

Hillcrest Chapel -- 10/27/91 a.m.

THE HOPE OF THE HOPELESS
Romans 4:13-25

Intro: I want to use as my text today the six words at the beginning of verse 18, "Who against hope believed in hope."

We can see from the reading of this chapter that the "who" of this statement is Abraham. He was the one who "believed in hope" when everything was "against hope," or hopeless.

Year ago I remember seeing a book (I believe it was written by Arno C. Gaebelein) called, Hopeless Yet There Is Hope. That is the thought in this text: Things looked hopeless, yet Abraham "believed in hope."

We know that it was not as easy for Abraham to believe as it was for Paul to write this statement, or for me to say it. There were the dark times when the hope he had seemed out of reach. There were times when Abraham did not believe. There were times when he acted in unbelief. But when the whole matter was finished, and the record was to be placed in Holy Scripture, the Spirit of God directed Paul to say about Abraham that he "against hope believed in hope." And therefore Abraham became an example for us, a man who believed God, a man whose faith we do well to follow. So a passage like this is of tremendous importance from a practical standpoint. And that is a big reason why we ought to be interested in it.

But let us examine this statement a little more closely by asking the question,

I. WHAT IS A "HOPE" IN SCRIPTURE?

Probably the simplest way to describe a hope is to say that it is a promise. More than that, it is a promise unfulfilled. It is a promise that we can expect to see fulfilled if the one who made the promise is reliable.

But hope is also something that we do. We have hope that a certain promise will eventually be fulfilled. If we do not believe a promise, then, of course, we do not put any hope in it.

The word hope in every day language expresses a certain amount of uncertainty. A young man may try out for the Blazers basketball team, and he hopes that he will make it, but he is not sure. There might be others better than he is who will be chosen instead of him. But "hope" in Scripture is different. There we are dealing with the promises of God.

We may not know when a promise of God will be fulfilled, but we have no doubt but that eventually it will be fulfilled. The promises of God are absolutely certain.

All of this means that when we hope in what people will do for us, we have no certainty that it will take place. We hope it will, but we do not know. On the other hand, the promises of God are absolutely certain, and we can "hope" in them with absolute certainty and peace. God has never made a promise that He did not intend to keep, nor has He made of promise that He might not be able to keep. He is the omnipotent, sovereign God. There is nothing impossible with Him that He has promised to do. He may do things for which we have no promise, but that is entirely in His hands.

Now let us look at:

II. THE PROMISE OF GOD TO ABRAHAM.

Here we need to go back to the book of Genesis. The story of Abraham is found in chapters 12 through 25 of the first book of the Bible. Abraham lived as long before the birth of Christ as we do after the birth of Christ. This means that we are talking about a man who lived 4,000 years ago. Our text in Romans actually gives us the promise of God to Abraham in brief. Let me read verse 18 to you again.

(Read.) Notice it was "that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be."

To whom was Paul referring when he said, "According to that which was spoken"? Who made such a promise to Abraham? We all should know that it was the Lord. But we also should know that the Lord was not speaking of the fact that many nations would look to Abraham as their ancestor (which they do), but the Lord was speaking about spiritual descendants! Let me prove that to you.

Please turn to Gen. 12, and let me read the first three verses to you. (Read.) Notice especially the third verse.

Then listen to these words from Gal. 3:8, 9:

And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.

So this was a promise of the greatest proportions. God was promising Abraham salvation! It was a promise that was for Gentiles as well as for Jews. But all that Abraham had to go

on was the promise of God.

But one interesting thing about our text is that it tells us about Abraham's faith: "Against hope" he "believed in hope." What did the Apostle Paul mean, "Against hope"?

It meant that trusting God was not easy for Abraham. It meant that there were things which seemed to stand in the way of the hope that the Lord had given to him. Let us see what they were.

III. OBSTACLES IN THE WAY OF ABRAHAM'S FAITH.

We always need to remember when we compare the record of the lives of OT saints with the NT report of the final outcome, so that we will not be under any false ideas of the trials they had to overcome. We read here in Romans that Abraham "staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief." We also read that he was "fully persuaded that, what he [God] had promised, he was able also to perform." But when you read the Genesis account you see that he did stagger. You see that he was not always confident of what the outcome would be. You would never have those words "against hope" if it had all been easy for him. He did doubt. He did fail. He tried several of his own ways.

The word "stagger" in the Greek is an interesting word. It is a word which speaks of inner turmoil, of great confusion, even of arguing with yourself as to what should be done. Abraham experienced all of that. But the reason that Paul said in Romans that he didn't stagger, and that he was fully persuaded, is because Paul is talking about how the Lord brought him through and what his faith was like when at last the promise was fulfilled.

What were problems that stood in Abraham's way, obstacles to trusting the Lord, things which made it necessary for him to believe "against hope" that God would provide salvation for them as He had said that He would?

These are all important for us because we too face the same difficulties. Our circumstances are different, but the things that troubled him are some of the same things that trouble us.

I am not going to mention all of the obstacles he had. I would have to take more time than we have this morning to do that, but I will just confine myself to the things which Paul mentioned in this passage.

