

ARE YOU TRULY A PERSON OF FAITH?

Today's Text: Romans 4: 1 - 25

Extracts:

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." ...How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised... *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... Now, it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification [Rom. 4: 1-3, 10, 16, 23-25]*

Before the 2011 NFL (National Football League) Draft, Marcus Cannon, an offensive tackle from the Texas Christian University was seen as a top prospect for scouts, based on his college football record.¹ However, during the pre-draft medical tests, Cannon was diagnosed with a treatable form of cancer. As a result, his prospects dropped significantly, and the New England Patriots selected him in the 5th round of the Draft (138th overall). But he soon emerged as a steal for the Patriots. He responded to treatment and on November 15, 2011, he was promoted from the bench to the pitch. On January 5, 2012, the Patriots chose him as the winner of the team's Ed Block Courage Award.

To his team, Cannon was a man of courage for beating cancer and other odds to become a regular player. But to Cannon, it was faith in God that pulled him through. In his own words, "God wouldn't put this on my plate if I couldn't handle it. I knew I would slip [in the Draft] but I had faith that someone would take me." Are you a person of faith or courage? In this week's Bible verses, Abraham is called the father of faith. Can we call you that- or even a man of faith? Let us find out from this week's study.

¹ Story is based on the following sources: Jon Scott, "Cannon Relying on His Faith," PatriotsInsider.com, May 16, 2011, <http://nwe.scout.com/2/1072490.html> ; Mike Reiss, "Football journey: Marcus Cannon," Sat., Dec. 24, 2011, http://espn.go.com/blog/boston/new-england-patriots/post/_id/4713085/football-journey-marcus-cannon ; and Shalise Manza Young, "Marcus Cannon wins Patriots' courage award," Jan. 06, 2012, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/sports/2012/01/06/marcus-cannon-patriots-block-award-winner/3UXTMhg1bSgJCJ9X0wsimL/story.html?camp=pm>

1. Introduction: Do you walk by faith or by sight?

According to the Scripture, believers are to walk by faith and not by sight [2 Cor. 5: 7]. *To walk by sight means relying on empirical evidence- what you can see, hear, touch, taste, or feel.* That is why they talk of evidence in the law court where criminal charges are required to be proved beyond reasonable doubt. *In that sense, dreams, imagination or opinions may not be empirically verifiable; only facts can be proved.* That was why, when the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the risen Christ, he replied, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe” [Jn 20: 24-25]. In other words, he was saying that seeing is believing.

However, empirical evidence has its limitations. For example, *how can we see invisible things like yesterday and tomorrow which are real? How do you know that what you may be looking at is not an optical illusion (such as a mirage) and not reality at all?* That is why the Scripture says that people of faith “do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen [f]or the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal” [2 Cor. 4: 18]. Therefore, faith is “the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen” [Heb. 11: 1]. In that sense, *faith is the eye with which believers are able to see beyond the ordinary or the visible.* That begs a bigger problem! How are we sure that faith is the basis of your non-fact-based conduct?

To answer that question, we need to examine how different people see the unknown/invisible world around them. In doing so, we need to first answer two inter-related questions:

1. Who do you rely on when you peer into the unknown future- God or others?
2. Even when you are relying on God or others, do you follow blindly or with your eyes wide-open?

There are so many possible situations but the following are critical to understanding this week’s study:

a) *You could be a mere forecaster!*

The weather man does not go to God when s(he) wants to know about tomorrow’s weather forecast. All s(he) does is to look at the satellite maps and reports and make projections from there. Most times, weather people are right. Sometimes, they are wrong. In like manner, scientists rely on empirical data to make forecasts or projections about the phenomena that they are studying. Again, they can be right or wrong, depending on the sophistication of the equipment that they are using.

