

Summary: God promised Abraham that he would be heir of the world (4:13-15). This was a gracious promise, which could only be received by faith. And that remained true through the whole life of Abraham (4:16-21). It also remains true for us today (4:22-25).

How do you view the world?

When you wake up in the morning,
how do you think about the world and your place in it?

Is the world a scary place to you?

Are you afraid of what you will find “out there”?

Or perhaps, afraid of what you will find even in your children’s bedrooms!

After all, your children are part of this “world” that you inhabit.

We all inhabit the world.

We encounter the good, the bad, and the ugly.

We often think in terms of Jesus’ language of “in the world, but not of it.”

But what does that mean?

How should we view the world?

In some places we hear that the world is under judgment and is passing away

(1 Cor 7:31 or 1 John 2:17)

It is in this sense that we are in the world, but not of the world.

Our identity – our citizenship is in the heavenly city.

But in other places we are told that God is going to save the world (John 3:16).

Sometimes scripture will say that God is judging the world and calling the righteous out.

Other times scripture will say that God is saving the world and casting the wicked out.

Why does scripture use both of these ways of saying it?

Because God created the world good.

Insofar as scripture speaks of the world as the good creation of God

which needs to be restored and renewed,

it speaks of the salvation of the world.

But the world has become corrupt due to sin.

And insofar as scripture speaks of the world as that power

which is opposed to God and is under the dominion of the devil,

it speaks of the judgment of the world.

1. The Heir of the World (4:13-15)

Think back to Romans 3.

There Paul spoke of how God is going to judge the world,
and how the whole world is held accountable to God (3:19).
There Paul focused on the world as it is hostile to God.

But here, in Romans 4:13, Paul says that

*The promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world
did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.*

Not only will Abraham and his offspring inhabit the world.
They will inherit the world!

We read Genesis 17,

where God promises Abraham in verses 4 and 8:

“My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations....

And I will give to you and to your offspring after you
all the land of your sojournings,
all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession,
and I will be their God.”

And from this Paul says that the promise was that Abraham and his offspring
would inherit the earth!

How do you get from the promise of Canaan to the promise of the whole earth?

By the principle of analogy.

God promised to Abraham that his offspring would inherit Canaan.

Now, in Jesus Christ, God has shown that Abraham’s offspring includes Gentiles.

If the promised seed has been expanded to include all peoples,
then the promised land must also be expanded to include the whole earth.

And there is even direct evidence for that in Genesis 12:3 –
“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

The purpose of the Abrahamic covenant was to bring the blessing of God upon all nations

And what God has revealed in Jesus Christ

is that the purpose of the Abrahamic covenant has been fulfilled
in the resurrection of Jesus.

In the resurrection of Jesus the Offspring (the Seed) of Abraham has inherited the world.

Jesus is the offspring who has inherited all the promises.

And because Jesus has inherited the promises,

and because he has poured out his Holy Spirit as the guarantee of our inheritance,
therefore you not only *inhabit* the world,
you also *inherit* the world.

The early church father, Severian, put it this way:

“Paul says that the righteous will inherit the world
because the ungodly will be thrown out and handed over to punishment
on the day of judgment,
but the righteous will possess the universe which remains,
and will have been renewed,
and the good things of heaven and earth will be theirs.”

So the promise to Abraham and his offspring – his seed –
was that he would be heir of the world.

And this promise was not “through the law”
but through “the righteousness of faith.”

Last time we saw that the Jews thought that Abraham was the perfect law-keeper.
It is safe to say from Romans 1-3 that Paul would disagree.
Abraham was not perfect.
But he doesn't try to prove that Abraham was a sinner.
Rather, he points out that Abraham (the most righteous man who ever lived)
was not justified by works, but by faith.

So if the most righteous man who ever lived needed to be justified by faith,
then the implication should be clear!
Are you claiming to be more righteous than Abraham?

It is a brilliant argument, because *no* Jew would ever claim to be equal to Abraham
(except Jesus, of course!).

But what is more, Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness
before he was circumcised.

The *uncircumcised* Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.
Therefore Abraham is the father of all who believe (whether circumcised or not).

But someone might say:

“Fine, okay Paul, Abraham was justified by faith.
God made the promise to Abraham that his seed would inherit the world.
But while the promise to Abraham was by faith,
the way that the children of Abraham inherit the land is by the law.”

