

Faith that Counts

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[0 : 00] I want you guys to open your Bibles up to Romans chapter 4.

We are finishing Romans chapter 4 this morning, and you guys can just turn and remain standing if you want, because I'm going to make you stand up again. All right. That way Greg and Becky don't feel awkward when Nick makes them stand up the whole time, right?

We're finishing up Romans chapter 4 this morning, and then going to take a break for a few weeks from Romans. We're going to spend a couple of weeks talking about the birth of Christ, and then about four or five weeks in the book of Psalms.

But this morning we're still in Romans, and so I want us to finish out this chapter well. So I want us to begin reading in Romans chapter 4, verse 18 together. The Apostle Paul writes, Father, we give you thanks that your Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write these words for our instruction this morning.

And ask now that the same Spirit who inspired these words would open our hearts and our minds to understand and rejoice in the truth. We ask this in Jesus' name.

[2 : 04] Amen. You guys take a seat. We have been in Romans 4 for a number of weeks now. And I know that there sometimes is the thought, are we finished talking about Abraham yet?

Because Paul has been talking about Abraham for an entire chapter now, and we've been talking about Abraham now for a couple of months. So Abraham has been on our minds.

Now, I know for you, you get to sort of go home during the week, and your mind is on other things. But I start out Sunday night or Monday morning back in the next few verses, and so Abraham has not left my mind really at all for any day at all for the last couple of months.

I've been thinking about Abraham and trying to understand what Paul tells us about Abraham and what Abraham did in Genesis and seeing the things that Paul draws upon. And so Abraham has been really heavy on my mind.

And you come in every week and you hear more about Abraham, and you might be thinking, can Paul move on maybe to another Old Testament character? Could we maybe possibly talk about someone else?

[3 : 05] But this morning we get to see a glimpse of why Paul has been really honing in on Abraham, why he has been talking to us so much and so frequently about the life of Abraham and what God did in the life of Abraham and how Abraham came to be counted righteous in God's sight.

In fact, I want you to take a look here at the passage that we're talking about this morning, and we will see Paul tells us exactly why we're talking about Abraham. He tells us, verse 23, that the words spoken about Abraham, the words, it was counted to him, were not written for Abraham's sake alone, but for ours also.

So the testimony of the book of Genesis about Abraham and how Abraham became right with God were not written merely for Abraham's sake, nor were they merely written for the sake of the people of Israel so that they would understand where they came from.

Those stories, those words, that historical record of Abraham's interactions with God was written down for our sake. Why? Because we get right with God in the very same way that Abraham did.

God has not changed in all of these centuries and in all of these millennia. God does not change. The Bible tells us He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

[4 : 25] So we get right with God. We obtain entrance into God's kingdom in the same way that Abraham did. And Paul tells us over and over throughout that chapter that the Old Testament itself, the Hebrew Scriptures themselves, tells us that Abraham got right with God by faith.

Notice what it says in the verse right before that in verse 22. That is why Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness. That's in quotation marks. Counted to him as righteousness.

And then Paul goes on to say those words, it was counted to him, were written for our sake. So we are very much concerned throughout this chapter, Paul is very much concerned throughout the first four chapters of this letter, that we understand how to get right with God.

And that we understand and see that from the life of Abraham in particular. Because Abraham is the pattern. Abraham is the preeminent Old Testament example of what it takes for a man or a woman to be right before God.

How does a sinner go from being what he or she is, a sinner deserving of God's wrath, how does a sinner go from being of that status to the status of righteous before God on Judgment Day?

[5 : 37] And the answer is very simple. It is by faith. But this passage, the end of Romans chapter 4, tells us more than that. We know that. We've been talking about that for chapters now.

We've been talking about that for months now. We know that we are justified. We are declared righteous by God by faith on the basis of trusting in the promises of God.

But a further question reveals itself. And that question is, how do we know whether or not the faith that we have or that we claim to have is the right kind of faith?

