

GRACE TO YOU

ROMANS 4:18-25

STAGGERING FAITH



FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

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JANUARY 15, 2023 (PM)

INTRODUCTION

A prototype is a product that is made for the purposes of being an example and model for others. Inventors will often make a prototype of their invention to raise funds for production on something like *GoFundMe*. While waiting for the prototype to move into manufacturing and distribution, the purchasers will often look back at pictures and videos of the prototype to remind them of what they've bought or invested in and what they have to look forward to. **Do we have any spiritual prototypes and how can they help us?**

Romans 4 presents Abraham as a prototype believer in God, and especially his promise of a world-inheriting Seed. Romans 4:18-25 especially highlight the staggering unstaggering faith of Abraham. It was staggering in the sense of it being stunning, and it was unstaggering in the sense of being strong and stable.

BACKGROUND

In general terms we can summarize the first four chapters of Romans as follows:

- Chapter 1. The Gentiles are guilty
- Chapter 2. The Jews are guilty
- Chapter 3:1-19. Everyone's guilty
- Chapter 3:20-31. Get from deadly guilt to healthy joy through faith in Jesus.
- Chapter 4: Follow Abraham's example of faith in the promises and you'll inherit the world.



Why was Abraham's faith so exemplary?



1. FAITH STAGGERS WHEN IT IS HOPEFUL (18)

Abraham had no hope

*"In hope he believed **against hope**" (18).*

God promised Abraham **"that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be"** (18). Abraham had no hope of this promise being fulfilled when he looked at his and Sarah's great age (90+), biology, history, or human opinion. None of those present or past sources gave him any hope that he would become a father, far less a father of many nations. He had no hope. It was against hope in the sense that hope has some rational or reasonable basis. His hope was irrational and unreasonable. It defied the usual conventions and content of hope.

Abraham was full of hope

*"In hope he believed **against hope**" (18).*

It's possible to have faith without any great hope of what is believed happening. For example, football fans begin each season believing this season will be a championship season, but they may have little real hope of that happening. A Christian may believe that God can cure his cancer, but have little hope that he will. Abraham not only had faith, he had hope. He not only believed but hoped for what he believed in. He not only believed that God could make him a father, and a father of many nations, but he had a happy hope of that actually happening.

Anyone looking at Abraham's situation would say, "He has no hope of a child," meaning that it's completely impossible to conceive of someone his age having a child." But when Abraham encountered this view of hope, he believed against it. "In hope he believed against hope" (18)

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

"I believe, but it's hopeless." It's possible to believe in God and to believe in the Gospel and yet have little real hope that God's promises, especially God's promises will be fulfilled in your life or that of others. Perhaps you look at circumstances, past history, people's opinions, or your feelings, and conclude, "I believe that's generally true but I have no hope it is true for me."

"I believe with hope." Abraham challenges and invites us to a hopeful faith, a faith that hopes for personal fulfillment of God's promises despite what everything and everyone says. Hopeless faith is not staggering to anyone, but hopeful faith is staggering both to yourself and others.

HOPE-TAKING FAITH
IS BREATHTAKING FAITH



So, does faith just ignore reality?



2. FAITH STAGGERS WHEN IT IS REALISTIC (19)

Abraham considered his weakness

Abraham "considered his own body, which was as good as dead, [and] the barrenness of Sarah's womb" (19).

Some people's faith is unthinking. They don't want to think about anything that would challenge or weaken their faith. If any questions arise in their own minds or from others, they ignore them or try not to think about them. We might say, "They're not living in the real world. They're denying reality." For example, someone may have a terminal illness but they live in denial of it. They don't want to face it.

In contrast, when Abraham was promised that he would be the father of many nations, he fully thought through the obstacles to this promise being fulfilled. He thought seriously and deeply about both his hundred-year old body that was "as good as dead" and also Sarah's barren womb. He admitted the deadness of their bodies and how they could not produce any life.

Abraham's faith did not weaken

"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" (19).

I remember when I was first asked to teach the Old Testament in a seminary and soon realized I would have to interact with many arguments against the Old Testament's reliability. I had heard of some of these liberal critiques of the Old Testament over the years, but I was scared of facing them, or researching them, in case they weakened my faith. Now I had no choice. I had to read their books and try to find answers to their arguments. I was surprised to see my faith strengthen instead of being weakened as I considered their case against the truth of God's Word. Consideration of the opponents of the Bible did not weaken my faith in the Bible.

Similarly, as Abraham considered the deadness of his body and of Sarah's womb, his faith in God's promise grew stronger not weaker. He did not deny reality but faced it, admitted it, and thought it through. But his faith did not weaken one bit. That's staggering faith.

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

Unrealistic faith is unstaggering faith. When someone refuses to see the reality of what they are facing, yet still believes, it's not that different from what some secular people do when they face difficulties and challenges. It's not staggering because people will just say, "They're in denial. They are not facing reality"

Realistic faith is staggering faith. I've been often amazed at the faith of believers when they receive results that indicate a terminal illness. When I see the strength of their faith, I've sometimes asked them questions to see if they fully understand the reality of their situation. I've always been surprised to discover that they have thought it through and are fully aware of what they are facing. That's staggering faith.

DENIAL STRENGTHENS DOUBT
REALITY WEAKENS DOUBT



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3. FAITH STAGGERS WHEN IT DOES NOT STAGGER (20)

Unbelief staggers

"No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God..."

Although we've been using "stagger" in the sense of amazing us, it also can mean to waver or wobble. That's the effect of unbelief. When we do not believe God's Word, it destabilizes us. We totter, stumble, falter, dither, oscillate, vacillate, see-saw, and waffle. Abraham did not waver in this way through unbelief when it came to God's promise.

