

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 31, 2016**

BELIEVING IN HOPE

Romans 4:18-25

Two Sundays ago, before we were interrupted last weekend by the blizzard of 2016, we looked together at Romans 4, examining there the experience of Abraham as an illustration of the biblical doctrine of justification (or salvation) by faith, which lies at the heart of the gospel Paul proclaimed and which we believe. We continue today where we left off two weeks ago, reading Romans 4:18-25. I invite you to follow along in your Bible or the Pew Bible (page 798) or your favorite electronic device. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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Let me tell you about a man named Robert Dick Wilson. Long before my time, he was a linguistics scholar and professor of Old Testament at Princeton Seminary. Wilson was born in 1856 in the small town of Indiana, PA, which is where Mary Sue and I spent the summer we were married (1977), in training to do campus ministry with the Coalition for Christian Outreach (CCO). The town of Indiana's most famous native is actor Jimmy Stewart, whose father owned a hardware store in town.

But back to Wilson: By the time he was an undergraduate at Princeton University, he could read the New Testament in nine languages. In his lifetime, he learned 45 ancient languages, including Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, as well as all the languages into which the Old and New Testaments had been translated up to the year 600 AD. After finishing his graduate studies, he taught at Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh and then for nearly 30 years at Princeton Seminary before leaving Princeton to become a founding member of the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary a year before his death in 1930.

Interestingly, when he listened to his students preach, there was something more important to him than their familiarity with the biblical languages or their ability to explain the nuances of particular Greek or Hebrew words. There was another quality he would listen for. After hearing one former student preach, Wilson said: "I am glad that you are a big-godder. When my (students) come back, I come to see if they are big-godders or little-godders, and then I know what their ministry will be."

Abraham was a "big-godder." The God he believed in was a big God, a God who makes big promises and always keeps His promises, a God who has the power to do the seemingly impossible, because everything is Him-possible with God.

Since Abraham is such a central figure in the history of the Jewish people and in the history of salvation (as a direct ancestor of Jesus), it is important to know his story – or, perhaps we should say, the story of God's dealings with him. His story is the main focus of Genesis 12-

25. His shadow, though, looms large throughout the whole Bible, and throughout the history of the Jewish people, who trace their ancestry back to Abraham and his wife Sarah.

Abraham occupies a prominent place in the chronicles of faith in Hebrews 11 (verses 8-19). In addition, Paul shines the spotlight on Abraham both here in Romans 4 and in Galatians 3 and 4 as he explains the gospel way of justification by faith apart from works or merit of any kind.

Even though we talked about Abraham's story two weeks ago, it is good for us to review some of the details. Abraham, as you know, was originally "Abram." Sarah's name was originally "Sarai." Abraham is first mentioned at the end of Genesis 11, where we read that he was the son of Terah, and the brother of Nahor and Haran (Genesis 11:26-27). Sarah, his wife, was barren. She was unable to become pregnant and bear children, which was, no doubt, a source of great grief and disappointment to both Sarah and Abraham. But God had plans for them it would take them a long time to understand.

Originally from Ur of the Chaldeans, Abraham and Sarah left their home and family and friends, and set out with Abraham's father Terah and his (Abraham's) nephew Lot to go to the land of Canaan. But they only went part way. When they got to Haran, in present-day Syria, they settled there (Genesis 11:31). But Abraham, having heard God's call and God's promise to bless him to be a blessing, did what the Lord told him to do. He left Haran, without knowing exactly where he was going. The Lord led him to Canaan, the land that would become the inheritance of the Jewish people hundreds of years later following their exodus from Egypt. God's call to Abraham, the Bible says, took place when Abraham was 75 years old (Genesis 12:1-3). In the chronicles of faith found in Hebrews 11, it says: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance" – the land of Canaan – "obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country" (Hebrews 11:8-9).

Sometime after arriving in Canaan, the Lord spoke to Abraham again and promised to give him a son, and descendants as numerous as stars in the heavens (Genesis 15:4-5). Abraham's response was a defining moment in his life. How did he respond? Genesis 15:6 says: "Abraham believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness." He *believed* God. He *trusted* God to do what He said. He *accepted* what the Lord said to him as true. And the Lord accepted him. On the basis of his faith, God accepted Abraham and declared him righteous in His sight.

Remember that Abraham was 75 years old when he received this promise from the Lord – the promise of a son and a line of descendants that would become a great nation. God promised. Abraham believed. And then ... nothing happened. A decade passed. Neither Abraham nor Sarah were getting any younger. Sarah's biological clock had already stopped ticking. So, what to do? Since it seemed that God wasn't doing anything and perhaps needed a little help, Sarah took matters into her own hands, in a manner of speaking, and proposed to Abraham that he have a child through her maid servant Hagar. Abraham agreed and slept with Hagar, who became pregnant and gave birth to a son named Ishmael. At long last, at the age of 86, Abraham had become a father (Genesis 16:1-4, 15-16).