Or how do we know that our faith is real and genuine? How do we know that we actually have justifying faith? How do we know that we have saving faith? How do we know that we have kingdom entrance granting faith?

How do we know that we have that kind of faith? Because there are indications throughout the Bible that it is possible for someone to claim to believe in Christ and yet not have saving faith.

[6 : 38] So that Jesus says Himself, He says that there will be many people who say to Him, Lord, Lord, and then list the things that they've done, and then He will say to them, depart from me, I never knew you.

Those are frightening words from our Lord that it is possible for someone to call upon His name and yet at the end of it all find that they never had a life-giving, vital, justifying faith and relationship with God through Christ.

That is entirely possible. And so we need to know, if we get right with God through faith like Abraham did, what was it about Abraham's faith? What can we see?

What marks of genuineness do we see in Abraham's life about his faith? And how can those be applied to us? So can we look at Abraham's faith and see a template and be able to tell whether or not our lives and our faith match up with that template closely enough that we can have some sort of confidence that our faith is indeed real and vital and alive and life-giving and justifying faith in God's sight.

That's what this paragraph is written to help us to see. Notice how this verse that we just read is worded. It says, that is why, or on account of this, his faith was counted to him as righteousness.

[8 : 00] On account of what? On account of Paul's description of Abraham's faith in the previous verses. Paul gives us a description of what Abraham's faith was like and then says, because his faith was like that, on account of these things that I've said about his faith, that faith was in fact counted as righteousness.

So I want us this morning just to briefly consider three things that the Apostle Paul tells us about Abraham's faith. I'll give them to you up front and then I'll show them to you in the text.

Number one, Abraham's faith actually had an object. Abraham's faith had an object. We'll talk about what that was in just a second. Number two, Abraham's faith did not waver.

And then number three, in contrast to that, Abraham's faith grew stronger. So let's take a look at these things. Number one, Abraham's faith had an object, which is another way of saying that Abraham's faith was not just some sort of fuzzy, feel-good type of thing.

We live in a culture that is very pluralistic. Now, you can talk about pluralism in two ways. You can talk about pluralism as just a fact of society, and we can look around us and we can say that, yes, indeed, we live in a pluralistic society in terms of we see around us a number of ethnicities and cultures represented wherever we go.

[9 : 24] If you go to work, everybody doesn't look like you, everybody doesn't talk like you, everybody doesn't have the family background that you have, everybody doesn't come from the same region of the country that you come from, or even perhaps not even everyone is from this country that you work with.

So we are in a pluralistic, multicultural type society. That's a fact. That's evident. That's just pluralism on display. But there's another kind of pluralism that has begun to dominate our country, our society, and that is something that I would call philosophical pluralism.

This is not just a pluralism of fact, as in there are many ethnicities and peoples and cultures represented among us. This is a pluralism that seeks to level all differences between those, to say that all values and all cultures are equally valid, and therefore one person from one culture cannot look at another culture and in any way pronounce any kind of value judgment upon their values or beliefs.

And there's a grain of truth in that, because we do certainly want to understand other cultures before we begin to think badly of them, or before we begin to think negative thoughts about them, because we want to understand why they do the things they do, why they say the things that they say, and oftentimes we will learn things that change our opinion about them, that change our perspective upon them.

But to carry that to the point to where you say that you cannot make any moral judgments about another person's values because we want to be a pluralistic society is to carry it way too far.

[10 : 59] If you apply that across the board, then you can never look at what someone else does and say that what they're doing is wrong, is evil. In fact, I heard a story this week about a well-known writer who lived in the early part of the 20th century, and he was not from America, but he lived in New York City, and he had fully embraced the idea of pluralism, he had fully embraced the liberal outlook upon life, so that he had no desire to cast any sort of judgment up anyone.

Everyone's beliefs and ideals were equally valid in his eyes. And it was nearing the time of the beginning of World War II, had not yet begun, and he says that he went to an area, he went to an area of New York, around New York City, that was largely German.

