

# **Romans 4:17-21—The Faith Of Abraham: Believing That God Can Do The Impossible**

## **Memory Verse**

Romans 12:1-2 NKJV

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. <sup>2</sup> And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

## **Introduction**

Last week we saw the significance of the statement that Abraham is the father of all who believe; whatever promises were given to Abraham, were also given to his descendants who believed in the same way as Abraham did. Abraham put his faith in the Messiah, trusting that the coming Messiah would be the sacrifice on his behalf that would be the full payment for all of his sins. In response, God transferred His own righteousness to Abraham, and so Abraham was declared to be as righteous as God Himself. The same promise is available to all who choose to believe.

This week we see the faith required for a person to believe. It requires us to completely surrender to, and put our trust in, God, as we understand that our salvation is humanly impossible. Just like Abraham trusted God to give then Isaac when both his and Sarah's bodies were reproductively dead (being well past the age of childbearing), we trust that God will keep His promise to bring us back from the dead in a spiritual sense—to bring us back into relationship with himself by giving us His righteousness.

## **Outline**

1. (vs 17-18) Abraham believed that God could and would do the impossible
2. (vs 19-21) Abraham's faith

**Romans 4:16-25 NKJV**

**Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all <sup>17</sup> (as it is written, "*I have made you a father of many nations*") in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; <sup>18</sup> who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "*So shall your descendants be.*" <sup>19</sup> And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. <sup>20</sup> He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, <sup>21</sup> and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. <sup>22</sup> And therefore "*it was accounted to him for righteousness.*"**

<sup>23</sup> Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, <sup>24</sup> but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, <sup>25</sup> who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.

# 1. Abraham believed that God could and would do the impossible

## Romans 4:17-18 NKJV

(as it is written, “I have made you a father of many nations”) in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; <sup>18</sup> who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, “So shall your descendants be.”

## Romans 4:17-18 AMP

As it is written, I have made you the father of many nations. [He was appointed our father] in the sight of God in Whom he believed, Who gives life to the dead and speaks of the nonexistent things that [He has foretold and promised] as if they [already] existed. [Gen. 17:5.]

<sup>18</sup> [For Abraham, human reason for] hope being gone, hoped in faith that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been promised, So [numberless] shall your descendants be. [Gen. 15:5.]

v 17 **As it is written, I have made you the father of many nations:** This quote, “I have made you the father of many nations”, comes from Genesis 17:5. If you follow the story along, you’ll find that Abraham was still childless when God said this. So why does God say, “I have made you (past tense) the father of many nations”? Let’s read the story.

## Genesis 17:1-8, 15-22 NKJV

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.” <sup>3</sup> Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: <sup>4</sup> “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer shall your name be called Abram [exalted father], but your name shall be Abraham [Father of a multitude]; for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. <sup>8</sup> Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

<sup>15</sup> Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. <sup>16</sup> And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her.”

<sup>17</sup> Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” <sup>18</sup> And Abraham said to God, “Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!”

<sup>19</sup> Then God said: “No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him. <sup>20</sup> And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. <sup>21</sup> But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year.” <sup>22</sup> Then He finished talking with him, and God went up from Abraham.

Understanding the context of this passage in Genesis is essential to understanding why Paul quoted this passage in Romans 4:17, and what it means for us.

Genesis 17:1 **When Abram was ninety-nine years old:** It's been 24 years since God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would bear a child. Back when God first appeared to Abraham in Genesis 12, Abraham was *only* 75 and Sarah 65 years old. However, as Paul points out in Romans 4:19, by this stage of life, 24 years later, it was physically or humanly impossible for Abraham and Sarah to have children—“*And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb.*” Abraham is now 99 years old, and Sarah 89. However, three times in Genesis 17 God explicitly promises that one year later, Abraham and Sarah would have a child (vs 16, 19, and 21).

### **Application: Why does God make us wait before He answers our prayers or fulfils a promise?**

Why do you think that God made Abraham and Sarah wait for 25 years? Simple, so that they could know the power and glory of God: God waited until there could be no other explanation for the birth of Isaac than that it was a miracle. Isaac was the child of promise or grace, while Ishmael was the child of law or works (a result of human effort).

Why do you think God allows our circumstances to get as bad as they do, or to continue as long as they sometimes can? Why does God make us wait before He answers us? Often it is so we come to the place where we (or others), recognise that we have no ability in and of ourselves to help ourselves or solve whatever problem that we find ourselves in.

Consider that, because of our stubbornness and independent nature, it can take a while for us to admit that we can't do things by our own strength. So God patiently waits for us to quit trying to do things ourselves, and trust in His strength instead.