The first obstacle was:

A. Time.

Genesis 12 gives us the call of Abraham, and the hope which the Lord placed before him in those first three verses. However, it is not until we get to chapter 21 that Isaac was born. That was twenty-five years later! Abraham had gotten to be 100 years old, and Sarah was 90--too late even in those days for a man and his wife to have a child.

So the first obstacle was time.

We all hate to wait. By nature we are impatient. I like that familiar story of the Christian who was in a lot of turmoil, and someone asked him what was wrong. His answer way, "Because I am in a hurry, but God isn't!"

We like to see things happen right now, and when they don't happen, even after a reasonable period of time, we have the feeling that they will never happen. Sometimes things even get worse, rather than better, with the passage of time. We can see so many ways and can identify so many times when it would be perfect for God to work, but nothing happens!

I personally have suffered as much over this matter of time as I have anything else. I am waiting now on the Lord for several things. I have a hard time seeing why some things don't happen faster than they do. And I see this almost daily in the lives of others. A child is away from the Lord; what doesn't the Lord bring him back? A husband and wife are having trouble; why doesn't the Lord remove the cause of their difficulty? A family has a special need; why does the Lord not provide when He said that He will? We have loved ones who are not saved; we pray for them, but they seem to get farther away from the Lord. Or we know other people who profess to know the Lord, but we see no evidence that they are growing. They may come to church, but that is as far as it goes. We pray for them, but nothing happens. And all the time the clock ticks on. What are we to do?

The answer is obvious: we have to do what we don't want to do; we have to wait. Abraham and Sarah had to wait. They waited twenty-five years for the birth of the son who was to be one among many (although they did not know this) who would be in the line leading to Christ.

God may not always do what we would like for Him to do, nor what we might reasonably expect Him to do. But He calls upon us to wait, to trust Him, to believe in His wisdom and His power, to believe the promises of His Word, and to quietly obey His will while we are waiting.

David said in the first verse of Psalm 40, "I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry." He also said in Psal. 34:8, "Blessed is the man that trusteth in him," speaking of the Lord. Abraham waited and so did Sarah, and they found out that God is faithful to His Word.

Let me mention another obstacle:

B. Human frailty.

Our Authorized Version renders verse 19 in this way: "And being not weak in faith, he considered **not** his own body now dead...nor yet the deadness of Sarah's womb."

But there are some MSS of Romans that render it this way: "And being not weak in faith, he **considered** his own body now dead...and the deadness of Sarah's womb."

Which ever translation is right, this verse indicates that they had considered what they could do. If God is not doing something, maybe He intends for us to do something. Sometimes He does, but not always. They even had a child by Hagar, and that was a great mistake. But you see, when time is going by, we are not only frustrated by that, but we are frustrated also because often our hands are tied so that we can't do what we might like to do.

Or perhaps you feel that because of your human frailty, and the way you have failed the Lord in the past, that the Lord is not going to help you in that need that you are facing now. This is where our faith is often tested, and we learn more about the grace of God than we have ever known before.

If we are learning more about our own limitations and weaknesses, that is good. The Lord waits until we know that we are not sufficient in ourselves so that we will trust Him, and wait for Him.

I will mention one more obstacle which seemed to stand in the way of Abraham's faith.

C. The nature of the promise itself.

Look at verses 20 and 21.

One thing that trials often do to us is to make us stagger at the very promises of God. We are inclined to say, "The Lord used to do special things for His people, but we don't see that any more." Have you ever been through a trial where it became hard for you to read your Bible because you were

having trouble believing that they were really true?

Look at what David said in Psalm 22, verses 1 through 8 (and even beyond). Have you ever felt like that? Have you had times in your life when the Word seemed just too good to be true? Or have you felt that the Lord might meet the needs of others, but not your needs?

You will find if you read Gen. 15 that the Lord came to Abraham after he had returned from the battle with the kings in which he was victorious, but evidently fearful about what those kings might do to retaliate. And the Lord said to Abraham, "I am your shield, and your exceeding great reward." But Abraham responded by saying in effect, "Those promises really don't mean anything to me, Lord, because you still haven't given us a son!"

Concl: How amazing it is, then, that we read what we do in Romans 4 about Abraham! Romans 4 tells us not what Abraham finally made of himself, but what the Lord did in his life. Romans 4 is not a tribute to Abraham, but a tribute to Abraham's God. Abraham was not a self-made man; he was a God-made man. It was the Lord Who brought him through all of the obstacles he faced, and all of the doubts which filled his heart.

And you see it has been written us, too, that we might trust in the promise of salvation which God gave to Abraham, and which was validated by our Lord Jesus Christ when He came to earth to die and to be raised again. But trusting the Lord is not some one-time thing that we do when we are saved, but it is a way of life. And the Lord lets us wait, and shows us the greatness of our need, and the power of His promises, so that we will see that the only way of blessing is for us to trust Him, to wait for Him, and to do it joyfully, knowing that He will not and cannot fail us.

Our ultimate hope is that some day we will see the Lord, be with the Lord, and, most amazing of all, will be like the Lord.

Let me conclude by reading you the other passages in Romans where Paul spoke of our hope in God, in Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. (See next page.)