Largely German. He went to a movie theater there, and as he was there, he saw some leaflets and newspapers that had very anti-Jewish, anti-Semitic sentiments in them, and then before the movie, there was a sort of, I guess you would say, like a commercial that came on that was very anti-Semitic, and he said the people began to chant, death to the Jews, death to the Jews, in America, in New York City, and that deeply troubled him.

And he went home and he thought about it, and he wrote later on that what he found most troubling was not the racism itself. That was troubling to him. It was not the anti-Semitism itself. What he found most troubling was that he had no grounds upon which to condemn it.

He realized he had no philosophical basis upon which to say that what Hitler was doing in Europe was wrong, because according to his own set of beliefs, he had no right to judge them.

[12 : 51] He couldn't do that. And yet he knew in his bones that it was wrong what they were doing. There's a kind of philosophical pluralism that will strip us of the ability to say, you need to believe certain things, or you have no hope.

But if the gospel tells us anything, the gospel tells us that you must believe certain truths, truths. And if you deny those truths, if you reject those truths, you have no hope.

Which is another way of saying that real saving faith is faith in something particular, and Abraham's faith had an object. Abraham's faith was directed toward something.

I want you to take a look and see what the Apostle Paul has to say specifically about Abraham's faith. He says in verse 18, In hope Abraham believed against hope that he should become the father of many nations.

As he had been told, so shall your offspring be. Abraham had been told something. Abraham had been given a promise.

[14 : 01] In fact, if you look up just a few verses to some verses we covered a couple of weeks ago in verse 13, we are told that 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.

There was a promise made to Abraham concerning his offspring, concerning his descendants, concerning his seed is a literal translation of the term, of the word.

Promises had been made to Abraham, and Abraham believed those promises. But they weren't vague promises. They were specific promises.

Promises that pertained to the future. Promises that pertained to an inheritance granted to Abraham and to all of his offspring. But I think that if we read the story of Abraham within the context of the book of Genesis as a whole, which we're intended to do, I think we'll see more than that.

Because when Abraham is promised over and over that blessing will come to the world, to all the nations or all the families of the earth through his seed, I think that we are meant to read those statements throughout the story of Abraham that the Apostle Paul draws on here in Romans 4 in the light of Genesis chapter 3.

[15 : 18] Now Genesis chapter 3 is of course the account of the fall of Adam and Eve. They are in the garden. Everything is perfect. Everything is right. And yet Satan comes in and they give in to his temptation and they sin and break God's law.

And then when God comes to judge them, God tells the serpent that for his deeds, for what he has done, he has said, I will put enmity between your seed and the seed of the woman. And then he says about the seed of the woman, the offspring of the woman, he says that you shall bruise his heel, but he will crush or bruise your head.

So that there is, all the way back in Genesis chapter 3, a promise made about a coming redeemer who is called the seed, who will reverse the effects of all of Satan's work and in fact destroy and judge Satan himself.

That promise is found all the way back in Genesis chapter 3. That promise we know was passed on all the way down at least until Noah's father, Lamech, because Lamech expresses the hope that Noah himself would be the one who would reverse the effects of the fall.

That Noah might be this seed. He believed that perhaps his son was the one who would reverse that. We know that's not true. We know that God does deliver humanity in a sense through Noah, but we see Noah after the flood, drunk and naked and sinful as anybody else.

[16 : 43] So we know that Noah is not the seed. And yet we can see in that, we can see the passing down from generation after generation, all the way from Adam and Eve down to Noah's father, of the promise of a seed.

And Moses, century after Abraham, writes about that seed in the book of Genesis. So I think that it's entirely plausible to think that when God spoke to Abraham of a seed, Abraham would have some knowledge of those promises in Genesis chapter 3 about a seed who would come and redeem God's people and reverse the curse and defeat the serpent.

And Abraham trusted in promises about a seed. What Abraham knows is that the seed now will be one of his seed, one of his descendants.