Lesson: *Often God can't answer our prayers because we are not ready to accept His help!*

Also consider that God will never share his glory with anyone else—“*I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not give my glory to anyone else, nor share my praise with carved idols*” (Isaiah 42:8 NLT). If God won't get the credit, then He won't answer the prayer. This is not just appropriate for who He is (He is absolutely *worthy* of all praise and glory), but also very necessary for us—it stops us from becoming more proud than we already are, and so moving further away from God. Remember that one of the purposes of trials is to get us to cease from depending on ourselves, and learn to trust God instead.

Lesson: *Stop trying and start trusting! “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.” (James 4:10)*

### **Application: Isaac as the child of promise—a picture of grace and the New Covenant**

Isaac being the child of promise also helps us to better understand the New Covenant with its principle of grace which is accessed by faith, and how this is the complete opposite to the Old Covenant with its principle of law which is accessed by works.

## Galatians 4:21-23 NLT

Tell me, you who want to live under the law, do you know what the law actually says?  
<sup>22</sup> The Scriptures say that Abraham had two sons, one from his slave wife and one from his freeborn wife. <sup>23</sup> The son of the slave wife was born in a human attempt to bring about the fulfillment of God's promise. But the son of the freeborn wife was born as God's own fulfillment of his promise.

Abraham had Ishmael when he was 86 years old by an Egyptian slave girl called Hagar (see Genesis 16). Abraham and Sarah waited 11 years but then tried doing God's work man's way, and it ended in disaster. There were family feuds, and the birth of the everlasting hatred between the arabs and the Jews (see Ezekiel 35:5), which is still spilling over today.

As stated in Genesis 17:17-18, Abraham's son Ishmael was not accepted by God—*Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"* <sup>19</sup> *Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him.*

Also, Genesis 22:2 shows that God didn't even recognise Ishmael—*Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love.*

These scriptures are warnings to us that all our own effort that we expend doing our own thing, and/or doing God's work our own way, and/or building our own kingdoms and reputations, will be completely ignored by God when we stand before Him in Heaven. Consider the following scenarios:

Us: "Hey God, what do you think about the huge business I built while still alive on the earth? I made a fortune. Everyone thought I was great."

God: "What business? What fortune? What reputation? I don't see anything."

Us: "Hey God, what do You think about the beautiful family I nurtured and raised while living on the earth. I gave my whole life for them—they were everything to me. They really thought I was a great dad and father—they made me feel so good."

God: "Yes, your family was your idol, you worshipped them. They were your source of contentment, joy, and security—but that's over now."

Abraham on the earth was getting a taste of what the Bema seat will be like for us when we stand before God and our works are judged for reward (see 1 Corinthians 3:12-15): if we are not careful, much of what we consider important here will be shown to be wood, hay, and straw—it will all burn—it will have no eternal value—our "Ishmael's" will be neither accepted nor recognised. Worse still, we will miss out on the eternal rewards that we could have had if we had only submitted to God and lived by faith.

Paul continues in Galatians, using this type or picture of Isaac vs Ishmael to help us understand the difference between the Old and New Covenants.

## Galatians 4:21-26 NLT

Tell me, you who want to live under the law, do you know what the law actually says?  
<sup>22</sup> The Scriptures say that Abraham had two sons, one from his slave wife and one from his freeborn wife. <sup>23</sup> The son of the slave wife was born in a human attempt to bring about the fulfillment of God's promise. But the son of the freeborn wife was born as God's own fulfillment of his promise.

<sup>24</sup> These two women serve as an illustration of God's two covenants. The first woman, Hagar, represents Mount Sinai where people received the law that enslaved them. <sup>25</sup> And now Jerusalem is just like Mount Sinai in Arabia, because she and her children live in slavery to the law. <sup>26</sup> But the other woman, Sarah, represents the heavenly Jerusalem. She is the free woman, and she is our mother.

It's important to understand that the Old Covenant, pictured by Ishmael, represents slavery—we burden ourselves with trying to complete the impossible and never-ending task of trying to be good enough by our own effort—this is what it means to keep or live under the law (see Galatians 4:21). In contrast, the New Covenant represented by Isaac represents freedom—Christ did all the work, and all we have to do is by faith enjoy the victory, walking in His power—it's all a free gift, it's all grace, and it's received by faith.

### **Application: Proleptic speech—God speaks of future events as having already happened**

Genesis 17:5 **No longer shall your name be called Abram [exalted father], but your name shall be Abraham [Father of a multitude]; for I have made you a father of many nations:** For 24 years, Abram has been constantly reminded of the inability of himself and Sarai to have a child of their own. Why? Because the name Abram means “exalted father”. In that day, the meaning of a person's name was important—they were a part of their identity. Consider how he would have felt as he introduced himself to new people.

