't claim that. But you do have the promise of Isaiah 41:10:

"Fear not for I am with you, be not dismayed for I am your God; I will help you, I will strengthen you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand"

There's no news in the boss's office that keeps Him from being with you and upholding you. There is no future for you that doesn't have God right there with you.

No news at the doctor's office, or from the Bursar's office, or from the Oval office will ever keep God from being with you and upholding you. You can see the reality of bad news, bad diagnoses, bad geopolitical situations. But

cling to the competing, more sure reality of God always being with you and for you.

2. Examples of Clinging to His Plan When You Don't Have Specific Promises

There are some situations that God hasn't promised will work out the way we want. For example, we can raise our kids the right way and they can still wander from Christ. I don't see an air-tight guarantee in scripture that they won't.

Ours are young, but there are moments that strike fear in us.

In addition to clinging to the promise that God is in our future and with us no matter what, we also know that the general plan of God is that He usually does save the children of Christians:

Acts 2:39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

His plan is to apply His promises to us and our kids, and we can usually expect that they'll come to know Him.

Or maybe it's for your neighborhood. We live in places where so many people need Jesus, and the fact that we moved in has not made revival break out in most of those places. We want to see our neighbors come to Christ, but they're not knocking down the door asking for the Gospel.

We don't have a guarantee for them, but we do have:

Matthew 28:18-20 "And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to

observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

He has put us in our circles of influence with His authority and He is with us in those places. So that gives us confidence to speak, not knowing for sure what He’s going to do, but knowing He has promised to be with us and for us there. And his power is a more sure reality that my neighbor’s resistance to the Gospel.

An area of struggle for me and many of you who serve in ministry in various capacities is to believe the people and a community will be changed by the Gospel. Because it looks like there are so few results, so few real conversions to Christ. Is saying these words just foolish and powerless?

1 Corinthians 1:21-24 “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The reality looks bleak: this doesn’t work, thoughts and prayers and Gospel speaking are a joke. But God made a promise that through the folly of what we preach He would save. Which reality is the one we put our higher trust in?

We can trust the things God has said he will do, and the things He usually does because they fit with His plan.

And when we don’t know specifics of what He will do, we don’t know generally what His plan is, we can still trust Him to be a good Father.

3. Of Clinging to His Fatherly Love and Response to Prayer

Matthew 7:7-11 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will

find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

We pray for things. Things like provision for our needs. Things like healing, because God can and does heal. We can keep praying even when the doctors say nothing else can be done, because we know that the nature of God is to call life out of death. But the way we pray for healing is, "God, please heal." It is not "I am speaking healing over my life right now, I'm claiming a healing" - as if our faith had an inherent power that could do that. Because God is the one who changes reality by speaking, when we pray we ask him to do it - but we can't presume on that.

And while we don't know what He'll do in response to many of our prayers, we know that if we're asking Him for bread He won't give us a stone. He'll only give what we ask or something better.

4. And if you are not a Christian:

There is a cold hard dead reality for you: your sin has separated you from God. Though you've tried, you've still been selfish, you've still failed, you still are facing punishment from Him.

But here's what He did. It was one-sided (you couldn't keep your end of the bargain so you didn't have one.) He came and died and rose again.

And promises "whoever believes in me will not perish but have everlasting life."

So turn and trust Him. Repent of your sin, let go of what you were hoping in to make you ok, and trust in Christ. He promises "whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Believe Him, trust Him, and it will be credited to you as righteousness.

Because God keeps every promise. He's trustworthy. So trust Him.