

Reading intro:

In one episode of the TV show *Blue Bloods*, Detective Reagan is called to the scene of the abduction of a high school girl. As he sets out to find this teenager, the father of a girl who was abducted from that same school 7 years earlier comes to see him. The detective hates seeing Joseph, that father, because it reminds him of his failure to find Joseph's daughter Allie. When the detective asks Joseph why he keeps on believing his daughter is not dead, the father responds, "On the day Allie was taken, you told me 'The best weapon we have in a case like this is to never lose hope!'"

Reagan responds, "How do you do it, Joseph? ...No matter how many years pass, you keep hoping everything's gonna be okay." Joseph says, "Because I don't have a choice. The alternative is accepting that my life is over. That I've lost the one thing I love most in this world." His words come from a heart that can't give up believing in the impossible.

Our Bible reading has a similar sentiment: "Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed..." In conversational English we sometimes say, "I am hoping against all hope." That means, what I'm hoping for is probably impossible but I'm hoping for it anyway. This is hope with little reason or justification, as in "I'm hoping against hope that someone will return my stolen wallet."

The basis for the hope of Joseph in that TV show is very different than the basis for the hope of Abraham. So think about the basis for our hope as we read our Bible passage.

Pray

Turn to Romans 4, beginning at v.16. Our text is v.18.

I'm going to read this passage starting with the NIV and then switching to a different translation. The reading will be on the screen but I invite you to use your Bible to compare if you have your Bible handy.

As a bit of introduction, keep in mind that Romans 4 is all about Abraham being justified by faith, rather than by works, including circumcision or any other demands of the law so that Gentiles can be saved by faith as well as Jews.

Now, hear the word of the Lord as written by the Apostle Paul, beginning at v.16:

¹⁶ Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷ As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

¹⁸ Against all hope, but still in hope, Abraham believed that he would become the father of many nations, in line with what had been said to him, 'That's what your family will be like.' (or so shall your offspring be) ¹⁹ He didn't become weak in faith as he considered his own body (which was already as good as dead, since he was about a hundred years old), and the lifelessness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰ He didn't waver in unbelief when faced with God's promise. Instead, he grew strong in faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully convinced that God had the power to accomplish what he had promised. ²² That is why 'it was calculated to him in terms of covenant justice'.

²³ But it wasn't written for him alone that 'it was calculated to him'. ²⁴ It was written for us as well! It will be calculated to us, too, when we believe in the one who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead, ²⁵ the one who was handed over because of our trespasses and raised because of **(for)** our justification.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear Family of God,

People would look at Abraham and Sarah and think they were a couple of nutcases. For 25 years—starting at 75 & 65 years old—they believed this crazy promise that they would become parents. We're now in our late 50s and I know it ain't happening again for Patsy and me. That's physically impossible, particularly for a woman at this age. And it was obviously not considered any more likely in Abraham's time when he and Sarah were into their 90s. Did you hear the description in Romans 4:19? The NIV reads,

Rom 4:19 (Abraham) faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead.

Faith: Hoping Against Hope

As good as dead! You can't get water out of a stone, some people say. In other words, you can't expect a stone to give what it doesn't have. In the same way, it was crazy for Abraham and Sarah to think that they could become natural, biological parents at their age. Their bodies in that regard weren't up for it. They were as good as dead. People could understandably protest that they were taking this faith in God thing much too far. But God promised and so they believed.

“Against all hope, but still in hope, Abraham believed that he would become the father of many nations...”

Noah was like that too. Until his day, apparently no one had ever heard of a flood. But God says, “build an ark on dry ground, far from any water.” And Noah does it. As he works on that construction project, you can completely understand that people watching him would think Noah had lost touch with reality. He was taking this faith in God thing too far. But God called him to do it and “Against all hope, but still in hope,” Noah believed and obeyed.

I’m sure that as Ruth walked away from her sister in law to follow her mother in law Naomi, as she left her Moabite neighbours in her rearview mirror, they were probably all thinking, “This girl has lost it. She’s got it good here. Why go to a foreign land with a foreign woman and serve a foreign God?” She was probably thought to be taking faith in the God of Naomi much too far as well. “Against all hope, but still in hope,” Ruth believed.

February is Black History month. There are many examples of our black sisters and brothers who were likely called crazy—or worse—by people who saw them trying to follow God’s call. “Against all hope, but still in hope,” they believed.

Lott Carey (1780-1828) was born into slavery in the US, raised in a Christian home but turned away from the Lord as a young man. He worked in the day and partied at night. After 2 or 3 years of that lifestyle, he felt the Holy Spirit convicting him of his sin. He repented upon hearing a sermon about Nicodemus. It so captured his heart that he longed to read that story himself, so he learned how to read. He read the Bible for himself and his faith grew. Over time, the Lord enabled him to purchase his freedom from enslavement. He could live in freedom and pursue a better life for himself and his family in the US. But, instead, he felt a call to become a missionary to Africa. After several years of preparation, Lott moved his family to Liberia. Within the first year, his wife died, leaving him to care for his three children. But he persevered in the work, believing God’s call for him. After just 8 years of sharing the gospel and planting churches in Liberia, Lott himself died.

