

Lesson 46 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 4:17, Continued

Romans 4:17 — as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations” — in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Let’s look at another thing we can learn from Genesis 17, which Paul quotes here in Romans 4:17. Is it only Romans 4 that tells us about the spiritual descendants of Abraham? Or can we also see those spiritual descendants in Genesis 17? I think we can see them in both places.

Genesis 17:7-8 — And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your **offspring** after you throughout their generations **for an everlasting covenant**, to be God to you and to your **offspring** after you. And I will give to you and to your **offspring** after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, **for an everlasting possession**, and I will be their God.”

We know there is a physical aspect to those promises. God called Abraham out of Mesopotamia, and then God gave the promised land to Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and Jacob. We read about that physical aspect elsewhere.

Genesis 35:10-12 — And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name.” So he called his name Israel. And God said to him, “I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. **A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body.** The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will

give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.”

But we also know that there was a spiritual aspect to those same promises. Those promises were for the physical descendants of Abraham in one sense, but we know those same promises were for the spiritual descendants of Abraham in another sense. Paul tells us that.

Galatians 3:16 — Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.

Galatians 3:29 — And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.

Romans 9:8 — This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

But can we also see that same thing in Genesis 17? I think we can, or at least hints of it. For example, we don’t just see a covenant and a possession in Genesis 17, but instead we see an *everlasting* covenant and an *everlasting* possession. And we don’t just see the father of a *few* nations, but instead we see the father of *many* nations.

There is a hint in Genesis 17 that the promise was much more than just a promise of physical descendants and a physical land. And, of course, we today know that is true because we have the New Testament to tell us that. Those promises to Abraham were not only physical promises.

Hebrews 11:9-10 — By faith he [Abraham] went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. **For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.**

Romans 4 also confirms the spiritual aspect of Genesis 17. How? Because Romans 4 goes far beyond the physical descendants of Abraham.

Yes, Abraham was physically the father of all of the Jews, but Abraham was not physically the father of all the Gentiles. Other than the Ishmaelites, the Edomites, the Midianites, and maybe a few others, Abraham was not physically the father of the Gentiles.

But what about spiritually? Spiritually all of those physical distinctions fall away. Spiritually Abraham is the father of all who are justified under the system of faith — Jew or Gentile. We just read that a moment ago; let's read it again:

Galatians 3:29 — And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

And is that spiritual aspect of the promise also something we see in Genesis 17? We suggested it was just a moment ago, but now we can say that with certainty. Why? Because Paul says it right here in verses 16-17.

Paul tells us that Abraham is the father of all who are justified under the system of faith — both faithful Jews and faithful Gentiles. And how does Paul prove that? He points to the phrase “**many nations**” in Genesis 17:5.

That use by Paul of the phrase “many nations” proves that it must have had a spiritual dimension in Genesis 17. God must have been describing the physical descendants of Abraham at one level along with the spiritual descendants of Abraham at another level. Paul’s argument confirms that for us because Paul uses the phrase “many nations” to establish that Abraham is spiritually the father of all faithful Gentiles — even though Abraham was not physically the father of all the Gentiles.

Before we move on to verse 18, let’s pause for a moment and look at where we are in chapter 4.

As we have seen, Paul’s focus in Romans 4 has been to explain how Abraham was justified. Paul quoted Genesis 15:6 in verse 3 to show us that Abraham’s faith was counted as righteousness. But how did that happen? So far in Romans 4, Paul has been dealing with the various answers to that question, most of which he has told us are wrong answers.

How was Abraham credited with righteousness? Paul has looked at several wrong answers to that question.

- Abraham was not credited with righteousness because Abraham earned it by his works (verses 4-8).
- Abraham was not credited with righteousness because Abraham was circumcised (verses 9-12).
- Abraham was not credited with righteousness through law; that is, through a system that demands flawless conduct (verses 13-15).

Those are all wrong answers. And the right answer? The right answer is that Abraham was credited with righteousness through faith (verses 16-17).

So now it is time for Paul to describe Abraham's faith, and that is what Paul does in verses 18-21, with verse 22 rounding off the discussion of Genesis 15:6 that started all the way back in verse 3. And, finally, Paul applies all of this to us in verses 23-25, the closing verses of Romans 4.

How did Abraham walk by faith? Paul answers that question in the next four verses.

Romans 4:18-19

Romans 4:18-19 — In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.

We often say that our faith in God is **because** of the evidence rather than **despite** the evidence, and that is true if the evidence is true. Paul has already told us in Romans 1:19-20 about the evidence that the entire world has from God as to his power and his divinity.

And so, if the evidence is true, then it is always the case that our faith in God will be supported by that evidence. But what if the evidence is not true? What if the evidence is a lie?