And the story of the Old Testament is really a story of the narrowing down of the identity of the seed. Could be anybody in Genesis chapter 4, could be anybody, any descendant of Adam and Eve, you get it narrowed down to the family of Noah by the time you get to chapter 10 or chapter 5.

But it could be any descendant of Noah gets narrowed down to one of Noah's sons, Shem. Could be any descendant of Shem until it gets narrowed down to one of Shem's descendants, Abraham.

[18 : 00] Could have been any of Abraham's sons, but it gets narrowed down all the way to Isaac. You go through the history of Israel, could be anybody, but it gets narrowed down to the tribe of Judah because we know in the book of Genesis that Judah would have a ruler and would rule over all of Abraham's seed.

Could be anybody from Judah. Until we find out there's a man named David halfway through the Old Testament and David is given promises concerning a seed who will reign forever and ever. So the Old Testament is a story of the narrowing down, the giving of more information about the coming Redeemer.

Until we get to the New Testament and the New Testament opens with these words, a record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham, the son of David.

Abraham himself, I think, knew and understood that there was a coming Redeemer. He did not know all that we know about the Redeemer. He did not know that he would be born in Nazareth. In all likelihood, he probably did not know that he would die upon a cross or that he would rise again three days later.

He did not have all the information that we now have as those who live under the New Covenant. But nevertheless, Abraham's faith was a faith in God's promises concerning the Redeemer.

[19 : 16] Abraham's faith had an object. Saving faith believes in a person. And it's no different for us today. And yet now, with all of the revelation that God has given to His people throughout the centuries, we know so much more about the Redeemer and we are required to believe these specifics about the Redeemer.

Notice what Paul says at the very end of this paragraph. He says in verse 24 that it will be counted to us who believe in Him who raised the dead, Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

So at a very minimum here, we can see that Paul expects genuine saving faith to be faith in Christ who died for our sins, for our transgressions.

That is, He died in our place. Or, as he says in chapter 3, God put Him forward as an atoning sacrifice or a propitiation. That is, Jesus died in our place for our sins, taking God's wrath upon Himself for us, in our place, so that we now must believe in a Redeemer who is substituted in our place on our behalf.

And not only that, but a Redeemer who rose again from the dead. These are things we must believe. These are not optional. And these aren't the only things that we must believe about Christ.

[20 : 49] They are some of them. And we are reminded in this paragraph both about Abraham and about ourselves that for faith to be genuine and real and life-giving and justifying, it must be faith in an object and that object is Christ and all that He has done to save us from our sins and give us the hope of eternal life.

Faith is not vague. Faith is not sentimentality. Faith is not sincerity in any old thing. Faith is specifically in Christ, our only hope and our only Redeemer.

And so, if you want to know whether or not your faith is real, if your faith is saving and justifying, the first question you need to ask is, in what do I believe? In what do I have faith?

Because I feel like so often the word faith for us has been by just in general, in our language today, has been stripped of its meaning. People will talk all the time about believing or about having faith and if you press them, they don't really have faith about anything in particular.

That's why if you ask people about their religion or their spiritual life, oftentimes they will tell you, well, I'm not overly religious but I'm very spiritual. Okay, well, what spirits do you believe in specifically? Let's get real and say, what spirits do you believe in?

[22 : 11] And at that point, they don't know because they've not thought about what the word spiritual might mean or what spirituality might imply. Same thing is true for faith. We see this every year at Thanksgiving because the word to give thanks or be thankful has been really stripped of its real meaning.

So oftentimes people will sit around the table at Thanksgiving and they will list all the things that they're thankful for. And I oftentimes want to ask, not in my own family because I know, but I oftentimes want to ask, to whom are you thankful for all these things?

Because thankfulness implies giving thanks to someone for something that they gave you. But the word thanks has now lost the idea of having a person to whom you are thankful.