It is safe to say that people could look at his faith and think Lott was mad for leaving the US and risking his life and the life of his family for the sake of the gospel. “Against all hope, but still in hope,” he believed that God was calling him to reach Africa with the gospel.

He is another example of trusting God in the midst of impossible situations. (<https://www.imb.org/2018/08/28/missionaries-you-should-know-lott-cary/>)

Similarly, **Harriet Tubman** is well-known in Canada. She escaped slavery in the US in 1849 but was not satisfied with just her own freedom. Tubman said it was

the voice of God that helped her lead as many as 300 slaves into freedom in Canada using what was called the Underground Railroad. Her commitment to live out God's calling to sacrificial service would be considered foolishness to many. "Against all hope, but still in hope," she believed in the call of God on her life. It was her faith that drove her to seek the good of others. No matter how crazy anyone else thought she might be, she followed God's call to save people from slavery and even from death.

Such is a life moved by the faith that our God is the God of the impossible. He doesn't ask us to do what is possible for us. No, he asks to do what is possible for him.

Faith: in God's Power, not Ours

You see, the point of Paul using Abraham as an illustration of faith is not so much to highlight the faith of Abraham but the one in whom Abraham put his faith. Paul is highlighting God's power to change lives and use people for his purposes. Paul is saying "Against all hope" meaning all human hope. All hope in human plans and strength. "But still in hope"—hope grounded in God. Abraham's hope was based on God's promise and had God's power to back it up and make it happen. Romans 4:20 says of Abraham,

*Rom 4:20 He didn't waver in unbelief when faced with God's promise. Instead, he grew strong in faith and gave glory to God, ²¹ being fully convinced that **God had the power** to accomplish what he had promised.*

God has the power to help us do the impossible. Our faith is in God's power, not in ourselves.

Moreover, Paul teaches us that God's power for us is based on God's work for us too. Verse 22 says,

²² That is why 'it was calculated to him in terms of covenant justice'.

Our NIV translation says *it was credited to him as righteousness*. While that's an accurate translation into English, it can give the sense that Abraham earned something, which is not at all the meaning of that phrase in the Greek. It is not about God owing something to Abraham for his faithfulness or crediting him for his righteousness. The translation, "it was calculated to him in terms of covenant justice" gets at the sense that God is giving Abraham what God intended for mankind. God is fulfilling his promise and providing the justice needed to fulfill it.

Justice demands that sin be paid in full, but humans can't pay for our sin. Only God could do that and God did do that through Jesus, his Son. God's covenant from the Garden of Eden was that he would make things right! He would reverse the curse. And to do so, he would pay the just price for sin.

That was the promise that Abraham was believing. Yes, God could do the impossible and make Sarah pregnant even at 90 years old. But more importantly,

God had promised to send a Messiah to reverse the curse and enable Abraham and Sarah to fulfill the creation mandate in Genesis 1 to be fruitful and multiply. The birth of Isaac is a sign that God saves his people—ultimately through Christ by turning the curse on its head, by restoring creation. Isaac born to an infertile old couple symbolizes God's love for the world and his power to put things back as he created them.

In short, dear friends, we need to see God's power on display in the life and faith of Abraham. God's promise and his power to fulfill it is the reason Abraham can hope against all hope.

In the *Blue Bloods* show, Joseph kept hoping for the return of his daughter but it was a hope that had no real solid ground to stand on. It was "I have to keep on hoping she is alive otherwise I'll have no reason to live." His hope was only a way of avoiding a potential bad end to the story.

But Abraham's hope is different. He's not a nutcase for believing some impossible dream. He's believing because God is the God of the impossible. When God promises, no matter what obstacles come in the way, God will not be stopped. His plan will not be thwarted. He will accomplish what he promises. So Abraham has confident hope because God is a God of his Word and his power alone will accomplish what he promises. God is the God of the impossible.

You see, we are wrong if we deceive ourselves into thinking that Abraham was so great because he had such strong faith. Let's not forget that Abraham doubted God several different times. Most notably, when he agreed with Sarah's reasoning that they should help God to fulfill his promise to give them a son. You remember that? Sarah argued, "Surely, since it's taking so long, God must have in mind that Abraham use a surrogate mother." That led to the birth of Ishmael but he was not the child God promised. This was a case of Abraham making a mess instead of waiting for God to do what he promised and to do it in the way he promised.

So the fulfillment of God's covenant promises is not based on Abraham's perfect faith. It is based solely on the work of Jesus to satisfy the demands of covenant justice. It's not based on Abraham's obedience. Not on Noah's obedience. Not on Ruth's obedience. Not our Lott Carey's or Harriet Tubman's obedience. And not on mine or yours. Our righteousness comes by faith in Jesus alone who turn around the curse of sin by satisfying God's covenant justice.

In his effort to show Gentiles and Jews alike that we are saved by faith alone, Paul refers to the circumcision of Abraham here in Romans 4. He makes it plain that circumcision was a fruit of faith, not a requirement for faith or work of some kind that earned us salvation. We must be clear that it's **not** the sign of the covenant that saves but the God behind the covenant. It's God's power that saves

us and his power is able to fulfill his promises, especially his promise of salvation to people of all nations. In his power we can live by faith, even doing the impossible that God gives us to do.