But the birth of Ishmael was not the fulfillment of God's plan for Abraham. Another 13 years passed. When Abraham was 99, the Lord appeared to him and spoke to him again, saying: "I will bless (Sarah) and will surely give you a son by her" (Genesis 17:16). Moments later, the Lord repeated the promise: "(Y)our wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac" (17:19).

Abraham's reaction was to laugh, not out loud but to himself (17:17). He thought to himself: After all these years? At the age of 100? And Sarah, at the age of 90?

Sarah would laugh, too, though she denied it, when the Lord visited Abraham again in Genesis 18 and confirmed the promise of a son through Sarah. She overheard the Lord say to Abraham: "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son" (18:10). She laughed when she heard it. This is not a direct quote, but I think her reaction was something like, "Yeah, right."

But God said: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (18:14) Is *anything* too hard for God? I suppose we could make an endless list of things that are impossible from a human perspective. But, as Abraham came to understand, things that are impossible for us are "Him-possible" with God. Including things like a virgin becoming pregnant and giving birth to the Son of God in flesh and blood. Or the power of God to enable an old man like Abraham, whose body was "as good as dead" (Romans 4:19; Hebrews 11:12), and an old woman like Sarah, who had endured a lifetime of infertility, to become parents long after all human hope had died.

Is anything too hard for the Lord? Hundreds of years after the time of Abraham and Sarah, and hundreds of years before Paul wrote to the Romans, Jeremiah the prophet said: "Ah, Sovereign Lord, You have made the heavens and earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for You" (Jeremiah 32:17). Nothing.

Even bringing the dead back to life is not too hard for God. Abraham believed this, and he believed it long before the time of Jesus. Return with me to Hebrews 11 and the chronicles of faith: "By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father, because he considered Him faithful who had made the promise. And so, from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, and as countless as the sand on the seashore" (Hebrews 11:11-12).

But the story does not end there. Hebrews 11 continues: "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice." Can you imagine? "He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son" – meaning the son about whom God had made His covenant promises to Abraham – "even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'" Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death" (11:17-19). Long before the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, Abraham believed in the power of God to bring the dead back to life again.

Notice what Paul says about Abraham in Romans 4:

Verse 18: “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed ...” Believed what? Believed the promises of God. Believed the One who had made the promises to him.

Verse 19: “Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead” – which it was from the point of view of being able to produce children – “and that Sarah’s womb was also dead.” His body was weak. His body was dying. But not his faith. His faith was firm.

Verses 20 and 21: “Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promises of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised.”

The remarkable thing is that Abraham’s faith, his trust in God, actually seemed to increase as the time of waiting went on. It was not always constant. It is not that there weren’t moments of faltering, doubt, and impatience along the way. There were. Chuck Swindoll writes: “As I read the story of Abraham and Sarah I see multiple examples of wobbly-legged faith. Yet God looked not so much at their faltering growth but at their ultimate destination” (Swindoll, *Insights on Romans*, 105).

If this is true of Abraham and Sarah, isn’t it possible that it is also true of us? Isn’t it possible that while we become obsessed with our own weaknesses and faltering along the path of growth, God is looking at our ultimate destination?

“From our perspective,” Swindoll continues, “while (Abraham and Sarah) wavered a lot along the way, the Lord looks at the fact that they arrived, despite the presence of natural hindrances. They may have laughed, but that laughter did not nullify their trust. The aging couple took full account of their decaying bodies and [lack of] sexual potency as they, together, chose to believe God. Despite the occasional setbacks, Abraham’s mind remained undivided – weak in human understanding but always trained on God and no other” (Swindoll, 105).

Against all hope, Abraham held onto hope and believed God. Abraham and Sarah waited 25 years for God to keep His promise. In fact, God waited until it was physically impossible for Abraham and Sarah to have children before He fulfilled His promise. Yet Abraham was fully convinced that God’s power could and would match His promise. Which it did.

Abraham was a “big-godder.” He believed in a very big God. How about you? Are you a “big-godder?” Do you – do we – believe in a big God, a God who always keeps His word, a God who does impossible things? Do you – do we – really believe that God is able, more than able, to do immeasurably more than we could ever ask or imagine, according to His power at work in us? Do you – do we – really believe that God will do what He has said He will do, even when to all appearances it is impossible?

Do you – do we – really believe the gospel message that salvation is all a gift of grace to be received by faith alone, apart from any merit or good deeds on our part? This is the thing Paul ultimately wants us to see in the life of Abraham. Yes, Abraham is the example par

excellence of being justified or declared righteous in God's sight by faith. But Abraham is not unique in having been saved by faith. It is God's way of salvation for everybody who is saved. It is the only way of salvation. God did it all. God does it all. It is all a gift of grace that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it. Like you and me.

Only a big God could do it. And He did.

Whatever you and I may go through in life, may we hold on for dear life to our faith in this "big God." Like Abraham, may we believe in hope, being fully persuaded that God has the power to do all that He has promised. Even to save us from our sins and from ourselves. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.