This is precisely the sort of objection that Paul anticipates here in verses 14-15.
*For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs,
faith is null and the promise is void.*

Paul says that if God started by faith and promise,
and then switched to law,
then we are all in trouble.

Paul has already demonstrated that all (both Jews and Gentiles)
have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (3:23)

Based on the law, we will never attain to righteousness.
So if it is those “of the law” who are to be heirs of the promise,
then faith is pointless and God’s promise is empty.
If the law is your only route to the inheritance,
then *no one* will receive the inheritance.

For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

The point of the law was to focus God’s judgment on Israel.
God’s curse on Adam (and all humanity)
was focused on Israel through the curse of the law.
The purpose of the law was to bring wrath on Israel.
God gave Israel a detailed law in order to multiply transgressions
and make it perfectly clear that *no one* could be saved by the law.

In short, you *cannot* be good enough to please God.

2. The Centrality of Faith in the Justification of Abraham (4:16-21)

And this is why Paul continues his exposition of the justification of Abraham.

It is NOT the case that Abraham was justified by faith at first,
and then was justified by works later.
No, it is by grace from first to last.

*That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace
and be guaranteed to all his offspring –
not only to the adherent of the law
but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham,
who is the father of us all, 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.(4:16-17)*

I should mention that verses 16-21 are all one sentence!

And the whole point of this one sentence is that *it depends on faith.*

Look at how often the word faith is used in this *one* sentence:

“it depends on faith” (v16)

“the one who shares the faith of Abraham” (v16)

“he believed God who gives life to the dead” (v17)

“in hope he believed” (v18)

“he did not weaken in faith” (v19)

“No distrust [literally no unbelief] made him waver” (v20)

“he grew strong in his faith” (v20).

Any time someone uses the same root word seven times in one sentence
you should probably pay attention!

Why is faith so important to Paul?

In order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring

If the promise rests on works, then there is no guarantee.

But the promise of God does not rest on your performance.

The promise of God rests on his grace.

And thus it comes to all who share the faith of Abraham.

But what does this mean?

Paul is concerned to show that justification is by faith –

not just “at first” (as though you could add something else later),
but from first to last.

Notice how Paul uses “his faith was counted to him as righteousness.”

He originally quoted it in 4:3 to refer to what happened in Genesis 15.

But then he quotes it again verse 9

to emphasize that this was before Abraham’s circumcision,

and in verses 5 & 11 referring to those who share Abraham’s faith.

And again in verse 22,

to show that the whole of Abraham’s life was lived by faith.

Abraham’s faith was a true and living faith.

Abraham’s faith was a faith that worked by love.

That is why his faith was counted to him as righteousness. (v22)

It’s not just that Abraham believed God in Genesis 15

and then stopped believing God!

It’s not that Abraham believed certain doctrinal statements about God,

so who cares how he lived!

Some people see a conflict between Paul and James.

They think that Paul and James are talking about two different justifications:

Paul says that we are “declared righteous” by faith,

while James says that we “shown to be righteous” by works.

But there is only one justification.

J. Gresham Machen said it well when he said that
'the works that Paul condemns are not the works that James commends!'

Self-securing works, self-congratulatory works –
works that seek to boast before God:

those are the works that Paul condemns.

When James says "show me your faith by what you do,"
Paul calls those good works 'the obedience of faith.'

And furthermore,
the faith that James condemns is not the faith that Paul commends.

When James says that even demons believe,
obviously that is not even remotely resembling the sort of faith
that Paul commends.

Paul wants you to understand
that the sort of faith that is reckoned as righteousness –
the sort of faith that justifies –
the sort of faith that characterizes heirs of the world –
(heirs of the new creation)
is a faith that believes the promises of God against all odds.

Abraham believed in a God who gives life to the dead.
His own body was as good as dead.
Sarah had "necrosis of the womb" (the word for barrenness is the word "dead").

But God had said:
So shall your offspring be –
You shall be father of many nations.
And so Abraham believed God.

Where are you tempted to doubt God's promises?
God has promised that when temptation comes, he will provide the way out.
Do you believe that?
You've lost your temper for the thousandth time.
Your will – your ability to combat your sin – is dead.
Why should you believe that God provides grace
in the moment of temptation?

God has promised that he will never leave you or forsake you.
Do you believe that?
When you sit there with your prayers bouncing off the ceiling –
and your heart feels cold and dead –
why should you believe that God is still with you?
that God hears you?