Abram: “Hi, good to meet you, my name is Abram (exalted father).”

Friend: “Where are your children?”

Abram: “I don't have any yet, but I will one day. God said so.”

Friend: “You really think that you and Sarai will have children, even though you're both past the age of child bearing? Don't you realise that that is humanly or physically impossible?”

Abram: “I know”

Friend: “Good luck”

Abram: “One more thing”

Friend: “What's that?”

Abram: “Today God spoke to me and changed my name to ‘Abraham’ (literally: father of a multitude).”

Friend: “So grandpa, now you believe God is promising that you will not just have a son, but will also have many descendants? Don't you think that you're a little crazy?”

Genesis 17:5 **For I have made you a father of many nations:** God is speaking *proleptically*, meaning that He is talking about something existing even before it comes into existence. *Prophecy* is God telling us that something will happen before it happens—*Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them* (Isaiah 42:9). But *proleptic* speech goes one step further, it doesn't just say that a future event will happen, but that a still future event has already happened.

God often speaks like this in Scripture, talking about future events in this world, as well as our what He will do for us in the future (from our perspective) as if they have already happened. God talks like this because He already knows the future. To God, it's as good as done. If God says something will happen, then it will happen. God can be so sure because He's already seen it come to pass—it's all present tense to God who is outside of the time/space continuum that He created. God doesn't require faith—He sees, knows, and understands all. Here are two other examples of God speaking proleptically, speaking of things that have not happened yet as though they already have.

Revelation 11:15 NKJV—*In reference to the Second coming of Christ when He returns to rule and reign over all the earth*

Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ [past tense], ... and He shall reign forever and ever! [future tense]”

Revelation 18:1-8 NKJV—*In reference to the future destruction of the current world system (Babylon)*

<sup>2</sup> “Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, [past tense] ... <sup>8</sup> Therefore her plagues will come [future tense] in one day—death and mourning and famine. And she will be utterly burned with fire, for strong is the Lord God who judges her.

### **Application: Proleptic speech and the assurance of our salvation (Jon Courson)**

“Romans 8:29, 30 tells us that, on the basis of His foreknowledge, God predestined those who would want to know Him. And because they’re predestined, they’re called by Him. And when they respond to His call, they’re justified—declared righteous—and they’re glorified [past tense]. The implication is staggering. God views us as already glorified [as already having received our new bodies and living with Him]. What does this do? It frees me incredibly, knowing the Father sees me not in my cruddy humanity, but in my glorified state. I see myself flailing, faltering, and failing. But the Father sees me as already glorified.

Think of it this way....

*Picture yourself in New York City, watching the St. Patrick’s Day parade. A band marches by, followed by some floats and big balloons. Your buddy, standing a mile down the road has not yet seen the band, the floats, or balloons that pass before you. You’re enjoying them presently, and you know he’s going to enjoy them eventually when the parade works its way to him.*

*That’s the way the time/space continuum works. But suppose on this St. Patrick’s Day, you were invited to sit in the Goodyear blimp. Suddenly you would see the whole parade simultaneously. The people down below would be watching the parade go by. But not you. You would see the whole thing in its entirety. That which is yet to be for your buddy, you’d already see. And that which already was for him, would still be in your sight. From your vantage point, it would all be happening in the present.*

That’s how it is for the Father. We’re marching through the parade of life, trying hard, doing good sometimes, stumbling other times. But He sees our whole life—past, present, future. He sees the whole thing in totality. Thus, He views us as already glorified, as already in the kingdom of heaven. Consequently, we have beautiful freedom today. We can just enjoy the Lord because He has said we are already glorified. We’re not a disappointment or an embarrassment to Him. We’re already perfect in Him.”

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### **Romans 4:17-18 NKJV**

**(as it is written, “I have made you a father of many nations”) in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; <sup>18</sup> who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, “So shall your descendants be.”**

## **Romans 4:17-18 AMP**

**As it is written, I have made you the father of many nations. [He was appointed our father] in the sight of God in Whom he believed, Who gives life to the dead and speaks of the nonexistent things that [He has foretold and promised] as if they [already] existed. [Gen. 17:5.]**

**<sup>18</sup> [For Abraham, human reason for] hope being gone, hoped in faith that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been promised, So [numberless] shall your descendants be. [Gen. 15:5.]**

v 17 **God, who gives life to the dead:** Abraham and Sarah was both as good as dead, reproductively speaking. Only by a supernatural regeneration of their aged bodies could a son be born. This is the same principle that we believe and trust in—*And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins* (Ephesians 2:1).

