

Romans 4:13-25 The promise of God

The 4th verse of the hymn, “Just As I Am” goes,

Just as I am, You will receive
Will welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve
Because of your promise I believe
O Lamb of God, I come

The promise of God is amazing. As a child your Mum or Dad may have made you a promise, such as a day out at the seaside. You knew the fulfilment of the promise depended completely on Mum or Dad being true to their word. God’s promise is amazing, because unlike even good parents, He never lets us down (Joshua 21:45).

1. The promise of God is not through the law (4:13-15)

I came across a tweet, “We are wired to think we have to earn something; the gospel says live well but we don’t earn God’s favour.” The gospel is grace, God’s undeserved favour, and depends on His promise. Only He has the power to fulfil His promise. But we are so wired up to think there is no such thing as a free lunch, we can actually be suspicious of anything that is offered totally free. Of course, earning a good wage is right and proper. But in our relationship with God we are unable to earn His favour. Trying to find salvation *through the law* (Romans 4:13) is trying to earn God’s favour. This is not to say there is anything wrong with the law (Romans 7:12,14). But using any religious activity as a means of salvation rather than as an expression of the salvation already received can never produce the kind of life that pleases God. If that were possible then, *faith means nothing and the promise is worthless* (Romans 4:14). It would be like a 5 year old saying, “I’m going to get in the car and drive myself to the seaside!”

But it’s more than that, because, *the law brings wrath* (Romans 4:15a). If by an unhappy chance you are stopped for speeding, it is then you realise that the law brings wrath, probably a £60 fine and three points on your licence! We have all broken God’s law (i.e. are sinners), and Deuteronomy 28 gives an idea of some of the consequences, which are addressed to the nation of Israel, but may also have personal application (cf Psalm 103:10).

Without the law there would be no real knowledge of sin (Romans 4:15b). Two things begin to happen when we start reading the Bible with eyes that see. First we begin to see the glory of God in Jesus Christ. Secondly we begin to get a sense of our own sinfulness, and the need for “welcome, pardon, cleansing and relief.”

2. The promise of God comes by faith (4:16-17, 23-25)

Faith has been called the 6th sense, and faith is the means by which we relate to God (see Hebrews 11:1). We can be certain of God’s promise even if we don’t see with our natural senses. But what exactly is the promise of God? Abraham was promised a son through whom would come the long promised Messiah, Jesus. Jesus also promised the Spirit.

God sent His Son in order to put human beings right with God, to justify them (e.g. Romans 4:25) Justification is a word not easy to understand. In a court of law the judge will either condemn or acquit the defendant. If the person is acquitted, or declared ‘not guilty’, this means they are justified. Paul is referring to justification in the heavenly courtroom. But sometimes a person can be declared ‘not guilty’ even when they are guilty, e.g. in ancient Israel if there was only one witness

(Deuteronomy 19:15); or in a modern courtroom if there is insufficient evidence for a reliable conviction. So,

Justification = to be declared “not guilty” even when you are.

Justification = just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned.

Justification doesn’t suddenly make you into a godly person, that takes time. Rather it is the legal verdict in the heavenly courtroom. The reason God can do this is because another took our sins for us, Jesus Christ who became the *sacrifice of atonement* (Romans 3:25) so that the promise may be guaranteed to all who have faith in what Jesus has achieved (Romans 4:16). Jesus the Son puts us right with God by faith, but He also promised the Spirit (Acts 1:4). All who have truly believed and are justified in Christ also receive the Spirit to walk a new way by the Spirit. Much of Romans 5-8 is teaching about walking according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh.

3. The promise of God sustains our faith (Romans 4:17-22)

Although Abraham lived to see Isaac born, Isaac wasn’t the ultimate fulfilment of the promised Messiah. But the word of promise sustained his faith. Abraham believed in *the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that are not* (Romans 4:17b). In other words, Abraham believed in a miracle working God, the same God we believe in. Scientists have done a lot of wonderful things, but they can’t give life to the dead or create something out of nothing. But God can do these things with ease. Abraham had to face the fact that he and Sarah were past child bearing age. Yet because of the promise of God he looked to the God who could do miracles (and still can!) (Romans 4:19).

Paul also believed in the God who can do miracles. On one occasion he confessed, *we were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself*. Yet he trusted in God who can raise the dead: *this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again* (2Corinthians 1:8-10). This kind of faith gave Abraham, and Paul, genuine hope (Romans 4:18).

In Romans 19-20 (KJV) it says that Abraham was not *weak in faith* but he was *strong in faith*. This is worth noting because Romans 14 and 15 is about the weak and strong in faith. For now we can note that the strong in faith are those who share the faith of Abraham, be they Jew or Gentile, who believe in the God who gives life to the dead, who believe that God raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead for our justification.

To speak of God as a miracle working God is not to deny the natural world or the laws of nature. But it is to say that God is the Creator of the natural world, and therefore above it.

We cannot not turn God’s power on and off like flicking a light switch on and off. However, when God promises something, we can trust for sure that He will fulfil it, in His own way, not ours, and in His own time, not ours. Not one of God’s good promises has ever failed for his people, and this gives us hope.

There are things in my life I regret and things I have doubted God about. But since the day I gave my life to Christ, I have never doubted His promise of eternal life to all who believe. And like Abraham, we wait in anticipation for the complete fulfilment of the promise. One day the glory of the Lord will fill the earth as the waters cover the seas, and we will understand that the resurrection life God promises extends beyond the grave. This word of promise sustains our faith.