Faith strengthens

"...but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God" (20).

Abraham's strong faith gave glory to God and giving glory to God strengthened his faith. His strong faith gave glory to God in two ways. First, God was honored and magnified by it regardless of whether anyone else knew about it. When he trusted God's Word, it put a shine and luster on God's truthfulness and trustworthiness, as well as his power and grace. Second, God was honored and magnified by Abraham's faith as others, including Sarah, found out about it both before and after the birth of Isaac. They also would have seen and appreciated God's character and qualities in Abraham's faith and the fulfillment of it. God blesses strong faith that glorifies him by strengthening that God-glorifying faith.

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

Weak faith is weakening. When our faith is weak, we are weak. We will stagger and stumble, oscillate and vacillate, waver and waffle. Weak faith is not something to accept or tolerate but something to change.

Strong faith is strengthening. When we give glory to God by our faith, God gives strength to our faith. When we declare him to be worthy of our trust, he gives us more trust in him. He does this because there's nothing that glorifies God more than strong faith.

WHEN WE GIVE GOD FAITH
WE GIVE GOD GLORY AND
GOD GIVES US MORE FAITH



What is strong faith



4. FAITH STAGGERS WHEN IT IS FULLY CONVINCED (21-25)

God will do whatever he has promised

"...fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (21).

How much did Abraham believe God. 100%. Totally and completely. He was "fully convinced," fully assured that God would do exactly what he said he would do.

The result was that **"his faith was counted to him as righteousness"** (22). It's not because of the quality of his faith but the object of his faith. It's not so much how he believed, but what he believed in. When, by God's grace, Abraham transferred his faith to God's promised Seed, God transferred to Abraham, the righteousness of the promised Seed to Abraham.

God did what he promised

"But the words "it was counted to him" were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (23-25).

As Abraham looked forward to God's promise with faith, his example inspires us to look backwards to God's fulfilled promise with faith. Just as Christ's future righteousness was counted to Abraham by faith, Christ's past righteousness is counted to ours. Abraham was the "prototype" believer and we are the "full production" believers. With the full promise of God now fully fulfilled, we should have at least as full confidence as Abraham. Given that we now know how Abraham's Seed was delivered to death for our sin, and raised again for our justification, knowledge Abraham did not have, our faith should be staggering in not staggering. We can be saved without Abraham's staggering faith. But we will miss out on a lot of stability, strength, and confidence.

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

Start with staggering (stumbling) faith. Abraham's faith staggered early on when it came to his sin with Hagar. He believed in the fact of God's promise but not the method of it. It was still faith but it was not like the faith of his later years. So, even if your faith is young, weak, staggering, know that your faith in Christ still saves.

Go on to staggering (surprising) faith. Don't stop or rest content with faith that staggers and stumbles around. That won't stagger anyone. But go on to ask God for and exercise faith that gets stronger and more stable by his grace. That kind of unstaggering faith will stagger many.

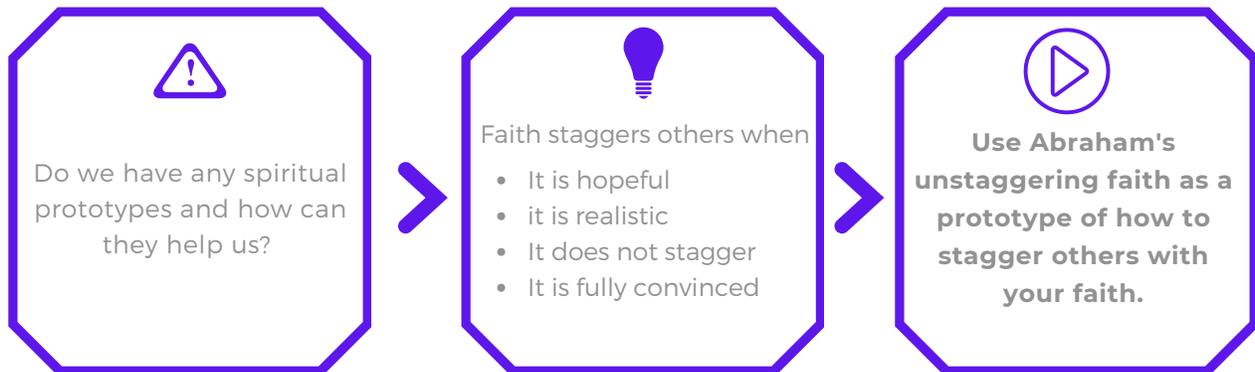
UNBELIEVERS WILL STAGGER
WHEN BELIEVERS DO NOT STAGGER



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SUMMARY



A NEW CHAPTER

Follow THE prototype. In this section on Abraham as our prototype, Paul implicitly points to Jesus as our ultimate prototype. We are staggered at his unstaggering faith. His faith was so full of hope, so realistic, so strong, and so fully convinced in his being delivered for our trespasses and raised again for our justification. His perfect faith covers our imperfect faith.

Be a prototype. We are called to be examples of faith to others who are believers, and to those who are not. This is especially true when our faith may be expected to stagger in times of testing and trial. The faith of God's tried and tested people staggers and strengthens me.

Prayer. Staggering God and Savior, give me Abraham's unstaggering faith, and do this for your glory, my good, and the good of others.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What other prototypes of faith do you have and how do they help you?
2. How hopeful is your faith and how can you increase your hope?
3. How can you make your faith more realistic?
4. In what ways does your faith glorify God?
5. How would you rate your confidence in God's promises?
6. Who do you know that's shown stunningly strong faith to others, and how?

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