However, scientists or weather people can only talk about what they already know. For example, can they tell us about job satisfaction in hell? How many planets do we really have? They cannot answer such questions! Yet, before the invention of the telescope, a man of faith, Prophet Isaiah wrote, “It is He[God] who sits above the *circle* of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers” [Is. 40: 22]. That was at a time in history when scientists assumed the earth to be flat and the centre of the universe! Up till today, scientists are still searching for life in other (so far discovered) planets. Yet, God has long spoken through His messenger, Isaiah, saying [Is. 45: 18]:

*For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens, who is God, **who formed the earth and made it**, who established it, who did not create it in vain, **who formed it to be inhabited**.*

Clearly, those who base their faith on the logical or provable things cannot see far; they are too short-sighted to go far! Expertise is limited and limiting.²

b) *Or you could be relying on ephemeral spirits!*

Have you ever asked yourself where horoscopes³ come from that you follow so religiously each new day? You know the star under which you were born and your conduct each day is based on what the Zodiac signs say. Or you could swear by your culture or tradition without ever thinking what powers underpin your cultural values. Does it ever occur to you that you are consulting ephemeral spirits, the powers used by astrologers, magicians, soothsayers and sorcerers to tell you about your future? For example, see how much the Pharaoh of Egypt during his spiritual battle with Moses, relied on magicians? When Aaron cast down Moses’ rod, it became a snake. Pharaoh’s wise men, sorcerers and magicians threw down their sticks too and they turned into snakes [Ex. 7; 10-11]. When Moses turned the Nile water red, the magicians of Egypt replicated the feat [vv. 20-22]. You may say that Moses’ snake swallowed up the magicians’ snakes but they succeeded in making the king believe that he was powerful!

So, be careful what you are relying on as you face an unknown future. In due season, you may discover too late that that prophet you trust so much in your church or that pastor you thought was a powerful man of God could have been using diabolical forces to tie down the congregation for pecuniary or other personal gains. By their fruits, you shall know them.

² “If you think faith is so hard, try expertise!” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 2 No. 8: 18 March 2001; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_2/PDFs/Ifyouthinkfaithishardtryexpertise.pdf

³ An astrologer's description of the personality and future of a person based on the position of the planets in relation to the sign of the zodiac under which the person was born-*Encarta Dictionary North America*

The slave girl that followed Paul and Silas as they went to prayer in Philippi spoke the truth about them as “the servants of the Most High God” who had come to proclaim to the people “the way of salvation.” But Paul was in spirit and he knew that she had the spirit of divination that she used to bring her masters much profit by fortune-telling [**Acts 16: 16-17**]! Therefore, *following fortune-tellers is not walking by faith but by divination.*

c) *Or you may actually be a person of faith*

According to a Chinese proverb, the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. The problem, though, is that, if you do not know where you are going, you cannot even take that first step! The pessimist will look for the easiest route so as not to be discouraged. The optimist will go for any route, no matter how hard. The risk-avertter will not want to travel at all because it is too risky to do so! The risk-taker will want the riskiest route with the highest pay-out! Yet, NONE of such actions can be said to be based on faith, the type that we are looking at in this week’s study. Let us come back to the subject after we have examined what makes Abraham to be called the father of faith.

2. Lessons from Abraham, the father of faith

Paul reminded us that it was faith that made Abraham righteous before God, and that happened long before he was circumcised in flesh. Also, faith is by grace, not by works because those who have worked are owed wages [**Rom. 4: 1-4**]. Here are the lessons that we can learn from Abraham’s walk with God that has made him the father of faith and, indeed, the friend of God [**Is. 41:8**] forever [**2 Chron. 20: 7**]:

a) *Faith begins with hearing God’s word*

Abraham (then known as Abram) was 75 years old [**Gen. 12: 4**] and his barren wife, Sarah (then known as Sarai) was ten years younger [**Gen. 17:17**]. God called him to leave his country, family and father’s house and come to a land that He would show him. God would make him a great nation and in him “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” [**Gen. 12: 1-5**].

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God [**Rom. 10: 17**]. Jesus has said, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain” [**Jn 15: 16**]. *Therefore, true faith begins with God calling us to do something for Him. It has little or nothing to do with your personal*

*ambitions because your ambition may not be God's purpose!*⁴ Abraham might never have left his home country or even town if God had not called him out. In the Chinese proverb example, when God calls you, He will also choose the direction in which you will take that very first step. So, if all you have ever wanted to do is to go abroad, you are on your own only and unless it is God that has specifically called you out on that mission for Him.

b) *But faith is measured by obedience, not profession*

As soon as Abraham had heard God's word, he took his wife and nephew, Lot, and left for the land that the LORD had shown him, that is, the land of Canaan. On arrival there, God spoke to him, saying, "To your descendants I will give this land." Abraham built an altar there [**Gen. 12: 5-7**].