For most of us, the best evidence is what we see. Very often, our best argument for why we believe something happened is that we saw it with our own two eyes.

But we need to be careful. Why? Because sometimes our eyes can deceive us. Sometimes what we think we see is not what is really happening or what is really there. Isn't that what Peter told us?

2 Peter 3:4 — They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”

Why did those people scoff? Why did they disbelieve what God had told them? Because of what they could see. When they looked around, what they saw was “all things ... continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.”

And sometimes I might be tempted to think the same way. With my own two eyes, I have seen the sun come up every day of my life — are you really telling me that someday that won't happen? That someday time will be no more? That someday all that we can see around us will be burned up?

When God says one thing, and my eyes tell me something else, what should I do? What should I believe? Science tells us to always believe our physical senses over everything else. But is that right?

No, it is not right. When I am tempted to believe my eyes over God, I need to remember who made those eyes! I can be certain that if I am seeing things clearly and correctly, then nothing I see will ever contradict what God has told me. But what if I am not seeing things

clearly or correctly? What then? What happens when my physical senses fail me?

The answer is that I need to trust in God rather than in myself. I need to trust in the wisdom of God rather than in the wisdom of man. I need to trust the word of God over the word of man. I need to rely on my spiritual eyes rather than just on my physical eyes. And doesn't the Bible tell us that same thing?

1 Corinthians 3:18 — Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.

2 Corinthians 4:18 — As we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

We look, not to what is seen, but to what is unseen! And that is not just true of the followers of Christ — that was also true of Christ himself! Even Jesus did not judge things merely with his physical eyes.

Isaiah 11:3 — He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear.

Yes, we often place our greatest trust on the things we see with our physical eyes, but God wants our greatest trust to always be in him.

Yes, we can learn things about God with our physical eyes — Paul has already told us that. But if we want to go from knowing about God to actually knowing God, that knowledge will come only through our spiritual eyes.

That will happen only when we are able to see things the way God sees them. And to do that we must view those things through the word of God. Some of us have physical eyeglasses, but all of us have spiritual eyeglasses. The Bible is our spiritual eyeglasses!

Now, with that background in mind, let's start with this question about verses 18-19. **What did Abraham see with his physical eyes?**

Physically, Abraham saw that he was as good as dead, and physically, Abraham saw that his wife Sarah was barren. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. But Abraham did not physically see many nations among his offspring. In fact, Abraham did not physically see any offspring at all.

That is what Abraham saw with his physical eyes. And for most people today, that would be the end of the story. But that is the point where faith comes in.

2 Corinthians 5:7 — For we walk by **faith**, not by sight.

Hebrews 11:1 — Now **faith** is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things **not seen**.

Hebrews 11:3 — By **faith** we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, **so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible**.

Faith is how we can see that which is not visible to our physical eyes. And faith is **not speculation** about the unseen. Instead, faith is **knowledge** and **understanding** of what we cannot see. Faith is the **assurance** and the **conviction** of that which we cannot see and that for which we hope.

Most of us would not physically walk around with our physical eyes closed. The same is true of our walk of faith. We cannot spiritually walk around with our spiritual eyes closed.

We have already looked at several verses that describe our spiritual eyesight. The Handout for Lesson 46 includes many other verses that you may find helpful in your own studies.

Today, let's consider an example of spiritual eyesight — the example of Abraham. And let's look at the specific descriptions of Abraham's faith that we find here in Romans 4.

Verse 18 tells us that “in hope he believed against hope.” What does that mean?

One thing we know for sure about that verse is that it is describing two different hopes. And how do we know that? We know that because one of those hopes is pitted against the other hope. Abraham believed in one hope against another hope. What are those two hopes?

Those two hopes are earthly hope and heavenly hope. Those two hopes are the hope we have when our physical eyes are fixed on the world and the hope we have when our spiritual eyes are fixed on God. One of those hopes is grounded in the wisdom of man, while the other hope is grounded in the wisdom of God.

Let's start by asking the world a question — what hope did Abraham have to ever become the father of many nations?

The world's answer is slim to none — and almost certainly none. Why? Because of what these verses tell us about Abraham's age and

physical condition, as well as that of his wife Sarah. No fertility clinic on earth would give them any hope of having a child.

That is the world's answer. That is the hope offered by the world. So now let's ask God the same question — what hope did Abraham have to become the father of many nations?

And, no surprise — God's answer is completely opposite to the world's answer. God's answer is that it is so certain that Abraham will be the father of many nations that we can talk about it in the past tense. It is just as certain as if it had already happened! That is the hope provided by God. The world says no, but God says yes.

2 Corinthians 1:20 — For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

The world versus God — which of the two did Abraham believe? Verse 18 tells us: “In hope he believed against hope.” In the hope provided by God, Abraham believed the promises of God, even though those promises were totally against the hope provided by the world.

