

Chapter Thirty-five
Studies in the Epistle of Paul to the Romans
Life Out of Death through Faith

“¹⁷ (As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, *even* God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. ¹⁸ Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. ¹⁹ And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara’s womb: ²⁰ He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; ²¹ And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. ²² And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness” (Romans 4:17-22).

Some things are difficult to believe. If a 40 pound six year old came to me and told me he had just lifted 200 pounds over his head with his bare hands, I would find that pretty difficult to believe. However, if his 220 pound muscle bound father told me had just lifted 200 pounds over his head that would be believable. Credibility is often determined by who is telling the story. Such is the nature of faith.

God makes some very incredible statements in His Word. Accepting those statements by faith could be very difficult if a person lacked knowledge of God’s capabilities or the willingness to believe what God says. Because we know Who God is and believe what He says, what He says is credible (believable to us). God’s promise to Abraham came to him in his old age. Abraham and Sarah were both well beyond the ages where they were physically capable of having children. However, reading the whole account of this event from Genesis chapter 15 through Genesis chapter 21 shows us how it all unfolds.

The first appearance of God to Abraham is recorded in Genesis chapter 15 in the account of God making a covenant with Abraham. It is important to understand that the backdrop of all of this is God’s purpose in maintaining a pure lineage for the birth of Messiah. God’s purpose for choosing Abraham was to bring forth a nation from which Messiah would be born.

In the development of this story we move from the point of believability to unbelievability. When God first appeared to Abraham (when he was still Abram), Abraham and Sarah (still called Sarai) were apparently still capable of having children and still attempting to do so. Abraham believed God when he believed himself capable of producing children. That is what is recorded in Romans 4:17-22.

“¹ After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I *am* thy shield, *and* thy exceeding great reward. ² And Abram said, Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house *is* this Eliezer of Damascus? ³ And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir. ⁴ And, behold, the word of the LORD *came* unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. ⁵ And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. ⁶ And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:1-5).

However, God wants to prove to Abraham that the whole basis of faith must be totally apart from human capabilities. God is going to take Abraham beyond the realm of believability into the realm of the incredible. God is going to expand this spark of faith recorded in Genesis 15 into something totally beyond Abraham. In Genesis 16, we find a change taking place. Abraham and Sarah are becoming desperate. Ten years had passed. They have all but given up on God’s promise and have decided to take the matter into their own hands.

“¹ Now Sarai Abram’s wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name *was* Hagar. ² And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. ³ And Sarai Abram’s wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife” (Genesis 16:1-3).

The story of God’s building faith in these people’s lives does not end in this sad state of affairs. It gets worse before it gets better. Abraham was 86 years old when Sarah’s handmaid (Hagar) gave birth to Ishmael. The covenant was made with Abraham 10 years (plus nine months) before. Abraham would have been about 75 or 76 at that time.

God’s next appearance to Abraham was thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael when Abraham is 99 years old (Genesis 17:1). God reconfirms His covenant to raise up a nation from the loins of Abraham (Genesis 17:1-14). After 24 years, Abraham is beginning to waver in his faith. We should not forget that God has a purpose in all of this. God is separating Abraham’s faith in God from Abraham’s faith in himself.

Another point would be missed in all of this if we skip past what takes place in Genesis 15:7-18. It is important to look closely at this portion of Scripture in order to understand God’s covenant promise to Abraham.

“⁷ And he said unto him, I *am* the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it. ⁸ And he said, Lord GOD, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it? ⁹ And he said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon. ¹⁰ And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not. ¹¹ And when the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away. ¹² And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him. ¹³ And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land *that is* not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; ¹⁴ And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. ¹⁵ And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶ But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites *is* not yet full. ¹⁷ And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. ¹⁸ In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates:” (Genesis 15:7-18).

Normally in the making of a covenant between two people, an animal would be killed and divided in half. The parties involved would stand before the divided parts of the animals and state their individual parts in the covenant promises. Then they would pass together between the divided parts of the animal(s) signifying their acceptance of death should they break their covenant promises to one another. Notice that this is not what took place in Genesis 15:7-18. God brought a deep sleep upon Abram. God alone states the conditions of the covenant and God alone passes between the divided parts. The covenant of God with Abraham was not based upon Abraham’s faith or conditioned on Abraham’s performance, but solely on the basis of God’s purpose.