Faith is measured by obedience, not profession. Abraham did not consider his own convenience on the matter. What God wanted, that was it. Perhaps out of fear or doubt, we may find ourselves fighting with God's call for us to do something for Him. For example, Moses asked God to send somebody else to Pharaoh because he was slow of speech [**Ex. 4:11**]! Jonah bought a one-way ticket to travel west instead of going east to Nineveh [**Jon. 1: 1-3**]! Any of us can do exactly the same thing. *We all want God's blessings but on a platter of disobedience.*

c) *Keep crosschecking with God to avoid pitfalls*

If Abraham was going to be the father of many nations, nothing was happening to him in that direction a whole decade after he had left his home country.⁵ As he thought about it, God came to him one night in a vision. Abraham poured out his pains of childlessness to the LORD. God assured him that his heir would not be his servant, Eliezer, but one who would come from his own body. We are told that Abraham "believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" [**Gen. 15: 1-6**].

Most of us would also have worried like Abraham but could we have accepted God's assurance that all would be well? The bills are mounting. The landlord has served an eviction notice coming into effect in a few days. The children are crying because they are hungry. You are where you are because God led you to give up a lucrative job to become a church worker. Are you going to continue to trust Him or curse the day that you obeyed His word?

⁴ "Your ambition is not necessarily God's purpose!" *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 6 No 19: 7 Aug. 2005; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_6/PDFs/19_YourAmbitionisnotGodspurpose.pdf

⁵ We can infer this from the fact that he was 86 years old when Ishmael was born [**Gen. 16:16**]. He left Haran when he was 75 years old.

Even Abraham fumbled for a while. His wife, Sarah, was over 70 years old- way beyond her menopause. Thinking that the child of promise was coming from his loins and not from her womb, he and his wife agreed for him to marry her maid, Hagar. She conceived and bore him Ishmael when he was 89 years old [**Gen. 16: 1-16**]. But God reiterated that the child of promise would come through Sarai whose name God changed to Sarah [**Gen. 17: 15-16**], meaning, princess. The lesson we learn from that is the need to keep crosschecking with God to make sure we are still on course. After famous victories in Jericho and Ai, Joshua assumed that whatever he did thereafter had God's approval. But he was deceived by the Gibeonites to sign a peace treaty with them because he "did not ask counsel of the LORD" [**Josh. 9: 1-14**]. **So, keep crosschecking every now and then.**

d) The final test comes after your triumph!

At the age of 100 (Sarah was 90!), after they had waited for 25 years, Isaac was born as God had promised them [**Gen. 21: 1-8**]. At that stage, who else could question that it was a miracle? But the final test was soon to come. After asking Abraham to send away Ishmael and his mother, Hagar [**vv. 9-21**], God tested Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to Him as a burnt offering! Abraham did not hesitate one bit. As he was about to do it, God called to him from heaven and said to him, "*Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me*" [**Gen. 22: 1-12**]. Now you can see why Abraham is called the father of faith.

From the foregoing, we can understand why the Scripture has said that faith without works is dead [**Jam. 2: 17**]. *After God has blessed you, can you forego all for Him? Can you use your blessings to glorify Him by spending them on His purposes? If you can answer 'yes' to those questions, you are a person of faith.*

3. Conclusion: You too can become a person of faith!

Jesus said to doubting Thomas, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" [**Jn 20: 29**]. You have not seen Jesus but He has called you who labour and are heavy laden to come to Him and He will give you rest [**Matt. 11: 28**]. He has called those who have ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches [**Rev. 3: 6**]. He says that He will soon return to give His rewards to us according to our works of obedience [**Rev. 22: 12**].

Have you heard Him? If so, have you obeyed? If you have obeyed, have you made it your new nature to obey Him until the day He calls you home to your mansion in His Father's house in heaven? If you have answered 'yes' to those questions, well done. You are a person of faith.