And that is our first lesson about faith from these verses, and it may be the most important lesson about faith — **a saving faith in God believes God over anything or anyone else.** Every person on earth might tell us that our situation is hopeless, but if God tells us otherwise, then we believe God.

Romans 3:4 — Let God be true though every one were a liar.

That is the difference between worldly hope and biblical hope. Paul will return to this same topic later in this letter.

Romans 8:24-25 — For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

And that hope for what we do not see is not a hope based on optimism. Instead, that hope is a hope based on the character of God. Our hope is not confidence in our circumstances, but rather our hope is confidence in God. Our circumstances might seem hopeless to the world, but our hope remains. Why? Because our hope is in God, not in ourselves or in our circumstances.

And there is a fine line here between saving faith and the hope that comes from a saving faith. The saving faith gives us that hope, and we have that hope only because of that saving faith. That faith and that hope are two sides of the same coin. Faith is the trust that God will do what he has promised, and hope is the confidence we have in the promises of God.

Verse 19 tells us that Abraham “did not weaken in faith when he considered” his own body or Sarah’s barrenness. And that description is closely tied to the description we just considered.

If I believe in the promises of God because of the nature of God, and if the nature of God is unchanging, then why would my faith ever weaken? What could possibly cause my faith to weaken?

Yes, Abraham was changing — he was certainly not getting any younger! But God was not changing. What God had promised Abraham earlier was still just as certain now as it had been when the promise was first made.

If our faith weakens, that is because we have stopped listening to God and have instead started listening to the world. If I start believing the wisdom of the world, then, yes, my faith in the wisdom of God will weaken. But that is where come back again to the first lesson we learned about Abraham's faith — **a saving faith in God believes God over anything or anyone else.**

God has told me that something will happen, and so I know that it will happen. It might not look that way from a worldly perspective, but the world is wrong. A faith like that will never weaken because it is based, not on the changing wisdom of the world, but on the unchanging wisdom of God.

If my faith is based on my circumstances, then when my circumstances change, my faith will change. But if my faith is based on the character of God, then my faith will not change with my circumstances, but instead my faith will grow and strengthen as I grow in the knowledge of God.

Before we leave verse 19, we need to closely consider one of the words in that verse — the word “barrenness.” We are told that Abraham “considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.”

The Greek language of the New Testament had an ordinary word that was used to describe a woman's barrenness (such as we see in Luke 1:7 and Galatians 4:27), but that is not the word that Paul uses here. Instead, Paul uses the noun *nekrosis* (Strong's # 3500), which means “deadness.” And, in fact, that is the second use of the word in this one verse — Paul earlier used the verb form of the same Greek word to describe Abraham as being as good as dead (*nekroo*, Strong's # 3499).

Abraham was as good as dead, and Sarah's womb was dead. Why the focus on death in verse 19? I think we have already seen an important clue in answering that question. If we look back to verse 17, we find a third appearance of this same Greek word — not the noun, not the verb, but the adjective *nekros* (Strong's # 3498) — God gives life to the **dead**.

And that is not the only clue. We will see another clue later in verse 24, where the same adjective will appear again when Paul tells us that God “raised from the **dead** Jesus our Lord.”

And so what we see is that Paul is repeatedly using the Greek word for death in these verses. Why?

Verses 17 and 24 answer that question, and that answer gives us another foundational principle of a saving faith in God — **a saving faith in God transforms death into life, which is something only God can do.**

Just as Abraham's body (although as good as dead) was given life by God, and Sarah's womb (although dead) was given life by God, so God will give us life — just as surely as God raised Christ from the dead.

That is the hope. That is the promise that we believe. That is the “hope in the promise” as Paul describes it in Acts 26:6.

That is why we trust in God and rely upon God and upon the promises of God and the word of God. **Life from death.** Only God can do that for us (Romans 4:17), and it is only the gospel of Christ that provides God the power to do that for us (Romans 1:16). Eternal life or eternal death? Every person on earth is headed toward one or the other.

Romans 4:20-21

Romans 4:20-21 — No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

The first thing we find in verses 20-21 is a very big difficulty. And what is that very big difficulty? It is the fact that verses 20-21 do not, at least on first glance, seem to match up very well with what we read in Genesis about these events in Abraham's life.

What do I mean by that? Well, let's start with what we read about Abraham in Genesis.

- After he received the promises of God in Genesis 12 and before he had any offspring, Abraham lied about Sarah being his sister because he feared for his own life. But if Abraham had believed the promises of God, shouldn't he have known that God would preserve his life until he had those offspring?
- In Genesis 15:3, and despite the promises of God in Genesis 12, Abraham said to God, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."
- In Genesis 16, despite the repeated promises of God that his offspring would come through Sarah, Abraham had a child with Hagar.
- In Genesis 17:17, after hearing once again the promises of God, Abraham fell on his face and laughed.