Abraham considered his own body – which was as good as dead –
and he considered the dead womb of his wife.

If God is going to fulfill his promises,
he is going to have to give life to the dead.
This was the hope of Psalm 102, which we sang earlier.

My days pass like smoke.
My days are like an evening shadow.
It is only if *you* O LORD have mercy and hear our prayers
that life will come again.

And so Paul says of Abraham in verses 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,
fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.*

Do you believe this?
Can God give life to the dead?
I'm not asking that as an abstract theological question?

Because for Abraham this was a question that he faced every day.

Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness –
not just in Genesis 15,
but also in Genesis 17,
because it is only in Genesis 17 that Abraham received the promise
that he would have a son by Sarah!
And yet Paul says in 4:22
that Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness
because he was fully convinced that God would give him a son by Sarah.

And for that matter, James says in James 2
that Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness in Genesis 22:
when God called Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac.
And Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham believed
“that God was able even to raise Isaac from the dead.”

Abraham was justified by faith.
Never in all of Abraham's long life
does that principle change.

Justification is a once-for-all act of God's free grace.
It includes both the forgiveness of sin
and the imputation (the reckoning) of Christ's righteousness to us.

If you think about that,
this means that justification is a once-for-all gift
that keeps on giving!

Think about it this way:

if you are justified – if your sins are forgiven –
does that mean that God has already forgiven the sins
that you will commit tomorrow?

Sort of.

What it means that the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ has already paid for those sins.

But that sacrifice is not *applied* to you until you repent!

In other words, every time God forgives you
he is applying that once-for-all declaration
that he made in your justification.

There is *one* justification,

but our experience of that one justification comes all throughout life.

The Westminster Confession talks about living in a state of justification.

Just as God declared Abraham righteous in Genesis 15,
and Genesis 17, and Genesis 22,

so also his declaration regarding you has continual application to you,
because by faith you continue to walk before him.

And on the last day in the resurrection of the body

God will declare you righteous openly and publicly,
vindicating you before the watching world,
because you have trusted him who justified the ungodly.

You see, saving faith *is* faith in the resurrection.

Saving faith is faith that God *can* and *will* raise the dead.

Because if you believe that God can raise the dead,
then truly you have no fear.

3. And Not for Abraham Only (4:22-25)

That is why Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness.

*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.*

Saving faith is resurrection faith.

Even as Abraham believed in him who gives life to the dead,
so also we believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord.

Paul says here in Romans 4

that your faith is counted as righteousness.

Paul will say in Romans 6:11

that therefore you are to “consider yourselves dead to sin
and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

That word “consider” is the word “count, reckon, impute.”

Saving faith is a resurrection faith.

It is a faith that believes in him who gives life to the dead.

And if God has raised Jesus from the dead,

then if you are in Christ,

you are reckoned dead to sin

and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Because Jesus was delivered up (to death – as an atoning sacrifice, a propitiation).

Why?

For our trespasses.

For our sins.

And Jesus was raised from the dead.

Why?

For our justification.

The purpose of the resurrection of Jesus was so that we might be justified –

that we might be declared righteous.

that our sins might be forgiven before the court of heaven.

Paul had said back in 1:3-4 that the gospel of God

is the gospel concerning his Son,

who was descended from David according to the flesh

and was declared to be the Son of God with power

according to the Spirit of holiness

by his resurrection from the dead.

The gospel is the good news of what Jesus has done in his death and resurrection.

The Son of God, the seed of Abraham, our Lord Jesus Christ,

has entered into the promised inheritance.

He has inherited the world, as God had promised.

Conclusion:

So, tomorrow morning,

when you wake up,

how will you look at the world?

When those little rugrats that you sometimes acknowledge to be your offspring
are squabbling and complaining,
and you just *long* for a little peace and quiet,
will you remember the promises of God?

Will you believe that Jesus was raised from the dead
and seated in glory at the right hand of the Father?

Because if you believe that Jesus was delivered up for our sins,
and was raised from the dead for our justification,

then you cannot *possibly* think that those squabbling rugrats can *in the least*
break that peace that you have with God.

In Christ, you have received the promise that you will be heir of the world,
together with all the faithful offspring of Abraham.

The doctrine of justification by faith gives us great confidence to live the Christian life.
You know that God accepts you fully –
not for anything that you have done, but because of Jesus.
You know that God has freely forgiven all your sins –
and so (as we'll see in coming weeks) sin is no longer your master.