When we partake of the Lord's Supper together next Sunday, it is a celebration of what God has done and how Christ's work is more than enough to save us. Celebrating the Lord's Supper is **not** a sign of our perfect faith. No, our coming to the Lord's Table reminds us of what Jesus has accomplished for us. It tells us that God—in his covenant faithfulness—sent us his Son to satisfy the demands of his covenant justice which we could not meet. In addition, it reminds us that we need and we have God's grace to help us live by faith, even doing the impossible in our day too. We hope against all hope, we live by faith because of God's promises and God's power.

Faith: Living Out of Our Sure Hope

So the challenge of this chapter is for us to live out of our sure hope in Christ. That's what faith is about. We have a solid basis, a sure foundation to build on. Our lives are part of God's eternal kingdom beginning in this world and lasting into eternity.

Maybe it's because of my poor ability to see what God is doing through my life, but there are days when I think, "Is my work as a pastor really making a difference—any difference at all? Does my 30 or 40 years of ministry—if I live to be 70—really accomplish anything?" You might wonder that about your life too.

Then I look at a guy like Abraham—my spiritual father and your spiritual father—and realize that he must have had those kind of questions. Did it really matter that I left my father Terah and went to Canaan? Did it really make a difference that Sarah and I trusted God to give us a son? Even after getting Isaac, I'm sure they were delighted, but what real impact did they feel their little lives made in the big scheme of things? They didn't see their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. They just had a relatively small family by the time they died. With eyes on our own life, we just can't see the big picture that God has in mind. But through the lens of the Bible, we get to see that Abraham was indeed the father of many nations. He is the father of the **nation** that brought Jesus into the world but he didn't see that happening in his lifetime.

Did Ruth really think that her decision to follow Naomi would change the world? I suspect not. She probably enjoyed her life with her new husband Boaz, enjoyed a family and the fellowship of God's people and of God himself. But she didn't know what God would do through her faith. We know because of the big picture. We read in the Bible that Ruth's choice to put her hope in the God of Naomi and Abraham resulted ultimately in the birth of Jesus! But she didn't know

that. The God of the impossible made it happen because he was fulfilling his promise step by step in a young Moabite woman.

Did Lott Carey feel he had made a difference for the Lord by leaving the US and starting a mission to Africa? Did his 8 years there and all the sacrifices he made make a difference? I suspect he wondered that himself. But looking back 200 years later, we can now see that the God of Abraham used the faith of this man to start change a large part of the world.

Carey endured deep loss in the process. He suffered physically, emotionally and maybe even spiritually at times. But his hope was in the God of the impossible; he persevered like Father Abraham, not knowing exactly what God might do with his work, but convinced that following God's lead is never crazy! Against all hope, but still in hope, he believed.

The same is true for Harriet Tubman. Against all hope, but still in hope, she believed the voice of God was calling her rescue slaves, one by one. And that's what she did.

It's true in our lives too. We've seen a lot of sorrow in recent weeks. Should we doubt that God has a plan for our lives? Does our struggle through the past year of Covid-19 make a difference for God's kingdom and his plan? Does our cancer, our dementia, our battle with other things really matter?

What about the good things we do that seem rather insignificant? Does it make a difference in the kingdom of God that I preach this sermon? Does your attention to your family and spouse have eternal significance? Does it matter that you go to work each day and try your best to honour God there? Does it matter that you go to school and learn to think and to better understand the world as God made it?

It does. It does! Yes, it does!! Every act of faith, every moment lived by faith in God makes a difference because in some small way it advances God's work in this world. Whether our life is long or short is not the issue. It's God's life and he gives it to us and uses us for his purposes. Do we fully understand? I highly doubt it. Do we see the difference we make? Not all the time. Maybe in some small ways.

But our faithfulness to God is as important as that of Abraham, Noah, Ruth, Lott Carey, Harriet Tubman or anyone else in Abraham's family of faith. Our hoping in the God of the impossible and acting on that hope, no matter how small the act of faith, makes an eternal difference. We might not see it in our lifetime here on earth, but God can use our small acts of obedience now just as he used the saints of old to accomplish his plans.

So, friends, go about your small acts of faith in the confidence that God is doing something with your life—in its joys and its struggles—God is doing something that you might not fully understand today. When we offer our lives in faith to God’s service, he uses us. Because of Jesus, your life matters and is showing the world—even in small ways—that the curse of sin is broken; the hope we have in Christ is the source of our strength and confidence.

And all God’s people say, “Amen.”

Our musicians will come forward now and lead us in a song of confidence and hope in Christ. Despite our weaknesses and our faithlessness, Jesus **ensures** our future and the hopeful purpose of our lives, whether long or short, pleasant or difficult. Some of the words we’ll sing include:

*To this I hold my hope is only Jesus
All the glory evermore to him
When the race is complete still my lips shall repeat
Yet not I but through Christ in me*

Christ is our hope against all hope.