And faith has oftentimes lost the idea of having an object. But faith by its very nature is faith in something or someone. And we can test, we can begin to see whether or not our faith is real by determining whether or not we actually trust in Christ.

Or whether we just have a vague spirituality and faith that we claim. It's the most objective test. The other two things that we're going to look at are subjective and I don't know.

[23 : 23] I couldn't look into your life and tell you whether or not you passed these tests of genuine faith. But I can sit down with someone and have a conversation with them and ask them questions about what they believe and what they know of Scripture and what they know about Christ.

And that test, anyone can apply to anyone else to find out, do they know the basics about who Jesus is? Have they trusted in the basic message of redemption that we find in the Bible and particularly in the New Testament?

Have they trusted in that? That's objective. The next two tests are tests that you're going to have to look within yourself. You're going to have to look inside and apply these tests to yourself.

Faith not only has an object, but faith, when that object looks to be impossible, when the promises seem impossible or even at times when they seem ridiculous, faith in the face of that does not grow weak and shrivel up and die.

Notice what we're told about Abraham's faith here. We're told, first of all, in verse 18, in hope he believed against hope. Now that's a strange phrase.

[24 : 33] In hope he believed against hope. And really, the order of these words is reversed in Greek. It's against hope he believed in hope or against hope in hope he believed.

It's a very confusing type of statement. What does that mean? How do you, in hope, believe at the same time against hope? Well, I think given the context and what we see here throughout the rest of this paragraph, I think the idea is that humanly, from a human perspective, there's no hope of these things happening.

What Abraham has promised is impossible. And yet, biblical faith is rooted in hope. So that against hope, against all human hope of these things happening, there is a real, deeper, vital hope in God's power and God's ability.

Notice how that's described. He says, in hope he believed against hope that he should become the father of many nations. There's the promise. As you have been told, so shall your offspring be. Now, here it is.

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.

[25 : 48] Think about this. He's a hundred years old and God has told him, you're going to have some kids. What do you mean? He's a hundred years old.

Now, I get it. Abraham lived to be 160 and you're thinking, well, if you live to be 160, maybe a hundred's not really that big of a deal. So you do the math. Abraham's, let's say, two-thirds of the way through his life, two-thirds of the way through, say, a 90-year-old life.

Today, we're about 60 years old. Okay? And you think, it's not out of the question. It's entirely possible. Okay. But Abraham's looking at himself and he knows it is out of the question for him.

It's not going to happen. His body, in terms of what it would take to have children, is as good as dead. All right? There are no little blue pills.

There are no doctor's offices. There are no fertility clinics that Abraham can go to. And he knows himself and he knows, I'm as good as, this can't happen. This is, from a human perspective, it cannot happen.

[26 : 49] Set that aside. He's got a wife, and Paul uses stark, strong language here and describes her womb as dead. Dead. What does he mean by that?

He means two things. Number one, she's past the age of childbearing. I mean, there comes a point in time in every woman's life when it's no longer physically possible to bear children, to have kids. And not only is she past that point in time, but even in the time of life when she could have had children, she was unable to.

And here she is in her 90s. She's never had any children. She's past the age of having children. And now God not only tells Abraham that he's going to have a kid, but you might in some remote things say, this is, eh, maybe possible.

Maybe Abraham will have a good day. But when you consider his wife, no. Because God has not only said he's going to have a kid, but it's going to be through his wife. It's going to be through Sarah. It's not going to be through Hagar.

It's not going to be through some concubi. It's going to be through his wife. That's impossible. That cannot happen. Humanly, that kind of promise is ridiculous. It doesn't make sense.

[27 : 51] It really doesn't. I saw, I read about a, a billboard that is, it's a fairly new billboard. You know, every once in a while some atheist group will come out with a new type of billboard, some sort of clever saying they'll put up on a billboard.

And I, there's a new one. I can't remember in what city it was placed in. Maybe it was more than one. But there's a new one up this year that I thought was particularly clever. And it says, Dear Santa, all I want for Christmas this year is to skip church.