v 17 **And calls those things which do not exist as though they did (NKJV)**

v 17 **And speaks of the nonexistent things that [He has foretold and promised] as if they [already] existed (AMP)**

This is the definition of proleptic speech. God refers to things as having happened, when as yet they haven't, at least relative to our position in the space/time continuum. We need to have this same kind of faith, to not only trust that God will fulfil His promises to us, but also to see God's promises as already having been fulfilled. For example—*Now to Him who is able to ... present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy* (Jude 24). Can I see myself as one day being faultless before God's presence with exceeding joy? Remember that this is not just positionally, but practically. This gives me hope and purpose—*I begin to desire to become what God has already made me* (from His eternal view). Yes, one day I will be faultless and will experience exceeding joy when I stand before God in my new glorified body. This is what it means to be *glorified*, as Jon Courson was describing above.

"I'm greatly comforted when God speaks about me as righteous, justified, glorified, holy, pure, and saintly. God can talk about such things before they exist, because He knows they will exist." (Smith)

### **Application: The nature of genuine hope**

v 18 **Contrary to hope, in hope believed (NKJV)**

v 18 **[For Abraham, human reason for] hope being gone, hoped in faith (AMP)**

Hope is not just a wishy washy feeling, something that we would like to see happen, like "I hope the Eagles win the football game today. Rather, the biblical definition of hope "is the absolute expectation of coming good" (Jon Courson)

"Abraham's example also helps us to understand the nature of faith. The conception of Abraham's son Isaac was a miracle, but it was not an immaculate conception. Abraham's faith did not mean that he did nothing and just waited for God to create a child in Sarah's womb. Abraham and Sarah had marital relations and trusted God for a miraculous result. This shows us that faith does not mean doing *nothing*, but doing *everything* with trust and reliance on God." (David Guzik)

"All true believers, like Abraham, obey. Obedience is faith in action. You are to walk in the steps of the faith of father Abraham. His faith did not sit still, it took steps; and you must take these steps also by obeying God because you believe him. That faith which has no works with it is a dead faith, and will justify no one." (Spurgeon)

“Even though it looked hopeless physically and logically, Abraham had hope. Biblically, hope is the absolute expectation of coming good. Abraham said, “From God’s perspective, His promise has already been fulfilled. So I know with absolute certainty it will happen in me and for me.” (Jon Courson)

v 18 **So that he became the father of many nations:** “Even as it took a supernatural life-giving work to make Abraham the physical father of many nations, it also took a supernatural life-giving work to make him the spiritual father of many nations.” (David Guzik)

## 2. Abraham’s Faith

### **Romans 4:19-21 NKJV**

**And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. <sup>20</sup> He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, <sup>21</sup> and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform.**

### Abraham had a growing faith

v 20 **but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God:** Growing in faith is a natural part of growing as a Christian. We should naturally learn to trust God more as we have more experiences of Him being faithful to His word and the promises it contains. Believers should be going from faith to faith, to greater and greater obedience. As people see us grow in our faith, it brings glory to God as we also grow in obedience and love, producing more of the fruit of the Spirit. Growing in faith means overcoming **unbelief**.

Luke 17:5 is a good prayer for all of us to pray; *And the apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith.”* (Luke 17:5 NKJV) If the apostles needed Jesus’ help to grow in their faith, then so do we.

### Matthew 9:27-30 NKJV

When Jesus departed from there, two blind men followed Him, crying out and saying, “Son of David, have mercy on us!” <sup>28</sup> And when He had come into the house, the blind men came to Him. And Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said to Him, “Yes, Lord.” <sup>29</sup> Then He touched their eyes, saying, “According to your faith let it be to you.” <sup>30</sup> And their eyes were opened.

This will be true for us as well in many areas of our lives. Will I choose to trust God, and therefore obey Him, and so experience victory over sin and blessed contentment? God says the same thing to us, “According to your faith let it be to you.”

### Abraham’s faith looked beyond circumstances

v 19, 21 **He did not consider his own body, already dead ... and the deadness of Sarah’s womb):** Keep your eyes on Jesus and you won’t sink (Matthew 14:29-31)

### Abraham’s faith was fully convinced and therefore he did not waver or doubt

v 20-21 **[Abraham] did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, ... being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform:** If I am doubting (disobeying) then I need to ask God to give me greater faith. I need to learn to trust that what God says is true. Is there any reason not to trust and therefore obey God?