That is what we read about Abraham's faith in Genesis. But how does Paul describe Abraham's faith here in verses 20-21?

- "No distrust" made Abraham "waver concerning the promise of God."
- Abraham was "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised."

No distrust made him waver? He was fully convinced? Is that what we see in Genesis? As I said, at least on the surface, it seems like there is a disconnect here. How can we explain it?

Most commentaries say that the best explanation is that verses 20-21 are describing the settled direction of Abraham's faith rather than trying to record and comment about every moment of his life. Here is how some of those commentaries describe that view:

(Moo) These verses are telling us "not that Abraham never had momentary hesitations, but that he avoided a deep-seated and permanent attitude of distrust and inconsistency in relationship to God and his promises."

(Schreiner) "Paul is not trying to chronicle in detail the ups and downs of faith in the life of Abraham. The words 'he did not doubt' characterize the basic pattern and direction of Abraham's faith, which was ultimately typified by trust in God, not by doubt. He didn't waver in the sense that he persevered and persisted in faith."

I agree with that view, and I think it is bolstered by the word choice that we find in verse 20. The word "waver" is the Greek word *diakrino*

(Strong's # 1252). It is the same Greek word we find twice in James 1:6-8, which is a very instructive passage when it comes to Romans 4.

James 1:6-8 — But let him ask in faith, with no **doubting**, for the one who **doubts** is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; **he is a double-minded man**, unstable in all his ways.

I know that we sometimes read those verses from James and perhaps wonder why we bother to pray at all. After all, can any of us say that we have never had a moment of doubt when we ask God for something in prayer?

But that is not at all what James is saying. Instead, James is talking about someone who is **double-minded**. James uses that word “double-minded” in James 1:8, and he uses the same word again later in his letter.

James 4:8 — Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, **you double-minded**.

James is not describing someone with a moment of doubt. Instead, James is describing someone who has a settled inner division in their life when it comes to God. Yes, perhaps there is a surface part of the person that says the right things, but there is another deeper part of the person that is filled with nothing but chronic doubt and distrust in the promises of God. The person is double-minded.

How can we describe such double-minded people? James tells us that such people are unstable in all their ways, that they will receive nothing from the Lord, that they are like a wave of the sea that is tossed by

the wind, that they are far from God, that they need to cleanse their hands, and that they need to purify their hearts.

Now, here is the question for us — **was any of that true about Abraham?** Even when he lied about Sarah, laughed at the promises of God, and questioned God's plan? Even then, is there anyone who would describe Abraham the way that James described the double-minded man?

James certainly would not. In fact, James, like Paul, points to Abraham as an example of faith that we should all follow (James 2:21-23). James tells us that Abraham was a friend of God (James 2:23). James presents Abraham as the opposite of the double-minded doubter.

There is a link here between James and Romans, and I think that link answers our question about Abraham. And what is that link? The **wavering** in Romans 4:20 is the **doubting** in James 1:6 — the Greek words are identical.

And what that means is that verses 20-21 are telling us that Abraham was **not** the double-minded man of James 1 and James 4. Abraham's faith was not just an unsettled surface faith. Instead, Abraham's faith was a deep settled faith. Abraham's faith was Abraham's way of life. And isn't that how this letter to the Romans started?

Romans 1:16-17 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, **"The righteous shall live by faith."**

That quotation from Habakkuk is describing a faith that is a way of life, and that is the same faith that we find in Abraham.

Yes, Abraham had questions. Yes, Abraham occasionally had some doubts. A few times Abraham even took matters into his own hands. But no, Abraham was not double-minded. Abraham was not unstable. Abraham was not far from God. Instead, Abraham was a friend of God! Abraham was single-minded. Abraham's faith did not just live on the surface. Abraham's faith was his way of life.

And so, yes, on the surface it may have looked like there was a difficulty in verses 20-21. But now that we have looked more closely, I think we can see that there is no difficulty at all.

In fact, instead of a difficulty, I think what we find here is a great encouragement. Why? Because the lesson we learn from Abraham's faith is that we can have questions and doubts, and yet still have the faith of Abraham!

If God could say that Abraham did not waver concerning the promise of God and was fully convinced that God is able to do what he has promised, then the same can be true about me. Yes, I sometimes have questions, I sometimes have doubts, and I sometimes try to take matters into my own hands. And do you know what? All of that was also true about Abraham!

Abraham is not an example of perfection. We have such an example, but Abraham is not it. Instead, Abraham is an example of faith.