

Sermons through

Romans

Heir of the World

Romans 4:13-15

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
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For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ For if those who are of the law *are* heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, ¹⁵ because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law *there is* no transgression (Romans 4:13-15).

Introduction

Many years ago I had a room-mate who was a world class pole-vaulter. Every weekend I would watch him on television during the opening credits of ABC's Wide World of Sports. It was a clip of him doing a celebratory back-flip after breaking the indoor world with the voice over of Jim McKay uttering the words "The thrill of victory."

Not many of us have had exhilaration at that level—spreading our arms with the weight and power of the Titanic behind us and the wind and ocean before us, screaming "I'm king of the world!" Of course for Leonardo DiCaprio the world would soon devour him in a frozen sea of desolation. The world can be a very disobedient subject. Many have tried to possess it, rule it or just get ahead in it, only to find that the world relentlessly spins while we begin to fatigue. Alexander the Great, in a very brief period of time, conquered and ruled nine time zones only to die at the age of thirty-three.

So it would appear that when it comes to a culture changing, world transforming force, no individual wins. In fact, it can easily be shown that no nation wins, no dynasty wins; a crown may shift from king to king from Caesar to Caesar, from oligarchy to oligarchy from republic to republic, but eventually they, along with their manifestos and constitutions, crumble up and blow away.

So what are we to make of this promise God made to Abraham that he would be "**heir of the world?**"

For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:13).

Let us not lose sight of the primary point the apostle puts forth—that God has made a promise, a promise accessed by faith in Christ. The nuclear core of the Christian faith—the venue which contains the fuel and power, without which the impressive plant would merely be a well constructed ghost town—is faith in Christ. Faith in Christ is the instrument by which His righteousness is freely given to us and our sinfulness is placed upon His shoulders.

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; ⁸ Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin (Romans 4:7, 8).

Who is the Seed?

Yet it would be exegetically irresponsible to ignore such a gargantuan statement that Abraham was promised the whole world—especially when we consider that the promise is not merely to Abraham but also **“to his seed.”** Now what is meant by that? Who is the seed?

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

So it appears that the seed is referring to Christ. Hebrews 1:2 speaks of Christ as the one **“appointed heir of all things.”** So we must be careful to avoid thinking that somehow this great promise of the inheritance of the earth is bestowed apart from Christ. There is no ‘end-run’ that mankind is capable of, by which the world will be his. But we should also recognize that those who have faith in Christ become, as it were, joint heirs.

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

Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when He taught:

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5).

Paul will later write:

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together (Romans 8:16, 17).

Neither Jesus nor Paul were teaching of a works righteousness, but they both would teach of true and necessary fruit of those who are saved by grace (in this case meekness and willingness to suffer for the faith). So even though the promise is an inheritance by grace and not earned or, so to speak, a debt, the inheritance at some level involves human behavior. This is where things get tricky.

To this point we've been speaking in a very isolated sense of justification by faith—something Abraham received before he had some anything. But **“heir of the world”** is a more pregnant term. And Abraham had an active role to play in order for this to unfold. And at the risk of over-coaching I think I have a pastoral responsibility to ask everyone in this room just how active you are in living out this calling. Of course in order for us to live out the calling, we must have some idea of what the promise consists of.

What is the Promise?

What is the promise in its fullness? There are a wide variety of answers you'll be given in Christian circles. There is a very popular, yet somewhat modern option, that all the promises, whatever they may be (apart from the promise of heaven) are

reserved for a period after the return of Christ. According to this view, the current age, in spite of a worldwide evangelistic effort, is consigned to the ash can of history.

Others relegate all the promises to the realm of the immaterial or eternal. That which is happening in the observable world is of little consequence. There may be some hat-tipping to political or societal transformation but, for the most part, there is what might be called a commitment to cultural insignificance. Time does not allow me to suggest why I view these positions as destructive—not merely to culture but to the souls of men—suffice it to say for now that the promise is a very thorough promise. Calvin offered:

The chief thing was indeed the restoration of life; it was yet necessary that the fallen state of the whole world should be repaired¹... not only the hope of a heavenly life was exhibited to Abraham, but also the full and complete blessing of God, the Apostle rightly teaches us, that the dominion of the world was promised to him.²

Calvin seems to be beckoning back to the original mandate given to Adam to serve God by taking dominion **“over all the earth” (Genesis 1:26)**. Adam failed to be a blessing, to always do that which was pleasing to his Father, but Christ would not fail. Christ would restore that which was lost in Adam, a restoration which begins with the souls of sinners. But how wide is the blessing? Is it meant for this age? Is there anything concrete to it? I would say ‘yes.’ Read the promise given to Abraham:

Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.⁵ No

1 Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin’s Commentaries (Ro 4:13). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

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longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you (Genesis 17:4-6).

So the promise involves “**nations**” and “**kings.**” There are no nations in heaven or the immaterial realm and there is only one King. How could Abraham have taken this in any other way than to understand that through his seed—through the victory of Christ—there would be worldwide transformation? Let us take, just a moment, to read some passages which supplement this notion:

I will declare the decree: The Lord has said to Me, ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. ⁸ Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession. ⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel.’ ” ¹⁰ Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. ¹¹ Serve the Lord with fear, And rejoice with trembling. ¹² Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish in the way, When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him (Psalm 2:7-12).