As we have said, in the record of these events God is separating Abraham’s faith in God from Abraham’s faith in himself. We find the next step in that process found in Abraham’s response to God’s reconfirmation of His covenant promise to Abraham in Genesis 17:17.

“¹⁵ And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall* her name *be*. ¹⁶ And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be *a mother* of nations; kings of people shall be of her. ¹⁷ Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall *a child* be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear” (Genesis 17:15-17).

The next appearance of God to Abraham is recorded in Genesis 18:1-15. It appears obvious that Abraham is repentant about his doubting God and laughing at God's incredible promise. God had separated Abraham's faith in Him from Abraham's faith in himself. Abraham was ready for the impossible and was ready to believe God for the impossible. However, Sarah was not (Genesis 18:12).

“¹ And the LORD appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; ² And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw *them*, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground, ³ And said, My Lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant: ⁴ Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree: ⁵ And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said. ⁶ And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead *it*, and make cakes upon the hearth. ⁷ And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetcht a calf tender and good, and gave *it* unto a young man; and he hasted to dress it. ⁸ And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set *it* before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat. ⁹ And they said unto him, Where *is* Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. ¹⁰ And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard *it* in the tent door, which *was* behind him. ¹¹ Now Abraham and Sarah *were* old *and* well stricken in age; *and* it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. ¹² Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? ¹³ And the LORD said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? ¹⁴ Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. ¹⁵ Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh” (Genesis 18:1-15).

It would take the events of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16-19:29) and Sarah's deliverance from defilement by Abimelech because of Abraham's deception (Genesis 20) to prepare her heart and faith for the supernatural event in her conception of Isaac in Genesis 21. Her laughter of doubt was turned to laughter of rejoicing.

“¹ And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken. ² For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. ³ And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac. ⁴ And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ And Abraham was an hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him. ⁶ And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, *so that* all that hear will laugh with me. ⁷ And she said, Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck? for I have born *him* a son in his old age” (Genesis 21:1-7).

Sarah said, “Who would have believed her if she had told them she would one day breast feed Abraham's child when he and she were so old?” No one would believe such an incredible statement. However the two that needed to believe it did. Abraham came to believe it. Sarah came to believe it.

This is the story behind Romans 4:17. Abraham stopped believing in himself and began to believe God solely on the basis of Who God is. He believed in the promise of the God Who is able to bring life from death. He believed in the promise of the God Who is able to make something from nothing.

The real issue is not what we can believe, but Who we can believe. Faith in God sees beyond human capabilities and rests in the ability of God to do whatever He says He will do. God's question of our faith is a simple one. It is the question of God to Abraham in Genesis 18:14 as to why Sarah laughed at God's promise. God's question of our faith is this, “Is any thing too hard for the LORD?”

What is your answer to that question? What you are willing to trust God with and for is the measurement of your faith in Him. Is there something you think too hard for God? Take that something to the Throne of Grace and lay it at the feet of Jesus. Trust Him with it. He will do what He says He will do. Perhaps all He is waiting for is the day when you finally separate your faith in God from your faith in yourself. That day could be today. It is your choice.

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1. Discuss why some things are more difficult to believe than others. _____

2. How does a lack of knowledge of God's abilities affect a person's faith? _____

3. Believing God's promises is based upon a belief in God's ability to keep those promises. How does time and God's apparent inactivity affect a person's faith? _____

4. In the development of the story of Abraham, Sarah and the birth of Isaac, we move from the point of believability to the point of un-believability. Why is this important in understanding the process of the development of our faith in God? _____

5. Do you think God is working in your life to take your faith beyond the credible into the realm of the incredible? If so, discuss why you think that is necessary and how you can make that transition immediate. _____

6. Read Genesis 16:1-3. Why did all of this happen? _____

7. Detail the age of Abraham at the time when God first made covenant with him, his age in Genesis 15:3 and his age in Genesis 17:1. _____

8. Read Genesis 15:7-18. Explain how this compares to the normal way a covenant was made between to individuals and the significance of this as it relates to God's purpose. _____

9. Read Genesis 17:15-17. Why was it necessary for God to reconfirm His covenant with Abraham? What is revealed about what had happened to Abraham's faith by his response to God's reconfirmation of the covenant promises? _____

10. Read Genesis 18:1-15. What about this tells us Abraham is repentant about his doubting God's promises? _____

11. Why do you think it is important to fully understand the story behind Romans 4:17 and in what ways does your life practically answer God's question of our faith, "Is any thing too hard for the LORD?" _____