I'm too old to believe in fairy tales. That's what the billboard says. It's pretty clever. Okay? And we usually see those things and we get all, we get kind of offended and upset about those sorts of things. Those, they bother us, you know.

We always want to counter those sort of clever statements with our own clever statements. We always want to do that as evangelicals. And so, you guys remember, people still have the, the, the Jesus fish on their cars.

People still have those. I don't have one, but people still have them. And it has the, usually it has the letters Ichthus inside it, which is Greek word for fish. Every letter stands for a word in Greek, Jesus Christ, God's son, savior.

[28 : 54] So they became popular, you know, maybe 15, 20 years ago, they became really popular and they were all over cars. And then, and then atheists came up with an idea. Let's take the word Ichthus out and put Darwin in it and put feet on it.

That'll be really clever and funny. And it is kind of clever. All right. And then, somebody, a Christian came up and said, we can beat that. We'll put our Jesus fish back on there and he'll eat the Darwin fish.

Right. So we're always trying to sort of top those kinds of things. Maybe what we should do instead of trying to top their clever statements with our cleverer statements is try to hear their clever statements and understand what they're saying and what we need to overcome not to outwit them, what we need to overcome to reach them with the gospel.

Because to a non-Christian, in particular to one who is of no spiritual inclination at all, Christianity is ridiculous.

I mean, this is Christmas time. Think about what we're celebrating at Christmas time. God becomes a man and he's born from a virgin and angels come and talk to her and her husband and then there are angels singing to shepherds in the middle of the night and guys follow a star to find this baby.

[30 : 07] I mean, it sounds ridiculous on the surface. And then, continue with basic Christian theology. This man is going to live a perfect life. He's never going to sin.

Never pushed his brother down. Never kicked his sister in the shin. You know, never spit at anybody. Never made a face at his mom when she turned her back. Alright. All my kids are already. They're out. They're not in the runnings anymore.

It's done. It's over with. Okay? But it's ridiculous. Nobody can live like that. Even if you don't believe in original sin, which most people don't, even if you don't believe that we're actually sinners, nobody believes that anybody's perfect.

It's not possible to be perfect. He's perfect. And then he grows up and he dies and comes back to life. It does sound ridiculous to non-Christian ears.

It sounds entirely ridiculous. ridiculous. That's what the billboard is telling us. That's what the billboard is reminding us of. It is no more ridiculous that a man should rise from the dead than that 100-year-old Abraham should have a baby through his 90-something-year-old wife who's never been able to have kids.

[31 : 17] These things on their surface to unbelieving ears sound preposterous. It is not possible for these kinds of things to happen.

And we're told that Abraham actually considered his body. He knew that. He saw. He pondered. He knew how old he was. He was aware of his wife's problems and her age as well.

He knew these things. Abraham thought about these things. He considered them. Saw it all. Abraham didn't bury his head in the sand and pretend that what God had told him didn't sound ridiculous.

He didn't bury his head in the sand. No. That wasn't the secret to protecting faith. Sometimes we feel like we believe that the secret to preserving our faith or perhaps preserving the small little faith of our kids is just to put on blinders or build up walls around our homes and around our families and make sure they never hear any of these objections.

We will tune them out. We will pretend that we can't hear the voices around us and we will try to make it so that our children never hear any of them except that kids grow up.

[32 : 33] It just happens. And you have to interact with people in the world. Most of the kids that I have seen as they grow up reject their faith.

Most of them have come from homes in which their parents rather than addressing challenges and answering challenges refuse to talk about them and sometimes would get angry with their kids when their kids would bring them up.

Basic questions. How do we know the Bible is real? Don't you say that sort of thing. We don't talk about the Bible like that. Rather than sitting down and saying well here's why we believe in the scriptures.

It doesn't help to pretend that this stuff is not fantastic. It doesn't help to pretend that these things don't sound preposterous on the surface. It doesn't help at all. It doesn't help us.