It is the judges “**of the earth**” who are called to be wise and “**serve the Lord.**” What is the obvious reading of the text? It does not appear to be immaterial. And, if it is after the return of Christ, why would a warning like this even be necessary since the transformation would have been immediate and cataclysmic? But it is not merely the call to “**Kiss the Son**” there is the promise of the universal success and blessing:

I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the

sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice (Genesis 22:17, 18).

All the ends of the world Shall remember and turn to the Lord, And all the families of the nations Shall worship before You. ²⁸ For the kingdom *is* the Lord's, And He rules over the nations (Psalm 22:27, 28).

For God *is* the King of all the earth; Sing praises with understanding. ⁸ God reigns over the nations; God sits on His holy throne (Psalm 47:7, 8).

He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth. ⁹ Those who dwell in the wilderness will bow before Him, And His enemies will lick the dust. ¹⁰ The kings of Tarshish and of the isles Will bring presents; The kings of Sheba and Seba Will offer gifts. ¹¹ Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; All nations shall serve Him...¹⁷ His name shall endure forever; His name shall continue as long as the sun. And *men* shall be blessed in Him; All nations shall call Him blessed. (Psalm 72:8-11, 17).

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days *That* the mountain of the Lord's house Shall be established on the top of the mountains, And shall be exalted above the hills; And all nations shall flow to it. ³ Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, To the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, And we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, And

the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. ⁴ He shall judge between the nations, And rebuke many people; They shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war anymore (Isaiah 2:2-4).

Indeed He says, ‘It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, And to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.’ ” ⁷ Thus says the Lord, The Redeemer of Israel, their Holy One, To Him whom man despises, To Him whom the nation abhors, To the Servant of rulers: “Kings shall see and arise, Princes also shall worship, Because of the Lord who is faithful, The Holy One of Israel; And He has chosen You (Isaiah 49:6, 7).

How beautiful upon the mountains Are the feet of him who brings good news, Who proclaims peace, Who brings glad tidings of good *things*, Who proclaims salvation, Who says to Zion, “Your God reigns!” ⁸ Your watchmen shall lift up *their* voices, With their voices they shall sing together; For they shall see eye to eye When the Lord brings back Zion. ⁹ Break forth into joy, sing together, You waste places of Jerusalem! For the Lord has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem. ¹⁰ The Lord has made bare His holy arm In the eyes of all the nations; And all the ends of the earth shall see The salvation of our God (Isaiah 52:7-10).

Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you— The sure mercies of David. ⁴

Indeed I have given him as a witness to the people, A leader and commander for the people. ⁵ Surely you shall call a nation you do not know, And nations *who* do not know you shall run to you, Because of the Lord your God, And the Holy One of Israel; For He has glorified you (Isaiah 55:3-5).

And it shall come to pass *That* from one New Moon to another, And from one Sabbath to another, All flesh shall come to worship before Me,” says the Lord (Isaiah 66:23).

“For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, That they all may call on the name of the Lord, To serve Him with one accord. ¹⁰From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, The daughter of My dispersed ones, Shall bring My offering (Zephaniah 3:9, 10).

One would be hard-pressed to read passages such as these and not come away with the notion that the blessings of Christ will shower the earth—and that those blessings will manifest themselves in every conceivable way from displacing tyrants to feeding the poor to protecting the innocent.

When the world acknowledges a wise, loving, benevolent and sacrificial King, it will necessarily address man’s inhumanity to man. At this point my Dispensational friends cry “It sure doesn’t look that way to me” and my amillennial, two kingdom friends, accuse of “triumphalism.” It is my opinion that they both err in ways too numerous to address here. But on point, this is what I believe we’re looking at when we read **“heir of the world”** in this text.

How is it Accessed?

But even more on point, how is it accessed?

For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, ¹⁵ because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law *there is no transgression* (Romans 4:14-15).

Though there may be disagreement regarding the breadth of what it means to be **“heir of the world”** there is agreement, for the most part, on how the promise is accessed—our paths that diverged now are cinched back together. At its heart, the promise is accessed by faith in Christ. Apart from faith there is no promise, there is no blessing, and there is no inheritance. This is why you’ll often hear, and rightfully so, that the problems of darkness within any culture begin at the pulpit.

Should we seek to obey the law? Certainly—but law without faith is a **“ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7)**. It is through the law, or rather our inability to keep it, that we come to realize that we are dead in our sins. The boundary markers of God’s law open our eyes to see that our feet have clearly transgressed, we have trespassed and are deserving of the wrath of God—a wrath that Jesus took upon Himself at the cross of Calvary.

Whatever the inheritance looks like, whatever effect it might have on this world, it is all null and void, apart from individuals who, by the grace of God, call upon the name of Christ as their only hope in this life or the next.

Questions for Study

1. Give examples of how people might seek to possess, rule or get ahead in this world. How does that generally work out (page 2)?
2. What is the Apostle Paul's primary point in this passage (page 3)?
3. Provide a full explanation of who the "seed" is in this passage (pages 3, 4).
4. Is the phrase "heir of the world" synonymous with justification or does it go beyond that? Explain (page 4).
5. What are the various explanations for what the promise given to Abraham might look like? What are their strengths and weaknesses (pages 4, 5)?
6. Will God fulfill the promise given to Abraham? Describe the promise (pages 5-8).
7. What are the benefits of the world acknowledging a wise, loving, benevolent and sacrificial King (pages 8, 9)?
8. How is the promise accessed? How is it not accessed? What are the dangers of confusing this (page 9)?