It doesn't help our children. It doesn't help us to reach out to those who feel that way about Christianity. And it wouldn't have helped Abraham to pretend that he was 25 again and his wife was fertile and she was 22.

[33 : 34] That wouldn't have helped him because it wouldn't have been true. So why didn't his faith falter? Why didn't his faith weaken? Why not? The answer is actually up above our passage.

The answer is in verse 17 that we looked at last week very briefly. Where we're told in verse 17 first there's a quotation I've made you a father of many nations.

That's the promise again. And then we're told that that promise was made in the presence of God in whom Abraham believed. And this is what Abraham believed about God. This is a summary of Abraham's faith about who God was. Of the God in whom Abraham believed who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Abraham knew something about God. God is a God who gives life to the dead. God is a God who looks into the future and pronounces things as existing that do not yet exist.

God can speak about things that have not yet come to be as if they have come to be because if He determines to do it nothing can stop Him from doing it. There is nothing impossible for God Himself so that if you do believe in God if you know that He exists if you believe in Him then none of these things are ridiculous anymore.

[34 : 57] They're no longer preposterous. What's preposterous about a man coming back from the dead if God created everything by speaking words? What's preposterous about that?

What's strange about that? That's not impossible anymore. That's nothing for Him. He created life. He came up with the idea for biological life. I think He can reanimate a body.

I don't think that's a big deal for God to do. I had a class when I was in college at Baylor. I was a religion major at Baylor and I was taking a class. I don't remember the name of the class. It was basically over the Gospels.

We were looking at different stories in the Gospels of Jesus. There was a girl in my class and she came from a Buddhist family. She was kind of a nominal Buddhist.

I don't know that she practiced Buddhism but that was her background and we were having discussions back and forth and I can remember one thing very clearly that she said because we were talking about the resurrection.

[35 : 55] We were looking at the different resurrection stories in the Gospels comparing and contrasting them and we had already covered the story of Christ's birth earlier in the semester and I can remember her saying you believe in the Christmas story.

You believe that God really became a man. Well yeah. I mean that's what it says. Yeah. And then she said well if I believed that I really wouldn't find it hard to believe at all that he came back from the dead.

That was her thinking that if A is true then what's the big deal with B? If Jesus is God if he's God in the flesh what's the big deal about him coming back from the dead?

And that's very much what we're seeing in the life of Abraham. The God that Abraham believes in can do anything that he wants to do. So if he wants to make Sarah have a baby no big deal.

God can do anything that he determines to do. And when we are faced with the utter impossibility of the fulfillment of God's promises in human terms that ought not to weaken our faith.

[37 : 03] It ought not to weaken it at all. Because we know that God is a God who gives life to the dead. He calls the things which do not exist as if they already do.

This is who he is. Nothing is impossible for him. Nothing is too difficult for him. And so we don't hide away from the fact that on the surface it sounds ridiculous.

But we have a God for whom the ridiculous is routine. No big deal for him to perform. So that real saving faith in a real redeemer understands and knows that the God who stands behind that redeemer can do all things.

And even the ridiculous becomes real so that our faith is not weakened. In fact, the third evidence that I see in this text for genuine faith is the exact opposite.

In the face of the impossible, real faith grows and becomes stronger. Notice what the text says. Verse 20, No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God.

[38 : 16] But instead, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

Real, genuine saving faith doesn't just crumble at the sight of difficulties. Real saving faith grows stronger at the sight of difficulties. It increases.

Now, if you look at the life of Abraham, that doesn't look like what you might think. If you read through Genesis, start in chapter 15 where God declares him righteous by his faith and then read to the end of Abraham's life.

You will not find the record of a perfect, pure saint of God. That is not at all what you will find there. In fact, you will find a man who is flawed.

Very flawed, in fact. I mean, for the second time, and now, after he's been justified before God, Abraham lies about Sarah and allows another man to take him into her home because he's worried about his own life.

[39 : 18] I mean, that's not really a very good husband. That doesn't rank real high on husbandly skills. Abraham's not, he's not the best guy. He's not perfect and he's not sinless.

So to say that his faith did not weaken but in fact grew stronger does not mean that Abraham lived a sinless life or even anything close to a sinless life after he was declared righteous by God.

That's not at all the point at all. I don't think that our growing strong in the faith always, to our eyes, in the moment, looks like we're advancing. Sometimes it looks, in fact, like we're standing still and it feels that way.

But in the midst of that standing still there is inward strengthening that's taking place. I think of those ropes that they used to make us climb in gym class in junior high.

I don't know why it was, I don't know why the coaches felt the need to make us climb a gym rope or why that was a test of anyone's fitness at all. Maybe you just had soft hands and you just couldn't get off the rope. I don't know. It could have been a test of anything.

[40 : 19] But I remember and it didn't seem overly safe. They were just tied to the rafters. You know, we'll climb as high as you can climb. You know, how is that safe? There's no harness or anything. I didn't understand that at all.

But you had basically three different kinds of kids that would climb those ropes. You had the ones who would just scoot up to the top. Alright? And then you had those who would, like, they would try really hard for just a moment and they would get, you know, that high off the ground and then they would drop and they're done.

They're just exhausted. They can't do it. And then you would have the kid who would get, you know, maybe this high off the ground or a little higher but he wouldn't get nearly as high as the ones who could scurry up and then he would just hug the rope.

He'd just sit there on the rope and he's not moving. He's not going to move because he doesn't want to go down. He doesn't want to retreat. He can't go any higher.

He's not strong enough. He weighs too much. He just can't get up there. It's not going to happen. But he just hangs on. And I think sometimes that's what strengthening in the faith looks like. Sometimes it looks like you're shooting up the rope.

[41 : 18] Sometimes it looks like you're just hunkered down and hanging on with all your might. But you're hanging on, I think, is the point. And Abraham hangs on throughout his entire life. Terrible things happen to Abraham.

Abraham is called upon to do difficult things too in his life and yet he hangs on. His faith never withers away. His faith never goes away. But he's not always in a constant state of advancement.

Sometimes he's just sort of hanging on to the promises and it doesn't look like he's growing stronger. But by the end of his life he's a man full of faith and strong in the faith.

He never just lets go of the rope and drops to the ground and walks away. And I think that's the point. I think saving, justifying, kingdom entrance granting faith is a faith that hangs on and advances sometimes quickly and sometimes little by little but never lets go of the rope.

so that you look out over the course of your life and you feel now in this moment right now oh, I feel like dirt.

[42 : 31] I just, I seek no growth in my faith. I just do not, I keep doing the same old sin day after day and I just, I don't know what's wrong with me. Maybe I just don't, maybe I'm not a Christian.

Maybe I just don't believe. And maybe, that's possible, maybe you've dropped to the ground. But maybe not. Because you have to look at the broader scope. You can't look at this week or this month.

You look more broadly and you look and you say from the moment that I first put faith in Jesus to now has there been advancement? I haven't walked away, I haven't abandoned, so have I moved anywhere?

Have I gone anywhere since then? And that's a good and true test. And it is good to apply these tests to our lives.

The Apostle Paul in fact says in 1 Corinthians that you should test yourself to see if you're in the faith. Peter tells us to make your calling and election sure or certain.

[43 : 27] That is, we ought to be pursuing assurance by applying these biblical tests to our faith. But remember, they're tests for the sake of assurance. They are not merely tests so that you can constantly, constantly doubt yourself.

They're tests for the sake of assurance. and Paul says these things about Abraham and his faith were written down for us. On account of us.

So that not only may we know the way of salvation and the means by which we get right with God, but we can know whether or not we have participated in that means.

So I encourage you, test yourself to see if you're in the faith. Make your calling and election sure. And if you cannot make it sure or if you fail the test, then trust in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.